Louise Yung Nielsen and Mette Lykke Nielsen

Tears and body insecurities

The authentic influencer as change-maker?

Abstract: This chapter explores the phenomenon of authentic influencers who showcase everyday life, emotional experiences, and behind-the-scenes content on Instagram. These influencers embrace more explicit depictions of authentic content, often sharing personal and private content that highlights their vulnerabilities and struggles with body insecurities. The chapter analyses the performances of emotions, motherhood, and body insecurities by these influencers, and discusses their potential as a feminist contribution to influencer culture. The authors use a postfeminist framework to define influencer culture based on the politics of authenticity and visibility, and to untangle its ambivalent relation to feminism. The analysis focuses on two core motifs: the crying selfie, which explores how female influencers perform emotions and motherhood, and images revealing the manipulative nature of images of their bodies.

Keywords: postfeminist influencer culture, Instagram, crying selfies, authentic influencers, vulnerability, motherhood

1 Introduction

In a large and growing part of the digital marketing economy, influencers and other so-called content creators make a living by commodifying their everyday lives (Abidin, 2015). This economy throws individuals into the digital market, where lifestyles, identities, and personalities are subject to the market conditions. Sarah Banet-Weiser (2021) observes that influencer culture has intensified the demand for authenticity. This claim is widely acknowledged among internet scholars like Duffy and Hund (2019) and Lehto (2022). These scholars underscore the pervasive expectation of authenticity placed upon all influencers as well as on all users of social media. Banet-Weiser (2012) previously articulated how authenticity historically has resided beyond "the crass realm of the market" (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 10), encompassing domains like "the space of the self, of creativity, of spirituality" (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 10). However, in the era of pervasive brand culture, authenticity has moved into the realm of the market economy, with influencers epitomizing the interweaving of the subject, authenticity, and brand value. Authenticity stands as the cornerstone of influencer culture.

While all influencers grapple with the demand for authenticity, a notable divergence in how they manifest it exists. While some have faced criticism for portraying idealized images steeped in exclusive consumption patterns and unattainable body standards, others embrace and perhaps exalt more explicit depictions of authentic content. This chapter explores the influencers who take pride in showcasing everyday life, emotional experiences, and behind-the-scenes content. Scholarly work has described them as "realistic" mommy bloggers (Germin et al., 2021) and "everyday" mothers (Archer, 2019). Through their Instagram presence, they candidly present both minor and significant challenges faced by women and parents in domestic settings. This chapter explores the "honest" female influencer, who claims to portray a more candid depiction of their emotional journey, parenthood, and vulnerabilities.

These authentic influencers generously share personal and private content. The content is typically dominated by everyday scenarios (often family life, children, etc.), the influencer's difficult feelings of inadequacy, and low self-esteem. For example, in connection with their own bodies after childbirth, influencers often display vulnerability in either pictures or videos. Empowerment is often a theme that goes together with vulnerability (Fotopoulou, 2017). Danish influencers Alexandra Staffensen, Matilde Trobeck, Cecilie Olsen, Camille Gudmand Lange, Josephine Müller, and Line Sofie Petersen are examples of this movement. Content from each of these six influencers will be analysed in this chapter. Instead of curating beautiful and staged images of themselves and their lives, this type of influencer also shows the other side of the coin or "the real thing" (September 18, 2023), as Camilla Gudmand Lange puts it. Gudmand Lange describes herself in her bio on Instagram as follows: "Two children 👦👶 Unusually many emotions 😊😩 Entrepreneurial dreams 🏋 Standard days and evenings filled with laughter 👩‍❤️‍👨", while influencer Alexandra Staffensen describes herself as "without filter 🍽" ("bramfri").

Owing to a combination of platform affordances and commercial culture, Instagram has become a perfect hotspot for the performance of relatability, intimacy, and everyday life. The signaletic elements of social media and the fact that technology allows constant updating and sharing of new content make it a perfect spot for the analysis of contemporary constructions of authenticity. Exploring this, the chapter's focus is:

1. To analyse authentic influencer culture with a focus on emotions, motherhood, and body insecurities.
2. To discuss the influencers' authentic representations of everyday life as feminist potential.

This chapter introduces authenticity through a postfeminist framework. In this framework, we define an influencer culture based on the politics of authenticity

and visibility. The authenticity bind (Duffy & Hund, 2019) and brand authenticity (Banet-Weiser, 2012) are core concepts. Further, but still within the framework of postfeminist theory, we untangle the influencer culture's ambivalent relation to feminism. This contribution will offer an analysis of two core motifs of authentic influencer culture: (1) The crying selfie – here, we focus on how female influencers perform emotions and motherhood, and (2) images revealing the manipulative nature of images of their bodies. Other motifs not included in this study are the performance of domestic labour, narratives of marriage, and narratives about self-development. This analysis focuses on how body insecurities become a collective issue and how the performative nature of confessional culture is emblematic of inhabiting an "authentic" influencer body.

Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012, 2021) has written about our contemporary contradictory obsession with authenticity. Historically, we have been afraid of losing authenticity to commercial logic. Just think of terms like "selling out", which is a negatively charged term that marks a preference for profit at the expense of credibility or authenticity. Underlying such a term as "selling out" is the thinly disguised dichotomous relationship between "the commercial" and "authentic". Banet-Weiser (2012) questions this dichotomy, and her ambition is to reformulate a new concept of authenticity that does not separate itself from the commercialism but integrates it. The realm of influencer culture illustrates how commercial principles have permeated areas traditionally considered free from such influences, notably the individual. Adept users of social media platforms can transform their online presence into a thriving business. It also epitomizes a shift away from corporate narratives towards the pursuit of personal authenticity (Banet-Weiser, 2021); initially, there was optimism that social media would usher in more democratic and inclusive modes of engagement. However, influencer culture encapsulates the pinnacle of the internet's commercialization.

2 The Danish influencer industry

According to a report by the Agency for Culture and Palaces (2020), influencer marketing constitutes a significant share in the Danish advertising market. The influencer industry has been growing rapidly from 2015 to 2019 with a turnover that has reached DKK 119 million; however, the growth in turnover slowed down in 2018 – 2019. In the context of the rest of the advertising market, whose overall turnover is declining, or stagnant, even modest growth is remarkable. These figures are not just evidence of a growing industry, but of a cultural phenomenon that resonates widely with users of social media platforms.

In the Danish context, fashion bloggers were the first incarnation of what we now know to be both influencers and content creators. The first fashion bloggers became mainstream in the late 1990s. Initially, bloggers were microcelebrities (Senft, 2008); they were amateurs and blogged because they could not help it and because they loved it. However, in the late noughties, in the wake of the commercialization of the rest of the internet, the fashion industry began to realize that the close relationship between fashion bloggers and their readers had great commercial potential. Since then, there has been drastic professionalization and commercialization of fashion bloggers. The industry has grown around influencers, with many commercial agencies engaging in influencer marketing. They match clients with the right influencers who can represent the brand in question in exactly the correct manner. Businesses and organizations have become accustomed to incorporating them into their communication and marketing strategies.

For the individual content creator, increased competition requires much more strategic production and distribution of content that gives the individual influencer optimal visibility. Abidin (2016) has named this "visibility labour", i.e. work carried out with the purpose of increasing visibility. Therefore, a strong personal brand is essential, and we can see in the influencer landscape that influencers increasingly build distinct profiles, making their personal brands stronger and more likely to be attractive for commercial partners. The CEO of the Danish influencer agency Represented, Henrik Akselbo, stated that to be successful as an influencer, "you have to be generous with yourself" (Nielsen, 2016, p. 103). Influencer Alexandra Staffensen, for example, has used the catchphrase "break the taboo" in her Instagram biography to talk about abuse that happened earlier in her life. The group of influencers that this chapter focuses on is generous in a radical way. All things that we typically associate with the private sphere are displayed in the public arena. Laundry, reflections on life situations, traumatic events, everyday life, difficult emotions, lack of energy, and feelings of inadequacy. What we, in a traditional understanding of human life, categorize as private.

Denmark's comprehensive welfare system provides both citizens and influencers with significant social and economic stability. Influencers operating within this context may experience a different set of motivations and challenges than those in societies with less extensive social safety nets. This backdrop can offer Danish influencers motivations beyond financial incentives, fostering a focus on creative expression, personal fulfilment, and passion-driven pursuits. With a safety net in place, the Danish influencers are perhaps liberated to share more authentic and vulnerable aspects of their lives and may experience a greater freedom to address topics like mental health, relationship challenges, or personal struggles without being solely reliant on their online presence for survival.

3 Influencing and the politics of authenticity and visibility

For influencers in this study (and influencers in general) visibility is a crucial concern in several ways, which we will highlight here. As previously mentioned, Abidin calls efforts at enhancing visibility "visibility labour" (Abidin, 2016). This includes strategic efforts and knowledge about the optimization of content, tapping into trends, and the gaming of algorithms (Möhlmann et al., 2023; Petre et al., 2019), which will allow even more exposure of content. Visibility issues go beyond questions of labour and strategic character, especially within the realm of feminine influencing visibility, to encompass visibility politics.

Feminist movements have long grappled with the issues of visibility and recognition (Duffy & Hund, 2019; Gill, 2016). Women, historically relegated to the private sphere, have fought to have their voices, experiences, and labour acknowledged in the public domain. In the realm of influencer culture, this feminist imperative takes a new guise. The display of vulnerability, the baring of emotional truths – often epitomized by the now-ubiquitous "crying selfies" – transcends the individual (Fotopoulou, 2017). Public visibility has become a tool of empowerment for many female influencers (Duffy & Hund, 2019). By openly sharing their emotional experiences, they create spaces for dialogue and support among their followers. This form of visibility allows them to connect with audiences, who may relate to their experiences, fostering a sense of community and solidarity. A similar tension lays the groundwork for scholars of digital culture – for example, Aristea Fotopoulou's (2017) study of feminist activism, which is subtitled "Between empowerment and vulnerability", highlighting the ambivalent approach to the display of vulnerability.

However, it is not sufficient for a successful influencer to merely be visible. She must project the correct set of values. In her reflections on influencer culture, Banet-Weiser (2021) points out that authenticity on social media is defined by a fundamental tension: "for female influencers on Instagram, being authentic is often about constantly adjusting yourself to correspond with dominant white ideals of femininity. Yet authenticity is also about failure, pressure, depression, tears, and vulnerability" (Banet-Weiser, 2021, p. 143). Brooke Erin Duffy and Emily Hund (2019) refer to women's conditions on social media platforms as "the authenticity bind". This refers to the fact that women are expected to project realness, but at the same time cannot be "too real". Duffy and Hund put this phenomenon in the context of the more general policing of women and women's bodies. Women's bodies are frequently subject to policing and scrutiny on social media. Any perceived deviation from conventional beauty norms can lead to criticism and judge-

ment. This can create a dilemma for women who seek to be authentic while navigating surveillance and criticism of their bodies.

While it is a bold declaration that women's emotions, struggles, and insecurities will no longer be relegated to the confinement of the private sphere, influencers operate within the attention economy (Goldhaber, 1997). This means that the core cultural dynamic is the commodification of visibility, where the display of emotion becomes a form of digital currency.

4 Influencer culture and its relationship with feminism

The cases examined in this chapter portray emotional states through visual (and verbal) expressions (crying selfies), alongside visual and verbal portrayals of bodily insecurities. These forms of content serve as reflections of femininity and emotional expression within a mainstream Danish influencer culture. This content underscores a complex relationship that influencer culture maintains with feminism. The core tension is that, on the one hand, influencer culture contributes to the emergence of female entrepreneurs who make a living by highlighting achievements (beauty, fashion, domestic work, cooking, and baking) that have historically been undervalued (Dejmanee, 2016). Influencers have found lucrative ways for these forms of work to become visible and to be attributed higher value than before. On the other hand, however, influencer culture can also be rightly accused of a very one-sided focus on traditionally feminine domains, which contributes to perpetuating the notion of, especially, the home as a woman's domain.

The concept of postfeminism has been used to describe this influencer culture, which simultaneously embodies both feminist and anti-feminist thinking. The British cultural and media scholar Rosalind Gill has written about postfeminism (2007, 2017). Gill points out that postfeminism is not an -ism in the same way as aesthetic -isms such as cubism, but cannot be categorized together with ideologies such as liberalism either. Instead, postfeminism should be understood as a "cultural sensibility" (Gill, 2007). Gill (2007) attempts to define postfeminism by making seven points in contemporary culture. She argues that postfeminism is characterized by, among other things, (1) femininity being seen as a bodily category (as opposed to, for example, a personality trait); and (2) women being granted more agency and possessing more individual freedom of choice; but (3) while this does not mean that women's bodies, appearance, and choices are no longer monitored and controlled, they are considered merely processes that are internalized and take place as self-monitoring, self-discipline, and self-control.

"Feminism and femininity: Or how we learned to stop worrying and love the thong", an essay by self-proclaimed third-wave feminists Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards (2004), argues for a return to feminine aesthetics – makeup, high heels, and, of course, thongs – with the two authors contending that young women should be able to enjoy these without being shamed or feeling shame. Baumgardner and Richards argue that young women can easily embrace feminism without rejecting the feminine consumer goods of the consumer society. British cultural researcher Angela McRobbie disagreed. In her book *The aftermath of feminism: Gender, culture, and social change* (2009), McRobbie points to the common misconception that feminism has triumphed to such an extent that it has become redundant. In an age dominated by *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), *Sex and the City* (1998–2004) and the Spice Girls (1994–2000), McRobbie argues that the feminism outlined by Baumgardner and Richards in their essay is problematic because its pro-capitalist femininity-focused repertoire supports capitalism's exploitation of young women's increased income and demand to consume themselves in femininity (McRobbie, 2009, p. 158).

Postfeminist thinking is related to neoliberalism in several ways. Gill articulates the link between the two by claiming that postfeminism is gendered neoliberalism. The neoliberal rationale operates within a political and economic reality and often entails the deregulation of society and cultivation of free market forces. However, neoliberal societies have far-reaching consequences for individuals. The neoliberal individual does not have friends but contacts and networks. What distinguishes contacts and networks from friendships is that the former can be exploited for personal gain. Similarly, the neoliberal individual will not have hobbies and interests just for fun, but all activities and practices can be turned into assets on the CV. Thus, the neoliberal individual is a strategic individual who relates to her life as a career, and all relationships and activities can be valued through a market economy paradigm (Brown, 2003; Gill, 2021).

5 Method: approaching authenticity construction through visual analysis

To explore the themes of authenticity, intimacy, and portrayal of mundane everyday life among female influencers, we employed visual analysis (Rose, 2022) combined with a qualitative content analysis approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). For Rose (2022) an image is always constructed, aligning with our focus on the construction of authenticity in the analysis of content. Rose (2022) argues that image meaning is created at four sites: Production, image, circulation, and audi-

ence. Although the significance of the production site, site of circulation, and site of audience was primarily indirect, these four domains serve as the foundational framework for our image analysis. Further, we chose to employ qualitative content analysis because it allowed for an in-depth examination of the captions which were included in some cases. We identified content from six female influencers for this study based on specific criteria: they must have a substantial following on social media platforms (all influencers had a following between 22,000 and 142,000 followers, December 2023), engage with themes related to authenticity, and frequently share content reflecting their everyday lives. The influencers selected were @alexandra_staffensen, @matildetrobeck, @denperfektemor, @linesofieh, @camillegudmandlange, and @josephinelivin. The analysed content was collected over a period of six months. The oldest piece of content was posted in February 2022, while the most recent was posted in August 2023. All in all, six posts were included in the analysis, one from each influencer. We engaged not only with the visual material, but also with captions. However, we refrained from engaging in stories or reels, only still images.

Given the specific nature of our research questions, a small dataset was an appropriate choice. This allowed us to conduct an in-depth analysis of the contents of the selected influencers. This approach aligns with the qualitative nature of our research question, which aims to uncover rich and contextually situated knowledge. This allowed us to capture the subtleties and nuances of the influencers' portrayals of authenticity, intimacy, and everyday life, thus shedding light on the complexities of their online personas.

5.1 Choosing analytical motifs

Examining authentic influencer culture, we chose to explore two distinct motifs present in the content the influencers post. First, crying selfies (Schwartz, 2022) have garnered substantial attention in the mainstream media and popular culture. Choosing to work with crying selfies provides an opportunity to engage with a cultural phenomenon that has resonated with a wide audience and has the potential to influence public perceptions and discussions about emotional expression, mental health, and identity in the digital age. The second motif we chose to work with is content where female influencers candidly disclose the artifice behind their carefully curated images, which is essential because of its cultural and sociological significance. The choice to reveal the deceptive aspects of influencer content offers a unique insight into confessional culture (Aslama & Pantti, 2006; Grobe, 2017), as well as contemporary culture of photography. The six posts are evenly distributed across the two themes.

6 Analysis: the crying selfie as an expression of vulnerability in motherhood

Crying selfies and selfies shared on social media platforms, characterized by their close-up depictions of women with red eyes, red noses, and visible tears, serve as a powerful visual commentary on the intersection of vulnerability, gender, and emotional expression in contemporary culture. These images, although seemingly spontaneous, are of course highly constructed. The crying selfie is a recent and widespread trend among influencers and other personalities on social media platforms. Major celebrities such as supermodel Bella Hadid, American influencer Emma Chamberlain, and many others have posted crying selfies. The phenomenon has attracted a lot of attention and has mainly been understood through psychology, that is, how social media users who post crying selfies often feel more connected with other people (Bakar, 2021), or how crying selfies represent a change in how we communicate emotions to the outside world (Pitcher, 2021). In the broader context of the historical narrative surrounding feminine melancholia, the crying selfie emerges as close kin to the prevalent internet trope known as the "sad girl" (Holowka, 2018; Thelandersson, 2018), both of which notably exhibit a profound fascination with sadness and melancholic expressions (Thelandersson, 2023). Tears and melancholia, though vital components of emotional expression, have remained relatively understudied within the realm of social media platforms, despite their exploration in so-called femme culture as acts of resistance (Schwartz, 2018, 2022). In the studied context, the production of crying selfies predominantly occurs within the context of motherhood.

The most prominent visual element of crying selfies is tears. Tears have long been symbolic as well as material vessels of emotions, often associated with sorrow, grief, or catharsis. In the context of crying selfies, tears are potent visual signifiers of emotional vulnerability. The presence of visible tears challenges societal norms that have historically discouraged women from openly displaying their emotional state. This subversion of emotional restraint speaks to a broader cultural shift toward embracing authentic emotional expressions. Tears can be approached as physiological, psychological, sociological, or cultural (Lutz, 1999). An interdisciplinary approach will provide a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon of tears. In Western culture, tears often symbolize the release of pent-up emotions, a "cleansing of the soul", and a pathway to emotional catharsis (Lutz, 1999; Vingershoet, 2013).

To fully grasp the cultural meaning of these images, we must turn to their captions. Motherhood is the core framework applied to all the images. In fact, it was quite difficult to identify crying selfies that were not leaning into narratives about
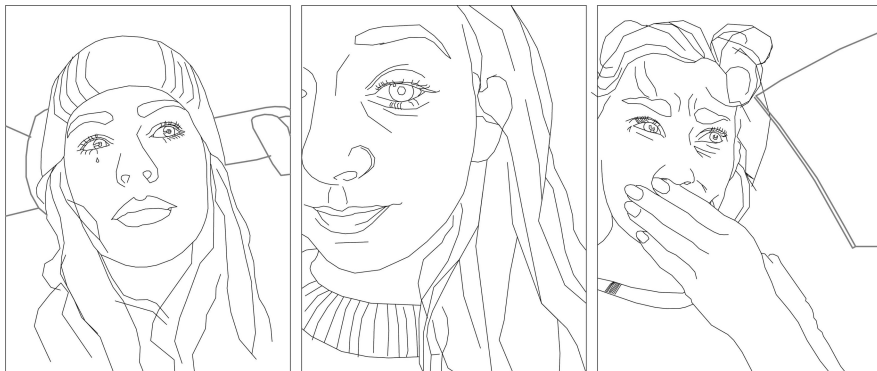
Figure 1: Artistic reinterpretations of crying selfies by Alexandra Staffensen, Camille Gudmand Lange, and Cecilie Olsen are presented (from left to right). Notably, the original images are omitted in this chapter, with these digital drawings serving as representative recreations of the copyrighted original images. The reinterpretations are made by Laust Ovesen. This method is inspired by Abidin (2018).

motherhood. The three images chosen also displayed the woes of motherhood. All three captions communicate a narrative of separation between the posting mother and her child. In two cases (@alexandra_staffensen and @denperfektemor), the women were divorced from the child's other parent.

@alexandra_staffensen captions her post from February 17, 2022:

> It has been quite a tough few days, and it certainly did not make it easier to send my boy off for his winter vacation today. I know he'll have an incredibly great time and be well taken care of, but when you're already feeling a bit extra vulnerable, I just couldn't hold back the tears. As soon as he was out of sight, the waterworks started... And I went straight to my Mom's place to cry it out. I had needed that all day ♡.

@denperfektemor captions her post from June 28, 2023:

> One of the tough transition days 😭
> I won't see Arthur again until Monday, and today was just not fun for either him or me. "I'm not ready, Mom," he said.
> I barely made it out of the kindergarten gate before the tears started rolling.
> Now, I'm crying in the car, taking a deep breath before heading home...
> Bummer... and ouch 💔

Both influencers engage in a form of emotional labour that defies societal expectations of stoicism and unwavering strength in motherhood. The act of shedding tears and openly expressing her emotional struggle challenges the traditional narrative,

which idealizes motherhood as a constant state of joy and contentment. The third influencer, @camillegudmandlange is not divorced from her children's other parent but finds herself in a state of vulnerability, as she must leave her children behind for a work-related trip. In the caption of her post, she lists her negative thoughts that have been occupying her mind, including concerns like "How can I break the news to my kids that I'll be away for four days?" and "Am I failing as a mother?" Gudmand Lange concludes her caption with a plea for advice: "Do you have any suggestions for amplifying the positive thoughts?" (February 2, 2023).

The crying selfies and their captions have tacit implications for our broader societal understanding of motherhood as a stage for the performance of highly emotional behaviour. On the one hand, they question conventional narratives that idealize motherhood as a constant display of happiness and fulfilment. Instead, they invite us to recognize that the emotional labour of motherhood encompasses a spectrum of feelings, from profound love and happiness to frustration, sadness, and vulnerability. In this context, motherhood becomes a place where authentic emotional performances, including moments of extreme emotional behaviour, are both acknowledged and valued. However, at the same time, crying selfies can be analysed critically in terms of their reinforcement of traditional gender roles. The sharing of personal struggles and moments of vulnerability is a manifestation of feminism's insistence on visibility. Women who have historically been relegated to the private sphere use social media to bring their authentic experiences into the public eye. In doing so, they challenge the erasure of women's emotional labour and mental health struggles from societal discourse. Through their digital vulnerability, these individuals demand recognition and empathy, reclaiming spaces for their emotional narratives.

On the other hand, crying selfies perpetuate the stereotype of mothers as emotional caregivers, responsible for managing and displaying emotions not only for themselves but also for their children during challenging life transitions. This can be seen as a burden placed on women to perform emotional labour in the face of adversity. By placing such strong emphasis on emotional intensity, risk of marginalizing or delegitimizing mothers who do not fit this mould increases. This narrow portrayal leaves little room for imagining alternative forms of motherhood that do not conform to these emotional expectations. Thus, crying selfies can also contribute to the perpetuation of the "good mother" ideal, where a mother's worth is often measured by her emotional devotion and self-sacrifice. This ideal, which is deeply rooted in traditional gender roles, can be oppressive and limiting, making it challenging for mothers who do not conform to this emotional standard. This selfie, like the first, reinforces gendered expectations related to maternal emotions. It positions the mother as the primary emotional caretaker, tasked with managing her feelings while navigating motherhood. This can be

viewed critically in the context of feminist discourse as it perpetuates stereotypes that may limit women's agency and emotional expression.

Finally, it is important to consider that crying selfies exist within the larger framework of emotion commodification on social media – a culture that encourages the performance and display of emotions for digital consumption. In the era of emotion commodification, in which likes, comments, and shares translate into digital capital, the authentic emotional performance of motherhood becomes both a form of resistance and a point of connection. Public sharing of maternal experiences, even moments of vulnerability, can serve as content that generates likes, comments, and engagement. Tom Lutz (1999, p. 19) mentions, that "tears demand a reaction", and that is what at least Staffensen's and Olsen's crying selfies received. Both received at least three times as many likes as their average post during the time of posting.

7 Analysis: confessional body images

In 2015, 18-year-old Australian influencer Essena O'Neill deleted thousands of photos from her Instagram profile because she had grown tired of the "fake" life she was leading on the platform (Hunt, 2015). On the remaining images, she edited the captions. To a picture of O'Neill wearing a bikini, she added: "See how relatable my captions were – stomach sucked in, strategic pose, and pushed up boobs. I just want younger girls to know that this is not a candid life, or cool or inspirational. It's contrived perfection made to get attention" (Hunt, 2015). This example emphasizes that a recognizable and desirable femininity requires hard work, both in a direct sense through the concrete shaping of the body via disciplining technologies such as exercise and diet, and in an indirect sense, the body must look good in the photo. It also takes work, which O'Neill confirms when she confesses in another post that she had taken countless photos before she had a picture to share on Instagram. Essena O'Neill was one of the first influencers to craft an anti-Instagram statement, and she stood out because she never returned to social media, except for a short attempt to run an anti-capitalist website in 2019 (Gorman, 2019). This confessional genre has since become a mainstay of influencer culture, save for the departure from social media. Instead of announcing their departure from social media platforms, this genre has now become a marker of authentic influencer practice.

The images in question are from three Danish influencers. All posts are constructed in the same manner. Two similar images are placed side by side. On one image the influencers are posing hard to look their best/thinnest/fittest. On the other the influencer is relaxing her body disclosing a less perfect body.
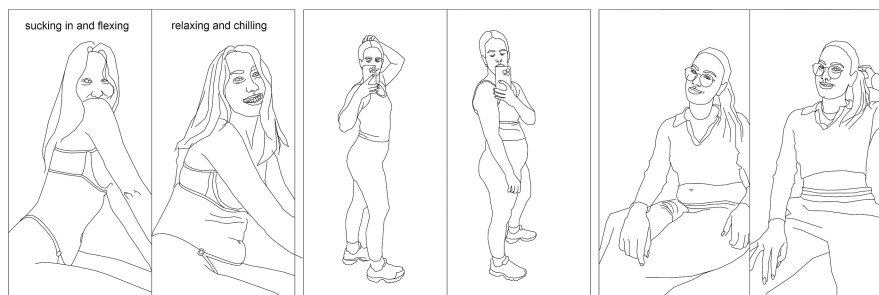
Figure 2: Artistic reinterpretations of confessional body images by Josephine Müller, Matilde Trobeck, and Line Sofie Pedersen (from left to right). Reinterpretations are made by Laust Ovesen.

While this formula for the two images side by side is confessional, it is also performative. Influencers claim that only the image of the attractive body is performative, while the other image is truer. However, this claimed dichotomic relationship between the two images is missing the fact that both images and both bodies are performative; one image and body is performing a conventional beautiful body, while the other image and body is demonstrably anti-performing. The latter is, of course, just as much of a performance as the former. The act of resisting or rejecting the pressure to conform to particular ideals and instead posing as "natural" and "authentic" is, in itself, a deliberate performance. Like Essena O'Neill, all three Danish influencers promote a more "healthy" and "realistic" body image. They all point to social media as the villain, singling out the technologies used to make the body appear desirable. They particularly highlight poses that manipulate the body's "natural" ways of expression and emphasize lighting and post-editing technologies such as filters.

@linesofieh captions her post from August 27, 2022:

> Same girl – just two different ways of sitting ♡📷 Remember to remind yourself that not everything you see in here is reality. It's so scary how pictures can be edited these days and how unhealthy a relationship many develop with their own bodies because they compare themselves to others. You are beautiful no matter how your body is shaped ✨

@matildetrobeck captions her post from June 18, 2023:

> Just a little break for your scrolling thumb, which may be causing you intense insecurity and negative thoughts about yourself as you look at all the perfect people you have in your feed. Here, you get a body with ovulation that truly makes my stomach swell, as if it were a cinnamon roll dough.

> Angles, lighting, editing, and I'll get you, I will. You're scrolling in a fantasy world, remember that ♡ #youareneveralone #bodypositive #bodypositivity #youareenough #fucktheideal

Both influencers invite their followers behind the scenes, offering a glimpse behind the curtain in a deliberate effort to present themselves as more authentic. They are actively dismantling the façade that social media represents for them, while actively branding themselves as an authentic voice cutting through all social media noise. While the core of confessional culture is "real" emotion (Aslama & Pantti, 2006), these influencers inject a sense of collectivism into their approach to confessional culture. Both captions speak directly to the followers, reminding them that their bodies are natural and beautiful. The female body is a core place for collectivist, maybe even activist, ambition of the confessional postings. Postfeminist scholarship has clarified that the female body holds a complex and ambivalent significance for women (Gill, 2007, 2017; McRobbie, 2009). On the one hand, the female body serves as a source of identity, empowerment, and self-expression, shaping women's experiences, relationships, and sense of self. On the other hand, societal expectations and objectification place immense pressure on women to conform to idealized standards.

The posts are a reflection on the contemporary production of bodies through images and a targeted effort to challenge the power of the image and production of a disciplinary (male?) gaze (Mulvey, 1975). A selfie can be defined as a photograph taken of oneself with the intention of showing it to others (Senft & Baym, 2015, p. 1589). Its nature is dual: it is both a photographic object and a gesture, an action (Senft & Baym, 2015; Frosh, 2015). John Berger (2008) points out that art history's oil paintings of nude female bodies leave no room for agency for the female subject; she is reduced to a beautiful sight for the male gaze. However, the selfie allows the object of the image to be assigned agency, as it not only stands in front of the camera's lens but is also the creator of the photograph. So, despite the reception of this new genre in the broader public largely focusing on the selfie takers as self-absorbed or vain (Abidin 2016; Senft & Baym, 2015), the selfie is also potentially empowering (Tiidenberg & Gómez-Cruz, 2015).

In the case of the confessional content, the comparison of the two side-by-side body images serves as a reclaiming of the female body through selfie practices. The latter image displays a body that refuses to submit to the disciplinary requirements of female bodies in our culture and serves as an exposure of the hypocritical nature of mainstream Instagram beauty performance. In the comments, all three influencers are celebrated for their "bravery" and their "realness".

While the female body is "liberated" in these confessional posts, new demands are placed on the self. The notion of embracing one's body is accompanied by psychologizing discourses of positivity and self-joy. Amid the so-called liberation of the

female body a paradox emerges. These posts seemingly champion body positivity, but they also urge women to be happy and content with their bodies and engage in self-love and self-care. This exact point has been underscored by Elias et al. (2017): postfeminist culture goes beyond the realm of the body and extends its influence into the sphere of the subject. They point to how the beauty industry has broadened its commercial scope, moving beyond the improvement of bodily appearance to encompassing the cultivation of the subject through discourses of "wellness" and "self-development". It is important to acknowledge that the three influencers who openly discuss image manipulation possess a privilege level that allows them to do so. They may already have established a significant following, financial stability, or industry influence that provides a safety net. This privilege makes them vulnerable without facing severe repercussions in terms of sponsorship deals or follower backlash. While the intent behind confessional content may be to promote transparency and body positivity, there is a risk that it inadvertently shames other influencers, who may still feel compelled to adhere to conventional beauty standards or image manipulation practices. The message that some influencers are "keeping it real" can create an implicit hierarchy of authenticity that may unintentionally marginalize those who continue to curate their images.

8 Conclusion

In the realm of digital culture, in which authenticity is increasingly negotiated online, the display of vulnerability and confession has emerged as a powerful tool for the construction of authenticity. As we have journeyed through this chapter, we have witnessed significant ways in which these themes reaffirm and challenge the traditional narratives of motherhood, vulnerability, and female bodies. In this process, we have come to recognize that the authentic influencer carves out a highly visible arena for the renegotiation of gender roles and expectations. Authenticity, it appears, seems to remain relevant as a desirable feature of contemporary culture. And in the realm of authentic influencers, performing motherhood, vulnerability, and "realness" seem to be the defining traits of an authentic performance. The influencers we have engaged with are mainstream influencers. Thus, they have not used photography to disrupt gender stereotypes, but while they possess tools for disruption, authentic influencers seem to be entangled in the traditional gendered discourses of authenticity. The presentation of tears and bodies on social media platforms may raise concerns about the perpetuation of gendered stereotypes. While some use these posts to subvert traditional roles, others may inadvertently reinforce them by adhering to the conventional standards of gender performance.

It has also become clear how influencers' relationship with photography lies in the direct continuation of women's complicated relations with the form. Historically, women have been objectified in photography and are often portrayed through the male gaze. Early photographs often focused on women's appearances and beauty, reinforcing traditional gender roles and ideals. However, with the emergence of modern photography, digital photography, image sharing platforms, and especially digital self-portraiture, women have gained the agency to represent themselves as they choose. This is apparent in the practice of the influencers we have engaged with in this chapter. The crying selfies show how the ambivalence of showing emotions as a woman is managed by displaying them in full view. Meanwhile, the confessional posts comparing the two images side by side are a direct attack on the so-called deceptive nature of social media platforms, although this specific genre of content is just as much a performance in itself.

In summary, the digital realm is a complex space that simultaneously challenges and expands traditional discourse on gender. Crying selfies, while validating emotional expressions, also prompt questions about the performative nature of vulnerability. In some instances, they risk commodifying and sensationalizing pain, thereby challenging the ideals of authenticity. In conclusion, vulnerability in the digital age is a rich site for exploring feminist viewpoints. It reaffirms feminist ideals of visibility and labour recognition while challenging these notions through the complexities of online performance and representation. Digital space offers a dynamic platform where individuals negotiate their identities, transcend traditional gender roles, and reshape our understanding of the feminist project in the 21st century. As we continue to navigate these virtual landscapes, it is essential to recognize that the personal is not just political but also profoundly digital, bridging the gap between private and public and constantly evolving the feminist horizon.

References

Abidin, C. (2015). Communicative ♡ intimacies: Influencers and perceived interconnectedness. *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, & Technology, 8*, 1–16. https://doi.org/10.7264/N3MW2FFG

Abidin, C. (2016). Visibility labour: Engaging with influencers' fashion brands and #OOTD advertorial campaigns on Instagram. *Media International Australia, 161*(1), 86–100. https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X16665177

Abidin, C. (2018). *Internet celebrity: Understanding fame online.* Emerald.

Agency for Culture and Palaces. (2020). *Kort nyt: Influencer-bureauer* [Short news: Influencer agencies]. The Agency for Culture and Palaces [Slots og Kulturstyrelsen].

Archer, C. (2019). How influencer "mumpreneur" bloggers and "everyday" mums frame presenting their children online. *Media International Australia, 170*(1), 47–56. https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X19828365

Aslama, M., & Pantti, M. (2006). Talking alone: Reality TV, emotions and authenticity. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *9*(2), 167–184. https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549406063162

Bakar, F. (2021, January 10). *Is the "crying selfie" good or bad for our mental health?* Huffington Post. https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/crying-selfie-mental-health-impact_uk_61e82deae4b0a864b07ab40b

Banet-Weiser, S. (2012). *Authentic™: The politics of ambivalence in a brand culture.* New York University Press.

Banet-Weiser, S. (2021). Gender, social media, and the labour of authenticity. *American Quarterly*, *73*(1), 141–144. https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2021.0008

Baumgardner, J., & Richards, A. (2004). Feminism and femininity: Or how we learned to stop worrying and love the thong. In A. Harris (Ed.), *All about the girl: Culture, power, and identity* (pp. 59–68). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203492567

Berger, J. (2008). *Ways of seeing.* Penguin Classics.

Brown, W. (2003). Neo-liberalism and the end of liberal democracy. *Theory & Event*, *7*(1). https://doi.org/10.1353/tae.2003.0020

Dejmanee, T. (2016). "Food porn" as postfeminist play: Digital femininity and the female body on food blogs. *Television and New Media*, *17*(5), 429–448. https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476415615944

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (2011). Introduction: The discipline and practice of qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 1–20). Sage.

Duffy, B. E., & Hund, E. (2019). Navigating visibility and vulnerability in social media contexts: Instagram's authenticity bind. *International Journal of Communication*, *13*, 4983–5002.

Elias, A. S., Gill, R., & Scharff, C. (2017). *Aesthetic labour: Rethinking beauty politics in neoliberalism.* Palgrave Macmillan.

Fotopoulou, A. (2017). *Feminist activism and digital networks: Between empowerment and vulnerability.* Palgrave Macmillan.

Frosh, P. (2015). The gestural image: The selfie, photography theory and kinesthetic sociability. *International Journal of Communication*, *9*, 1607–1628.

Germin, E. R., Eckert, S., & Vultee, F. (2021). The impact of Instagram mommy blogger content on the perceived self-efficacy of mothers. *Social Media + Society, 7*(3). https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211041649

Gill, R. (2007). Postfeminist media culture: Elements of a sensibility. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *10*(2), 147–166. https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549407075898

Gill, R. (2016). Post-postfeminism?: New feminist visibilities in postfeminist times. *Feminist Media Studies*, *16*(4), 610–630. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2016.1193293

Gill, R. (2017). The affective, cultural and psychic life of postfeminism: A postfeminist sensibility 10 years on. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *20*(6), 606–626. https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549417733003

Gill, R. (2021). Neoliberal beauty. In C. M. Leeds (Ed.), *The Routledge companion to beauty politics* (pp. 9–18). Routledge.

Goldhaber, M. H. (1997). The attention economy and the Net. *First Monday, 2*(4). https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v2i4.519

Gorman, A. (2019, November 19). *From sponsors to socialism: The return of Instagram star Essena O'Neill.* The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/nov/19/sponsors-socialism-return-instagram-star-essena-oneill

Grobe, C. (2017). *The art of confession: The performance of self from Robert Lowell to reality TV.* New York University Press.

Holowka, E. M. (2018). Between artifice and emotion: The "sad girls" of Instagram. In K. M. S. Bezio & K. Yost (Eds.), *Leadership, popular culture, and social change* (pp. 183–195). Edward Elgar. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781785368974.00022

Hunt, E. (2015, November 3). *Essena O'Neill quits Instagram claiming social media "is not real life".* The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/nov/03/instagram-star-essena-oneill-quits-2d-life-to-reveal-true-story-behind-images

Lehto, M. (2022). Ambivalent influencers: Feeling rules and the affective practice of anxiety in social media influencer work. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *25*(1), 201–216. https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549421988958

Lutz, T. (1999). *Crying: The natural & cultural history of tears.* W. W. Norton.

McRobbie, A. (2009). *The aftermath of feminism: Gender, culture, and social change.* Sage.

Möhlmann, M., Alves de Lima Salge, C., & Marabelli, M. (2023). Algorithm sensemaking: How platform workers make sense of algorithmic management. *Journal of the Association for Information Systems*, *24*(1), 35–64. https://doi.org/10.17705/1jais.00774

Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. *Screen*, *16*(3), 6–18. https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6

Nielsen, L. Y. (2016). *Indfoldede og Udfoldede Kroppe: En Undersøgelse af Kropslig Performance på Modebloggen* [Enfolded and unfolded bodies: An examination of bodily performance on the fashion blog]. PhD Thesis. Aalborg Universitetsforlag. https://doi.org/10.5278/vbn.phd.hum.00038

Petre, C., Duffy, B. E., & Hund, E. (2019). "Gaming the system": Platform paternalism and the politics of algorithmic visibility. *Social Media + Society*, *5*(4). https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119879995

Pitcher, L. (2021, November 16). *What the crying selfie says about our mental health.* British Vogue. https://www.vogue.co.uk/arts-and-lifestyle/article/crying-selfie

Rose, G. (2022). *Visual methodologies: An introduction to interpreting visual materials.* Sage.

Schwartz, A. (2018). "Put on all your make-up and cry it off in public": The function of femme grieving practices. In S. Rodrigues & E. Przybylo (Eds.), *On the politics of ugliness* (pp. 69–89). Palgrave Macmillan.

Schwartz, A. (2022). Radical vulnerability: Selfies as a Femme-inine mode of resistance. *Psychology & Sexuality*, *13*(1), 43–56. https://doi.org/10.1080/19419899.2020.1810745.

Senft, T. M. (2008). *Camgirls: Celebrity and community in the age of social networks* (Digital Formations 4). Peter Lang.

Senft, T. M., & Baym, N. K. (2015). What does the selfie say? Investigating a global phenomenon. *International Journal of Communication*, *9*, 1588–1606.

Thelandersson, F. (2018). Social media sad girls and the normalization of sad states of being. *Capacious: Journal for Emerging Affect Inquiry*, *1*(2), 1–21. https://doi.org/10.22387/CAP2017.9

Thelandersson, F. (2023). *21st century media and female mental health: Profitable vulnerability and sad girl culture.* Palgrave Macmillan.

Tiidenberg, K., & Gómez-Cruz, E. (2015). Selfies, image and the re-making of the body. *Body & Society*, *21*(4), 77–102. https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X15592465

Vingershoet, A. (2013). *Why only humans weep: Unravelling the mysteries of tears.* Oxford University Press.