

# LUISS



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Degree in Marketing – Customer Engagement & Relationship  
Management

Chair of Marketing Communication & New Media

## Influence & Impact: Exploring the Role of Celebrity and Creator Economy in Beauty Brands

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# INTRODUCTION

The evolution of the beauty sector in the past years has taken place with greater importance based on digital experience and value communication.

In this context, the Celebrity & Creator Economy have assumed a crucial role. This thesis aims to analyze the intersection between these two economies and explore how the link between brand and celebrity can affect important parts of consumer behavior like engagement and WOM. The paper will try to give new insights into the dynamics of marketing communication in the beauty industry through theoretical analysis and experimental investigation.

The first chapter delivers a general introduction to the beauty market and analyzes its characteristics and evolutionary context. It will be discussed how digital changes have encouraged the creation of new consumption models where authenticity, storytelling, and engagement are very important.

Moreover, a special emphasis will be placed on the intersection of celebrity and creator economy, two phenomena that have fundamentally altered how brands communicate and build relationships with their audiences.

The celebrity economy, based on the capacity of public personas to forge emotional connections with audiences, has proven effective within beauty industry, since celebrities can act as value ambassadors for ideals like diversity, empowerment, and creativity.

To support this study, three emblematic case studies will be analyzed: Fenty Beauty by Rihanna, Rare Beauty by Selena Gomez and Haus Labs by Lady Gaga. These brands represent successful examples of applying marketing strategies founded on the connection between brand and celebrity. Fenty Beauty, for instance, has changed the rules of inclusivity in the industry by providing a range of products made for a mixed customer base. Rare Beauty, instead, stands out for its commitment to mental health awareness, while Haus Labs promotes values of artistic expression and creativity.

Through the examination of the communication tactics of these brands, this thesis will focus on one of them as a representative example to highlight the factors that have contributed to its success. Particular attention will be given to its impact on engagement and WOM, providing an in-depth examination of how its messaging and connection with the celebrity founder influence consumer behavior.

Chapter two presents the theoretical framework of the research. In a first part, a literature review will be conducted exploring the main communication drivers in the beauty industry.

The second part, on the other hand, introduces a conceptual model that illustrates the research hypotheses. Specifically, it will attempt to demonstrate how celebrity bonding improves WOM (H1) and engagement (H2), and how the latter in turn influences WOM (H3). In addition, the importance of a narrative message in enhancing engagement (H4) will be explored.

The third chapter illustrates the experimental research designed to validate the proposed conceptual model. Through the administration of a structured questionnaire to a representative sample, the data collected will be analyzed to test the hypotheses developed.

Finally, in the concluding chapter, the results of the analysis are examined considering practical implications and theoretical insight.

The study broke new ground for emerging brands to replicate communication strategies based on the synergy between the celebrity and creator economies, which has suggested possible directions for further investigation. In this way, the thesis contributes not only to an academic understanding of the dynamics of the beauty industry but also provides practical insights that can be applied in developing innovative and effective communication strategies.

## CHAPTER I

### THE BEAUTY INDUSTRY: THE ROLE OF CELEBRITY AND CREATOR ECONOMY

#### *1.1 Overview of the Beauty Industry*

The beauty industry has its origin in antiquity, where beauty and personal care products were used as a symbol of religion, cultural identity, and social status, not just to enhance physical appearance.

In ancient Egypt, for example, kohl was used not only for eye make-up but also to protect the eyes from the sun and evil spirits<sup>1</sup>. In Greek and Roman ages, therefore, perfumes and ointments were associated to elegance and luxury. In the Renaissance, however, cosmetics became a hallmark of the noble classes. Beauty products therefore reflected not only the Aesthetic trends of the time, but also the social and economic dynamics of the time. With the industrial revolution this industry underwent a huge transformation<sup>2</sup>.

Mass production made beauty products accessible to a greater variety of consumers, and the creation of new brands fostered the emergence of new industries. At the beginning of the XX century, the giants of the industry such as Estée Lauder, L'Oréal, and Revlon emerged, revolutionizing standards in production, marketing, and distribution. This made them pioneers in using advertising laying the groundwork for many modern marketing strategies.

Today, the beauty sector position is a global powerhouse, valued at \$500 billion in 2023 (Statista, 2023), with an annual growth rate (CAGR, Graphic 1) projected between 4% and 6% through 2028 (McKinsey, 2023). Emerging markets, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region (Graphic 2), are driving this growth, with countries like China, India, and South Korea leading consumption and innovation. These markets, accounting for over 50% of the sector's growth by 2027 (Mordor Intelligence, 2023), are shaped by rising incomes and cultural trends such as K-beauty and J-beauty, which combine natural ingredients with advanced technologies.

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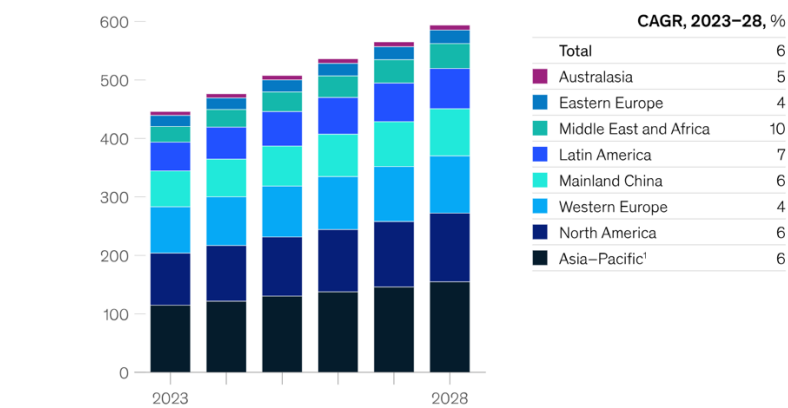
<sup>1</sup> Kohl was believed to have antibacterial properties.

<sup>2</sup> Industrial Revolution introduced the automated production processes, reducing the cost of beauty products and ensuring their accessibility to the middle class.

### Graphic 1: Global Beauty Market Growth Forecast to 2028

The global beauty market is expected to grow 6 percent annually through 2028.

Forecast beauty market retail sales, by region, \$ billion



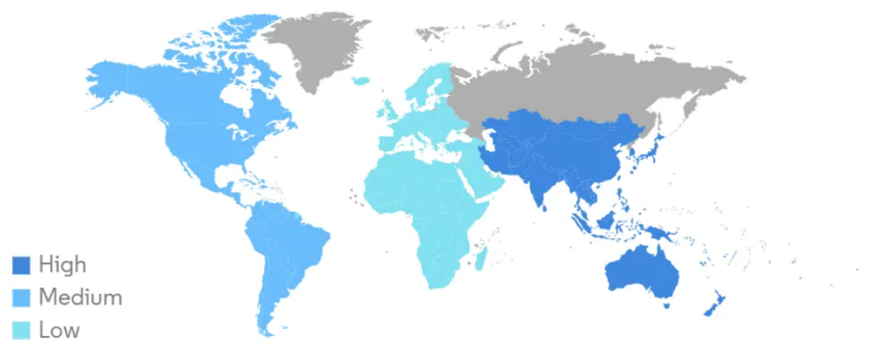
<sup>1</sup>Excluding Australia and mainland China.  
Source: Euromonitor; Generation Research; McKinsey analysis

McKinsey & Company

Source: McKinsey & Company (Euromonitor, Generation Research, McKinsey analysis)

### Graphic 2: Beauty and Personal Care Products Market: Forecasted Five-Year Growth Rate by Region

Beauty and Personal Care Products Market: Forecasted Five-Year Growth Rate, By Region



Source: Mordor Intelligence



Source: Mordor Intelligence

The beauty market is one of the most dynamic sectors of the modern economy. Its relevance is pointed out by its ability to adapt quickly to consumer preferences and to change social and technological trends<sup>3</sup>. This industry reflects cultural and technological changes in society, making it a key indicator of innovation and global trends. As noted by Paula Black (2006) in her paper “The beauty industry: gender, culture, pleasure.”<sup>4</sup>, the industry has evolved its traditional role of enhancing physical appearance to become a space for emotional and physical well-being. Beauty today responds to the physiological and social needs of consumers and no longer just to superficial desires<sup>5</sup>. This has solidified its position as a cultural and emotional pillar of contemporary life. The advent of e-commerce has played a pivotal role in the sector development, molding the changes taking place in the beauty industry, extending the access to beauty products to an expanse of consumer demographics, and enabling brands to communicate directly with their customers through digital platforms. According to McKinsey (2023), online beauty sales are projected to account for more than 30% of all sector transactions today, compared to less than 10% just a decade earlier. These changes have been possible thanks to the growing adoption of e-commerce and of technological innovations such as AR (Augmented Reality) virtual product try-ons<sup>6</sup> and AI (Artificial Intelligence) in customized recommendations that greatly enhance the shopping experience<sup>7</sup>. Customer interaction has improved immensely; going online for beauty products is a more seamless experience, and consumers find far fewer barriers to the online channel; all of which strengthen the channels for industrial growth. Modern consumers, in particular Millennials, and Gen Z are driving a transformation in the industry, calling for authenticity, immersive brand experience, and alignment of products with personal and social values. This consideration puts digital contents such as tutorials, reviews, and social media campaigns on the front line in influencing buying behavior and asserts the growing need for transparency and education for consumers while they make purchasing decisions.

## ***1.2 The Celebrity Economy and the Creator Economy***

The beauty sector and the world of celebrities has always been connected. However, in recent decade it has evolved into a more complex and interactive system. It's known as the Celebrity Economy. Simultaneously, the advent of digital platforms has given rise to the Creator Economy, where influencers and independent content creators have taken on a central role in brand promotion.

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<sup>3</sup> Clean beauty, sustainability efforts and gender-neutral products shows the ability to adapt of the beauty industry.

<sup>4</sup> Black, P. (2006). The beauty industry: gender, culture, pleasure. London; New York: Routledge, Cop.

<sup>5</sup> Nowadays consumers prioritize products that align with their ethical values such as eco-friendly, vegan, cruelty-free formulations.

<sup>6</sup> AR try-ons allow consumers to virtually test products before purchasing, reducing returned items and boost customer satisfaction

<sup>7</sup> AI-driven beauty tools recommend personalized skincare routine thanks to user data.



The former relies on the strategic use of celebrity figures who, through the transfer of symbolic value, improve brand exposure and reliability. In contrast, the other one, thanks to digital platforms has emerged allowing creators to establish authentic and direct connections with their community.

These two phenomena have provoked a radical redefinition of promotional and communication strategies, generating an ecosystem in which celebrities and creators influence one another, significantly altering the ways consumers perceive the value of brands and determine their success.

### ***1.2.1 The Celebrity Economy***

The celebrity economy is based on the influence and economic power of celebrities which is harnessed through their ability to generate value for brands, products and services. Celebrities leverage their popularity and authenticity to attract consumers, making their strength the means to turn fans into customers; although in the beauty industry, celebrities are often founders of successful brands and not mere ambassadors. Its foundation dates to the XX century, when the rise of mass media turned actors, musicians, and athletes into cultural icons capable of shaping consumer tastes and preferences<sup>8</sup>. Their ability to influence consumer behavior is based on a key concept: the trust built through their public image and emotional connection with fans. According to McCracken's (1989)<sup>9</sup> "meaning transfer model", celebrities act as providers of symbolic values, capable of transferring cultural values and aspirational powers to the products they endorse. In the 1980s and 1990s, celebrity endorsement firmly took its place at the core of various marketing strategies. Major global brands such as Pepsi (image 1) and Nike (image 2) took this opportunity to build relationships with consumers and reinforce corporate identity.

***Image 1:*** Cindy Crawford in the iconic 1992 Pepsi commercial

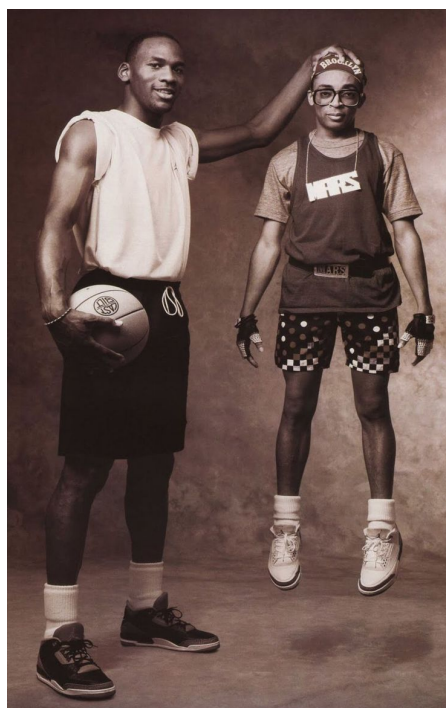


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<sup>8</sup> The development of radio, television and magazine in the 20<sup>th</sup> century had an important role in turning celebrities in global icon

<sup>9</sup> McCracken, G. (1989). "Who is the celebrity endorser? Cultural foundations of the endorsement process". *Journal of Consumer Research*, 16(3), 310–321

**Image 2:** Michael Jordan, Spike Lee in the 1998 Nike Shoes commercial



The celebrity economy, since the rise of social media, has adapted to new communication dynamics, evolving from a one way model to an interactive one. According to Ohanian (1990)<sup>10</sup>, the success of this phenomena is based on three main elements, which are the attractiveness, the credibility, and the trust. These factors contribute to create the positive perception of the products and encourage the purchase intention. However, the phenomena have some risks such as the potential misalignment between the values of the celebrity and those of the brand sponsored<sup>11</sup>. That can compromise the perceived authenticity, as noted by Escalas and Bettman (2003)<sup>12</sup>. The effects of the celebrity economy are: the increase of Brand Awareness (the link brand-celebrity boosts the brand visibility on a worldwide scale thus making it quickly recognizable), Perceived Authenticity (the product is perceived as more authentic when brand and celebrity values aligns), Increased Brand Equity (the brand obtain a huge competitive advantage because it attract new consumer segments thanks to the celebrity-brand bond).

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<sup>10</sup> Ohanian, R. (1990). "Construction and Validation of a Scale to Measure Celebrity Endorsers' Perceived Expertise, Trustworthiness, and Attractiveness." *Journal of Advertising*, 19(3), 39–52.

<sup>11</sup> If a celebrity becomes involved in controversy, the brand they endorse may suffer reputational damage.

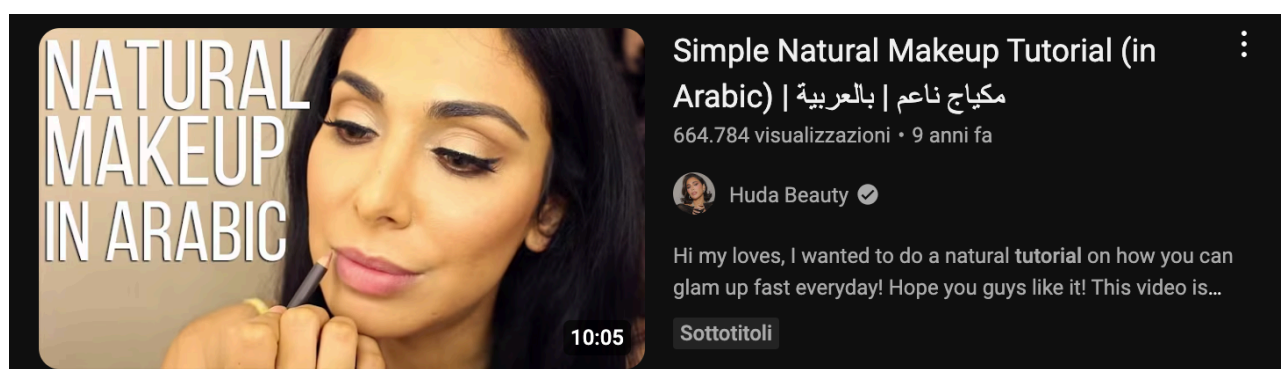
<sup>12</sup> Escalas, J. E., & Bettman, J. R. (2017). Connecting With Celebrities: How Consumers Appropriate Celebrity Meanings for a Sense of Belonging. *Journal of Advertising*, 46(2), 297–308.

### 1.2.2 The Creator Economy

One of the biggest advancements made possible by the growth of digital platforms like YouTube, TikTok and Instagram is the Creator Economy. Unlike traditional celebrities, creators can build their reputation sharing original contents and engaging directly with their followers, centering on a defined niche. Lou and Yuan (2019) argue that authenticity is what connects a creator with its audience, as this is the first step to build trust and consumer commitment. The beauty industry is one of those most profoundly revolutionized by the Creator Economy. Makeup tutorials, product reviews and visually appealing content have become essential factors for brands in the industry. Leading influencers such as James Charles and Huda Kattan (Figure 3) have demonstrated how an approach rooted in authenticity and transparency can translate into significant sales and the creation of highly loyal consumer communities.

This model proves particularly effective in reaching younger generations, who prefer personalized content over traditional advertising (Chung and Cho, 2017).

**Image 3:** Simple Natural Makeup Tutorial in Arabic by Huda Beauty on YouTube



Source: Huda Beauty YouTube Channel

Despite its rapid growth, the Creator Economy faces a lot of challenges, including market saturation and the need to maintain authenticity in sponsored collaborations. Nevertheless, the ability of creators to quickly adapt to changing consumer preferences remains a critical element of contemporary marketing.

### 1.2.3 Intersection Between Celebrity Economy and Creator Economy

The growing convergence between the celebrity economy and the creator economy has giving a boost to a hybrid ecosystem where celebrity and creators collaborate and sometimes overlap in roles<sup>13</sup>. Global celebrities adopt creator-like strategies to preserve their digital relevance, while creators with

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<sup>13</sup> Celebrity have adopted the same strategies used by influencers such as behind-the-scene content or personal storytelling to stay connected with their audience.

a lot of followers therefore very influential reach levels of fame comparable to traditional celebrities<sup>14</sup>. The Celebrity Economy and Creator Economy have shifted marketing dynamics to the core, bringing new paradigms of influence and consumer connection. Even though these two spheres were born in different contexts and times, now come together in a continuously evolving process that provides distinct opportunities for brands and sets the stage for a future where authenticity and aspiration can exist together in increasingly innovative models. Although the concepts of celebrity and creator are different, they intersect perfectly within the beauty industry. Celebrities are no longer just brand ambassadors but are now creators and entrepreneurs, constructing real authentic brands that reflects their personal value. That is very powerful in building an authenticity perception as it makes consumers see these brands as real extensions of those personalities and their associated values. It also serves to strengthen the trust in the brand because with whom else can the public identify more than with the founder and her values? Another important element is the emotional engagement that can be created through digital platforms as it gives celebrities a chance to create direct relationships with consumers, fostering feelings of belongingness and community creation.

The intersection between the two phenomena is that celebrities not only represented a brand but also became its active creators. Digital platforms play a crucial role here since they give to the celebrities the opportunity to connect with their audiences and share real values. In the Celebrity Economy, a brand's value is based on the image and aspirational qualities associated to the celebrity figure. Rather, success for the Creator Economy is rooted in personal storytelling, co-creation, and a capacity to forge a strong community.

When all two areas overlap, celebrities mix their influence with genuine storytelling strategies plus an active social media presence to create brands that resonate not only because of the founder's fame but also through shared values and direct connections with consumers.

### ***1.3 Success Stories: Three Iconic Brands***

At the crossroads between the celebrity economy and the creator economy lies an increasingly significant phenomenon in the beauty sector: celebrities who, instead of simply being testimonials for pre-existing brands, take on the role of true entrepreneurs. Where fame meets the ability to create and engage directly with the public, brands emerge that go beyond mere product sales but embody values and missions that connect with the modern consumer. Some of the most significant case studies include Fenty Beauty, Rare Beauty and Haus Labs, three brands founded by Rihanna, Selena Gomez and Lady Gaga respectively, here are Fenty Beauty, Rare Beauty, and Haus Labs—three brands established by Rihanna, Selena Gomez, and Lady Gaga respectively—that through very unique

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<sup>14</sup> Some influencers enjoy the same status of the celebrities with brand deals and fan followings.

strategic positioning have come to redefine the landscape of cosmetics through strong value identity and cultural impact. These brands not only reflect the values of their founders but also exploit the intersection between Celebrity Economy and Creator Economy. Fenty Beauty has revolutionized the industry with a very inclusive approach, ensuring diversity in representation about the world of cosmetics. Rare Beauty found its unique voice through the commitment to mental health and the promotion of personal authenticity. Haus Labs, finally, adopted a model based on innovation, sustainability, and freedom of expression, with clean and technologically advanced products that celebrate inclusivity and self-expression both within and beyond the beauty industry.

### 1.3.1 Fenty Beauty

**Image 4:** Fenty Beauty by Rihanna Logo



Source: Fenty Beauty Official Website

*“What began as a concept, a desire really, for every person to feel truly represented, and not only included, but celebrated, has now become bigger than I ever imagined.”*

Rihanna

Fenty Beauty was founded by Rihanna in 2017 and revolutionized the beauty industry with its commitment for inclusivity. The brand was released with 40 shades of foundation which lately expanded to 50, that is significantly more than traditional brands. This move highlighted a gap in the beauty industry where people with darker skin tones were often overlooked and redefined the standards of inclusivity, changing the cultural and economic landscape of the beauty industry.

**Image 5:** “Pro Filt’r Soft Matte Longwear Foundation” Shades



Source: Fenty Beauty Official Website

Another important part of Fenty Beauty's strategy is its diverse representation<sup>15</sup>. The brand's advertisements have always used models and influencers from various races, genders, and backgrounds which shares a feeling of welcome and realness. The #fentyface campaigns show Fenty Beauty's dedication to customers engagement which is also a key part of its selling plan. They use user-generated content (UGC), asking buyers to post their experiences with Fenty products, posting them through official channels to build a sense of community<sup>16</sup>.

**Image 6:** Fenty Beauty #FENTYFACE Campaign



Screenshot of the Fenty Beauty website

Its message of inclusivity was strengthened by making partnerships with influencers from different cultures. The impact it had on the cosmetic industry was so great that it earned what is called the "Fenty Effect" and pushed many other brands to rethink their shade ranges and inclusivity policies<sup>17</sup>. Prior to the launch of Fenty Beauty, most brands operated under a certain standard of beauty, thereby marginalizing people who did not fit within it and implicitly communicating that beauty was only for those who subscribed to these ideals. Fenty Beauty disrupted this narrative and compelled its competitors to reassess their approaches. The launch of 40 shades was a new standard in the industry; any less became equal to apathy. The immediate sellout of the deepest shades of foundation by Fenty Beauty demonstrated both financially and ethically indispensable ignored consumer needs within that marketplace. The commercial success of the brand was immediate. In its first month, it achieved an earned media value of \$72 million, outperforming its competitors. Publications such as Time Magazine recognized its impact by naming it one of the "25 Best Inventions of the Year". As a result, the concept of diversity in beauty became more widely accepted, and the concept of inclusion became an essential component of both communication and production.

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<sup>15</sup> Representation in beauty marketing is crucial for fostering inclusivity and consumer loyalty.

<sup>16</sup> Encouraging user-generated content strengthens community engagement and brand credibility

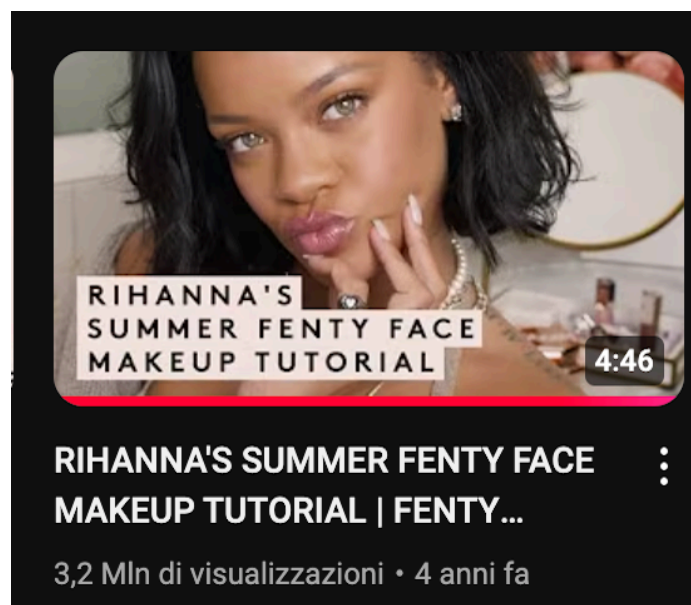
<sup>17</sup> The "Fenty Effect" refers to the widespread industry shift toward greater inclusivity.



Fenty Beauty adopted an omnichannel strategy, combining a massive digital presence with the physical distribution through Sephora, that accounts for 35% of the brand's total sales, reinforcing its premium positioning while maintaining broad availability.

A key aspect of the intersection of celebrity and creator economy in the case of Fenty Beauty is the activity of Rihanna herself, who creates tutorials and promotional content for the brand, reinforcing the direct link with the audience and offering an authentic insight into product usage. Her active role as the founder and public face of Fenty Beauty has been a critical component of its success, since she was deeply involved in every stage of Fenty Beauty's creation, from product development to marketing strategies.

**Image 7:** Rihanna's Summer Fenty Face Makeup Tutorial on YouTube



Source: Fenty Beauty YouTube Channel

Her popularity, which includes 150 million Instagram followers, 15.8 million TikTok followers and 44.1 million YouTube subscribers, has allowed her to connect directly with a global audience. A particularly striking example of her influence occurred during the 2023 Super Bowl Halftime Show, when Rihanna subtly displayed Fenty's Invisimatte Instant Setting and Blotting Powder during her performance.

What seemed a spontaneous moment of her quick adjusting her makeup, was in fact a calculated marketing strategy that generated \$5.6 million in media impact within 12 hours.



Beyond traditional advertising, the move demonstrated the seamless way in which Rihanna has integrated Fenty Beauty into global cultural moments, reinforcing the authenticity and organic appeal of the brand<sup>18</sup>.

**Image 8:** Rihanna applying Fenty Beauty makeup during the Super Bowl 2023 Halftime Show



Source: Daily Mail

More than aesthetics, Fenty Beauty highlighted deeper systemic injustices in representation and accessibility.

For decades, consumers with darker skin tones have been marginalized by an industry that has prioritized lighter skin tones, thereby reinforcing notions of exclusion. Rihanna's vision for Fenty Beauty went beyond simply offering a wider shade range, she leveraged makeup as a tool for empowerment. Its approach to inclusivity as a form of defiance against industry norms has redefined the standards, making representation a non-negotiable for new entrants.

Also, in 2020, Fenty Beauty donated \$1 million to racial justice organizations, including Black Lives Matter and NAACP, that demonstrates its commitment to aligning business with activism.

Fenty Beauty embodies values that transcend the beauty industry, it is a cultural phenomenon redefining the beauty sector, inspiring consumers, and competitors as well.

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<sup>18</sup> Rihanna's organic marketing approach differentiates Fenty Beauty from competitors.

### 1.3.2 Rare Beauty

*Image 9: Rare Beauty Logo*



Rare Beauty Official Website

*“Being rare is about being comfortable with yourself. I’ve stopped trying to be perfect. I just want to be me.”*

Selena Gomez

Rare Beauty was founded by Selena Gomez in 2020 and emerges for its commitment to mental health and personal authenticity. The brand goes beyond normal beauty standards by redefining the concepts of inclusivity, accessibility, and the social impact of the entire industry<sup>19</sup>.

The brand was founded starting by Selena Gomez personal struggles for mental health, trying to create a connection between self-love and well-being.

Rare Beauty is characterized by its product design, which includes light formulas with the aim of emphasizing natural beauty without creating a fake appearance. Among other features of Rare Beauty there is the use of soft-touch surfaces, ergonomic handles and easy-to-use packaging, such as the Soft Pinch liquid blush (showed in the picture), which highlights the brand's and its products' commitment to inclusivity, allowing access to these products even for those with mobility difficulties.

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<sup>19</sup> The brand seeks to redefine beauty standards beyond aesthetics.

**Image 10:** Soft Pinch liquid blush opening



Rare Beauty Official Website

The company does not offer products that focus on unrealistic standards of perfection but promote inclusiveness by introducing mental health initiatives<sup>20</sup>. Despite this, the brand manages to stand out for its social commitment, its design that takes up inclusiveness and its strong approach to digital marketing, positioning itself as accessible and community-oriented, with the aim of encouraging consumers to value and accept themselves, rather than unattainable beauty ideals. The analysis conducted by McKinsey in 2023, tells us that the beauty sector is undergoing a change, recording that 78% of consumers prefer to buy products that emphasize inner beauty and align with their values<sup>21</sup>. Rare Beauty has made the most of this change by emphasizing advocacy, making it a central pillar of its brand identity. The company has managed to stand out within the industry for its social mission, emerging as a unique, recognizable, and inimitable brand.

Selena Gomez has, in fact, established the Rare Beauty Impact Fund with her brand, donating 1% of sales to organizations that support psychological wellness and mental health awareness as part of their “commitment to provide people with access to the resources they need to support their mental health” (Elyse Cohen, Rare Impact Fund president).

This project aims to raise \$100 million in ten years. In 2023 the fund had recorded already over \$7 million, improving the lives of more than one million people around the world (Rare Beauty Impact Report). Up to now, the brand has raised millions of dollars to support mental health globally. This program is not limited to financial donations, as Rare Beauty extends through ongoing partnerships with mental health organizations, funding educational programs, and sponsoring awareness

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<sup>20</sup> The beauty industry has historically been criticized for promoting unrealistic beauty standards, and Rare Beauty positions itself against this narrative.

<sup>21</sup> Inclusivity is a major factor influencing Gen Z consumers, who demand authenticity and representation in marketing campaigns (McKinsey, 2023).

campaigns. Notably, Rare Beauty on the occasion of the World Mental Health Day, on October 10, has made a collaboration with Sephora, which donated 100% of the global sales of the brand's products in that day to the Rare Impact Fund<sup>22</sup>.

**Image 11:** Rare Beauty's Instagram post showing their initiative with Sephora for World Mental Health Day



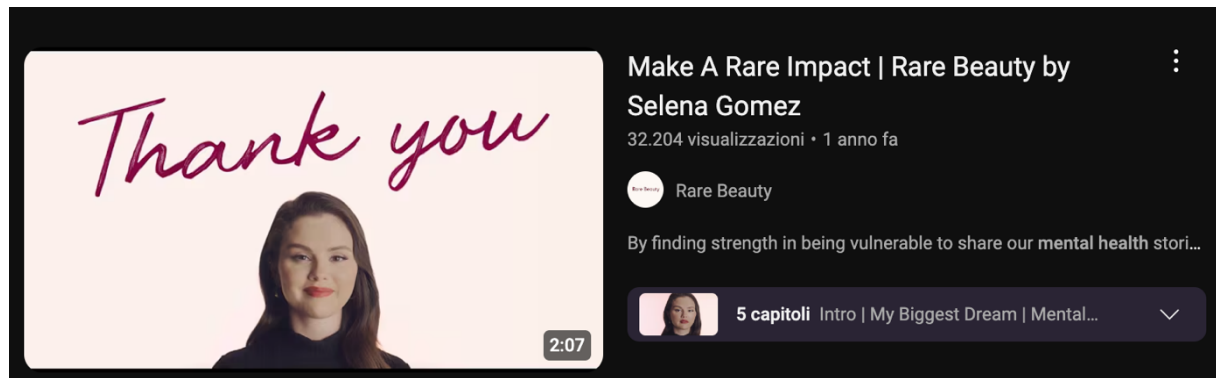
Source: Rare Beauty Instagram (@rarebeauty)

A key aspect of the intersection of celebrity and creator economy in the case of Rare Beauty is that Selena Gomez actively participates in the promotion of the brand with digital content, tutorials, and interviews where she talks about her personal experience within the struggle for mental health while showing the application of the products, thus actively involving her audience.

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<sup>22</sup> The Sephora x Rare Beauty partnership highlights how collaborations can enhance social impact initiatives (Sephora Official Website).

**Image 12:** Selena Gomez's speech on mental health from the Rare Beauty YouTube channel



Source: Rare Beauty YouTube Channel

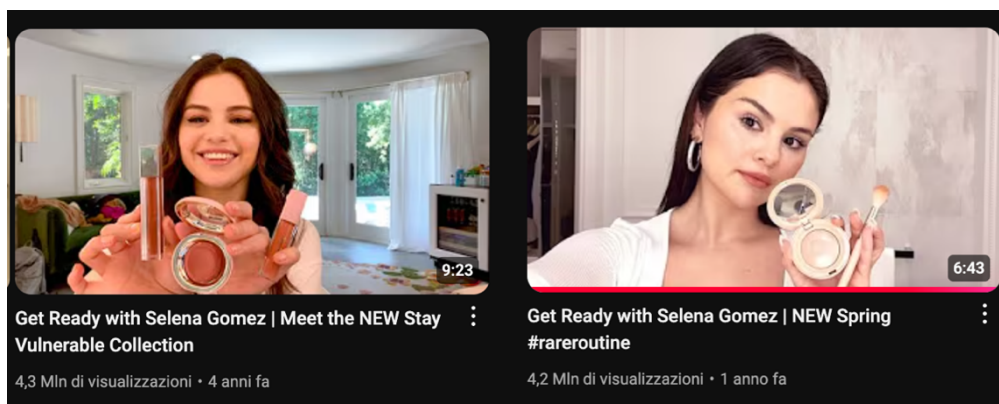
Her genuine storytelling and personal engagement on Instagram, TikTok and YouTube creates a strong emotional connection with consumers, strengthening brand trust and encouraging their loyalty<sup>23</sup>. By doing that, she facilitates the creation of a relation with the audience and normalizes the dialogue around often stigmatized topics<sup>24</sup>.

Selena Gomez's strong digital presence on social media, with 422 million followers on Instagram, 58.2 million on TikTok and 34.9 million on YouTube, gives Rare Beauty an exceptional organic reach, difficult to replicate with conventional advertising tools.

As a global icon, her influence had an important role in improving the brand's mission and creating a strong sense of community among consumers worldwide.

Another strategy used by the brand is to take advantage of user-generated content, encouraging users to share their makeup, using hashtags like #RareBeauty and #RareImpact; thus positioning the brand at the center of conversations on social media, leveraging the millions of views and videos that showcase its best-selling products.

**Image 13 – Image 14:** Selena Gomez's makeup tutorials on Rare Beauty's YouTube channel



Source: Rare Beauty YouTube Channel

<sup>23</sup> Authenticity is one of the most important factors driving consumer engagement on social media (Business of Fashion, 2023).

<sup>24</sup> Rare Beauty helps destigmatize mental health discussions, integrating advocacy into its business model.

Rare Beauty business model focuses on the union of social impact and innovation. The brand, in fact, is not only competitive in the beauty industry, but has also become a reference for those looking for products that go beyond aesthetics and that, in this case, promote mental well-being.

The commercial success of Rare Beauty is a demonstration of this strategy: during its first year on the market, the company recorded a revenue of \$60 million. In 2022, Rare beauty sold a value of 3.1 million of the Soft Pinch Liquid Blush, which gave \$70 million in revenue. In the 2023, it has recorded an increase of 50% of its sales (a revenue of more than \$350 million). Finally, the brand, thanks to its focus that goes behind the beauty product, is destined to have a great success in the cosmetic market.

### 1.3.3 Haus Labs

*Image 15: Haus Labs by Lady Gaga Logo*

**HAUS LABS  
BY LADY GAGA**

Source: Haus Labs Official Website

*“At Haus Labs, we want you to love yourself. Our products are about self-expression, being kind to yourself and others, and pushing boundaries in beauty.”*

*Lady Gaga*

Haus Labs by Lady Gaga, which had first come out in 2019 under the name 'Haus Laboratories', got rebranded in 2022. It is not just a simple rebranding since it means an entirely new method of approach<sup>25</sup>. One of the most important changes was the increased accessibility of the products, which were initially only available on Amazon, and are now sold at Sephora stores physically, thus, enhancing experiences of the traditional beauty industry letting customers test the products. Selling the products exclusively on Amazon since 2019 was driven by the brand's need for a global reach and logistical ease since selling through other retail portals would provide Haus Labs with very little support. Even though anyone could access the site, they lacked the reputation to trump brand prestige, thus, a shift in 2022 towards Sephora allowed Haus Labs to better enter the luxury industry<sup>26</sup>. Haus Labs was able to respond to the market demand right away by introducing 51 shades to cover a broader audience, showing their commitment to diversity.

In addition, Amazon had been the only retailer willing to fully support. Aside from that, Amazon had been the only retailer keen to wholeheartedly accept Haus Labs' unapologetic stance. Although it had broad availability, Amazon did not have the luxury and experience necessary for a prestige cosmetics brand and thus in 2022 transferred to Sephora, where Haus Labs could more

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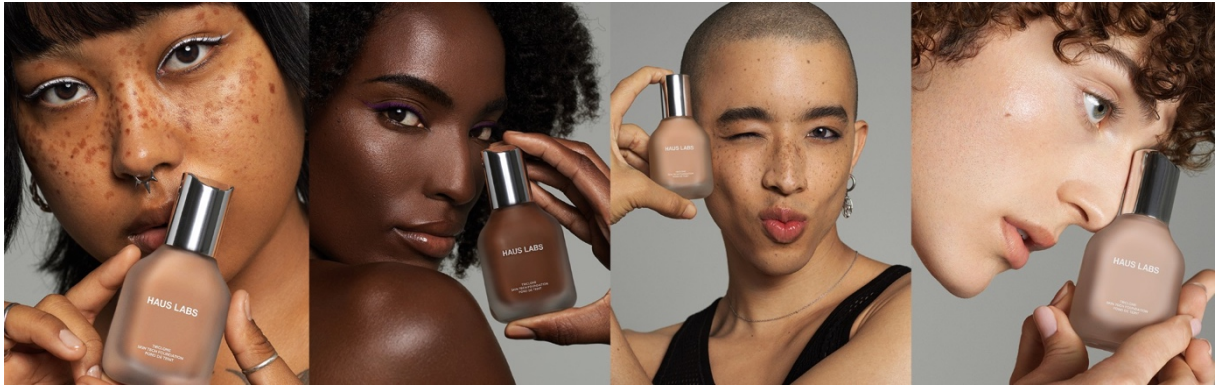
<sup>25</sup> The 2022 rebranding transformed Haus Labs into a clean beauty and skincare-driven brand.

<sup>26</sup> Sephora provides the physical retail experience Amazon lacked, allowing in-store product testing.



effectively place itself in the luxury market. The company was able to make this transition immediately in the industry, offering 51 shades of foundation, to continue to promote its message of inclusivity.

**Image 16:** Haus Labs Foundation Campaign by Lady Gaga



Source: Haus Labs Official Website

In addition, the brand replaced the previous packaging, improving the brand's aesthetic by introducing pastel shades, matte surfaces, and environmentally friendly, thus sustainable, materials in contrast with old glossy black packaging. In fact, the brand decided to highlight its focus on both inclusiveness and sustainability<sup>27</sup>. These changes have resulted in the brand receiving many positive reviews, and an increase in social media interactions, giving the company to possibility to expand into the European market as well. Since its creation, the brand has managed to differentiate itself from its competitors by combining high-performance cosmetics with skin benefits, creating a cross between beauty and scientific innovation. This makes product formulation technique another distinguishing feature. In fact, Haus Labs uses advanced ingredients such as fermented hyaluronic acid and biotechnological pigments, carefully formulated to improve skin quality and ensure longer-lasting, higher-performance cosmetic products. Among the most relevant products are Triclone Skin Tech Foundation: it includes more than 20 skin care ingredients, available in 51 different shades with the aim of meeting all the needs of customers with different skin tones and undertones, this has made Haus Labs succeed in establishing itself not only as a beauty brand but also as a leader in the cosmetics technology industry.

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<sup>27</sup> Sustainability-focused packaging is now a dominant trend in the beauty industry (Business of Fashion, 2023).



**Image 17:** Haus Labs by Lady Gaga Makeup Products



Source: Haus Labs Official Website

Financially, Haus Labs has remained steadily on the increase since its start. WWD estimates that Haus Labs was in 2020 the third highest media value celebrity beauty makeup company to gross over \$141.7 million. The company realized a 400% spike in sales from 2021 to 2022 as a direct impact of rebranding itself focused on clean formulations and skin-loving ingredients (Beautymatter).

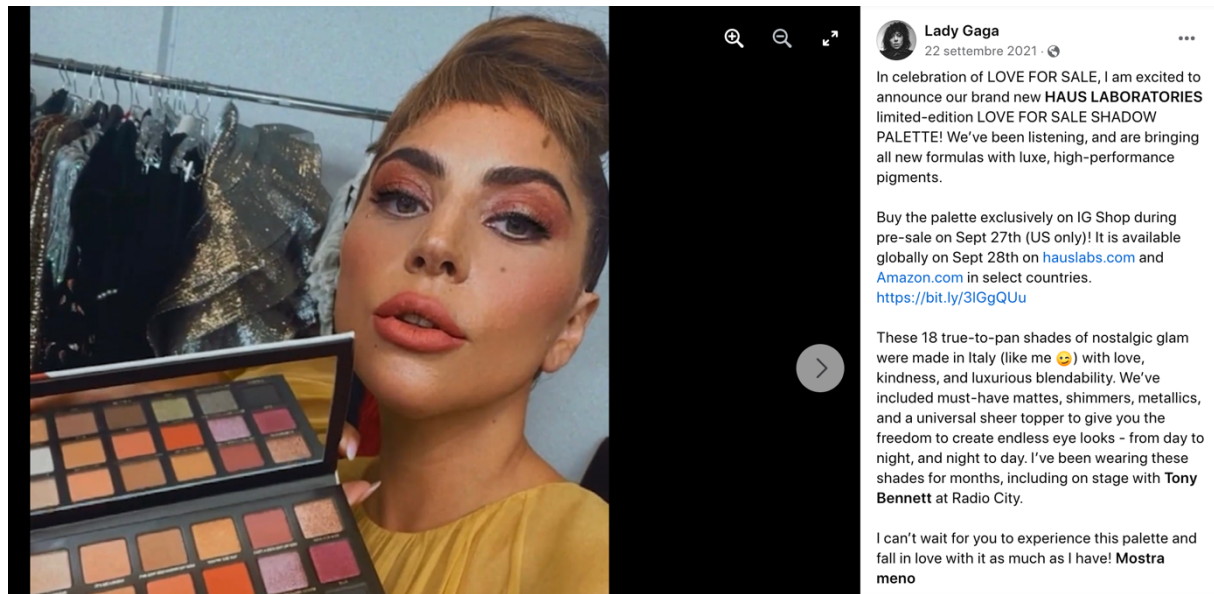
In 2023, the company kept growing, with sales between \$75m and \$100m, a 70% increase from last year (Beautymatter)<sup>28</sup>. It also partnered with ClearForMe to improve ingredient transparency on its e-commerce site (Beautypackaging). Its Sephora transition drove +45% digital traffic, supporting its omnichannel strategy (Beautymatter).

In March 2024, Haus Labs further enhanced its international presence with its partnership with Sephora, and currently distributes its products in 12 nations across Europe, including Italy, France, Spain and Germany, and is targeting long-term international expansion. (Milanofinanza). Haus Labs also donates \$1 for each purchase made on its official website to the Born This Way Foundation, a charity founded in 2012 by Gaga and her mother to raise awareness for mental health. The same amount for each sale of the Love for Sale Eyeshadow Palette was donated to Tony Bennett's charity, Exploring the Arts, which was established in 1999.

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<sup>28</sup> The brand's growth outpaced competitors, reinforcing its market viability.

**Image 18:** Haus Labs' Facebook post promoting the Love for Sale Eyeshadow Palette by Lady Gaga



Source: Haus Labs Facebook Page

The company aims to promote self-acceptance. Haus Labs, in fact shows its commitment to inclusiveness by offering products suitable for all skin types, regardless of ethnicity, gender or age<sup>29</sup>. The range of colors it offers, echoes the creator consideration of the make-up: a way to be able to express one's individual being, free from all stereotypes.

Haus Labs is a remarkable example of the convergence of the celebrity economy and the creator economy.

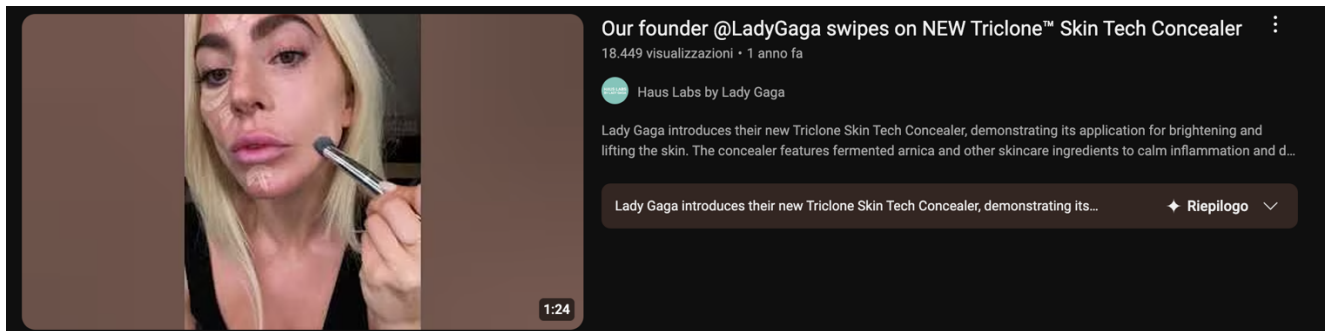
Indeed, Lady Gaga with Haus Labs engages in brand promotion through digital campaigns and educational tutorials, demonstrating product application and articulating her artistic vision. Brand engagement on Instagram, TikTok and YouTube has resulted in an emerging of community of consumers who view make-up as a tool for creativity and self-expression.

The communication strategy focuses on authenticity and inclusivity, the creator uses direct and makeup tutorials, with the goal of encouraging her followers to express themselves.

Haus Labs also uses ad campaigns on platforms such as YouTube, with videos showing where the creator demonstrates her makeup process.

<sup>29</sup> Inclusivity is not just a marketing message but a fundamental brand value.

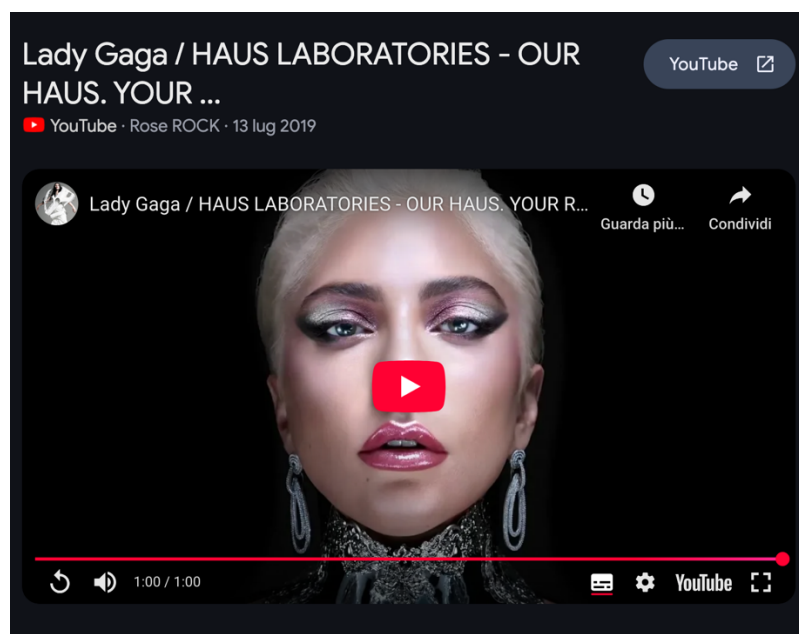
**Image 19:** Lady Gaga applying the Triclone™ Skin Tech Concealer on Haus Labs' YouTube channel



Source: Haus Labs YouTube Channel

The most iconic campaign was the one-minute video titled “Our Haus. Your Rules.” which served as the launch video and was directed by Daniel Sannwald and starred Lady Gaga. The video aims to get people to accept their unique self and express it through makeup and body sculptures thanks to her makeup collection.

**Image 20:** Lady Gaga in the “Our Haus. Your Rules” campaign video for Haus Labs



Source: Rose ROCK YouTube Channel

As mentioned before, the brand has with its commitment to innovation, sustainability, and empowerment, shows that the brand is not just an extension of personality but a true cultural movement in the beauty industry.

Haus Labs' commitment to innovation, sustainability and artistic empowerment demonstrates that the brand is not just an extension of Lady Gaga's persona but embodies a true cultural movement in the beauty industry.

## CHAPTER II

### THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

#### ***2.1 Literature review***

Several research arose from the existing literature that investigated the impact of brand-celebrity partnerships and the increasingly important role of digital influencers in marketing strategies. More specifically, five main themes are discussed: celebrity influence on WOM, consumer engagement, brand loyalty, narrative message credibility, and brand value perception.

##### ***2.1.1 HI***

Over the years, there has been a great change in the models of marketing in the beauty industry, shifting from traditional ways to modern strategies which are based on co-creation and participation. The makeup brands created by celebrities, with genuine content behind them, stand distinct from conventional endorsements where celebrities promote products conceived by others. The direct involvement of a celebrity in the development and promotion of a brand is important to stimulate positive word-of-mouth (WOM). A label established by a celebrity and bolstered by authentic and consistent content cultivates a more profound emotional connection and enhances consumer loyalty than a conventional sponsorship, in which a celebrity functions solely as a figurehead.

According to Botelho (2019)<sup>30</sup>, when a celebrity actively participates in the development and promotion of a brand, audiences feel greater involvement and authenticity. This authenticity boosts WOM since consumers tends to share favorable comments when treated honestly. Filieri et al. (2023)<sup>31</sup> further argue that the narrative coherence and authenticity of a celebrity-founder reinforce consumer trust, encouraging positive WOM. In a similar vein, Muda and Hamzah (2021) emphasize that the perceived credibility of a brand is markedly enhanced when a celebrity generates content that demonstrates direct engagement with the brand.

Social media engagement is extremely important to positive WOM (Wang & Lee, 2021). When the founder actively tells brand stories, consumers connect with them. Authenticity and active involvement in the beauty sector take precedence over mere appearance and fame (Filieri et al., 2023). There is a preference of the consumers toward brands that create a community, which can only be achieved when the founding celebrity balances the brand image with their personal values and commitment. Spironelli (2019) agrees that the genuineness of celebrity founders influences the

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<sup>30</sup> Botelho, B. (2019). *The role of authenticity in celebrity branding*. *Journal of Marketing Research*.

<sup>31</sup> Filieri, R., Lin, Z., Dey, B., & Miguéis, V. L. (2023). Authenticity in celebrity branding: Effects on consumer trust and WOM. *International Journal of Business Research*.

purchasing intention. There is a direct positive relationship between brand and commercial decisions of celebrities with consumer attitude. Chen and Dermawan (2020) claim that personalized content, such as tutorials and reviews created by celebrities, improves brand perception, and increases the intention to buy. When a celebrity displays genuine product knowledge and shares their passion for its use, trust in the brand is developed among consumers. The trust of the public is what primarily distinguishes a branded product from a celebrity endorsement. According to Muda et al. (2021), celebrity credibility ascends when a celebrity participates comprehensively in the brand story through authentic content, generating higher WOM both in quantity and quality. Also, Botelho (2019) argued that active brand-building celebrity founders enhance consumer loyalty toward brands creating real brand ambassador customers who help build brand equity.

The current body of literature indicates that celebrity founders who actively participate in branding and promotional activities cultivate a sense of connection and belonging among consumers. This emotional connection can lead to greater satisfaction, reinforcing the assumption that direct celebrity involvement in the product line narrative contributes favorably to consumers' behavioral intentions, including their propensity to generate positive WOM.

Given the above:

***H1: A makeup brand created and promoted by a singer has a greater positive influence on WOM compared to a brand sponsored by a non-founder celebrity.***

### **2.1.2 H2 & H3**

The active involvement of a celebrity in the creation, promotion and management of a brand has a significant impact on consumer engagement, an essential element in increasing WOM communication.

As explained by Brodie et al. (2011), engagement encompasses the affective, cognitive, and behavioral involvement of consumers towards a brand.

This is manifested through stimulating activities such as online discussions and debates, user sharing and content creation.

Engagement represents an active and intentional participation, as opposed to passive interactions, causing consumers to be identified as an essential part of the brand ecosystem.

Engagement, as pointed out by Hollebeek et al. (2014)<sup>32</sup>, is a process that progresses rather dynamically, based on the quality of the content, the timely consistency of the messaging and also based on the engagement demonstrated by the celebrity in question.

Brands built through celebrities, as opposed to simple endorsements or endorsements, are perceived as more authentic.

According to Moulard et al. (2015) celebrity values, in communion with truthfulness and constancy, make it possible to develop deep relationships and trust

When a brand is actively managed and marketed by a celebrity, the consumers' perception of authenticity is fostered and thus their propensity to be participatory and active in promotional inputs will be different as well as increasing the chances of a long-lasting relationship with the brand.

Wang and Lee emphasize the importance, therefore, of personalized and genuine interactions that lead brands to stand out from their rivals and foster consumer loyalty.

The development and growth of online platforms has resulted in unparalleled levels of engagement, radically transforming the way brands are perceived and consumed.

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010)<sup>33</sup> argue that direct engagement between celebrities and their audiences through social media facilitates a reciprocal dialogue, emphasizing a sense of community and the concept of belonging.

All content offering behind-the-scenes glimpses, tutorials, insights, focus on the celebrity's creative process, greatly increase the perceived value of the brand, thus fostering greater participation and involvement.

Chen and Donovan (2020) argue that not so much the frequency as the quality of engagement plays a key role in WOM.

High-value interactions and activities, such as personalized content, educational resources and peer recommendations, increase consumer trust and advocacy.

A further crucial component for promoting engagement is the creation of a brand-focused digital community.

Ho et al. (2024) state that digital brand communities provide a sense of belonging, thus enticing consumers to share their experiences and continue to support the brand organically. Phyu (2024) not only reiterates this notion, but also emphasizes that social media platforms provide an ideal space for immediate and personalized interactions, which increase consumer satisfaction and the likelihood of WOM diffusion.

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<sup>32</sup> Hollebeek, L. D., Glynn, M. S., & Brodie, R. J. (2014). Consumer Brand Engagement in Social Media: Conceptualization, Scale Development and Validation. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 28(2), 149–165.

<sup>33</sup> Kaplan, A. M., & Haenlein, M. (2010). Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of social media. *Business Horizons*, 53(1), 59–68.

Schouten et al. (2020) conducted a comparative analysis of celebrity-founded versus celebrity-sponsored brands. Their results indicate that the former category generates a deeper level of engagement, attributable to the perceived personal connection with the celebrity founder.

In particular, a make-up brand created and endorsed to an artist has a more beneficial effect on consumer engagement than a brand endorsed or sponsored to any other celebrity.

Finally, engagement is essential to strengthen word of mouth. Strategies based on authenticity, narrative consistency, and interactive digital experiences create a positive trust and loyalty. Investing in engagement, especially in celebrity-created brands, helps build strong relationships with consumers and ensure long-term brand success.

Considering this information:

**H2:** *Engagement mediates the association between brand and celebrity bonding and WOM. Specifically, a brand of makeup endorsed by a singer who is also the creator of the brand demonstrates a more favorable impact on engagement compared to the same brand endorsed by any other celebrity.*

**H3:** *Engagement mediates the relationship between brand and celebrity bonding and WOM. In particular, a high level of engagement contributes to an improvement in WOM.*

#### **2.1.3 H4**

The current marketing framework has undergone many changes. In particular, under the strategy communication field. The rise of digital platforms, together with the importance of emotional connection and professional involvement in the decision process, have resulted in storytelling becoming a central element in brand messaging. This methodology has proven effective particularly for celebrity-founded make-up brands, where not only do the latter lend their names but embody the brand's values and actively and directly contribute to the creation and promulgation of the narrative. This emotional factor fosters a more deeper engagement than traditional contents, that focus only on the spread of information. The make-up industry, with is linked to authenticity, creativity, and beauty, is an ideal area for storytelling, which strengthens the emotional connection between consumers and brands.

The effects of storytelling are based on two fundamental concepts. The “narrative transportation theory”, as presented by Green and Brock (2000), states that consumers who immerse themselves in a brand's story are more likely to develop positive feedback toward the brand. In the context of cosmetics, stories that emphasize inclusivity and empowerment resonate deeply, particularly when celebrity founders genuinely embody these values. Similarly, “brand authenticity theory” (Moulard



et al.,2015) presented that brand perception is more credible when brand values are correlated with the associated celebrity's behaviors and personal narrative<sup>34</sup>. When the founder shares his or her personal journey with the brand, it significantly increases perceived authenticity and increases consumer engagement.

Storytelling not only is important to differentiate brands in the market but allow also the creation of lasting emotional connections. Setter (2021) states that authentic stories told by celebrity founders, especially when they emphasize shared values such as inclusiveness, increase consumer identification with the brand. A study done by Kim et al. (2016) on luxury brands reveals that narrative messages outperform descriptive messages in generating high levels of engagement and perceived value. The emotions evoked by captivating storytelling, particularly when conveyed by a celebrity founder, motivate consumers to actively interact with the brand via social platforms, sharing and commenting. Shobowale (2022) emphasizes the role of celebrity founders in cultivating brand authenticity through personal storytelling.

Unlike the traditional contribution, where the individual is merely placed as a representative symbol, celebrity founders who share their personal experiences enhance brand credibility and foster stronger emotional bonds. Anagnostou (2024) went on to point out that platforms such as TikTok and Instagram offer fertile ground for storytelling due to their immersive and highly viral entertainment features. Storytelling videos in which celebrity founders share personal stories about their journey with the brand achieve significantly higher engagement rates than traditional descriptive content. This is evident in metrics such as likes, shares, and comments, which indicate the power of authentic storytelling in promoting emotional resonance and consumer loyalty. In addition, the “author stories” concept by Aaker (2018) underlines the strategic value in the narrative that embodies the fundamental values of the brand. In the beauty sector, celebrity founders who create engaging and authentic stories not only attract attention but also motivate consumers to actively engage in the brand ecosystem. These stories, when shared on digital platforms, have the potential to convert consumers from passive observers to active brand advocates, amplifying the brand's horizons and influence. Consumers are much more likely to shift from digital interactions to concrete purchase decisions when the celebrity narrative is in line with brand values. This transition is further enhanced by the perception of authenticity, which fosters trust and reduces psychological barriers to purchase. As Delbaere et al. (2021)<sup>35</sup> argued, storytelling creates a sense of belonging within a community, encouraging consumers to interact not only with the brand but also with other members of the brand's audience.

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<sup>34</sup> Moulard, J. G., Garrity, C. P., & Rice, D. H. (2015). What makes a human brand authentic? Identifying the antecedents of celebrity authenticity. *Psychology & Marketing*, 32(2), 173–186.

<sup>35</sup> Delbaere, M., Michael, B., & Phillips, B. J. (2020). Social media influencers: A route to brand engagement for their followers

From the integration of personal stories within the brand narrative, celebrity founders cultivate a broader and more emotionally connected network of consumers who feel invested in the brand's success.

Confirming the research findings, the synergy between authentic storytelling and celebrity involvement emerges as an indispensable factor in creating a competitive advantage in the beauty industry. When a narrative is driven by a celebrity founder and reflects consistency, emotional resonance, and is aligned with consumer values, it significantly increases authenticity and perceived meaning for the brand. Such narratives cultivate deeper brand loyalty and promote active participation especially on social platforms. This dual effect of strengthening emotional ties and stimulating consumer actions, bring back the central role of storytelling in contemporary marketing strategies, resulting in increased purchase intentions of customer loyalty and digital participation.

Taking this into account:

***H4:** The type of message moderates the relationship between the brand-celebrity association and engagement. Specifically, a storytelling message associated with a makeup brand endorsed by a singer who is also the brand's creator positively influences engagement compared to a descriptive message associated with a makeup brand endorsed by a generic celebrity.*

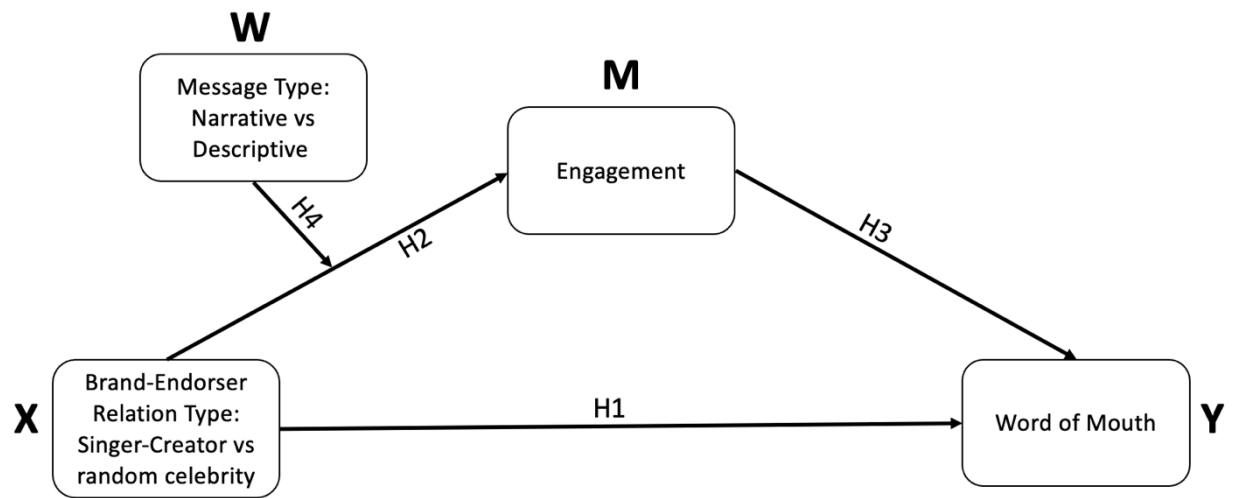
## **2.2 Conceptual Framework**

The primary objective of this experimental study is to investigate how different types of relationships between makeup brands and celebrity endorsers (singer-creator vs. generic celebrity) influence consumer WOM (word of mouth) within the cosmetics sector.

To test this relationship, the conceptual framework was completed by incorporating the indirect effect represented by the mediating factor of engagement, generated by the type of relationship between the brand and the celebrity, and the moderating effect resulting from the interaction between the brand-celebrity relationship and the type of message (narrative vs. descriptive). Based on this assumption, the research model was designed with engagement as the mediating factor, the type of message as the moderator, the type of brand-celebrity relationship as the independent variable, and WOM as the dependent variable.

The development of the conceptual framework by Andrew F. Hayes' Model 7 was adopted, characterized by the presence of an independent variable (X), a dependent variable (Y), a mediator (M), and a moderator (W).

**Image 21:** Conceptual Framework Model 7 Mediation moderated



## **CHAPTER III**

### **EXPERIMENTAL RESEARCH**

#### ***3.1 Methodological Approach***

##### ***3.1.1 Methodology and Study***

This experimental study follows a conclusive causal research design with a 2x2 between-subjects structure. The results are derived from participants' responses to a questionnaire, which was administered through a self-administered survey. The survey was conducted in Italy in February 2025 using the online platform Qualtrics XM. The subjects were chosen through a non-probabilistic sampling method, specifically a convenience sampling approach, chosen for its accessibility and efficiency in reaching respondents quickly.

This approach is cost-free and offers significant advantages, particularly in terms of rapid data collection and a high response rate. Regarding the target sample, respondents over the age of 28 were selected to ensure participation from individuals who have moderate exposure to sponsorships on social media. Additionally, both male and female participants were included, as gender was not anticipated to have a statistically significant influence on the experiment's results...

##### ***3.1.2 Participants and Sampling procedure***

A total of 278 people were invited to participate in the survey, and 225 of them completed the questionnaire in its entirety, ensuring detailed and valid responses for the study. The remaining 53 responses were incomplete and were subsequently filtered out during the data cleaning phase. The survey link, generated anonymously through the Qualtrics XM platform, was shared primarily through WhatsApp and Instagram, leveraging instant messaging and social media for distribution. The survey primarily reached individuals from Generation X and Y, residing in various cities across Italy. The respondents had an average age of 36.53 years, with ages ranging between 29 and 67. In terms of gender distribution, the majority of participants were female, accounting for 72% (162 out of 225), while males made up 24% (54 out of 225). The remaining 4% (9 out of 225) either chose not to disclose their gender (3.6%; 8 out of 225) or identified as non-binary (0.4%; 1 out of 225).

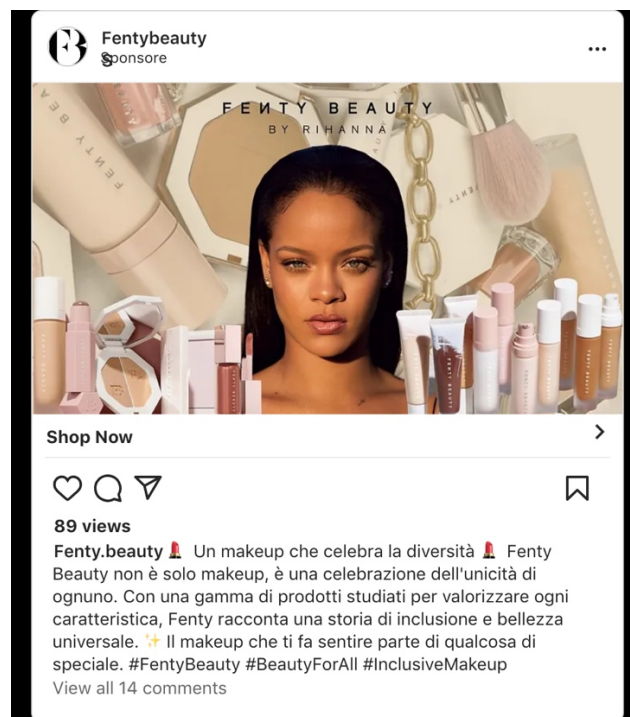
##### ***3.1.3 Data Collection and Questionnaire Composition***

To carry out the experimental study, a questionnaire was created with a total of eight questions, including six focused on the research topic and two aimed at gathering demographic information.

To test the independent variable (the relationship between the brand and the celebrity—brand founder versus an unrelated celebrity) and the moderator variable (message style—narrative versus descriptive), four distinct visual stimuli were developed.

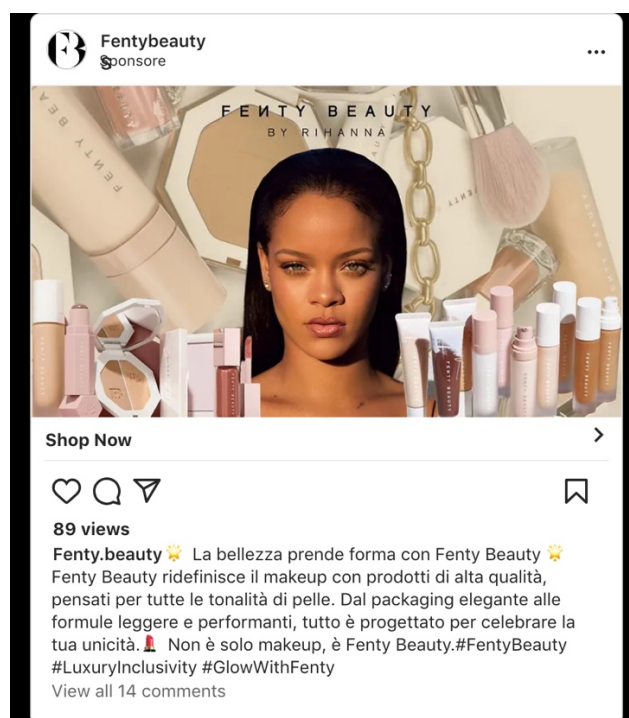
The first scenario consists in a sponsored Instagram post with Rihanna, who is both a celebrity and the brand's founder, accompanied by a narrative-style message.

**Image 22:** Stimuli 1 (Celebrity founder + Narrative message)



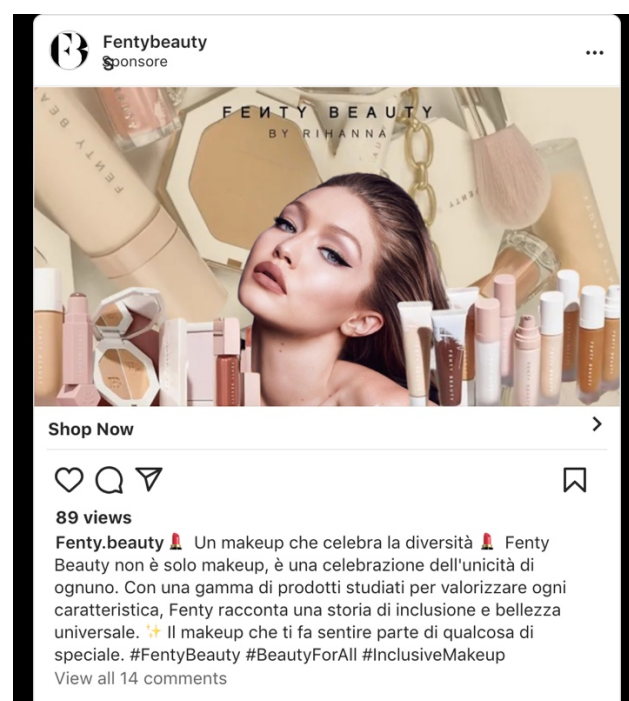
The second scenario consists of an image of a sponsored post on Instagram characterized by the presence of Rihanna (celebrity creator of the brand) and a descriptive message.

**Image 23:** Stimuli 2 (Celebrity founder + Descriptive message)



The third scenario consists of an image of a sponsored post on Instagram featuring a model (celebrity not creator of the brand) and a narrative message.

**Image 24:** Stimuli 3 (Any Celebrity + Narrative message)



The fourth scenario consists of an image of a sponsored post on Instagram characterized by the presence of a model (celebrity not creator of the brand) and a descriptive message.

**Image 25:** Stimuli 4 (Any Celebrity + Descriptive message)



As previously mentioned, data collection was conducted through a structured questionnaire divided into four sections. It began with a short explaining of the academic purpose of the study. The university's credentials were also included, and all privacy regulations were strictly followed to ensure anonymity in data collection and management.

The second section of the survey was designed as a randomized block featuring four different scenarios. Randomization played a key role in ensuring that each visual stimulus was presented to an equal number of participants. To prevent potential cognitive biases or preconceived opinions about the brand, the scenarios were created as mock-up posts rather than actual advertisements.

Therefore, all visual conditions were realized using Ad Mockup Generator (a free site for the development of realistic posts).

The third part of the survey was introduced to the respondents after being subjected to the observation of one of the four scenarios. Specifically, this block of the questionnaire consisted of 6 questions: the first 3 concerning the mediator (Engagement) and the other 3 concerning the dependent variable (WOM- Word Of Mouth). All questions were assessed using a 7-point Likert scale.

**MEDIATOR QUESTIONS:** Indicate on a scale of 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree) to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements):

**MED 1:** I perceive the brand I just visualized as part of myself-image.

**MED 2:** The brand just viewed could convey an image of me to others.

**MED 3:** I perceive the displayed brand as important to me.

***DEPENDENT VARIABLE QUESTION:***

Indicate on a scale of 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree) to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements):

**DV 1:** I am inclined to spread positive word of mouth about the brand I just viewed.

**DV 2:** I would recommend the brand I just viewed to my friends.

**DV 3:** If my friends wanted to buy make-up products, I would tell them to try those of the brand I just viewed

The first scale, relating to the mediator (Engagement), is derived from the scale pre-validated by Micu et al. (2009, pg. 69-81).

The second scale, related to the dependent variable (WOM - Word of Mouth), is derived from the scale pre-validated by Maxham III et al. (2003, pg. 46-62).

The scales were both readjusted according to the needs of the experimental study.

The fourth and last part of the questionnaire, finally, is characterized by the block dedicated to demographic questions, in which were asked the gender and age of the respondents.

**GENDER QUESTION:** Please indicate your gender:

Male

Female

Non-binary / Third gender

Prefer not to say

**AGE QUESTION:** Please indicate your age

### ***3.2 Experimental Results***

#### ***3.2.1 Data Analysis***

The responses gathered from the questionnaire created on Qualtrics XM were exported to the SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) software for analysis. As a first step, two exploratory factor



analyses were conducted to assess and validate the scale items used in the conceptual framework of the experiment. Principal component analysis was used as the extraction method, with Varimax applied as the rotation technique. To determine the appropriate number of factors to extract, the total explained variance table was examined, ensuring that, following Kaiser's criterion, only factors with an Eigenvalue greater than 1 were retained and that the cumulative variance exceeded 60%. Additionally, the communalities table and the component matrix were analyzed to further validate the factor structure

All items showed an extraction value above 0.5 and a factor loading greater than 0.3, confirming their relevance. As a result, all scale items were retained and validated.

Following this validation, two reliability tests were conducted to assess the consistency of the scales. Specifically, Cronbach's alpha was examined to ensure that reliability exceeded the 0.60 threshold. The mediator scale demonstrated a Cronbach's alpha of 0.890, while the scale for the dependent variable recorded a value of 0.900. These results confirmed that the two scales were highly reliable.

Additionally, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test was conducted to assess sampling adequacy. For the mediator scale, a KMO value of 0.730 was obtained, while the dependent variable scale recorded a value of 0.752, both exceeding the 0.6 threshold, indicating a satisfactory level of adequacy. Following this, Bartlett's test of sphericity was performed, yielding statistically significant results in both cases, with a p-value of 0.001 ( $p < 0.05$ ).

### ***3.2.2 Hypotheses Results***

After performing factor analyses and reliability tests, the primary hypotheses of the conceptual research model were assessed to determine their statistical significance, confirming or rejecting their validity and overall effectiveness.

#### **H1**

To assess the statistical significance of the direct hypothesis (H1), a One-Way ANOVA was conducted to compare mean values. This analysis aimed to examine the impact of the independent variable, which differentiates between a celebrity founder and a general celebrity, on the dependent variable, Word of Mouth (WOM). The independent variable (X) is categorical and consists of two distinct groups, coded as 0 for any celebrity and 1 for a celebrity founder, while the dependent variable (Y) is a continuous metric variable. After performing the ANOVA, an analysis of the descriptive

statistics table revealed that respondents exposed to the scenario coded as 0 (108 participants) had an average score of 4.2253, whereas those assigned to the condition labeled as 1 (117 participants) reported a higher mean value of 5.4330. Additionally, the ANOVA results indicated a statistically significant F-test, with a p-value of 0.001, which was under the threshold of 0.05 ( $p < \alpha = 0.05$ ). The analysis revealed a statistically significant difference between the group means, demonstrating a meaningful impact of X on Y. Consequently, the direct hypothesis H1 (main effect) was supported.

## **H2-H3**

To assess the statistical significance of the indirect hypothesis (H2-H3), a regression analysis was performed using Model 4 from the Process Macro extension in SPSS (version 4.2), developed by Andrew F. Hayes. This analysis aimed to examine the mediating role of engagement in the relationship between the independent variable (celebrity type: celebrity founder vs. general celebrity) and the dependent variable (Word of Mouth - WOM).

To evaluate the effectiveness of the mediation effect, it was essential to separate it into two distinct relationships: the first involving the link between the independent variable and the mediator (H2) and the second examining the relationship between the mediator and the dependent variable (H3). To establish the statistical significance of both hypotheses, a 95% confidence interval was applied, using a reference significance level of 5%.

Furthermore, it was essential to verify that the confidence interval boundaries (LLCI = Lower Level of Confidence Interval; ULCI = Upper Level of Confidence Interval) maintained sign consistency (both positive or both negative) for each hypothesis, ensuring that zero was not included within the range. Lastly, to determine both the direction and strength of each effect, the regression analysis  $\beta$  coefficients for the relationships between the variables were examined.

## **H2**

With regard to the first part of the indirect effect, a p-value of 0.0000, a favorable confidence interval (LLCI= 0.9163; ULCI= 1.6739) and a positive regression coefficient b of 1.2951 were noted through the observation of the SPSS output. As a result, this part of the indirect effect reached statistical significance, providing support for Hypothesis H2.

## **H3**

By analyzing the SPSS output for the second part of the indirect effect, a p-value of 0.0000 was observed, along with a confidence interval (LLCI = 0.6022; ULCI = 0.7665) that did not include zero

and a positive regression coefficient  $b$  of 0.6844. These results indicate statistical significance for this section of the indirect effect, thus supporting Hypothesis H3.

Based on the results obtained, it was possible to decree the success of the mediation effect (Indirect effect), as both sections of the hypothesis were significant. Furthermore, considering the non-significance of the direct effect contained within the regression, it was possible to ascertain the existence of pure mediation.

#### **H4**

To assess the statistical significance of the moderation hypothesis (H4), a Two-Way ANOVA was performed to examine the interaction effect between the independent variable (celebrity type: celebrity founder vs. any celebrity) and the moderator variable (message type: narrative vs. descriptive) on the mediator variable (Engagement). This analysis aimed to determine whether the combined influence of these factors significantly impacted engagement levels. The independent variable ( $X$ ) and the moderator variable ( $W$ ) are both categorical and consist of two distinct conditions: 0 (any celebrity, descriptive message) and 1 (celebrity founder, narrative message). In contrast, the mediator variable ( $M$ ) is continuous, allowing for metric evaluation within the analysis. After conducting the ANOVA and examining the descriptive statistics table, it was observed that respondents exposed to the scenario coded as 0.0 (53 participants) had an average score of 4.2138. Those in the 0.1 condition (55 participants) reported a mean of 3.3152. Participants who viewed the stimulus labeled as 1.0 (55 individuals) had an average score of 4.8848, while those in the 1.1 condition (62 individuals) exhibited a mean value of 5.1989.

. Upon examining the Test of Between-Subjects table, the corrected model yielded a  $p$ -value of 0.001, indicating statistical significance ( $p < \alpha = 0.05$ ). Subsequently, all effects of the independent variables on the mediator were assessed. Specifically, the first direct effect between the independent variable and the mediator was found to have a  $p$ -value of 0.001. For the second direct effect, which examines the relationship between the moderating variable and the mediator, the analysis resulted in a  $p$ -value of 0.122. Regarding the interaction effect between the independent variable and the moderator on the mediator, a  $p$ -value of 0.001 was obtained. This indicates a statistically significant difference in group means, confirming the substantial effect of the interaction between  $X$  and  $W$  on  $M$ . As a result, the moderation hypothesis H4 (interaction effect) was supported.

## CHAPTER IV

### GENERAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results obtained make it possible to offer a contribution at both the managerial and theoretical levels. In any case, this study also demonstrates some limitations which can be addressed by further investigation on the topic. The next sections will present the above topics in more detail.

#### ***4.1 Theoretical contributions***

The purpose of this experimental research was to demonstrate that a brand associated with a celebrity (in this case a singer) creator would improve engagement and Word of Mouth (WOM).

The paper, which took shape in the context of the Celebrity and Creator Economy, is structured around four hypotheses, and analyses the role of the link between brand and celebrity and its effects on Word of Mouth (WOM) and Engagement. The first hypothesis concerns the independent variable (Link between Brand and Celebrity) and the dependent variable (WOM-Word of Mouth) and the other two concern the effects produced by engagement and the type of message (narrative vs. descriptive).

After administering an anonymous online questionnaire to collect the data and analyzing the results with SPSS statistical software, all four hypotheses were proven. Therefore, this study generated theoretical contributions covering four different areas.

The first concerns the positive influence of a celebrity who is also the founder of the brand on the spread of word of mouth, compared to a celebrity who is not involved in the creation of the brand. Consistent with existing literature, consumers have a tendency to perceive a brand as more authentic and credible when the celebrity promoter is also its founder, thus reinforcing positive word-of-mouth (Muda et al., 2021; Filieri et al., 2023; Wang & Lee, 2021). However, while previous research has focused on the role of celebrities in brand advertising (endorsement), the distinction between the involvement of a celebrity as a mere testimonial and as a founder of the brand itself has rarely been explored. The results of this research confirm the hypothesis formulated above, namely:

***H1: A makeup brand created and promoted by a singer has a greater positive influence on WOM compared to a brand sponsored by a non-founder celebrity.***

The second theoretical contribution concerns the role of engagement as a mediator in the relationship between the brand-celebrity link and word of mouth (WOM). Research results showed that a cosmetics brand sponsored by a singer who is also its founder generates significantly higher levels of engagement than the same brand sponsored by a celebrity who has no direct involvement in its creation. This result is consistent with the literature that highlights how a celebrity's emotional and personal involvement in the creation and promotion of a brand can increase the sense of authenticity and connection with the audience, thus enhancing user engagement (Schouten et al., 2020; Wang & Lee, 2021). However, while previous research has focused on the influence of advertising campaigns with celebrities, the distinction between celebrity founders and mere endorsers had not been adequately explored. This study, however, confirms this hypothesis:

***H2:** Engagement mediates the association between brand and celebrity bonding and WOM. Specifically, a brand of makeup endorsed by a singer who is also the creator of the brand demonstrates a more favorable impact on engagement compared to the same brand endorsed by any other celebrity.*

Thirdly, this study confirmed that a high level of engagement helps to improve word-of-mouth marketing. The results showed that users who are most involved in the interaction with the brand are also the most likely to speak positively about it and share its message with other consumers. This result is in line with previous studies that have shown that emotional and cognitive engagement with a brand can foster word-of-mouth, positively influencing recommendation intention and brand reputation (Phyu, 2024; Schouten et al., 2020). However, the direct relationship between engagement and WOM had not yet been explored in the context of the Celebrity and Creator Economy, making this result particularly relevant. Based on this, it was shown that:

***H3:** Engagement mediates the relationship between brand and celebrity bonding and WOM. In particular, a high level of engagement contributes to an improvement in WOM.*

Finally, the fourth theoretical contribution concerns the role of message type in moderating the relationship between brand and celebrity bonding and engagement. The results showed that the use of a narrative message (storytelling message), as opposed to a purely descriptive message, has a greater impact on the level of user engagement. In particular, cosmetics brand promoted by a singer who is also its founder achieves a significantly higher level of engagement when the communication is through a narrative message, rather than through a simple product description. This result is consistent with the literature that emphasizes the effectiveness of storytelling in strengthening emotional engagement and connection between consumers and brand, enabling deeper interaction

and greater identification with brand values (Kim et al., 2016; Setter, 2021; Shobowale, 2022). However, the specific role of storytelling in the context of the celebrity and creator economy had not been analyzed in depth previously. Thanks to this research, it was possible to confirm that:

***H4:** The type of message moderates the relationship between the brand-celebrity association and engagement. Specifically, a storytelling message associated with a makeup brand endorsed by a singer who is also the brand's creator positively influences engagement compared to a descriptive message associated with a makeup brand endorsed by a generic celebrity.*

## **4.2 Managerial Implications**

The results of this research offer important implications for brands and marketers operating in the Celebrity and Creator Economy, particularly in the cosmetics and beauty industry. This experiment proved the validity of the hypotheses formulated and led to the identification of key strategies that brands should adopt to maximize their communicative and commercial impact.

First, this study highlights how emotional involvement is crucial in shaping how people perceive a brand and talk about it. One of the most powerful drivers of a brand's success is the ability to create a sense of belongingness, allowing consumers to feel part of a wider community. Human beings are, in fact, social animals that express themselves through words, concepts and narratives, which is why storytelling is an extremely effective communication vehicle.

For this reason, brands should move towards marketing strategies that emphasize storytelling and emotional connection with the audience. Choosing a celebrity founder as the face of the brand not only increases credibility, but also audience engagement, enhancing interaction and stimulating spontaneous spread of the promotional message.

Furthermore, the results suggest that the impact of all celebrity collaborations is not the same: a cosmetics brand created and promoted by a singer who is directly involved in the project is perceived as more authentic and generates higher levels of engagement than the same brand promoted by a non-founding celebrity.

This means that brands have to carefully evaluate the type of partnership to be established, favoring collaborations with the celebrities that have a real connection with them and are able to tell an authentic story.

Finally, the choice of communication message is crucial. The study showed that the use of storytelling as a communication technique enhances the influencer marketing effectiveness, especially when the brand is associated with a celebrity who has a direct link to it. Compared to descriptive messages,

storytelling generates greater emotional engagement, increasing the likelihood of conversion and word-of-mouth spreading. For this reason, brands should invest in creating content that goes beyond mere product exposure and tells a story that resonates with their target audience.

### ***4.3 Limitation and Future Research***

This study also has limitations that may offer interesting insights for future study.

A first consideration concerns the sample size. Although the data collected were sufficient to confirm the hypotheses, a larger sample could have further strengthened the robustness of the results and improved their generalizability. In fact, a larger number of participants would have provided an even clearer view of the dynamics analyzed, reducing the margin of statistical error. Future research could therefore extend the sample to further validate the findings.

Furthermore, the study did not distinguish the gender of the participants, an aspect that could prove significant in the beauty sector. Men and women often experience and perceive a brand differently, which affects both their level of engagement and their attitudes towards WOM (word of mouth). This means that communication strategies can work differently depending on the target audience. A more targeted analysis would capture these differences and offer more concrete insights into how audiences respond to content and communication strategies.

Another element to consider is the age of the sample analyzed. Younger audiences might respond more enthusiastically to digital storytelling strategies, while more mature consumers might have a different reaction, perhaps based on other forms of trust and authority. Dividing the sample into age groups and comparing their behavior could help to identify relevant differences in the level of engagement and propensity to WOM (word of mouth).

Finally, a further research development could concern the analysis of different communication formats and social platforms. This study focused on a single platform and a specific sector, but we know that the marketing dynamics can vary greatly depending on the channel used. For example, TikTok, Instagram and YouTube have different languages and modes of use, and the format of the content itself (videos, images, stories, reels) could influence the level of user engagement. Studying these variables could help to better understand which strategies are most effective according to the medium used.

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These reflections not only outline possible paths to further explore the topic of engagement and WOM in the context of the Celebrity and Creator Economy, but also provide useful indications to optimize marketing and communication strategies, making them more targeted and effective.



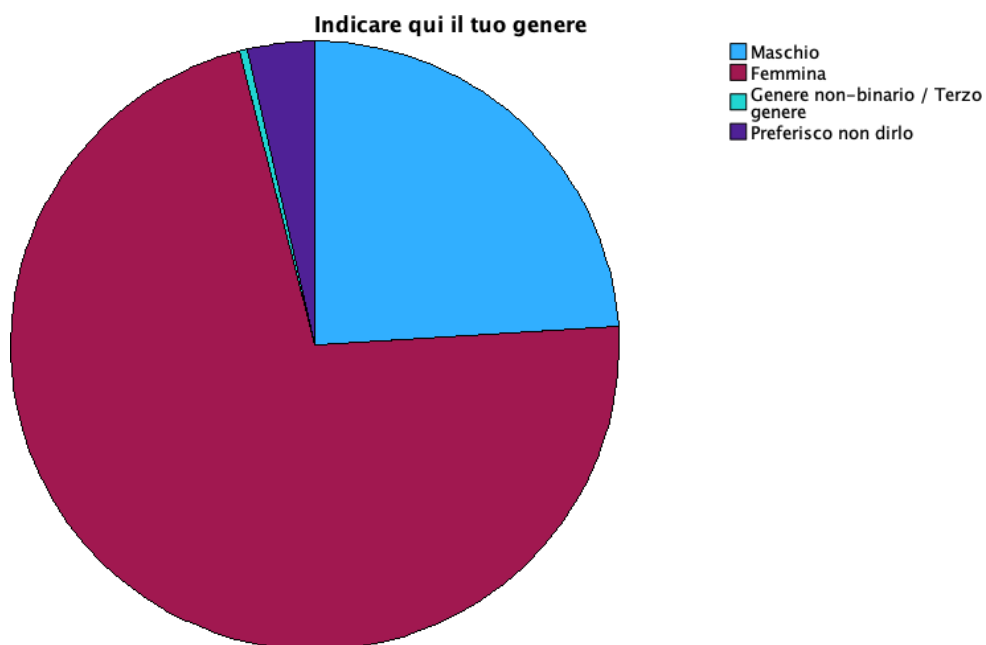
## APPENDIX

### *Questionnaire Structure*

### *Descriptive Statistics: Gender*

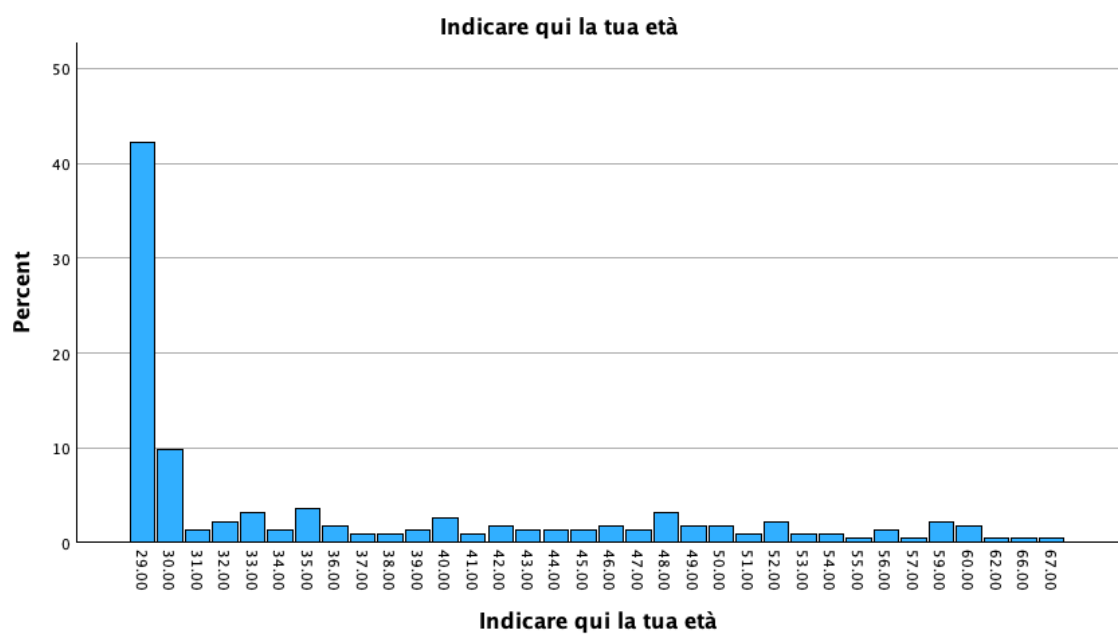
Indicare qui il tuo genere

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Maschio	54	24.0	24.0	24.0
	Femmina	162	72.0	72.0	96.0
	Genere non-binario / Terzo genere	1	.4	.4	96.4
	Preferisco non dirlo	8	3.6	3.6	100.0
	Total	225	100.0	100.0	



*Descriptive Statistics: Age*

Statistics		
Indicare qui la tua età		
N	Valid	225
	Missing	0
Mean	36.5378	
Median	30.0000	
Mode	29.00	
Std. Deviation	9.95614	
Variance	99.125	
Range	38.00	
Minimum	29.00	
Maximum	67.00	



## Factor Analysis: Mediator

### Total Variance Explained

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	2.461	82.019	82.019	2.461	82.019	82.019
2	.346	11.519	93.537			
3	.194	6.463	100.000			

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

### Communalities

	Initial	Extraction
Indicare su una scala da 1 (completamente in disaccordo) a 7 (completamente d'accordo) in quale misura sei d'accordo o in disaccordo con le seguenti affermazioni. - Percepisco il brand appena visualizzato come parte dell'immagine che ho di me stesso	1.000	.857
Indicare su una scala da 1 (completamente in disaccordo) a 7 (completamente d'accordo) in quale misura sei d'accordo o in disaccordo con le seguenti affermazioni. - Il brand appena visualizzato potrebbe trasmettere un'immagine di me agli altri	1.000	.841
Indicare su una scala da 1 (completamente in disaccordo) a 7 (completamente d'accordo) in quale misura sei d'accordo o in disaccordo con le seguenti affermazioni. - Percepisco il brand appena visualizzato come importante per me	1.000	.762

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

### Component Matrix<sup>a</sup>

	Component 1
Indicare su una scala da 1 (completamente in disaccordo) a 7 (completamente d'accordo) in quale misura sei d'accordo o in disaccordo con le seguenti affermazioni. – Percepisco il brand appena visualizzato come parte dell'immagine che ho di me stesso	.926
Indicare su una scala da 1 (completamente in disaccordo) a 7 (completamente d'accordo) in quale misura sei d'accordo o in disaccordo con le seguenti affermazioni. – Il brand appena visualizzato potrebbe trasmettere un'immagine di me agli altri	.917
Indicare su una scala da 1 (completamente in disaccordo) a 7 (completamente d'accordo) in quale misura sei d'accordo o in disaccordo con le seguenti affermazioni. – Percepisco il brand appena visualizzato come importante per me	.873

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

a. 1 components extracted.

### KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.730
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	400.503
	df	3
	Sig.	<.001

## Reliability Analysis: Mediator

**Reliability Statistics**

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.890	.890	3

## Factor Analysis: Dependent Variable

**Total Variance Explained**

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	2.501	83.378	83.378	2.501	83.378	83.378
2	.273	9.106	92.483			
3	.225	7.517	100.000			

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

**Communalities**

	Initial	Extraction
Indicare su una scala da 1 (completamente in disaccordo) a 7 (completamente d'accordo) in quale misura sei d'accordo o in disaccordo con le seguenti affermazioni. – Sono propenso a diffondere un passaparola positivo sul brand appena visualizzato.	1.000	.843
Indicare su una scala da 1 (completamente in disaccordo) a 7 (completamente d'accordo) in quale misura sei d'accordo o in disaccordo con le seguenti affermazioni. – Consiglierei il brand appena visualizzato ai miei amici.	1.000	.842
Indicare su una scala da 1 (completamente in disaccordo) a 7 (completamente d'accordo) in quale misura sei d'accordo o in disaccordo con le seguenti affermazioni. – Se i miei amici volessero acquistare dei prodotti di make-up, direi loro di provare quelli del brand appena analizzato.	1.000	.816

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

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