Influencer Politics

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Influencer Politics

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Influencer politics: An introduction

1 Introduction

Recent years have seen an upsurge in what have come to be known as *social media influencers* – a promotional phenomenon in which the connection between self-branding, advertising, and micro-celebrity in digital media is made explicit (Khamis et al., 2017). Early definitions refer to influencers as individuals who share their everyday lives, consumption habits, relationships, and private thoughts on social networking sites or blogs, and actively interact with their audience in a way that also generates financial profit through various marketing agreements with companies and organisations (Abidin, 2015, 2016). With increased professionalisation, the monetisation of both audience and self-brand has become a key aspect of influencer culture, which has also developed into a promotional industry in itself (Hund, 2023). Cultivating a strong relationship with one's "followers" through interactions and perceived intimacy is often a basis for success in this business (Abidin, 2015; Berryman & Kavka, 2017; Raun, 2018; Reinikainen et al., 2020). While sometimes referred to as a new and emerging form of advertising, the core principle of influencer marketing thus stems from the "two-step flow" of communication, and theories of influence through opinion leaders and parasocial relationships that were formulated as far back as the 1950s (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Katz, 1955).

From this perspective, the very idea of being an influencer is largely based on the intensified commodification of the self, in and through social media, in order to influence the audience to make certain choices – choices that might involve consumption practices but also ethics, values, and politics. It is therefore not surprising that the idea of influencers as political actors, or ideological intermediaries, has become increasingly visible in recent years. A trend of "political influencers", who incorporate specific politics into their content (Riedl et al., 2021; Suuronen et al., 2022) and shape the attitudes and perceptions of political issues among their followers (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2022; Schmuck et al., 2022) has been noticed globally. In the Nordic countries, for example, influencers have actively endorsed specific issues and incorporated them into their self-brand; for example, sustainability, feminism, animal rights, LGBTQ+ issues, and anti-racism have been recurring topics among some of the most successful influencers today. There are also examples of influencers who are involved in more "formal" politics, either by publicly supporting a certain party or politician (Suuronen et al., 2022), or – as in Sweden – influencers who in the run-up to forthcoming elections invite politicians

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onto their platforms and interview them about specific issues. Influencers in Finland were engaged in government information campaigns during the Covid-19 pandemic (Pöyry et al., 2022), and in both Norway and Sweden certain influencers have been held accountable for commercial collaborations or specific content based on the political views common amongst their followers (e. g. Arnesson, 2023, 2024).

The politicisation of influencers thus seems to be an ongoing process, and has drawn attention and concerns both in and out of academia. The process is also paradoxical, since influencers might engage in politics and act as opinion leaders in some cases, while simultaneously object to being considered powerful, and to be held accountable by their followers or news media, in other cases. Similar ambivalence can be seen among their followers, as well as among political experts, communicators, and journalists, when it comes to the issue of influencers and politics. This book seeks to highlight these current discussions about the role and significance of social media influencers in contemporary digital culture and politics. While the Nordic countries constitute its central focus, the content is not exclusively restricted to this geographical area. It also explores how German political strategists relate to influencers, as well as the politicisation of influencers in a conflict situation, i. e. the notion of "war influencers" related to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Divon & Eriksson Krutrök, 2023). The book is thus the result of a common interest among researchers engaged in work on political aspects of influencer marketing and influencer culture from critical, cultural, and strategic perspectives. It offers a range of case studies devoted to both the promises and limitations of influencer politics in the promotional cultures in which we live.

2 The politicisation of influencers

As discussed above, a recent trend towards more "meaningful" content has been observed among many influencers, who integrate certain issues or politics into their product promotion (Riedl et al., 2021). The term "political influencer" is not, however, a notion that is uniformly employed in research, or in the news media, when talking about this phenomenon. Casero-Ripollés (2020), for example, characterises political influencers as "digital opinion leaders" who seek to have an impact on the public agenda in different ways. This conceptualisation includes political actors who redefine their communicative practices and seek social influence through connectivity, interactivity, and self-presentation on social media, as well as how the concept of an influencer is widening to include other professions, such as CEOs and intellectuals who participate in public debates. As the first chapter of this book shows, similar conceptualisations have been used by journalists covering the

topic. From this perspective, research might focus on how far-right actors adopt influencer strategies to further a metapolitical agenda in digital media (Maly, 2020), how populist politicians use social media as a campaign arena (Enli, 2017; Starita & Trillò, 2022), or how talk-show participants position themselves as political influencers on X (formerly Twitter) (Marcos-García et al., 2020).

In contrast to other definitions, Casero-Ripollés does not emphasise the commercial core of influencers in terms of self-branding, advertising, or monetising their audiences in different ways. Other accounts of political influencers often highlight this aspect when they define the focus of their investigations (e.g. Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2022; Fischer et al., 2022; Goodwin et al., 2023; Riedl et al., 2021; Schmuck et al., 2022; Suuronen et al., 2022). Riedl et al. (2023), however, state that the term is highly contextual and that their definition might include content creators "who do not monetise their online activities at all" (p. 2). While we agree that context is critical here, and that the boundaries of what it means to be an influencer are fluid rather than fixed, the main contribution of this anthology is its focus on influencers who are deeply rooted in the commercial sphere – specifically in the beauty and lifestyle genres – and how their communication practices might be strategically "translated" into politics (Falasca & Grandien, 2017). Excluding the commercial and promotional nature of influencers from the definition means that all kinds of political activism or opinion formation in social media might be included. It also removes one of the underlying issues that makes this an interesting phenomenon to study: the perceived tension between politics and commercialism, often articulated through the notion of *authenticity*.

2.1 The gendered politics of authenticity

The ability to be perceived as "authentic", and to cultivate a self-brand that is both unique and relatable, is a key characteristic of influencers (Coco & Eckert, 2020; Khamis et al., 2017; Pöyry et al., 2019; Riedl et al., 2021). Early accounts of authentic online self-presentation stress an either/or view of being autonomous or being paid by others to present "strategically crafted messages aimed at manipulating or persuading consumers" (Gaden & Dumitrica, 2015, p. 7). As Banet-Weiser (2012) has pointed out, however, this binary simplifies the issue, and does not help to explain the many ways in which authenticity is continuously being (re)constructed and negotiated in mediated performances. Authenticity is a "messy" concept, and it is also inherently gendered – for female influencers, the curation of "the self" in order to gain followers and success can even be understood as a form of *labour* framed by tensions related to ideals of femininity and vulnerability (Banet-Weiser, 2021). In addition, influencer genres focused on beauty

and lifestyle are predominantly born out of fashion blogging and therefore inherently intertwined with ideals of autonomy and amateurism, which might cause a need to downplay the strategic choices and practices used to gain success in digital media (Duffy, 2017). This means that these influencers often struggle with the *ambivalence* of authenticity (Cunningham & Craig, 2017), and engage in ongoing negotiations of how to be "true to themselves" as well as their audiences (Wellman et al., 2020).

Such ambivalence becomes especially visible in a political context, where politics might be integrated into influencers' content creation as expressions of their values and "authentic" selves, or, alternatively, something that is used by others to criticise or question their authenticity. As shown in chapter 3 of this book, the commercial practices of influencers – their ability to package and "sell" ideas as well as products – is also one of the things that might make them interesting to political communicators seeking to reach and engage with new audiences. At the same time, it is precisely such a "commodification" of politics that, for some, makes them a threat to democracy and to political accountability. Emily Hund (2023, p. 146) highlights how the lack of transparency and regulation in the influencer industry might make it hard to identify a political message that is seamlessly integrated into an influencer's content, and even more difficult to know who the sponsor behind the post is. She also asks the question if "selling access to our personal self-expression" really should be considered beneficial for society? To resolve these tensions, political parties might emphasise the creativity and authenticity of the content creators they collaborate with, as discussed in chapter 4, rather than highlighting their commercial impact and "wide reach".

In a political context, influencers' rise to fame through self-branding strategies and the "organic" cultivation of a following on social media also provides a contrast to traditional celebrity endorsements (Harff & Schmuck, 2023; Schmuck et al., 2022). Relatability, and the ability to create active communities around themselves, has been characterised as a defining feature of successful influencers (Reinikainen et al., 2020). Parasocial relationships that develop over time, specifically when people follow the influencers through their everyday lives for many years, give them a certain status and power of persuasion (Suuronen et al., 2022). Such relationships are often based on the performance of affective labour, which presupposes and relies upon perceived intimacy (Raun, 2018). By sharing personal thoughts and accounts of their everyday lives, as well as addressing their viewers in an informal and conversational style that suggests an emotional bond, influencers can be perceived as a "big sister" or best friend who might guide and advise their followers (Berryman & Kavka, 2017; Torjesen, 2021). Consequently, influencers often take on, or are attributed, the function of role models with expert knowledge and skills in certain areas, especially for young people (Harff & Schmuck, 2023;

Riedl et al., 2021; Schmuck et al., 2022). Chapter 5 in this book shows how influencers' conversational style and interactive relationship with their audience is one of the strategies adopted by politicians, and adapted to a political context. The importance of interaction with followers is also highlighted in chapter 2, where influencers' potential impact on political participation is discussed. Being "political" does not necessarily involve endorsing a specific issue, party, or ideology, but rather implies a focus on the role of influencers in promoting political interest and processes such as elections etc. among their (supposedly) young followers (Harff & Schmuck, 2023; Riedl et al., 2021; Suuronen et al., 2022).

2.2 Politics beyond parliament

As Suuronen et al. (2022) note, the nature of politics is also increasingly elusive in other ways, and only focusing on "formal" politics in terms of institutions, parties, and elections would not capture the many dimensions and expressions of politics in influencer culture. Influencers' content creation and communicative practices often blur the boundaries between public and private spheres, which means that something that might be considered personal in other contexts here becomes infused with politics. Climate change, for example, is an issue that is often framed by individual lifestyle choices and consumption practices, something illustrated by the emergence of the "greenfluencers" discussed in chapter 6. Like the "personal green bloggers" before them (Joosse & Brydges, 2018), these influencers mediate and translate the complexities of sustainability into everyday politics, through appeals aimed at either individual consumption and personal well-being, or more radical appeals of transformation and accountability aimed at both brands and politicians. As discussed above, however, the commercial contexts within which these influencers operate cause tensions, and appeals for consumer activism also evoke issues of class and privilege. Research shows that "lifestyle politics" and consumption-based forms of political participation predominantly appeal to well-educated, middle-class, and high-income earners (Banet-Weiser & Mukherjee, 2012; Ferrer-Fons & Fraile, 2013).

Influencers in the beauty and lifestyle genres might also personify a specific form of popular feminism, which correlates with a significant increase in female entrepreneurship in digital contexts (Abidin & Gwynne, 2017; Duffy & Hund, 2015; Duffy & Pruchniewska, 2017). The image of a "girl boss" who builds her own brand and fame, through both marketing agreements and product launches, resonates strongly within the neoliberal discourse of individualism, self-government, and empowerment through self-realisation, consumption, and political brand cultures (Banet-Weiser, 2012, 2018; Roivainen, 2023). Simultaneously, postfeminist articula-

tions within influencer culture might also take a much more ambivalent and emotional form, as shown in chapter 7 of this book. Empowerment and vulnerability are inherently intertwined in depictions of motherhood and femininity among influencers who seek to present themselves as an "authentic" alternative to the supposedly staged image of an "ideal" woman and micro-celebrity. Postfeminist ambivalence in relation to empowerment and exploitation can also be seen in the pressure to conform to unattainable beauty standards, among both influencers and their followers. The "affective body politics" of social media (Hynnä et al., 2019) means that the body of the (female) influencer becomes a site of contestation, where it can simultaneously come to represent both individual self-expression and structural objectification. This paradox has been visible not least in debates over influencers' responsibility when it comes to the presence of so-called "pro-ana" content on social media, as well as the different ways in which technical affordances, i. e. filters, editing, and cropping, are routinely used on visually oriented platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. Chapter 8 discusses this politicisation of the influencer body in light of recent Norwegian legislation that bans the use of undisclosed photo editing in advertising – a law aimed at the practice of "improving" images with the help of filters, retouching, and other editing tools (Geiger, 2021).

Finally, the term politics can also encompass crises, conflicts, and war, where influencers – just like other individuals and businesses – are forced to adapt to a new situation. They might, for example, become intermediaries for "strategic narratives" produced by a political elite, as discussed in chapter 9. The fact that influencers were contacted by public agencies and involved in health information campaigns during the Covid-19 pandemic (Pöyry et al., 2022) shows that they are seen as strategic partners for governments during times of crisis. However, they might also play a part in spreading misinformation, false claims, and conspiracy theories about public issues (Harff et al., 2022). In relation to the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, there have been media reports of coordinated campaigns in which influencers were coerced to spread pro-Russian statements and propaganda (Gilbert, 2022). The United States government also reached out to TikTok influencers in an effort to debrief about its views on the current state of the war (Lorenz, 2022). Such initiatives can be seen as attempts to reach and engage with specific target groups, predominantly younger audiences, in a way that might not at first glance come across as persuasion or propaganda. Technological features of different platforms also shape the way that cultural trauma is expressed in digital media and impacts not just *what* influencers communicate about the realities of living in a conflict situation, but also *how* these audio-visual representations are formed (Divon & Eriksson Krutrök, 2023).

3 Influencer politics in social media

As this brief introduction has shown, trying to define what constitutes a political influencer is a rather complicated task because both "political" and "influencer" are concepts characterised by complexity and contextual dependency. Therefore, this anthology instead focuses on *influencer politics*, a concept that attempts to capture a specific form of convergence between the personal, political, and promotional in contemporary digital media and society. A key focus is how the core ideas of influencer culture – authenticity, intimacy, commercialism, and self-branding – shape the ways in which politics are expressed and understood in this context, as well as opening up space for new ways of connecting and interacting with the public. It also highlights the way that influencer culture itself is infused with politics, where issues of, for example, empowerment and exploitation are articulated and discussed in different ways.

We regard influencer politics as a concept with (at least) three dimensions: firstly, it covers influencers who engage in politics in different ways; for example, as part of their self-branding and commercial content, or as intermediaries who more or less explicitly promote certain policies, politicians, or ideologies. Secondly, it involves politicians or political parties who adopt influencer strategies and genre-specific practices, and adapt them to a political context. This might also include political actors who immerse themselves in influencer culture, and socialise with well-known influencers and micro-celebrities. Thirdly, influencer politics also includes the politicisation of influencer content and commercial collaborations, often through reactions and critique from followers and/or other media actors, who discuss issues of responsibility and power in relation to the influencer profession. This means that influencers' platforms are seen as sites for public debate, or part of a digital public sphere, where everyday politics is articulated and negotiated.

3.1 Outline of the book

The book is divided into two parts. The first part covers the intersection of influencers and the discourses and practices of so-called formal politics (see Suuronen et al., 2022), discussing both how influencers engage in formal politics, and how politicians and political actors adopt influencer strategies. The second part discusses the politicisation of influencer culture, presenting examples of how lifestyle content becomes politicised and how conflict situations, such as war, shape the practices and role perceptions of influencers.

In chapter 1, entitled "From beauty to ballots: Contradictory discourses on political influencers in Swedish news and social media", Johanna Arnesson examines the discursive construction of political influencers in the Swedish news and on social media before and after the Swedish parliamentary elections of 2022. The chapter addresses the tensions created by the commercial nature of influencers and their tendency to display their personal lives in relation to their political function, role, and power. Based on statements from influencers themselves, three political roles are identified: the impartial guide, the subjective storyteller, and the branded "polfluencer". The chapter also underlines how influencers are constructed as both a promise and a threat to political interest and participation, specifically among young people.

The possible promise of social media influencers continues in chapter 2, entitled "'Remember to vote!': How do people respond to social media influencers promoting political participation?" written by Essi Pöyry and Hanna Reinikainen. The chapter examines how an appeal to vote by a social media influencer affects the voting intentions of citizens, and how following social media influencers and political participation relate in general. By introducing the results of an experiment conducted with a Finnish consumer panel, the chapter claims that, while a social media post by an influencer can affect people's intention to vote, the way in which the appeal is made is also crucial – the audience's urge to interact with influencers is also pivotal when it comes to political appeals. In addition, the chapter shows that political participation, such as voting, and following influencers appear to be connected. For political strategists and campaign professionals, this is a reminder that people who follow social media influencers are, in fact, generally politically minded and aware of current affairs in society.

Chapter 3, "The influencer political communicators dream of: Seven theses on the ideal influencer in the political domain", continues to discuss the role of social media influencers in political campaigning. Nils S. Borchers introduces the ideas that German political communicators hold about the "ideal influencer" for a political communication campaign. The chapter shows how political communicators dream of working with social media influencers who break down complex political issues, bow to the dignity of politics, handle interactions with followers with expertise, show passion and authenticity, appear low-maintenance, and are lenient with political communicators. This chapter is among the first academic works to provide insights that illuminate how political communicators approach the integration of influencers into election campaigns.

Elections are also discussed in chapter 4, entitled "Election influencers on TikTok: Strategic utilisation of the short video format during the 2022 election campaign in Sweden". Here, Mattias Ekman and Andreas Widholm introduce how Swedish political parties have sought to utilise TikTok in their strategic communi-

cation practices in order to appeal to citizens who have generally been considered difficult to reach through traditional campaigning. The chapter assesses two cases: a collaboration between the Swedish Left Party and a group of content creators, popular among immigrant youth; and attempts by the Sweden Democrats to manage the short video format, utilising communicative styles and aesthetics often more familiar to commercial lifestyle influencers, in order to promote the party during their election campaign. The chapter concludes that the adaptation of political campaigning to new platforms seems to stimulate rather unorthodox ways of practising political communication.

In chapter 5, Christina Grandien and Johanna Arnesson further discuss the attempts by politicians to address current and future constituents through social media. In their chapter, entitled "A human behind the politics? Personalisation and interactions in the comments sections of Swedish politicians' YouTube channels", Grandien and Arnesson analyse the viewer comments about videos posted on YouTube by two Swedish politicians, Annie Lööf and Ebba Busch. The chapter concludes that these comments reflect influencer-like communication strategies, resembling realistic social interaction. Two-way interactions, referring to politicians responding to viewer comments, appear to enhance viewer engagement and contribute to an active commenting environment. Comments also serve as reflective engagement, characterised by immediate and emotionally charged responses, which are typical of lifestyle influencer content. The chapter also highlights concerns about insincerity in politicians adopting influencer personas.

The second section of the book delves into how lifestyle content posted by social media influencers intertwines with politics. In chapter 6, "Greenfluencers and environmental advocacy: Sustainability representations and appeals to action in content by Scandinavian influencers", Ida Vikøren Andersen and Moa Eriksson Krutrök discuss "greenfluencers" – influencers who manage to combine environmental issues and their personal lives in their content creation. The chapter suggests three different appeal strategies used by "greenfluencers": the feel-good appeal, the transformation appeal, and the condemn and commend appeal. The chapter further suggests that these appeals invite followers to take different roles: to act either as responsible consumers who consume sustainably and call out bad business practices, or as active citizens who seek to leverage their influence to change environmental policies.

Chapter 7 shifts the focus to one of the key elements of influencer cultures: how authenticity is negotiated, constructed, and presented. In their chapter, entitled "Tears and body insecurities: The authentic influencer as change-maker?", Louise Yung Nielsen and Mette Lykke Nielsen analyse the performances of emotions, motherhood, and body insecurities by six Danish influencers, and discuss 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 relationship with 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.

The ambivalent relationship between influencer cultures and feminism is continued in chapter eight "Body and beauty pressures in the Norwegian influencer industry: Exploring media discourses on influencers and their impact on beauty standards" by Mathilde Hogsnes and Tor-Morten Grønli. The chapter analyses media discourses of the perceived impact influencers have over young women's body and beauty pressures – identified as a significant issue by the Norwegian authorities, politicians, and influencer communities. The chapter finds that there are contradictions when it comes to the perceived roles of influencers and their practices in relation to body and beauty issues. On the one hand, it is argued that influencers are subjected to the same type of stereotypical body ideals and beauty standards that guide their practices. On the other, influencers are considered professional commercial actors who should be held to the same standards as any other commercial actor. In addition, while some influencers can be considered advocates for individual choice and pleasure, influencers also often reinforce stereotypical beauty standards, challenging the achievement of greater diversity and representation within the influencer industry.

Chapter 9 closes the book by examining how political and commercial influence have been brought together in the extreme context of the war in Ukraine. In their chapter, "Instagram as an affective battlefield: Patriotic inspirational influencers as strategic narrators", Nuppu Pelevina, Oksana Domina, and Salla-Maaria Laaksonen examine how Ukrainian social media influencers have communicated about the war in Ukraine and participated in disseminating strategic Ukrainian narratives and renegotiating their roles, genres, and practices amid the war against Russia. The chapter finds that Ukrainian social media influencers have functioned as information disseminators, public social activists, and inspirational patriots, by providing first-hand information about the situation in Ukraine, mobilising their followers to support the war effort, and building a consciousness of a shared past, an understanding of current events, and paths to a peaceful future. Thus, many lifestyle influencers in Ukraine have transformed themselves into intermediaries of strategic narratives, while engaging in shaping the nation's collective memory and national identity.

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Johanna Arnesson

From beauty to ballots

Contradictory discourses on political influencers in Swedish news and social media

Abstract: In early 2022, two of Sweden's most popular influencers launched YouTube series where they interviewed political leaders about the upcoming parliamentary elections. The series were presented as a way to reach and engage younger audiences, who supposedly would not take part in politics otherwise. They also triggered a debate about political influencers, both in traditional newspapers and in social media, where actors in and outside of the influencer industry participated. This chapter examines the discursive construction of "political influencers" in these debates, by analysing contradictory stances, as well as the boundary work of journalists, experts, and influencers themselves, in mediated discourse. The chapter highlights how the commercial nature of influencers, and their tendency to bring forth their personal lives, creates tensions in relation to their perceived political function, role, and power. The chapter also underlines how influencers are constructed as both a promise and a threat to political interest and participation, specifically for young people.

Keywords: political influencers, journalism, stance-taking, boundary work, discourse analysis

1 Introduction

In March 2022, six months before the general election in Sweden, the popular vlogger Therése Lindgren announced that she would publish a series of interviews with leaders of the parliamentary parties on her YouTube channel. She motivated the initiative, called *Therése and the Election*, by saying that influencers are important intermediaries of political information for young people, "who do not take part in traditional media to such a large extent" (*Blekinge Läns Tidning*, 2022, 23 March). Lindgren was not the first Swedish influencer to use her social media channels in this way: Margaux Dietz, another well-known YouTuber and social media figure, started a similar series called *Partitempen* even before the preceding election of 2018, and followed up with a new round of interviews in 2022.

The two series attracted a fairly large audience, with the most popular video (Margaux Dietz's interview with the leader of the right-wing Sweden Democrats)

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receiving approximately 355,000 views.[1] They also attracted media attention, resulting in a number of commentaries in newspapers around the country, as well as longer interviews with Lindgren and Dietz in the two leading morning papers. The idea of influencers as political opinion leaders or intermediaries of political information was also discussed in more general terms in relation to the election, both in the press and on social media. The election was a recurring topic, for example, on several more-or-less well-known influencers' own profiles, as well as on *Bloggbevakning*, a commercial website and Instagram account that covers and scrutinises the Swedish influencer industry.

In these discussions, influencers were both held up as social media wizards who would help uninterested or misinformed youth to gain a better grasp of politics, and perceived as a threat to democracy and to professional journalism. Similar opposing images also surfaced when the influencers themselves talked about their own political content and perceived position of power. These contradictory discourses are the primary focus of this chapter. It examines the discursive construction of political influencers in Swedish news and social media before and after the election of 2022. By analysing different ideas about their political function, role, and power, as well as the boundary work of different actors within this discourse (Carlson, 2015; Cheng & Chew, 2022), wider contemporary cultural tensions about influencers and their socio-cultural significance are highlighted (Droz-dit-Busset, 2022).

The chapter focuses on mediated discourses in a Swedish national context. Through systematic searches in the digital archive *Retriever Research Database*, I collected 23 newspaper articles of various genres that discussed issues related to influencers, politics, and power in the months before and after the general election of 2022. A majority of these focus on either the previously mentioned YouTube series from Lindgren and Dietz (n = 9) or on influencers and the election in general (n = 8). A smaller number of articles focuses on the perceived power of influencers, although not necessarily related to the election (n = 6).

Newspapers are, however, only "one link in a long chain of meaning-making activities" (Droz-dit-Busset, 2022, p. 2). As part of an ongoing research project on influencers and politics in Sweden, I have also spent a lot of time "lurking" on different platforms and influencer accounts, i. e. observing without participating, in order to build familiarity with social norms and specific contexts (Ferguson, 2017; McRae, 2017). Through this digital ethnographic approach, I have identified and collected additional materials in the form of content and user comments in which influencers' role in the 2022 election was discussed. For example, I have an-

1 At the time of writing, 18 April 2023.

alysed a specific influencer's own posts on the topic and the following discussion among their followers, as well as the comments to a post on the website *Bloggbevakning* entitled "Election sprint", which lists a number of political appeals from Swedish influencers. While videos in the YouTube series *Partitempen* and *Therése and the Election* are not part of the analysis, some viewer comments on these videos are used to illustrate audience responses.

2 Drawing the boundaries around political influencers

The idea that influencers can strive towards more "meaningful" content (Riedl et al., 2021) and use their platforms to promote certain issues or politics is no longer a novel concept. The term "political influencer" has become increasingly prominent in the public sphere over the last decade, although it is not always clear what it actually means. It has been used to describe a range of different actors and practices, both in and out of academia (e. g. Casero-Ripollés, 2020; Harff & Schmuck, 2023; Riedl et al., 2023; Suuronen et al., 2022). Just like other professions that do not necessarily require a formal degree or licence, being a social media influencer is "a varied cultural practice embedded within a complicated social landscape" (Carlson, 2015, p. 2), and is affected by its relations with platforms, agents, advertisers, followers, and other media outlets. This elastic nature means that who is considered an influencer and how their influence is actually achieved and perceived vary depending on context. The same goes for politics, a term that might encompass formal structures, ideologies, and power relations, as well as individually expressed action frames mobilised around personal lifestyle values (Bennett, 2012; Suuronen et al., 2022).

With this in mind, this chapter examines how different actors make sense of political influencers as idea and practice. It does so by analysing the stance-taking and contradictory discourses that emerge in news and social media. Stance-taking involves "the ways that speakers/writers (often implicitly) express an epistemic (i. e. true or false) or evaluative (i. e. good or bad) judgement vis-à-vis the topic under discussion" (Droz-dit-Busset, 2022, p. 2). Stances are identified by paying attention to how linguistic meaning-making resources, such as modalities, lexical choices, and the presentation of self and others, express a certain position on a topic or about an object. These stances are often legitimised through rationalisation, moral evaluation, authorisation, or mythopoesis (van Leeuwen, 2007).

Previous research has shown that, on the one hand, influencers might be celebrated with references to their numbers of followers, as well as narratives of up-

ward mobility and myths of meritocracy; on the other, derisory discourses might lament their lack of a work ethic as well as their intrusion into "industries that do not want them" (Droz-dit-Busset, 2022, p. 7). Similar derogatory notions have also been found in the Swedish press, where journalists' *detestation* of influencers is argued to be not just a feeling, but also an action; an explicit practice whereby power structures of age and gender intersect as the influencer is "of the wrong age in the wrong gender; [and] doing the wrong things in the wrong way in the wrong place" (Nilsson, 2021, p. 56).

Such *boundary work* can be defined as a symbolic contest over the boundaries of a social practice or particular profession (Gieryn, 1983; Carlson, 2015). In this case, this means contestations over who can be considered an influencer, what counts as appropriate influencer practices and interests, what the normative values, ethics, and beliefs of influencers are, and what kind of political role and power they actually have. Lifestyle journalists, for example, might take a pragmatic view of influencers as *functional interlopers* who "can exist within and out of journalism's boundaries according to circumstance" (Cheng & Chew, 2022, p. 385). Simultaneously, they protect their professional autonomy by highlighting certain skills, education, and values that influencers presumably do not possess, and by asserting their own independence from both audiences and advertisers (Perreault & Hanusch, 2022).

Influencers, on the other hand, also perform boundary work to distinguish themselves from other professions, or from each other. This might involve highlighting transparency as a professional norm rather than objectivity, since personal assessments and experiences are argued to be what attracts followers (Maares & Hanusch, 2018). Authenticity is another professional norm, one that involves an ongoing negotiation of the tensions between being "genuine" and being strategic (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021; Wellman et al., 2020). These negotiations include being "true to the audience" as well as oneself, which means that nurturing a positive relationship with followers is another core characteristic of influencers (Abidin, 2015; Wellman et al., 2020; Yuan & Lou, 2020). Practices and values deemed to be "inside" the boundaries might also depend on influencers' *role perception*; how they view their role in society and what they aim to achieve with their work. Previous research has identified five different roles that influencers claim for themselves: providing exemplars of lifestyle; inspiration; educating followers and providing orientation; providing a service and giving advice; and entertainment and relaxation (Maares & Hanusch, 2018).

The following analysis is structured around three focal contradictions found in the materials. These involve discussions on (1) the function of influencers in democratic processes, (2) the professional roles of influencers in relation to politics, and (3) the kind of power that influencers actually have. The use of *boundary-*

making strategies (Gieryn, 1983) in the interactions between actors, as well as how influencers' different *role perceptions* are expressed (Maares & Hanusch, 2018), are also discussed in relation to these overarching discursive struggles.

3 Political influencers as promise and threat

The first contradictory stance deals with the function of influencers when it comes to political participation and democratic processes. It involves the ways in which different actors characterise and (de)legitimise influencers' involvement in politics and the impact that this expansion of boundaries might have on certain actors, ideas, and processes.

3.1 A gateway to politics

The belief that there is a need to reinvent political communication, and to use new channels to reach young (potential) voters, seems to be an omnipresent idea in the analysed texts. An article in *Dagens Industri* (2022, 27 May), for example, states that first-time voters are "a group whose media habits clearly differ from those of older voter groups", specifically when it comes to the use of social media. As shown in the introduction, influencers themselves also highlight this perceived gap between the political parties and a young audience that does not follow traditional news media. Both Lindgren and Dietz emphasise that they see their YouTube series as a way to reach and engage with young people who might not be interested in the upcoming election, or who find politics too complicated and complex to understand. Their involvement in politics is here legitimised through rationalisation, a strategy that focuses on the goals and uses of social actions (Droz-dit-Busset, 2022; van Leeuwen, 2007). The influencers describe their interviews with party leaders as "a gateway to politics" or "a transport route for young people" intended to lead them into more initiated and knowledge-based political participation:

> Margaux Dietz herself describes "Partitempen" as "simple politics", a concept that should arouse an initial interest among younger voters (*Dagens Nyheter*, 2022, 18 April).

The aim is said to be "to simplify and explain politics to first-time voters" (*Göteborgs-Posten*, 2022, 30 May) and to give "as concrete answers as possible" (*Expressen*, 2022, 31 March) when it comes to how the different parties want to tackle issues that engage young voters. Lindgren focuses on climate change, gender equal-

ity, and mental health, issues that are ranked high among young people, as well as animal rights, which is one of her own interests. The politics that the series is meant to introduce and explain is thus not specifically situated on the political left-right spectrum, but rather is characteristic of what is often referred to as identity and lifestyle politics (Bernstein, 2005; De Moor, 2017). Comments show that this approach is appreciated by followers: a first-time voter thanks her for the "educational and simple series" that gives "a better understanding" of what the different parties stand for.

Dietz's series *Partitempen*, on the other hand, focuses on the self-presentation of politicians, so that a younger audience can "get to know them as individuals" (*Dagens Industri*, 2022, 27 May). This motivation is very much in line with the increased personalisation of politics, where the personality and self-brand of individual politicians and party leaders takes precedence over party politics and ideology (McGregor, 2018; Metz et al., 2020; Russmann et al., 2019). When looking at the comments on the videos, it seems that this idea also hits home with viewers, who appreciate the personal performance of specific politicians.

It is not just the influencers and their followers who see the perceived lack of political interest and knowledge of young people as something that needs to be addressed through new strategies. A media researcher who comments on the influencers' YouTube series has also suggested that there is a need for more engaging political communication. She argues that Swedish politicians were already participating in different forms of "infotainment" and light-hearted interviews back in the 1960s, and that this serves a different purpose than watching a more serious party leader speaking on TV (*AlingsåsKuriren*, 2022, 18 May). Similar views are expressed by a former political strategist who is featured as an expert in the previously mentioned *Dagens Industri* article. He states that initiatives such as *Therése and the Election* and *Partitempen* should be seen as a complement to more conventional political information and "qualitative journalism", and that they might "actually add something to democracy". Drawing on the work of Gieryn (1983), these views can be seen as examples of *expansion-based boundary strategies*, whereby the function of influencers is extended into the "twilight zone" of political communication and information (Maares & Hanusch, 2018).

3.2 A threat to democracy (and to journalism)

Many journalists, on the other hand, take a different stance when it comes to the YouTube series' impact on democracy, and to influencers' interference in the political sphere. The interview series are described in several articles as "nonsense", "trivial", and "meaningless". Some critics claim that they are too cheerful and

"silly", while others describe them as too boring, strange, and "above all unnecessary". These derogatory accounts are very much in line with how influencers' work and characteristics have been systematically downgraded in the news media before (Droz-dit-Busset, 2022; Nilsson, 2021), and often legitimised through moral evaluation, where influencers fail to live up to either the value systems of journalism or democratic ideals (van Leeuwen, 2007).

Rather than simplifying politics, making it more accessible and interesting, initiatives such as *Partitempen* are characterised as making a mockery of its imagined audience: "the arrangement suggests underestimation, if not contempt, for the intelligence of young people" (*Expressen*, 2022, 13 April). The interviews are not described as entertaining, but rather as something that journalists have to "suffer through" in order to comment on them. Similar criticism is also expressed by actors in the influencer industry; Camilla Gervide, editor of *Bloggbevakning*, is reported to have called the Dietz series "silly and patronising" when she talked about it in a podcast.

The YouTube series are also characterised as being a threat to democracy, since Lindgren and Dietz are too "uncritical" and unable to demand answers from politicians. These are examples of *expulsion-based strategies* (Gieryn, 1983), whereby journalists deem influencers unfit to do the kind of work that they are undertaking (e. g. Carlson, 2015; Cheng & Chew, 2022). The fact that influencers engage in politics in this way, and lend their channels to politicians who prefer "soft chats" rather than critical interviews, is "problematic" and puts the spotlight on the wrong issues:

> But something will go wrong in the election results if questions and answers about, for example, the politicians' favourite dish are to define which party one votes for, as it is ultimately completely irrelevant to us and what our elected officials are appointed to work with (*Norran*, 2022, 19 July).

Statements such as the one above can be compared with lifestyle journalists, who assert boundaries by claiming that influencers only give the audience what they want, rather than what they need (Perreault & Hanusch, 2022). Similarly to how advertisers might circumvent journalism and go directly to influencers (Cheng & Chew, 2022), politicians might choose "familiar conversations" where there are "no follow-up questions, no accountability, not even entertainment" (*Aftonbladet*, 2022, 16 April).

This reasoning exemplifies a third boundary-making strategy, *protection of autonomy*, which is a defence mechanism to shield a profession or social field from outside influence (Gieryn, 1983; Carlson, 2015). The independence of journalism is perceived as being threatened, and therefore journalists are characterised as

the ones with the knowledge and competence to ask "uncomfortable" and "critical" questions, specific skills that influencers allegedly do not possess. Professional values, such as objectivity and keeping a distance from those in power (Perreault & Hanusch, 2022), are also invoked; influencers are seen as too close to the politicians, too intimate and friendly, because they might "go to a party" together immediately after the interview. This is specifically highlighted when it comes to Margaux Dietz, who is a close friend of the leader of the Christian Democrats.

4 The political roles of influencers

As shown above, discussions about influencers' function in the democratic process also evoke different stances on their professional role in relation to politics. In this section, these contradictions are explored further by analysing how influencers themselves emphasise specific role perceptions, such as giving advice, educating, or acting as life coaches (Maares & Hanusch, 2018), in relation to their political content. The analysis covers three different, but sometimes overlapping, roles taken on by influencers: the impartial guide, the subjective storyteller, and the branded "polfluencer".

4.1 The impartial guide

Some influencers engage in expansion-based boundary strategies when they talk about their role in politics. Margaux Dietz, for example, is said to be tired of being "just an influencer" (*Expressen*, 2022, 13 April), and Therése Lindgren states that "it is fun to be able to push the boundaries of what an influencer really is" (*Expressen*, 2022, 31 March) through her pre-election interviews with politicians. Still, both of these influencers position themselves as impartial guides for their followers, and they mirror professional journalistic ideals of objectivity when they talk about their own societal role (cf. Maares & Hanusch, 2018, p. 271). Lindgren says that she wants to "help spread information and let my channels be an extended arm", rather than sharing her own opinions. Similarly, Dietz states that the important thing for her is to influence people to use their right to vote, not to tell her followers which party she will vote for. Thus, their role perception focuses on educating and providing orientation (Maares & Hanusch, 2018, p. 272) when it comes to the political system and the different parties. It can be seen that this resonates with social media users in the comments section of *Bloggbevakning*, where statements such as "the only thing so-called influencers should tell people is to go and vote – not for what or whom" recur frequently.

However, both influencers also emphasise that they are not trying to do journalism. Dietz says that it is precisely because she is *not* a journalist that she can ask politicians "questions that they are not used to" and that the informal format of the interviews forces them to "answer briefly and so that people understand" (*Blekinge Läns Tidning*, 2022, 25 February). This form of boundary work evokes specific skills and characteristics of influencers that protects the autonomy of the profession in relation to journalists, rather than the other way around. Influencers are also characterised by public relations (PR) experts and party officials as "skilled communicators" with the ability to "arouse interest" among their many followers. Less formal skills, such as personal experiences, might also give influencers credibility, specifically in the eyes of followers. A comment on *Bloggbevakning*, for example, argues that a traumatic childbirth might mean that a particular influencer "knows what she is talking about" when it comes to the impact of regional politics on maternity care.

4.2 The subjective storyteller

Other influencers, however, take a different stance and claim another role for themselves. In March 2022, the influencer Clara Lidström published a blog post in which, prompted by a follower's question, she reflects upon why she has turned down requests to interview politicians in the past, and will continue to do so in the future. She states that the election, and holding politicians accountable, is "too important for [her] as an influencer to handle":

> During an election year, the questions [posed] to politicians are extremely important so that we who vote can get a better grasp of politics. How would I avoid being deceived by a professional politician? And how could I avoid becoming a useful idiot who only goes about the politician's business?

Rather than characterising herself in the situation of a guide or facilitator, Lidström uses a derogatory term ("a useful idiot"), which indicates a loss of control and competence. She received approval from followers, who commented that they appreciate her decision, that she is "sensible", "wise", and "conscious of her own limitations". These expulsion-based strategies draw a boundary between her and other influencers, who are characterised as less "insightful". Distancing herself from election campaigning does not, however, mean distancing herself from being political. Lidström ends her blogpost by saying that she will write about the election on her blog – "soon even!" – indicating that politics is not banned from her platforms, only politicians. She is supported by Sandra Beijer, anoth-

er long-time blogger, who comments that influencers' "USP" – their unique selling point – when it comes to politics is the ability to engage in "subjective storytelling" based on their own political convictions, rather than letting opposing political actors use their platforms for campaigning.

Lidström and Beijer thus stress specific skills and competences to protect the autonomy of influencers against the threat of less competent colleagues, as well as "media-trained" politicians and PR professionals; revealing your authentic self and telling an engaging story, instead of acting as an intermediary for other people's opinions. Instead of objectivity and neutrality, these influencers highlight subjectivity as an ideal, a role perception that focuses on service and advice as well as depicting a specific lifestyle (Maares & Hanusch, 2018), whereby they incorporate certain values and practices into a desirable lifestyle and persona.

4.3 The branded "polfluencer"

It is, thus, not unusual for Swedish influencers to talk about politics and election campaigns, or for them to seamlessly integrate certain issues or opinions into their own content. For some, politics is even a primary aspect of their self-branding strategies, as a way to monetise their content and following. An article in *Dagens Nyheter* addresses the increased presence of "polfluencers" on social media and the impact that they might have in the upcoming election. The term is attributed to Amilia Stapelfeldt, an influencer described as an "independent liberal" and "classic" influencer, who combines fashion, beauty, and health content with "hot political issues". In addition to role perceptions such as educating and giving advice, she also aims to entertain and inspire her followers to act in a specific way (Maares & Hanusch, 2018).

Stapelfeldt engages in intra-professional boundary work by stressing fundamental values such as transparency; she is "open and transparent" about what she thinks, in contrast to influencers such as Margaux Dietz. She also characterises her own content as more rooted in a personal interest since she "talked about politics before the election and will continue to do so after", rather than "because it is entertaining and relevant for [her] audience right now". This reference to a long-term commitment highlights authenticity as a professional ideal; that being "true to oneself" rather than to what is popular is an inherent part of what it means to be an influencer (Wellman et al., 2020). Interestingly, though, she also alludes to the fact that political content can be *profitable:*

> I was an influencer when I started with political content, but I noticed that the more social political material I created, the more engaged the followers became, says Amilia Stapelfeldt (*Dagens Nyheter*, 2022, 20 July).

Engagement in terms of followers, likes, comments, and re-posts is hard currency in the attention economy of social media, where influencers need to create content that resonates with the interests and values of audiences on different platforms (Duffy et al., 2021). Branding oneself a "polfluencer" is therefore not just a way to make an impact in the political sphere, but also something that might lead to more exposure and a bigger audience, which means larger sums for advertising deals and brand collaborations. The fact that a prominent publication such as *Dagens Nyheter* uncritically uses a term that Stapelfeldt has coined for herself is therefore notable, since the article becomes part of the influencer's own brand management.

The article also exemplifies the elasticity of the term "influencer", because the journalist includes a range of actors who use social media to influence public opinion in the definition. For some, being called an influencer is not controversial or incorrect. A police officer interviewed in the article does not mind. He does, however, claim that all influencers are polfluencers to some extent, since "everything is political today" – an extension strategy that blurs the borders between personal and political spheres. In contrast, a medical doctor engaged in public debate about healthcare publicly renounced the term "polfluencer" and criticised the article on X (formerly Twitter):

> Influencers are private, personal, they sell crap with their looks, their personality and their lifestyle. This is so far from what I want to achieve with this account. I want to highlight how healthcare policy affects patients. It is NOT about me. (But sometimes it's about medicine.)

This statement can be seen a self-expulsion strategy, whereby this MD actively distances herself from any association with influencers, and simultaneously uses a derogatory discourse to position them outside the boundaries of legitimate political engagement. Influencers "sell crap" as well as themselves, a characterisation that draws a boundary between politics and commercialism, and alludes to the image of influencers as immoral imposters who would act as "advertising pillars" for anyone or anything that pays them (Nilsson, 2021, p. 52).

5 The power and powerlessness of influencers

A third contradiction in the media discourse involves different stances in relation to the political power and responsibility of influencers. On the one hand, influenc-

ers are held up as important media actors with the power to persuade the public; on the other, they are perceived as cultural "projections" controlled by political PR experts and advertisers, and thus as powerless intermediaries for the societal elite.

5.1 Powerhouses of the new era

Several articles present influencers in general, or specific actors such as Dietz and Lindgren in particular, as "the new holders of power" on social media. This framing is often based on reports suggesting that, to a large extent, young people get their political information from social media, as well as specific influencers' positions on lists such as *Maktbarometern*, an annual report that "maps the most powerful Swedes on our most popular digital channels" (Medieakademin, 2023). Power is here equivalent to factors that are measurable and comparable, such as reach, engagement, and profits:

> They are the powerhouses of the new era who make millions from their social media channels with hundreds of thousands of followers (*Dagens Nyheter*, 2022, 18 April).

From this stance, it can be seen that a large audience, or "wide reach", is the foundation of influencers' perceived power, and a way to legitimise them as political actors through the "numbers game" of theoretical rationality (Droz-dit-Busset, 2022, p. 4). Power is also associated with responsibility, however – not least by the influencers themselves. Lindgren, for example, states that she has a responsibility to lend her platform to politicians because her audience has an interest in social issues, an expansion-based strategy that includes certain actors and practices in her professional field. Lidström, on the other hand, takes responsibility by "coming to her senses" and *not* getting involved with politicians and party campaigns, thus engaging in expulsion-based boundary work.

While these influencers acknowledge responsibility in different ways, the media debate also involves those who see influencers as clueless, or even in denial, about their own power. One editorial suggests that "influencers do not understand that they are public figures who will be scrutinised just like other people in power" (*Borås Tidning*, 2022, 23 September) and that the characteristic mix of private and public content means that influencers have been "spared from serious scrutiny" because the "established media" has not kept up with developments. Others, however, point out that influencers seem to be very aware of their power and how to use it. Getting politicians to make an appearance on your platform might be a "power demonstration" in order to be taken seriously by other actors, according to a researcher interviewed in *Dagens Industri* (2022, 27 May). One journalist spe-

cialising in the Swedish influencer industry says that the impact of "polfluencers" might be problematic, since they control their own platforms and can avoid critical questions, or situations where they might be contradicted by others (*Dagens Nyheter*, 2022, 20 July).

The power of influencers is also characterised as problematic, or even potentially harmful, for journalists who are trying to do their job, a form of boundary work that focuses on protecting the autonomy of journalism. A column in *Göteborgs-Posten* (2022, 1 May) claims that "influencers are a threat to independent journalism", and the writer shares how influencers have become a "work environment problem" for her and her colleagues. Influencers try to control how they are represented in the media by creating "drama", and "use their platforms to silence critics" by turning their followers against journalists who publish unfavourable stories about them. This development is characterised as problematic in a political context as well, since "politicians who behave like influencers" also use the power of a mass following on social media to harass and silence journalists. Potentially, the writer says, this could mean that journalists avoid addressing certain issues, or writing about certain actors, for fear of repression.

5.2 Glamourous corporate mascots

In other articles, the idea of influencers as powerful actors with the capacity to persuade or threaten others is instead challenged. While claiming that political content might be a way for influencers to cement their position as important media personalities, the above-mentioned researcher also states that "we attribute more power to them than they actually have" and that "social media and the real world are in many ways parallel worlds" (*Dagens Industri*, 2022, 27 May). She, and other researchers and PR experts who are interviewed in different articles, instead highlight the benefits for politicians. A columnist in *Göteborgs-Posten* (2022, 30 May) writes that "regardless of whether the interviewer is biased or not, it is the politicians who benefit from appearing on our influencers' channels, not the other way around". Similar ideas are expressed by some influencers themselves, for example, the previously discussed Clara Lidström, who saw the approaches from politicians as a way to dupe her into something over which she would have no control, rather than as an example of her own power. From this perspective, influencers are an asset to be "managed and enticed" by politicians who wish to win elections in the future (*Ystads Allehanda*, 2022, 10 October).

Two articles take this stance very firmly, and question whether influencers really should be considered powerful and held accountable by their followers, the media, or themselves, at all. In a column published in *Aftonbladet* (2022, 9 No-

vember), two months after the election, the writer suggests that influencers are only "a projection" of the new conservative government's politics. In line with Nilsson (2021), they are understood here as "ghosts" who embody values and practices that people dislike, rather than being the actual root of the problem. In a similar column earlier that year, another critic states that "exposure and influence are not the same thing" and proceeds to criticise journalists and newspapers who highlight the need to scrutinise influencers and the industry they work in:

> To "investigate" the influencers, who are really just more glamourous corporate mascots in the style of Ronald McDonald or the Michelin Man, as "power holders" is to shoot the messenger in an almost comically literal way (*Dagens Nyheter*, 2022, 12 July).

The use of quotation marks in the extract above indicates sarcasm, and that the writer is questioning both the professionalism of other journalists and the positioning of influencers as central actors in political communication. Using the term "comically" also indicates that the ambition of other journalists is laughable and not something to be taken seriously, an expulsion-based strategy that positions them outside of serious journalism. Instead, this writer argues, the real power is held by those who pay influencers, not the influencers themselves. This stance is legitimised through personal authorisation (van Leeuwen, 2007), and references to "expert" knowledge provided by an academic doing research on the media representations (or lack thereof) of the extremely rich. Power is here defined by the ability to stay out of the spotlight, rather than be at the centre of it, and consequently avoid scrutiny, recognition, and accountability. The new obsession with the power of influencers thus only strengthens the social structures upon which the real (economic) power-holders thrive. This argumentation also alludes to underlying conflicts between "soft" lifestyle journalism and "hard news" genres (Cheng & Chew, 2022; Perreault & Hanusch, 2022), although in this case the journalists who investigate influencers are characterised as being too serious about something that is trivial, rather than the other way around.

6 Conclusion

This chapter has examined the discursive construction of political influencers in Swedish print news and social media before and after the general election in 2022. It shows how the stance-taking and boundary work performed by different actors construct the political function, role, and power of influencers in sometimes contradictory ways. First of all, influencers are described as both a promise and a threat to political interest and participation, specifically for young people.

The "reach" of influencers is seen, for example, as a defining feature of their relevance, although it is perceived differently depending on stance and context. When it comes to political function, their large following makes them potential saviours of democracy, individuals who can engage and inspire audiences to take an interest in politics. When it comes to power, the same persuasive potential makes them a menace to society, since they either do not recognise their own power or use it in a harmful way.

Secondly, contradictions are also visible among influencers themselves, with some adopting journalistic ideals of objectivity at the same time as asserting that their political content has other functions and benefits than journalism. This creates a paradoxical role, whereby influencers simultaneously fail to live up to the standards of "serious" journalism, or to the perceived standards of influencers' authentic and subjective storytelling. Influencers who expand the boundaries of their profession in this way need to manage tensions between what is seen as their strength – their ability to produce engaging content grounded in their personal lives and values (Maares & Hanusch, 2018) – and what are perceived to be successful standards within the field of political reporting. For others, the orientation towards objectivity is perceived as a loss of value similar to that of standardising content for commercial purposes (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021), and expectations of neutrality are seen as incompatible with what being an influencer means. These tensions between role perceptions show that "influencing", just like journalism, is a cultural practice that is constantly shifting and shaped by its context, and by how different actors struggle to define what is deemed "inside" and "outside" of its boundaries. As Carlson (2015) points out, these symbolic struggles are not without material rewards, since the position as a "legitimate" political actor might result in increased profits in terms of both social and economic capital.

A third point worth highlighting is therefore the commercial nature of influencers, and the underlying tensions that this creates in relation to their political function, role, and power. As one of the experts in the material notes, political "infotainment" is not a new phenomenon. Swedish politicians – in line with general trends in political communication – have been featured in light-hearted interviews as well as programmes aimed at a young audience for decades. It seems, however, that the commercial core of the influencer profession creates specific tensions in a political context, for critics as well as for the influencers themselves. While lifestyle journalists might see influencers as peripheral actors in their field (Perreault & Hanusch, 2022), most critics in this chapter place them unequivocally outside of "quality" journalism, which is perceived as having a specific democratic significance. The way in which influencers package, or commodify, politics is a matter of concern from this perspective, since it risks reducing important matters to what is "sellable" in the entertainment industry. There is also the underlying sus-

picion that influencers are always "for sale" (Nilsson, 2021, p. 52), and therefore will promote whatever politics they are paid to endorse. To manage this, some influencers try to adhere to ideals of neutrality, while others emphasise the authenticity of their political content as being "true to themselves" and their own values. At the same time, it is precisely this promotional aspect that makes them politically irrelevant for some, since they themselves are entangled in dependence upon commercial partners and platforms.

This chapter has focused on the stance-taking and boundary work of, predominantly, journalists and influencers in the beauty and lifestyle genre. Future research could build on this work, specifically when it comes to the self-professionalisation of influencers, and how the symbolic struggles over boundaries also lead to material benefits (or losses). The proposed categorisation of political role perceptions could also be applied in other genres and national contexts in order to further develop our understanding of how political and cultural conditions impact upon the professionalisation and politicisation of influencers. Although beyond the scope of this analysis, the image and role of politicians in this context is also something that would be of interest for future studies – it is not just the field of influencers that expands into politics; the promotional practices and characteristics of politicians also increasingly overlap with the field of social media influencers.

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Essi Pöyry and Hanna Reinikainen

“Remember to vote!”

How do people respond to social media influencers promoting political participation?

Abstract: Besides promoting consumer brands, many social media influencers have started to discuss political topics and campaign for political causes. At the same time, actors such as journalists and politicians have adopted communication strategies similar to those of social media influencers to advocate for political participation. To study how influencers might affect people’s participation in politics, we conducted an online survey with a representative sample of the Finnish population (N = 501). Our study produced two results. First, social media influencers are comparable to other actors in advocating for voting and can be even more effective if the message is framed correctly. Second, people who follow influencers are more likely to vote and be aware of their democratic rights than those who do not follow influencers. These results indicate that social media influencers have become part of the current media landscape and can cater for people’s informational needs concerning societal issues.

Keywords: political participation, voting, influencer endorsements, experiment

1 Introduction

The part played by influencers as social and political commentators, agenda-setters, and role models has started to become recognised around the world. The legacy media have reported how influencers have participated in political debates (Citarella, 2021), supported political campaigns (Lai, 2022) and promoted sustainable lifestyles (Townsend, 2022), while academics have discussed the possible effects of political influencer content and endorsements on followers’ behaviours (Cheng et al., 2023; Harff & Schmuck, 2023; Naderer, 2023; Schmuck et al., 2022). Many who are concerned about the decline of political and civic participation, especially among young people (e.g. Putnam, 2020; Renström et al., 2021), see a glimmer of hope in this development. Younger generations have been seen to find new interest in political and civic engagement thanks to these venerated, yet relatable individuals known as social media influencers.

A social media influencer can be defined as a person who, through personal branding and regular interactions with social media, has gathered a significant

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following and is able to monetise that following by, for example, creating content sponsored by consumer brands (Abidin, 2016; Suuronen et al., 2022). Various kinds of influencer marketing practices are the primary source of income for professional social media influencers, which sets them apart from other groups also present on social media, such as political activists (Riedl et al., 2023). The intimate and interactive relationships that influencers have with their followers are a key reason for their popularity and for the effectiveness of their endorsements (Pöyry et al., 2019; Reinikainen et al., 2020). Engaged followers tend to pursue similar lifestyles to those of their favourite influencers; for instance, by purchasing the same products and brands (Lueck, 2015). Therefore, influencer marketing has become a profitable way to affect consumer behaviour (Hugh et al., 2022; Reinikainen et al., 2020).

However, the effects of political influencer content still seem somewhat indistinct. On the one hand, influencers' social and political discussions have been found to increase the receptibility of political advocacy (Cheng et al., 2023) and possibly even motivate political participation among young people (Harff & Schmuck, 2023; Naderer, 2023). On the other hand, the simplified manner in which social media influencers sometimes present political issues might create cynicism towards politics (Schmuck et al., 2022). This means that the relationship between the consumption of social and political content created by influencers and a person's political behaviour is complicated. Hence, there is a need for more research on how people react to influencers' political appeals. This effect is especially intriguing when compared to that of other actors who have begun to adopt the styles of social media influencers to persuade their audiences, including politicians (Abidin, 2017) and journalists (Frig & Penttilä, 2023).

In this chapter, we examine two phenomena. First, we look at how social media influencers' promotion of a specific type of political behaviour – voting – affects citizens and how the effectiveness of this promotion differs from that of the appeals made by other actors. Second, we analyse how following social media influencers and political participation relate in general. We present the results of an online survey and experiment conducted with a Finnish consumer panel. Data collection took place in connection with the Finnish municipal elections of June 2021.

2 The role of social media influencers in consumer behaviour

Scholars often approach social media influencers as commercial actors due to their sponsored-content collaborations, influencer marketing activities, and en-

dorsement deals with consumer brands. These practices are popular because followers are often eager to imitate influencers' lifestyles, purchase the same products and services that influencers use, and resort to the advice and recommendations that influencers give (e. g. Munnukka et al., 2019; Pöyry et al., 2019). As a result, influencers have been construed as "socialization agents" because they are able to transfer ideas, opinions, and attitudes to their young followers, thereby affecting their behaviours (Tuominen et al., 2023).

Many marketing and business studies have investigated the effectiveness of influencers' advice and appeals and the mechanisms by which influencer content transmits attitudes and behaviours. For example, scholars have looked for associations between source characteristics (e. g. influencer credibility, trustworthiness, and similarity) and outcomes such as brand attitude and purchase intention (Hugh et al., 2022; Leung et al., 2022; Sundermann & Munnukka, 2022). Parasocial interactions and parasocial relationships, understood as one-sided, illusionary experiences of interaction and relationship building with media personas (Horton & Wohl, 1956), have also been shown to affect behaviours when it comes to the endorsements of social media influencers (Reinikainen et al., 2020; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Comparative studies have found that influencers appear more effective in driving purchase intention than traditional celebrities due to the aura of authenticity and relatability that surrounds them (Piehler et al., 2022; Pöyry et al., 2019). Still, how their power of influence compares to other kinds of actors and endorsers remains largely unstudied.

Another stream of the influencer marketing literature has explored the "content strategies" (Hudders et al., 2021) that influencers adopt when seeking to appeal to their followers. Typically, these strategies are based not only on images and visual appeal (Argyris et al., 2020; Ki & Kim, 2019) but also on the frequency and tone of the commercial messages (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019; Martínez-López et al., 2020; Zhu et al., 2022), as well as on the balancing act between "product-only posts" (Jin & Muqaddam, 2019) and posts that display or depict certain inspirational lifestyles (Vrontis et al., 2021). However, the effects of different rhetorical strategies by social media influencers remain understudied. Effective ways of speaking and writing are believed to differ among actors on social media. For instance, researchers have found that non-profit influencers tend to use normative rhetorical cues more often than for-profit influencers (Salte, 2022) and that political YouTubers sometimes adopt an intensely populist style borrowed from broadcast media (Finlayson, 2020). Some scholars (Ge & Gretzel, 2018) have even argued that influencers' use of emojis can also serve strategic goals, which suggests a subtle yet purposeful deployment of words and other rhetorical cues in influencer content.

3 The politicisation of social media influencers

Until recently, the consumer approach largely dominated both practical and academic studies of social media influencers. However, our understanding of these actors and their attributes has started to expand. For example, influencers' role in political campaigning is becoming more prominent (Goodwin et al., 2023). In the US, the Democratic Party and the Rock the Vote initiative have recruited social media influencers to promote voting among young people (Levine, 2022; Racker, 2022). Influencers have also joined election campaigns in Argentina (Brigida & Grimberg, 2023), India (Jaswal, 2023), and Germany (Breuer, 2021). In the US, the Biden administration has even held briefings specifically for TikTok influencers in order to reach young audiences and introduce them to issues such as the passing of the Inflation Reduction Act (Sprunt, 2022) and the war in Ukraine (Rai, 2022).

These examples suggest that the social role of influencers is starting to change and that their reach is seen as extending beyond consumer behaviour. Suuronen et al. (2022) believe that in addition to being "fashionable friends" (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011) to whom followers turn for questions regarding beauty, fashion, and lifestyle, social media influencers may also be viewed as "political friends" because they often bring up topics such as elections, political parties, and individual candidates in their content. Furthermore, Arnesson (2023) refers to influencers as "ideological intermediaries" because they tend to promote lifestyles that are not only "aspirational and inspirational" but also "deeply ideological" (p. 540). This shows how politics is slowly making its way into influencer content and merging with other types of information.

The politicisation of social media influencers has led researchers to investigate whether influencer-led socialisation could also drive political behaviour (Naderer, 2023) or contribute to social change (Kapoor et al., 2023). Scholars have assumed that influencer appeals work in the same way regardless of whether the domain is consumption; hence, they have studied the effects of influencers' commercial and political appeals by applying mostly the same methodologies. For instance, Cheng et al. (2023) found a connection between source characteristics (expertise, similarity, trustworthiness, attractiveness, and interactivity), parasocial relationships between followers and influencers, the perceived quality of the information provided by influencers, and followers' receptivity to influencers' political advocacy. Relatedly, Naderer (2023) discovered that perceived similarity with social media influencers predicted individuals' intention to take political action and that it activated even those who did not show an interest in politics. Dekoninck and Schmuck (2023) found that following influencers who address environmental topics was positively related to certain politically oriented behaviours, such as signing

petitions and attending protests, but not to others, including contacting a politician. They also found no interaction effect for parasocial relationships, though they had hypothesised this.

These results suggest that the credibility that social media influencers have gained among their followers might make them effective in promoting political ideas and beliefs, possibly even among those who can be considered politically passive or apathetic. However, whether influencers are "the silver bullet" when it comes to urging political participation is still unclear. For example, how do influencers compare to experts, journalists, and politicians – people who have traditionally possessed considerable expertise and knowledge on political and social issues and who are now also active on social media? Another question regards causality: do influencers really incite their followers to participate politically, or do politically minded people start following influencers whose content aligns with their ideology but who would, for example, vote regardless of this? Dekoninck and Schmuck (2022) have suggested "a spiral effect" whereby following political influencers and online political participation (e. g. signing an online petition or participating in political discussions on social media) are intertwined. The two authors have also argued that individuals who follow influencers who post about political issues are also inclined to politics and thus more likely to engage in them (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2022). Thus, studying the effectiveness of influencers' political appeals and the political participation of people who follow them ex ante can advance our knowledge of their political influence.

4 Social media influencers and political participation: methods and results

To better understand the role of social media influencers in promoting political participation compared to other types of sources, we conducted an experiment with a Finnish commercial consumer panel in the beginning of June 2021. This experiment showed Instagram posts by an influencer, a politician, and a popular media figure who endorsed voting in the upcoming municipal elections. While the elections were a real and topical matter at the time, the posts were entirely fictional. As far as we know, influencers were not commissioned to advertise voting for the municipal elections in question. The timing and context of the elections were exceptional. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the elections were postponed from April to June 2021, and voter turnout was exceptionally low (55 %; Åkman, 2021).

Our study produced 501 responses. The participants were aged between 18 and 65 years. In terms of gender, age, and place of residence, the distribution of the respondents mostly accurately represents the Finnish people between 18 and 65 years. Upon responding to the survey, the participants were randomly assigned to different experimental conditions (74–78 respondents to each condition). No identifiable personal information was collected, and the respondents were informed of the purpose of the study and their right to refuse or suspend participation.

The respondents were shown one of six possible treatments, which depicted a fictitious Instagram post. The photo showed two cups of coffee at a market-square coffee table. The name and profile picture of the person who had posted the photo as well as the caption were manipulated. All the posts had the following caption: "In spring, the municipal elections were postponed due to the coronavirus pandemic. The new election day is Sunday, 13 June". This text was followed by either an interactive or a normative appeal. The persons shown as having posted the photos were real and widely known in Finland. These individuals were chosen based on a separate pretest that indicated they were perceived as trustworthy and likeable.

The following 3 × 2 between-subjects design was used:

– Source: media personality, political figure, social media influencer
– Type of influence: interactive ("Are you going to vote? Are there any good reasons not to vote?"), normative ("Remember to vote; it's a civic duty!")

We measured the respondents' likelihood of voting in the municipal elections on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 corresponding to "I will definitely not vote" and 7 indicating "I will definitely vote". The results concerning the declared likelihood of voting were as follows: media personality, interactive influence M = 5.67, SD = 2.00; media personality, normative influence M = 5.59, SD = 1.97; political figure, interactive influence M = 5.43, SD = 2.00; political figure, normative influence M = 5.82, SD = 1.79; social media influencer, interactive influence M = 5.92, SD = 1.71; and social media influencer, normative influence M = 5.57, SD = 1.91. The means of the treatment groups are illustrated in Figure 1.

A general linear model was created on SPSS to analyse the effect of the independent variables (source and type of influence) on the dependent variable (likelihood of voting). The following covariates were added to the model:

– Age group (18–29: 24 %; 30–39: 20 %; 40–49: 20 %; 50–65: 36 %)
– Gender (male: 48 %; female: 52 %)
– Education (lower than college: 64 %; college or higher: 36 %)
– Having voted in the previous election (2019 parliamentary election) (yes: 86 %; no: 14 %)

– Instagram use (yes: 71 %; no: 29 %)
– Following social media influencers (any channel) (yes: 71 %; no: 29 %)

According to the model (Table 1), previous voting history had a significant and positive effect on likelihood of voting (F = 255.63, p < .001), as was expected. None of the other covariates had an effect on likelihood of voting. Neither one of the two main effects – message source (media personality vs political figure vs social media influencer) or type of influence (interactive vs normative) – had a significant effect on likelihood of voting, but their interaction effect did (F = 3.58, p < .05).

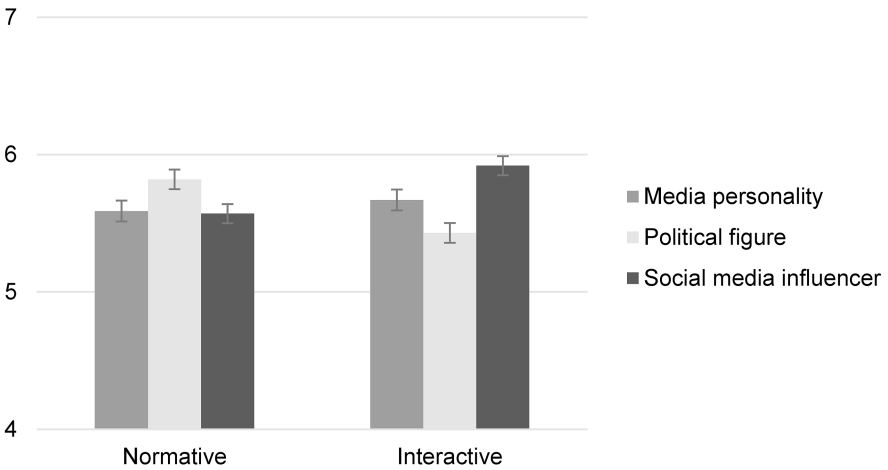

Figure 1: Likelihood of voting (scale 1–7). Means and standard errors of the likelihood of voting per treatment group (the scale has been zoomed in)

Table 1: Parameter estimates of the general linear model

DV = Likelihood of voting	*df*	*F*	*P* value
Age	1	3.255	.072
Gender	1	1.197	.275
Education	1	2.911	.089
Voted previously	1	255.629	.000
Instagram use	1	2.911	.089
Influencer following	1	.008	.930
Source	2	.104	.901
Type of influence	1	.044	.834
Source × Type of influence	2	3.578	.029
Adjusted R^2 = .394, p < .001			

This suggests that a participant's reported likelihood of voting was dependent on both the source of the message and the type of influence used in it. Normative influence was more effective when used by the political figure, while interactive influence was more efficacious when deployed by the social media influencer.

To further understand the relationship between voting and following social media influencers, we performed additional analyses. By conducting a cross-tabulation of whether the respondents followed influencers on social media (yes/no), how old the respondent was (under 40/over 40), and whether they had voted in the 2019 parliamentary election (yes/no), we were able to determine if there were statistically significant differences in the occurrences of these categories. Overall, younger people followed influencers more often than older people. Interestingly, following social media influencers was more common among those who had voted than those who had not voted both among younger and older individuals (Pearson $\chi 2 = 20.615$, df = 1, $p < .001$). Figure 2 shows the shares of respondents based on their voting decision, age, and influencer-follower status.

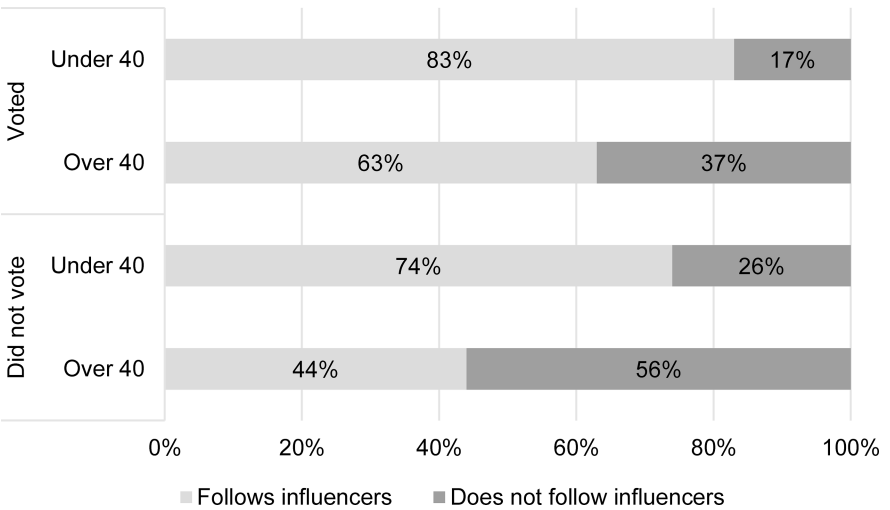

Figure 2: Shares of respondents based on their voting decision in the Finnish parliamentary election in 2019 and influencer following per age group

Following influencers was fairly common among the respondents; 71 per cent of the respondents indicated that they followed at least one person on some social media platform whom they did not know personally and who could be described as a social media influencer. The most common platforms for following influencers were Instagram (46 %), Facebook (44 %), YouTube (41 %), TikTok (14 %), and blogs (13 %). To more thoroughly understand the socio-political characteristics of the peo-

ple who follow influencers on social media, we conducted a logistic regression analysis. The dependent variable was binary, with not following influencers as the first category and following influencers as the second one. Once more, the analysis showed that younger age was a significant determinant of influencer following (B = -.052, Wald = 31.871, p < .000), as was female gender (B = .878, Wald = 12.395, p < .000). Education or income were not related to influencer following. However, being certain of the party one typically votes for (B = .169, Wald = 4.944, p < .05) and a person's belief in democracy (B = .560, Wald = 4.936, p < .05) were positively related to influencer following. Table 2 presents the results of the logistic regression.

5 Discussion

Our findings suggest that the effectiveness of the appeals for political participation made by social media influencers is comparable to that of the appeals by other, more established, and commendable actors. Well-formulated pleas by influencers may be even more effective than those made by other actors. Indeed, the experimental evidence shows that a single post by an influencer encouraging people to vote can heighten the audience's intention to vote. However, the data indicates that those who follow social media influencers are, on average, politically more active and aware of their democratic rights than those who do not follow them. This suggests that influencers have become part of today's modern media landscape and that they represent an important source of information among the many existing media outlets and operators.

Our experiment showed that none of the studied actors (media personality, political figure, and social media influencer) was more effective than the others when making an endorsement to vote. Rather, the way the endorsement was framed created differences between the three actors. For the political figure – an individual representing the establishment – the normative influence was most effective. For the social media influencer, the interactive influence was most effective. The influencer's interactive post was also the most effective message overall. This finding underlines the interactive nature of influencer–follower relationships (Abidin, 2016) and possibly parasocial relationships as the defining factor behind influencers' persuasiveness (Cheng et al., 2023; Munnukka et al., 2019).

Therefore, interactivity appears to be a fitting strategy for social media influencers to make appeals, which is in line with the notion that followers with parasocial experiences are keen to interact with influencers and eagerly answer their calls for interaction (Reinikainen et al., 2020). However, it is important to note that parasocial relationships do not necessarily explain influencers' effect on fol-

Table 2: Logistic regression results

DV = Following of social media influencers							95% *C.I.* for Exp(*B*)	
	B	***S.E.***	**Wald**	***df***	**Sig.**	**Exp(*B*)**	**Lower**	**Upper**
Age	-.052	.009	31.871	1	.000	.949	.932	.966
Gender[a]	.878	.249	12.395	1	.000	2.406	1.476	3.922
Education[b]	-.038	.262	.022	1	.883	.962	.576	1.606
Income	.006	.090	.004	1	.951	1.006	.843	1.199
Party certainty[c]	.169	.076	4.944	1	.026	1.184	1.020	1.375
Belief in democracy[d]	.560	.252	4.936	1	.026	1.750	1.068	2.868
Constant	1.608	.574	7.851	1	.005	4.994		

[a] Male vs female

[b] Lower vs higher degree level

[c] Changes which party votes/does not know which party to vote vs defines which party typically votes

[d] Four-item construct, scale 1 – 7: “Voting in municipal election is a civic duty”, “The election outcome has an effect on my life”, “By voting I can influence things in my municipality”, “Voting is important so that the will of the citizens will be fulfilled”

lowers' political participation (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2023). Our results give reason to argue that the expectation of parasocial interaction (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020) makes interactive appeals accepted and effective for social media influencers. These actors are known to have conversations with their followers and cherish follower relationships; thus, addressing audience members with their views and responses in mind can be considered suitable. The results also indicate that other actors, who are perceived differently and assessed on different terms, cannot simply replicate influencers' way of addressing audiences and expect the same effect. Interactivity seems to be an effective rhetorical strategy if there is a credible possibility of a parasocial relationship with one's social media followers, while normative influence is better suited to someone in a position of authority.

Furthermore, according to our findings, following influencers is common among people who vote, both younger and older ones; also, following influencers is related to higher democratic beliefs and party certainty. These results appear in line with those of Dekoninck and Schmuck (2022), who found a spiral effect between following influencers who talk about politics and participation in politics, which implies that political behaviour and following influencers might be intertwined and even reinforce each other. In contrast, Hasell and Chinn (2023) found that aspirational social media use, such as following lifestyle influencers, is positively associated with anti-intellectualism, unlike informational social media use. Our findings highlight the need to acknowledge that social media influencers are versatile and that following influencers may entail more than just craving something "aspirational". The desire to stay up to date with current discussion topics might explain why politically active, informed citizens follow social media influencers. Based on our results, we also argue that, in general, influencers have become part of the media landscape by covering both aspirational and informational issues. This means that treating influencers at large as actors who are easily able to reach non-voters or politically uninformed people (cf. Reinikainen et al., 2023) is too simplistic and incorrect a depiction of followers.

It is important to acknowledge that our study was conducted in Finland with Finnish respondents. Compared to citizens in other EU countries, Finnish people show significantly higher degrees of trust towards the media (Reunanen et al., 2023). Therefore, the differences between journalists, politicians, and social media influencers highlighted here might change if examined in other countries. Moreover, most of the respondents in our survey did not follow the personalities chosen for this study on Instagram, so the results do not account for the effect that deliberately following someone on social media has on a person's attitudes and intentions. As influencers are known for creating long-lasting, intimate relationships with their followers, our research setup with single fictional Instagram posts cannot fully portray the influence social media influencers have on their followers.

For example, an influencer who often discusses political topics will most likely accumulate authority and trust among their followers (Pöyry, 2023). Moreover, as some politicians, journalists, and other experts have started to imitate the practices of influencers (Abidin, 2016; Frig & Penttilä, 2023; Laaksonen et al., 2022), one can assume that, over time, these individuals will be evaluated differently compared to actors who remain within their usual roles.

6 Conclusion

Currently, there is growing concern about citizens' declining political participation, including voting (Renström et al., 2021). At the same time, the consumption of news via traditional media outlets (e.g. newspapers and TV) is decreasing. More and more often, audiences learn about social and political issues through social media (Reunanen et al., 2023). However, reliable information provision is challenged because of various actors who create and share misinformation and disinformation, which undermines the credibility of public institutions and people's sense of civic duty. In this chapter, we scrutinised appeals made on social media to vote in an election and the relationship between following influencers and citizens' political participation.

Social media influencers are often thought of as a quick fix for declining levels of political participation. These actors can speak to hard-to-reach audiences, and they can lend their credibility to good causes, for which they can be commissioned to create compelling content (Reinikainen et al., 2023). This chapter provides a deeper understanding of how people respond to reminders to vote by influencers and other actors on social media as well as of the general socio-political characteristics of those who follow influencers. We showed that social media posts by known individuals can positively affect people's intention to vote, but who the individuals are and how they address their audiences matter. In the case of social media influencers, the expectation of parasocial interaction seems to be the key. However, other established and trusted professionals are also encouraged to endorse political participation on social media. Actors who organise campaigns to support and increase such participation should keep in mind that many of those who follow influencers are generally politically minded and aware of current affairs.

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Nils S. Borchers

The influencer political communicators dream of

Seven theses on the ideal influencer in the political domain

Abstract: With the trickling realization that social media influencers might affect political attitudes and choices of their followers, they have appeared on the radar of political communication. As political communicators start exploring how to integrate influencers in election campaigns, they consider the advantages and disadvantages of influencer collaborations. But what does the ideal influencer – the one they would like to see in their campaigns – look like? In this study I present seven theses on the ideal influencer, as seen from a political communication perspective. I ground these theses in interviews with 26 political communicators from Germany. These communicators wish to work with influencers who break down complex political issues, bow to the dignity of the political, handle the interactions with followers, are passionate, authentic, low-maintenance, and lenient with political communicators. This study thus provides first insights to illuminate how political communicators approach the integration of influencers in the election campaigns they implement.

Keywords: social media influencers, political communication, strategic communication, election campaigns, ideal

1 Introduction

With the trickling realization that social media influencers affect not only the consumption choices of their followers, but also followers' actions and attitudes in other domains of life, they have appeared on the radar of political communication. As political communicators migrate more and more of their campaigns to digital environments, they are faced with the problem of finding ways to capture the attention of online audiences. Collaborating with influencers offers a promising solution to this problem. As iconic figures of the social media age (Borchers, 2022), they operate at the very heart of digital information flows. While influencers have long been frowned upon as the offspring of a consumer society out of control, the many occasions – sometimes large, often small – on which they have openly advocated political positions (e. g. Abidin & Cover, 2019; Allgaier, 2020; Lewis, 2020; Wellman, 2022) have led to a shift in thinking. Today, it is widely acknowl-

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edged that the social media channels influencers provide constitute third spaces in which non-political environments can become political (Suuronen et al., 2022).

Needless to say, the emergence of these novel spaces has not gone unnoticed by political communicators, who are puzzling their heads over how to best integrate influencers into election campaigns. We are currently witnessing the first steps of these political communicators into the unfamiliar territory that is strategic influencer communication (Bühler & Borchers, 2023; Goodwin et al., 2023). However, they do not enter this territory without an idea of what they expect to find. Corporate communicators, in particular, have been here before and shared their experiences. Over the years of engaging with influencers, they have developed a keen understanding of the opportunities and benefits that strategic influencer communication has to offer, such as their reach in specific, mostly young target groups, the authenticity of influencers and their posts, as well as the high flexibility in brand presentations (Borchers, 2023a). They also understand the pitfalls that come with influencer collaborations, such as the limited possibilities for controlling influencer conduct, the lack of professionalism in some influencers, and the danger of scandal spillover in the case of influencer-triggered crises (Borchers, 2023a). I assume that political communicators are aware of corporate communicators' experiences with influencer collaborations, yet they also bring their own rationale to the field that they adapt to strategic influencer communication.

Against this background, in this chapter I ask how political communicators envision the ideal influencer. I explore what qualities they want to see in the influencers they invite to cooperate. In doing so, I am less interested in their weighing of what might be realistic expectations about influencers and collaborations, even as I acknowledge that this weighing certainly plays a role in their decision-making. Instead, I am interested in the distinctively normative ideals they cling to when imagining collaborations with influencers: *If political communicators were to dream up the ideal influencer, what would this influencer be like?*

I approach this question by presenting seven theses, into which I condensed my observations from interviews with 26 political communicators from Germany. I am doing so by zooming in on certain observations I – as a researcher who has studied strategic influencer communication in corporate contexts for years – find particularly astute. This approach may seem inadequate in that I emphasize the main lines of findings rather than elaborating on the variety of viewpoints my interview partners expressed, and even more so, because I do this based on a sample that, although it includes representatives of almost all big German parties, can hardly be called representative. However, I suggest that this essayistic approach has the advantage of producing pointed emphases that make the insights I want to extract clearly visible.

2 When political communicators enter uncharted territory

Little is known about political communicators' strategic engagement with influencers. While scholarly exploration of influencers' political impact has begun to gain traction (Cheng et al., 2023; Naderer, 2022; Schmuck et al., 2022), research on the communicators' perspective is still in its infancy.

2.1 Defining the fundamental concepts

I want to start by establishing some definitions.

- *Social media influencers.* In the context of strategic communication, I understand influencers as "third-party actors that have established a significant number of relevant relationships with a specific quality to and influence on organizational stakeholders through content production, content distribution, interaction, and personal appearance on the social web" (Enke & Borchers, 2019, p. 274). This definition stresses the activities that influencers perform to achieve influencer status. The content influencers create and publish may address political issues. If it does, the respective influencers can be considered political influencers, as described by Riedl et al. (2023): "We define political influencers as content creators that endorse a political position, social cause, or candidate through media that they produce and/or share on a given social media platform" (p. 2).
- *Political communicators.* Most political parties have staff officially dedicated to communications, such as press spokespersons or social media managers. In addition, candidates and elected deputies as well as party staff, such as executive secretaries or scientific assistants to deputies, often communicate with external stakeholders or decide on communication measures. For the purpose of this study, I use the term political communicators to include all those professionals who perform functions in external communication on behalf of their parties.
- *Strategic influencer communication.* By working with influencers, organizations pursue specific goals. Research into corporate influencer campaigns shows that these goals can be manifold. They include, among others, attracting attention to organizational issues, shaping brand image, building communities, and affecting public discourse (Borchers & Enke, 2021). Some of these goals fall into the domain of marketing, whereas others follow the logic of public relations. That is why I use the term "strategic influencer communication" –

rather than the more common term “influencer marketing” – to highlight this diversity in goals (Enke & Borchers, 2019).

2.2 The little we know about the liaisons between political communicators and influencers

Political communicators have begun reaching out to influencers in an attempt to harness the influence influencers wield for the benefit of their election campaigns. Goodwin et al. (2023, p. 1616) collected various cases from the United States, including the integration of influencer content into the campaigns of Donald Trump, Kamala Harris, and Bernie Sanders. Similar cases have been recorded for other Western democracies (Woolley, 2022). Scholarly evidence for influencer integration in Germany – the country in which I collected the data for this study – is rare. In assessing the role of influencers in the German national elections 2021, Duckwitz (2023) reported cases in which influencers interviewed candidates and published the interviews on their channel, but her analysis remains quiet on the partisanship of these influencers. At the same time, among the 26 political communicators from Germany interviewed for the dataset behind this article, 18 reported that they had already worked with influencers, and 12 had done so in the context of election campaigning.

Despite the growing popularity of influencer collaborations in election campaigns, little is known about political communicators’ influencer-related activities. In a pioneer study from the United States, Goodwin et al. (2023) examined how coordination happens among political communicators, the agencies they employ, and influencers. They observed a tendency for hierarchical communication that is not at eye-level with influencers. Furthermore, they also found that political communicators have to offer benefits to influencers if they want them to join their campaign. Similar findings have been reported from corporate contexts (Archer & Harrigan, 2016; Borchers & Enke, 2021; Pang et al., 2016), thus indicating that they are applicable across different domains.

Focusing on the perspective of influencers, Suuronen et al. (2022) explored the reasons why influencers sometimes avoid raising political issues. This study showed that influencers distinguish between formal politics (i. e. concerning actors such as politicians and parties, but also political processes and institutions) and lifestyle politics (i. e. concerning any collective issue with an impact on society, such as housing, sexual orientations, or food choices). Influencers reported being less willing to get involved with formal politics and explained this position with their reluctance to be targeted by aggressive internet commenters, their fear of bothersome comments, and their strategy to keep their profile non-politi-

cal. For political communicators, these findings might imply that only a fraction of influencers are generally willing to engage in election campaigns, while those who are willing could benefit from solid support in case their campaign involvement backfires. At the same time, Hund (2023) and Magdalena Riedl et al. (2021) pointed to an increasing openness among influencers to supporting political agendas. Hund (2023) attributed this openness to an identity crisis of many influencers. Seeing their industry mature, they no longer want to (merely) promote materialistic lifestyles and therefore turn to social and political causes. This openness creates opportunities for influencer collaborations with political communicators.

2.3 Expanding the body of research: research interest and data

With this study, I seek to expand the body of literature examining political communicators' perspective on strategic influencer communication. Given the growing importance of influencer collaborations for election campaigns, the dearth of studies on this perspective represents a significant research gap. I make a first attempt to identify the qualities that political communicators want to see in the influencers they wish to collaborate with.

I ground the upcoming seven theses on the ideal influencer in 25 interviews with 26 political communicators from Germany, which Lara Bühler – a former MA student at Leipzig University – and I conducted in Germany between 2019 and 2023. In recruiting interview partners, we followed a maximum-variation strategy (Patton, 2002) and strove to talk to representatives of all major parties in Germany (i. e. holding seats in at least two parliaments). Notably, this strategy was only partly successful, because all of the political communicators representing the nationalist party AfD declined to participate in the study (at the time of writing, I had asked 14 party representatives for an interview). Accounting for the peculiarities of the German political system, we furthermore interviewed political communicators working on either the national level or the level of the 16 federal states. Table 1 provides an aggregated overview of the sample.

An interview guide helped to structure the interviews. This guide asked for the advantages and disadvantages political communicators see in working with influencers during election campaigns (Bühler & Borchers, 2023). I analysed the interview data in a qualitative content analysis, using the software MaxQDA. Following Schreier's (2012) recommendations, I adopted the subsumption strategy to develop a data-driven coding frame. This strategy consisted of adding new categories to the coding frame every time that I identified a novel aspect about the ideal influencer in the data. I paused my examination of the transcripts regularly to sort the cre-

Table 1: Composition of the sample

Criterion	Manifestation	Number of cases	Sum of cases[2]
Party	CDU/CSU (conservatives)	6	26
	SPD (social democrats)	6	
	AfD (nationalists)[1]	0	
	FDP (liberals)	3	
	Die Linke (socialists)	4	
	Die Grünen (environmentalists)	4	
	Others	3	
Political level	European	1	26
	National	10	
	Federal state	15	
Position	Member of Parliament	5	26
	Head of communications	4	
	Press officer	11	
	Social media/community manager	3	
	Campaign manager	1	
	Executive secretary	2	
Gender	Female	8	26
	Male	18	
Experience in collaborating with influencers	Prior experience	18	26
	thereof:		
	in election campaigning	12	
	in other contexts	6	
	No prior experience	8	
Future collaborations with influencers in election campaigns	Planning to collaborate	25	26
	Not planning to collaborate	1	

Notes: [1] AfD (right-wing) was contacted several times in the sampling process but did not respond to interview requests. [2] Number of interviews (25) differs from number of cases (26) because two party representatives participated simultaneously in one interview.

ated categories and arrange and re-arrange them in a hierarchical order. In a final step, I grouped the categories into seven clusters that served as the basis for my seven theses on the ideal influencer.

3 The ideal influencer in seven theses

In the following, I present seven theses on the ideal influencer as dreamt up by political communicators.

3.1 The ideal influencer breaks down complex political topics so that their followers understand why they are relevant

Political decisions are often complex. Many actors are involved in the decision-making, many stakeholders are affected by the decisions, and the topics that must be decided are deeply intertwined with each other. This complexity makes voting decisions extremely difficult. When thinking about the influencers with whom they want to partner, political communicators look for the ability to translate political topics into the lifeworld of followers. This translation implies that influencers prune the complexity of a topic by explaining its main aspects, pinpoint why it is relevant, and provide relatable examples from everyday situations. As one of the political communicators I interviewed explained:

> I think the point is that [influencers] connect the content with a reality of life in a more understandable way; in other words, show people somehow that this is important [...]. Often, politicians talk about some numbers, and maybe use more political wordings that are coined by the party and are somehow tailored to the press. And influencers, if they manage to break it down to such a reality of life, perhaps even more than politicians can sometimes do – I think that's better.

Certainly, "breaking it down" is a complicated task, and it becomes even more complicated when considering that the content influencers produce should not oversimplify issues, while also being entertaining. In fact, influencers require a great deal of political savvy to penetrate an issue such that they both single out the aspects that are relevant to their followers and identify the aspects that they can omit without distorting the meaning. Ideally, they should bring this savvy to the job, because parties do not want to educate them about politics. Indeed, political communicators balance a thin line between the desire for collaborations that require as little coordination effort as possible and the urge to strictly control influencer output (see also Thesis 6).

3.2 The ideal influencer bows to the dignity of the political realm

Politics is a serious business. Politicians steer the fate of millions, and their decisions make an impact on most areas of everyday life. Much is at stake when voters decide into whose hands they place their future, and the political communicators I interviewed are therefore convinced that election campaigning is a more momentous and, ultimately, a more dignified undertaking than the profane endorsement of products. They want to see influencers being aware of – and, possibly, cherishing – this difference. This attitude underlies the expectation that influencers use decent language when discussing politics. This is noteworthy, because the social media universe generally tolerates, even approves of, much more brash ways of talking than is common in most other media arenas (Hmielowski et al., 2014). The interviewed political communicators also view humour with a certain scepticism, at least if it falls short of a certain standard of sophistication. An interviewee elaborated that humorous content "must not come across as too ridiculous, because I think politics, certainly [my party's] politics, needs a little bit of credibility. So that it is not too ridiculous". In addition, influencers should be good citizens. Obviously, criminal records are a no-go. Depending on the party's value system, non-criminalized, yet frowned-upon behaviours, such as smoking cannabis, making sexist remarks, or simply "kicking over the traces", can prove problematic. In the eyes of political communicators, respectability and probity are important traits that they want to see in influencers – traits that reflect the dignity of the political realm.

The deference to the political that political communicators expect from influencers stems in no small part from the fact that they consider the expectations of internal stakeholders in their party when planning influencer collaborations. A political communicator with a background in corporate communication, who looked at his party's communicative activities from a distinctly disruptive angle, explained that "you cannot make any mistakes with [internal audiences]", because if communicating in a more flippant style, "these internal people will go nuts". Such indignation, in turn, will lead to lengthy internal discussions about the communication strategy. This consideration gains plausibility when realizing that party members are a special kind of people. They are far more interested in politics than is the average citizen in Germany (Hoffmann, 2011). Moreover, they are driven by the will to support the agenda of their party and see their involvement as a civic duty (Laux, 2011). Politics plays a prominent position in their life, and it is only human to attach great importance to something one values so highly. At the same time, the proportion of young party members (i. e. those under 30) is notoriously low, while this age group also suffers from a chronic underrepresentation in

party structures (Niedermayer, 2020). Parties' specific age demographics lead to irritation about social media customs and etiquette. The ingroup thus provides a powerful motivation for political communicators to seek out influencers who cherish the eminence of the political sphere. Obviously, this constellation creates a dilemma: if political communicators integrate influencers in their election campaigns to reach – and appeal to – young segments of the electorate, but, at the same time, attempt to please their fellow party members, most of whom are demographically very different from the targeted electorate, the consideration for the members conflicts with the campaign's prospect of success.

3.3 The ideal influencer is passionate about the party and its programme

Supporting political candidates and their parties should be an act of conviction, political communicators imagine. They want influencers to be passionate about the party and its programme. Political communicators therefore look for influencers who share the values of their party. A political communicator from a party that identifies as progressive explained that, "of course, [influencers] have to belong to the progressive social camp in the broadest sense, they have to be in favour of social justice, climate protection, against the right and so on, against nationalism and so on. Of course, that's important in some way, otherwise it only makes limited sense, I think". However, it is difficult to establish complete agreement. Programmes cover a wide range of topics, and there is a considerable risk that influencers will not share all of the party's positions. Pragmatically, influencers could cherry-pick the positions they share, while remaining quiet on those positions on which they hold diverging views. Yet what might work when presenting products and brands (Wellman et al., 2020) reaches inherent limits in the political realm. Here, influencers face the risk of followers holding them accountable for all of the positions a party advocates. Political communicators fear that, rather than remaining quiet, influencers will feel the need to actively address disagreements with the party once followers bring up a contentious topic. In imagining such situations, political communicators hope that passion will feed loyalty to the party. Indeed, loyalty is a tricky thing for influencers to balance because they should be loyal to both their clients *and* their followers (Borchers & Enke, 2022).

Political communicators hope for loyalty-producing passion in a different scenario as well. The dynamics of election campaigns are somewhat unpredictable, and a party can quickly fall behind if its strategy does not catch on. A political communicator I interviewed speculated about the challenge of collaborating with in-

fluencers in such situations. He mentioned that, in an earlier election, his party was on the winning end, with polls indicating increasing support for his party during the campaign. However, he mused,

> if it had gone the other way, I do not know if there would have been a challenge with [influencers] walking away from the flag and saying, "Sorry, I am not up to this anymore, I do not want to be on the losing side". Of course, that is within the realm of possibility.

If influencers are passionate about the party and its programme, chances are that they will be loyal to the party, despite a poor performance. "It takes something to stand up there as an influencer or celebrity," an interviewee explained, "and say: 'I think what they are doing is good'. Even if everything sucks right now".

3.4 The ideal influencer is authentic

The idea that influencers should be passionate touches on another idea that political communicators have about the ideal influencer, namely that influencers should be authentic: "I would say probably one of the most important qualities for us, and this is self-evident, is authenticity. So yes, if it is not there, then the whole business does not work somehow". Referring to the self-evidence, this political communicator invokes the faith that her corporate counterparts have in influencer authenticity. In commercial contexts, authenticity is widely considered one of, if not the most, important drivers of influencers' persuasiveness (Borchers, 2023b; Haenlein et al., 2020). In the perception of political communicators, authenticity arises from two relationships: the influencers' relationship to the issue and to the party. First, influencers should bring well-documented expertise to the policy issue on which they are commenting. For example, an influencer who discusses the taxation of stock profits in their campaign-related posts should have addressed stock investing before. Second, political communicators want to see a high fit in values between their party and the influencer so that the influencer comes across as a true supporter of the party. If the influencer is passionate about the party and its programme, this passion further fuels authenticity.

The wish for influencer authenticity has a notable consequence. Political communicators prefer influencers to participate in election campaigns without demanding payment. In essence, many political communicators imagine influencers' involvement with their campaign as a pro bono activity, not unlike the free-of-charge engagement of some communication agencies with NGOs (Waller, 2010). (I should mention that political communicators with a background in corporate marketing expressed a greater openness to compensating influencers than those

who lacked such a background.) The reluctance to pay for influencer services is not so much a question of budgets, even if my interview partners stressed that their budgets are usually too small to hire superstar influencers. Rather, they worry about the authenticity of compensated influencers. If influencers are paid, the argument goes, social media users will remember that they are generally sceptical of advertising claims. In doing so, they will be more likely to suspect that influencers are driven by material incentives rather than an intrinsic conviction that the party deserves support. When asked whether his party considered compensating influencers, a political communicator made this position particularly clear:

> I can rule this out completely, because it would make any advertisement untrustworthy. If [the fact that we pay the influencer] were to come out, it would simply be paid advertising, and that is simply untrustworthy. […] You want people who declare their support so that other people can see: "Okay, [the influencers] declare their support, they are convinced". And you do not become politically convinced by money, ideally.

Money thus undermines authenticity. This position disqualifies a major motive that drives political influencers – namely, to access monetary gains (Riedl et al., 2023, p. 2). The alternative to not paying influencers, from this point of view, is therefore not so much paying influencers but essentially not working with influencers at all. Although refusing to pay influencers may seem naïve from a corporate perspective (Archer & Harrigan, 2016), the fact that – certainly not all, but some – influencers were willing to join campaigns without receiving compensation in the past (Goodwin et al., 2023) indicates that building on influencers' passion and their sense of mission could be a viable approach for political communicators.

3.5 The ideal influencer handles interactions with voters

Influencer content is a great asset for parties, because it allows them to proclaim their message to sections of the electorate that might otherwise be hard to reach. In terms of the three great objectives of election campaigns – informing voters, interacting with voters, and mobilizing voters (Lilleker et al., 2011) – political communicators see the main advantage of engaging with influencers in the first objective, the provision of information and, to a lesser degree, in mobilization. In contrast, interacting with voters is hardly part of their consideration. It is a common complaint in the literature that political parties do not make enough of an effort to leverage the interactivity of social media (e. g. Lilleker et al., 2011), but that is also true for corporate communication (Borchers & Enke, 2021; Kent, 2013).

In influencer collaborations, the lack of ambition to interact with social media publics becomes particularly salient. To earn the status of a microcelebrity, influ-

encers need to interact intensely with their followers. This is how they build stable relationships with followers that ensure followers' interest in their posts. The frequency of interactions, quantified in measurable interaction rates, even serves as a relevant criterion when corporate communicators decide with which influencers they partner (Borchers & Enke, 2021), and the same is true for political communicators. It is not that political communicators would not want influencers to interact with their followers, at least as long as influencers represent the party's positions. They do not, however, see why this should necessarily be their business. In defence of political communicators, I must emphasize that this position is not simply the result of disinterest. Political communicators also mention that they do not know how they should participate in influencer–follower conversations, and they fear that followers could interpret their participation as undesired interference.

3.6 The ideal influencer is low-maintenance

Influencer collaborations extend the strategic toolbox of political communicators, but they should not absorb too many resources that would then be lacking in the traditional core business of managing relations with legacy media. Money can be one of the resources involved, and I have discussed the issue of paying influencers above (see Thesis 4). However, money is not the only resource of limited availability in political parties. Labour power is another. An interviewee explained:

> It is not only about whether someone wants money or not, but also: what kind of organizational work is behind it? Sometimes you get – and I mean this in a purely gender-neutral way – certain divas on board, where [...] the costs and the benefits are no longer in harmony, right?

As this statement implies, the effort it takes to coordinate influencer campaigns and, no less important, to control influencer conduct may push parties to their resource limits. What political communicators wish for, therefore, are influencers who are easy to take care of. This easiness is related to the diva-like behaviour just mentioned. Influencers should know that they are a small cog in the big machine that is the election campaign. As such, they should not cause more hassle than absolutely necessary. In the best case, the coordination effort is limited to a few general consultations on the content that influencers are supposed to produce. Political communicators therefore value autonomy in influencers, which allows them to focus their attention on other aspects of the campaign. A political communicator said that he cherished

> personal initiative. So that we did not have to approach [the influencer] and say: "Please do this or do that [...]." We had a campaign where I was scrolling through Instagram and all of a sudden, I saw one of the influencers we had on the ticket had done something like "Ask me anything about the [party]". It was not agreed upon, it was just like that. And that is totally cool.

However, not all political communicators show the same level of confidence in influencer autonomy. In general, as long as the content influencers produce resembles what political communicators envisioned beforehand, they are comfortable with granting influencers autonomy. Yet when there is a risk that the content will not be what they expected, political communicators appreciate having control options:

> We did not use approval processes or anything like that. Of course, we were present during the filming. Accordingly, we could have intervened on the spot if things had gone in the wrong direction, but we also displayed a certain openness and relaxed attitude.

Despite a general willingness to let influencers have their way, political communicators are apparently not prepared to relinquish control completely. Here, they encounter the limits to control that characterize influencer communication in general (Childers et al., 2019; McMullan et al., 2022). Rather than insisting on techniques of hard control that are established in the production of traditional campaign material, the control of influencer conduct requires less blatant approaches (Borchers, 2023b), such as the micro-management behind the camera mentioned in the previously quoted statement. Political communicators recognize that control logics shift in strategic influencer communication. Interestingly, they tend to explain this shift in terms of the lack of payment for content production. If influencers work for free, political communicators argue, they should not be subjected to strict guidelines and control mechanisms. An interviewee contrasted this situation with his expectations toward paid collaborations with advertising agencies:

> We have approval processes for TV spots, for example. There are [...] long, long approval processes until they actually are ready and broadcast. We do not do that [with influencers], but rather say [...] that they are actually doing it voluntarily, and usually even free of charge for us. [...] If you approach someone via an advertising agency, who then of course also gets paid properly for doing it, I think then you have a completely different expectation of it. It has to be perfect.

Explanations like this leave open the question of whether political communicators have fully embraced the new control paradigm that guides strategic influencer communication. There may be some doubt about this. Studying the management of political campaigns in the United States, Goodwin et al. (2023) reported that po-

litical communicators highly value control, much to the annoyance of influencers and influencer marketing agencies. In the case of the ideal influencer, however, the issue of control becomes superfluous. Being low-maintenance, ideal influencers do not put political communicators in the position of wanting to exert control, because the content they produce corresponds to the expectations of the party.

3.7 The ideal influencer is lenient with political communicators

Political parties can be demanding collaboration partners that test the patience of influencers. There are many voices that want to be heard in campaign planning, and as a result, decision-making takes time. Sometimes, party members debate vividly to find consensus on a topic, and not everyone in a party will always pull in the same direction. Decisions may also be reconsidered, because campaigns must respond to short-term dynamics when voters consider an advocated topic irrelevant or when a new issue unexpectedly rises to prominence. These dynamics make planning somewhat provisional. For political communicators, this provisionality implies that the ideal influencer should be lenient with them. Influencers should also be open to producing content somewhat spontaneously to fit the momentary dynamics of a campaign. In the worst case, they should be prepared to let go of a dear concept for a planned post or even of pre-produced content when the dynamics overtake planning, thus making it obsolete.

Another feature that makes leniency necessary is intra-party debates. These debates can give the impression that the party is acting without direction. Nevertheless, such debates should not scare off influencers, a political communicator elaborated, while acknowledging that “this is the biggest challenge, when we reach out to external communicators: to win someone over despite [our internal debates], or maybe because of that”.

The ideal influencer is also lenient in another sense. In the interviews, most political communicators emphasized that they – and their parties – have only limited experience in working with influencers, and they also have not yet established structures to accompany their influencer activities. This confession comes as no surprise, because influencer collaborations are still a new element of election campaigns. At the same time, most interview partners, at least those that operate at the level of federal states, pointed out that they manage, or plan to manage, their influencer activities in-house to avoid the additional costs of hiring an influencer marketing agency. This situation creates the risk of unusual client behaviour that might irritate influencers. This can happen when political communicators try to establish tight control over the content production and distribution process. It

can also happen when political communicators ignore the limits of what influencers, as one-person media companies, are able to reasonably invest in a collaboration, even if it is based on passion. The influencers that political communicators dream of should be indulgent and condone such unusual conduct.

4 Conclusion

Political communicators have a set of expectations about what collaborating influencers should be like. In this study, I reconstructed their ideas about the qualities the ideal influencer should possess. These qualities range from skills to behaviours and to character traits. The influencer political communicators dream of breaks down complex political issues, bows to the dignity of the political, handles interactions with followers, is passionate, authentic, low-maintenance, and lenient with political communicators. I do not want to claim that this list of qualities is complete. Some more obvious formal qualities related to social media metrics could be added – notably, that influencers should have large followings, that they should attract an audience that represents the target group of the party, and that their engagement rates should be high. However, given the pioneering character of my undertaking, I suggest this list provides first valuable insights to illuminate how political communicators approach the integration of influencers in the election campaigns they implement.

To conclude, I want to address the issue of influencer ethics. The election campaigns I discussed with my interviewees took place in a democratic system that places high normative demands on a fair competition of ideas. It seems therefore worthwhile to emphasize that the ethical principles of influencer communication (Borchers & Enke, 2022) are universal and apply to collaborations in the political domain, too. Woolley (2022) points to the risks to democracy that come with influencer collaborations in political campaigning, and that, in my reading, are largely due to unethical conduct. Woolley rightly draws attention to the principle of transparency, which requires that all collaborations be clearly disclosed. Another of his concerns touches on the principle of sincerity, which demands that opinions not be bought. Given the scepticism about paying influencers the political communicators interviewed for this study expressed, this issue may appear less serious. However, it is not yet clear whether collaborations without payments will become the dominant model in campaigning. Political communications may have to rely on paid influencers in the future, so that the principle of sincerity will gain in importance. Finally, the ambition to control influencer conduct raises ethical issues, because it conflicts with the principle of autonomy. Strategic influencer communication breaks with the long-standing tradition that the one who pays decides (Borchers,

2023b). Followers expect "their" influencers to act autonomously even in the context of official collaborations, and influencers are aware of the loyalty they owe to their audiences. Attempts to control influencer conduct are thus considered a violation of the field's ethics. To avoid such violations, political communicators should ask themselves whether they are ready to cede a great deal of control before they start planning their engagement with influencers.

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Mattias Ekman and Andreas Widholm

Election influencers on TikTok

Strategic utilisation of the short video format during the 2022 election campaign in Sweden

Abstract: In an increasingly fragmented digital media ecology, political actors constantly experiment with new formats, styles, and collaborations in order to reach specific segments of the citizenry. In this struggle, new and emerging platforms are explored as venues for political campaigning. This chapter explores how two political parties, the Left Party and the Sweden Democrats, utilised the short video format on TikTok during the 2022 election campaign. The chapter presents an analysis of the strategic relationship between influencers and political parties, exploring how TikTok's short video format impinges on how political messages are designed and communicated. The results highlight the performative aspects of political communication and point to how influencer politics can build on very different logics of authenticity work, using influential users and their followers as a gateway for political campaigning.

Keywords: TikTok, election campaign, influencers, political communication

1 Introduction

As a result of an increasing platformisation of digital political communication (Gorwa, 2019), political actors compete for attention and impact in a digital ecology saturated by information. Due to this competition, new platforms are continuously explored as venues for political messages and campaign efforts, where political actors experiment with new formats, styles, and contents. In this respect, contemporary political communication mirrors the development in the online advertising industry, where political messages are tailored along the line of marketing logics (Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2014). Following this development, social media platforms also constitute venues for so-called influencers; users that accommodate both "ordinariness" and a kind of celebrity status or digital micro-celebrity on a platform (Arnesson, 2024). Influencers are mainly known for their role as advertisers for commercial businesses promoting products as well as increasing "brand awareness" for commercial gain (Carter, 2016). However, similar performative practices can be used for packaging and "selling" political messages (Harff & Schmuck, 2023; Kissas, 2022), and influencers can potentially constitute a "third space" for

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political communication in social media, impacting the attitudes of their followers (Suuronen et al., 2022).

An example of a new and increasingly influential social media platform is the video-sharing app TikTok, known for spearheading the short video format. While much research on politics and social media has focused on platforms such as Twitter/X, Facebook, and Instagram, less attention has been paid to the utilisation of TikTok by political actors in election campaigns. TikTok has become one of the most popular platforms worldwide and is known for its entertaining user-generated content, featuring videos with particularly young users dancing, lip-syncing to music, or performing various talents. TikTok is characterised by a short video format that is tailored to fit production and consumption patterns of mobile devices. Even if TikTok is still not a major venue for political party communication, it is used extensively for spreading political messages and it has increasingly attracted the attention of political actors and their professional communication strategists. An important backdrop to this development is the rapidly increasing user fragmentation. TikTok has been pointed out as a potential venue where particularly young citizens can be reached by political messages. This demographic group is not to any large extent available on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter/X (cf. Cervi et al., 2023).

Similar to other platforms, TikTok is home to a myriad of influencers whose content has a greater reach than that of ordinary users. Influencers can incorporate social and political engagement in their communicative repertoire, for example, by raising awareness of climate change or human rights issues, or by endorsing particular parties or political candidates (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2022). This engagement can reflect social and political commitments, but it can also strengthen the brand qualities and social capital of influencers. From that perspective, socio-political engagements of influencers can be understood as a form of "authenticity work" (Arnesson, 2024; Banet-Weiser, 2021), a necessary component utilised in order to stay relevant and trustworthy in the digital public sphere. Simultaneously, audiences are "increasingly aware that authenticity is performative, that is, not something you have but rather something you do" (Arnesson, 2024, p. 1470). Thus, there are credibility and authenticity risks attached to the performed social and political engagement of influencers. Political influencers can be already established individuals on a platform, who take positions on, or sides in various political issues, but the definition can also include political actors who adopt advertising strategies used by influencers, for political purposes.

This chapter presents an analysis of the relationship between influencers and political parties, exploring how TikTok's short video format was utilised during the Swedish general election campaign of 2022. The aim is to highlight the performative aspects of political communication on a platform that is characterised by en-

tertainment, performance, and play. We seek to understand how the structural opportunities and constraints of TikTok's short video format – its "platform features" (Bucher & Helmond, 2018) – impact the way political communication is produced by political actors. The chapter illustrates this phenomenon through a qualitative analysis focusing on multimodal features (texts, music, visual elements, settings, tonality, etc.) of Swedish campaign videos.

First, we assess a collaboration between the Swedish Left Party and a group of specific influencers, popular within a very delimited segment of the citizenry, namely immigrant youth in the suburban areas of larger cities. Here we analyse a case where social media influencers are used as communicative proxies for a political party. In the second case, we assess how political actors of the Sweden Democrats manage the short video format, utilising communicative styles and aesthetics emanating from commercial influencers in order to promote the party during the election campaign. For ethical reasons the users/influencers have been anonymised.

2 Communication, celebrity, intimacy and influencer politics

Dissolving boundaries between politics and media is a central feature of the contemporary hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2017) and online communication has become an integrated element of political actors' strategic and routinised daily practices. This implies that political discourse is produced, packaged, and distributed strategically on a broad array of digital platforms and social media services in order to reach various sections of the electorate. As many scholars have pointed out, the adaptation of political discourse to various platforms has had vast consequences for the development of political communication.

It has been argued that politics has become increasingly individualised, personalised (Metz et al., 2020), professionalised (Davis, 2019), and affective (Boler & Davis, 2020), and also converged with some of the characteristics of celebrity culture (Ekman & Widholm, 2017a). Moreover, the diverse set of social logics characterising digital media platforms, including their algorithmic infrastructure and socio-technical features, impact the way political messages are tailored and curated to maximise impact. For example, communication strategies from the public relations (PR) and the advertising industries, such as micro-targeting and narrow casting, are becoming increasingly visible in political communication too (Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2014).

The performative aspects of political actors are indeed not new to the digital age, they can be traced back to the advancement of commercial television (van Zoonen, 2005). In particular, the advent of the *politician as celebrity* or *politicians in celebrity contexts*, during the television era, illustrated among other things by politicians' presence in light-hearted popular and commercial television shows, reveals an important shift towards what has since then become normalised appearances of political actors (cf. Street, 2010; Eriksson, 2010). Within the post-mass communication age, or what Strömbäck and Kiousis (2014) define as the "postmodern" phase of political campaigning, political actors appear in, and indeed cast themselves, across a various set of self-performative and self-personalised identities and roles.

We have previously referred to this phenomenon as a "performative turn" in political communication (Ekman & Widholm, 2017a). This turn is marked by a broader process of political "celebritisation" where staged connectivity with various actors and contexts plays a significant role in the social media practices of politicians (Ekman & Widholm, 2014, 2017b). Thus, political actors navigate a vast set of roles and identities, and can, when suitable, adapt to the characteristics of celebrity culture. They can be "attractive objects in themselves" (Ekman & Widholm, 2017a), and on TikTok, the combination of both (visual) intimacy and (cultural) sociability are fundamental performative features. Intimacy is organised around a performed relationship between the influencer and the audience, realised through a set of mediatised multimodal techniques, enabled by the socio-technical features of the platform (Abidin, 2021). Sociability is realised through a set of discursive techniques that produce the political influencer as a trustworthy and authentic source of (political) information.

Intimacy and sociability are also organised around the audience capacity to identify with the influencer, but simultaneously distinguishing the specific qualities that characterise the influencer as an unordinary or extraordinary user. Thus, the platformed presence of the influencer builds on a combination of "performed intimacy, authenticity and access" (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). Intimacy and sociability also entail highly affective dimensions, which underpin user engagement on social platforms. The distribution practices of social media content rely on emotive work that goes into sharing, circulating, commenting, liking, reacting, etc. in user networks (Paasonen et al., 2015). This implies that political content needs to adapt a range of emotive resources in order to gain attention in the information flows on platforms such as TikTok. Moreover, the political influencer is a person that can combine the specific performative elements that characterise a social media platform with a political message and equally construct a sense of trustworthiness. The specific features of the short video format are key to understanding the way political (and other) influencers appear and perform.

3 The short video format in strategic political communication

When TikTok emerged as a global platform for video-sharing, it distinguished itself from other video platforms such as YouTube, with a focus on a short video format, produced by ordinary users. The essence of videos on TikTok is moving visual communication enhanced by multimodal experimentation and user performance produced with, and consumed on, mobile phones (Hase et al., 2023). The consumption pattern of TikTok videos is very rapid and builds on scrolling through feeds facilitated by powerfully tweaked recommendation algorithms. TikTok videos compete for the viewer's attention within a very brief attention span, and thus need to capture the viewer instantly in order to obtain the user's interest. The strong focus on music and (bodily) performance also make TikTok different from other video platforms. In this respect, TikTok has established a niche that has forced some of its competitors to develop similar platform features, reflected in the development of short video formats such as Instagram and Facebook "Reels" and "Shorts" on YouTube (Abidin, 2021).

For political actors, the short video format facilitates the expression of political messages through music, storytelling, a variety of emoticons, and through the re-mixing of other actors' content. On TikTok, users can choose music from a library or upload their own tunes, enabling the production of sound memes, and dance and lip-syncing practices that characterise the content on the platform (Zamora-Medina et al., 2023). The incorporation of music in political communication is not new, but has long served as a cultural marker to political campaigning (Street, 2013). Since the short video format leans on emotive self-presentation strategies, often channelled through intimate, playful, and humoristic ways, these become important for political actors as well (e. g. Metz et al., 2020). Political actors need to adopt elements of these multi-layered performances of personalisation that dominate the format, in order to attract the attention of users. The specific features of the short video format can steer political actors toward the same playful participation, role plays, etc. that dominate the content, and current research suggests that this is reflected in how individual politicians use TikTok through personal "politainment" and brand-building (Cervi et al., 2023; Vijay & Gekker, 2021).

As illustrated above, the short video format offers a broad range of creative semiotic resources. For example, built-in resources such as emoticons, stickers, and text layers can be used to visually construct a multimodal message. The communicative practices also include the adaptation and circulation of popular video memes, where users can add new meaning as the content migrates between different users and contexts (e. g. Mortensen & Neumayer, 2021). The circulation of the

short video on TikTok is primarily centred on algorithmic systems that prioritise creative and collaborative practices over the number of followers a particular user has. For example, the collective feature of content production of TikTok is illuminated by the central role of re-mixing and replication of other users' content. Zulli and Zulli (2022) argue that "imitation" is a fundamental principle guiding user behaviour on the platform. In order to highlight the performative aspects of political communication, including how influencers are used strategically in terms of short video production, we ask the following three research questions: (1) How were the aforementioned features of TikTok's short video format adopted by political actors during the election campaign? (2) How were emotive elements used in order to establish connectivity to users? (3) How were political discourses adapted to the specific features of the short video format and the wider characteristics of influencers on TikTok?

4 Case one: Influencer politics by proxies

Within the final month of the Swedish general election in 2022, the Left Party (a socialist, feminist, and ecological party) announced a collaboration with a group of local social media profiles. The project, named "Powered by Vänsterpartiet", involved five creators living in so-called "vulnerable communities", a term used by the police since 2015 to label segregated and socio-economically disenfranchised communities with large immigrant populations. According to the Left Party, the aim was to "allow the creators to use their creativity and tell about their reality". The participants were selected through applications that focused on five themes: "Power, future, place, microphone, and home". The selection considered the "level of creativity, inclusion of artistic styles, storytelling and content that evoked emotions" (Vänsterpartiet, 2022). The collaboration resulted in four short videos, published on TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter/X, each video featuring and/or produced by one or two of the local profiles. One of the profiles is a known influencer while the others included a comedian, a creator, a film maker, and actors. The party launched separate accounts for the campaign on TikTok and Instagram, but also disseminated the videos on their various party platforms and channels. The collaboration was the first one of its kind in Sweden, where an established political party paid social media influencers/creators to produce content for an election campaign (Törner, 2022). In total, the four videos have received 287,000 views and 9,025 interactions (likes, shares) on TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube combined (as of September 2023), comments were closed on all platforms.

4.1 The collaboration videos

The first published video features a female "influencer" from a Stockholm suburb. The video is one minute long and called "Marginalised". The video starts with a rhyming monologue with soft mellow music in the background. The influencer is seated opposite a young man on the grass outside an apartment building, they are facing each other. It is sunset and soft swaying green trees are visible in the background. The female then turns away from the man and faces the camera, and her monologue starts. The video then shifts to a new scene and a beat is added to the music. The monologue continues but now as a more traditional rap, and the two persons are now positioned on an electric scooter with the female driving slowly through the community. The video ends with a zoomed-out image of the two persons leaving on a bridge. The image then fades and displays a dictionary explanation of the word "Marginalised". At the end, white text on a black background reads "Election day is 11 September. Use your voice. Vänsterpartiet.se".

The political discourse is centred on the experience of marginalisation and discrimination, including not being listened to, and it comprises an appeal to those in power, to start listening (e. g. Galpin, 2022). The monologue is also texted in yellow, centred in the shot. The video could be understood as an example of the spoken word genre adapted to a social media platform, and incorporates some of the features common to the short video format such as storytelling, added music, text, and performance (Kaye et al., 2022). The latter is realised through the bodily presence and movements of the two actors, first, more intimate in the grass, and then in public riding a scooter. The video constructs two central social relations, first with the viewers ("us"), and then to the subjects of power ("you within power, time to take responsibility"). This symbolic connectivity (Ekman & Widholm, 2017b) rests on the shared experiences articulated in the monologue, including emotions of neglect and not being listened to, thus stressing the experience of social marginalisation shared by the influencer and the (possible) viewers (Galpin, 2022).

The second video is called "Living with prejudice" and starts with the camera zooming in from above on the housing estates of a known Stockholm suburb, accompanied by a hip-hop tune. The music quickly fades out and the image shifts to two young males located in a corner shop. The mood is humorous and the two males are packing crisps and other snacks, while talking to each other. The dialogue is centred on leaving the suburb and moving to another place outside the so-called "vulnerable communities". One of the actors claims he has a contact on Facebook that can get them two apartments outside "orten" (slang connoting suburb and usually referring to so-called vulnerable communities), they only need a bank mortgage and an electronic bank-ID. He asks his friend to swish

(an electronic system for money transfer) him cash. His argument is that a potential move would mean that they will no longer suffer regular inspections. He then turns to two females standing by the counter to confirm that his idea is good. They look at him with contempt and say, "do you think you will blend in with them … you will be searched wherever you go and anonymous witnesses will follow you". One of the females interrupts the conversation (about swishing money to this and that), by saying, "vote correct – that's all". The two men then decide that the best thing is to vote in the election, but perhaps also to obtain the necessary money to move. At the end, the same message as in the first video is displayed.

The short video is a sketch comedy, common to the short video format on TikTok (Kaye et al., 2022), where serious issues such as regular police visitations and suspicions aimed at random young black men are blended with a humorous but realistic everyday dialogue. The use of an up-tempo hip-hop song in the intro is key to catching the viewers' attention, and a common feature on the platform. The indoor setting resembles a local minimarket/corner shop, distinctive for immigrant suburbs. The video relies on an affective humoristic performance, including body language and the idiosyncratic dialogue between the two young men, with the additional sarcastic interactions by the two females. The short video could be seen as a typical comedy skit. The comedy format is also key to the storytelling practices, where the message is embedded in the humorous delivery (Cervi et al., 2023), and within the repetition of certain key elements (the lack of money, "swishing", the need for change). The video constructs a familiar scenario, but at the same time specific to a certain socio-demographic space. This connectivity is simultaneously created by the familiarity of the physical space and the underlying political discourse – that racial profiling and unprovoked harassment against black citizens prevail even if you move outside vulnerable suburbs (e.g. Galpin, 2022). The short video carries the political message through an embedded structure of humour (Abidin, 2021), including the sarcastic "truth" delivered by the much wiser female characters at the end.

The third video, called "179:an", is named after a bus route passing through several so-called "vulnerable" suburbs in Stockholm and features three young persons with immigrant background sitting inside a bus. Two young men and a young woman are chatting in a light-hearted manner about graduating school. The young woman then receives a phone call from her mother, who is stressed and appears to search for the younger brother of the woman. The woman tries to call her brother, but only gets to his voicemail. Here the mood changes as she starts to look stressed. Suddenly the sound of police sirens appears and a blue light flashes in the window of the bus and reflects on the face of the increasingly worried woman. She leaves a message on the voicemail, urging him to stop hanging around the pizzeria. She hangs up and one of the young men on the bus asks her if something is wrong.

She replies that it concerns her brother and that she needs to get off. In the next sequence we see the young woman running on the street as she receives a phone call. She stops and answers, and the voice of a man appears at the other end of the line – her younger brother. He asks why she and their mother have been trying to reach him, and why they have left him so many messages (all performed in an idiosyncratic style). She asks, with a distressed expression, where he is, and he replies "I'm playing football with my friends". She takes a relaxing breath, as she understands he is ok, and lowers her phone. The finishing sequence has a low background noise added, and at the very end the sound of a minor chord from a string instrument fades out. The video then ends with the same text message as the other videos.

This video is more complex as it plays on referential knowledge about the situation in the specific area. It implicitly addresses the problem of gang violence and shootings (that has occurred across the suburbs of the bus route). In particular, the mentioned "pizzeria" works as reference for previous fatal shootings in the area (Nilsson, 2018). The video builds on a realistic social dichotomy expressed in the contrast between the joyful relation among friends and the imminent possibility of fatal tragedy. In this respect the video mirrors the reality of parents and relatives suffering from gang-related violence in the area – it also portrays the situation from the perspective of those who live there – and not the dominating representation of violence prevailing in the news. The political discourse is situated far from party politics, as it articulates the stress and vulnerability of ordinary local citizens – thus it produces emotive identification with people suffering similar emotions due to violence in the area (e.g. Galpin, 2022). The connectivity and identification are realised through the experience embodied by the young female and as it highlights the emotive insecurity faced by people in similar communities. The video incorporates features of the short video format, such as drama, bodily performance, and storytelling (Kaye et al., 2022) – the quality also supersedes the usual flow of short videos on TikTok and other platforms.

The final video is called "The Path/Road" ("Vägen"), and focuses on a poetic monologue performed by a woman. The monologue continues throughout the one-minute video and is visualised by constructed social relations in a forest. In the video we see a black woman (possibly the narrator), filmed in a close-up shot and then running through the woods chased by someone unknown. She struggles to make her way through the woods, tripping on a fallen tree bole as simultaneously the words "tripping on prejudices, ignorance and hate" are articulated. In the video several white men in suits turn up, marching through the forest. The woman then exits the forest with a relieved expression on her face and the video shifts perspective. Suddenly she is dressed in a suit, directing two white men in workwear as they help various young persons (with immigrant background) in

the forest. For example, by removing the symbolic fallen tree and aiding persons who have strayed away from the forest path. The video ends with several young people running free, and the camera closes in on the woman's face as she ends the monologue. The clip ends with the aforementioned text message.

This video constitutes a symbolic representation of race relations performed through a poetic monologue including the visual narrative. The political discourse is straightforward, as the video shifts from struggle, vulnerability, and conflict to cooperation, hard work, and freedom. Its simplicity is realised through familiar symbolic performances, such as running/chasing, tripping on tree logs, men in suits, straying off the straight path, and so on. The video conveys an intensity through the combination of the monologue, close-ups on the black woman's face, and the many short and rapid sequences staging social relations. In this respect, it conveys the "intimate disposition" of the short video format (Abidin, 2021, p. 80). The political message is universal and connects to ideals of cohesion and cooperation. This video also includes specific features of the short video, such as drama, performance, and storytelling (including a texted version) – but it also stands out in its artistic style. The affective dimensions are realised through the intimate performance of the woman in close-up shots, addressing the viewer on a personal level (Abidin, 2021).

All four videos explicate a form of political communication that we call influencers as proxy for party campaigning. By paying for content that connects individually narrated messages of marginalisation, prejudice, insecurity, and hope to a specific political party seems to be a novel, but also controversial, phenomenon (Törner, 2022), at least in a Swedish context. The connection between celebrities and politics is old, but we argue that this case reveals a new kind of "influencer politics" that moves beyond existing formats associated with celebrity politics. Even if one of the short videos includes a well-known influencer, the other three videos display the utilisation of creators, film makers, actors, and comedians within a political campaign, in what appears to be novel and exploratory ways. The videos also differ to some extent from the mundane flow of amateur videos on TikTok, since they are professional in style, form, and footage. At the same time, they adhere to several key features of the short video; music, storytelling, humour, body language, and performativity are all familiar elements of the content on TikTok (Kaye et al., 2022). Moreover, the "influencer" aspects of the videos are played down in favour of artistic performance – it is not necessarily centred on the "knownness" of the featured actors, but rather the familiarity of the faces, stories, environments, and visual representations in the videos.

5 Case two: Hybrid roles of far-right political influencers

In 2022, the far-right party the Sweden Democrats instigated a new media project entitled "Riks". According to its self-definition, Riks is an outlet devoted to "conservative news provision", and the content is distributed via YouTube but also through other platforms such as TikTok. The content of Riks shares several characteristics with other outlets operating within the growing right-wing alternative media ecology in Sweden (Ekman & Widholm, 2024a). What distinguishes Riks from other outlets, however, is that the channel was produced as part of the communications department of the Sweden Democrats. Hence, party members and candidates do not appear solely as sources in Riks's news. On the contrary, they appear in various "hybrid" roles, as politicians, news presenters, programme hosts, comedians, and satirists (Ekman & Widholm, 2024b). Interestingly, the hybrid performances of Riks's staff can easily be adapted to fit features of other platforms as well. In this analysis, we will therefore show how personalised performative roles derived from contemporary influencer culture are used strategically within the short video format, as a bridge that allows the Sweden Democrats to move content across platforms. We focus on the most viewed postings, and compare videos published on Riks's official account, with those published by programme hosts who operate as influencers on TikTok.

5.1 Viral election videos on TikTok

Riks's official TikTok account (@riksstudios) was created in May 2021, but it was not until a few weeks before the election that it started to post videos on a more regular basis. The account has attracted a limited number of followers (4,200 as of September 2023). During the four weeks leading up to the election, 32 videos were published, most of them short segments where news anchors present stories pertaining to the Sweden Democrats' most central policy areas. Campaign strategies are also in focus, for example, the Sweden Democrats' advertising in the Stockholm metro system, often referred to as "The repatriation train" ("Återvandringståget"), a reference suggesting that migrants in Sweden should book a "one-way ticket" to their home countries.

The provocative style may be different from traditional news, but the visual environment where programme hosts "perform" their role is reminiscent of a traditional television studio. The number of views vary between just over 1,500 for some videos, to 54,000 at the most. A general feature of the videos is that they

lack almost all the characteristics that are associated with the playful aesthetics of the short video format, such as music, text stickers, and emoticons etc. Instead, the videos carry with them a legacy from YouTube, from which they were originally produced. In order to be successful on TikTok, it is important to catch the viewers' attention through performative actions. This involves "stepping out" of a formal professional role, and instead adapting the communication in such a way that it fits the specific platform environment. In what follows, we will therefore provide a number of analytical examples of how such strategies have been put into practice in order to increase the potential circulation of the content.

Our first example includes an account connected to Riks that publishes mainly on issues relating to migration and crime. In contrast to Riks's YouTube channel, the account holder draws extensively on the most central features of the short video format. The political discourses are similar, yet the form differs greatly, since videos utilise music, lip-synching, green screen effects, and textual stickers (Kaye et al., 2022). The number of views during the weeks leading up to the election varied between 10,000 views for the least popular postings, and over 650,000 for the most popular video. The most viral post during the period had the title "Sweden should be good again", a paraphrase of Donald Trump's famous slogan "Make America great again". In the video, the female programme host is miming to the song "It's corn" by Tariq & the Gregory Brothers, wearing a T-shirt with the sign "Stop the Socialists" [Stoppa sosseriet]. "Why do you like corn?", one of the opening phrases of the song, is replaced by a completely different message saying (in Swedish): "Me? I will vote for the SD. Why SD? Because it is SD. A party focusing on security. They want to deport the criminals!". The text and the miming are accompanied by dance moves and body language, anchoring a distinctly critical and negative emotive message to positive vibes in accordance with the happy children's music. This duality between positive and negative emotions in campaigning strategies (Metz et al., 2020) was visible in several other videos during the period as well. One video (121,000 views) evokes a contradiction between worried facial gestures ("Oh lord, yet another shooting, what should be done to solve it") followed by ironic portrayals of a happy, dancing Social Democrat ("The Social Democrats and their youth centres"), alluding to the Social Democrats' non-repressive policies on crime and social integration. The message was accompanied by "The joke is on you", by Icarly Kate, a song popularised by other creators on the platform in various re-mixing contests. Similar communicative contradictions could be seen in videos portraying the aforementioned advertising campaign in the Stockholm metro ("No thank you! I don't use public transportation! The SD train? One ticket please!!!"). The examples evidence that strong emotions and affect are drivers of engagement on the platform, but they are seldomly evoked in pure forms. Paradox-

ically, negative campaign messages seem to be framed also positively or ironically in order to catch the users' attention (Ekman & Widholm, 2024b).

Our second example includes another of Riks's programme hosts who has been even more influential. The account also utilised TikTok's platform features extensively, combining written political slogans with music, dancing, and witty facial expressions (Cervi et al., 2023). The most viral videos, however, had a strong connection to the account holder's role as news presenter. In a video reaching more than 1.8 million views, the news presenter interviews the party leader of the Sweden Democrats, Jimmy Åkessson, asking "some of the most common questions I get from followers". The Riks logo is clearly visible on the microphone positioned in front of Åkessson, accentuating the hybrid position of being both reporter and political campaign influencer. In the video, Åkesson explains that the party's policies will result in a more secure situation for Swedish women, particularly those working with health and social care, as "criminals will be deported", "preferably to a dessert somewhere". While the subjects discussed are distinctly negative and conflictual, the tone is at the same time friendly and happy, illuminating that emotional drivers of political engagement on TikTok are complex and cannot be attributed solely to anger or hatred (Bossetta & Schmøkel, 2023).

However, the most viewed video (1.9 million views) was based on a news story published in Samnytt, an alternative media outlet with close ties to the Sweden Democrats. The video lacks music, but utilises the green screen effect so that the news story article is visible as a background image. The news video tells the story of two criminals – "I don't want to try to pronounce their names" – who are accused of robbing and shooting a man in front of his kids. The scenery is described with extremely provocative language ("such a fucking disgusting crime"), accompanied by written quotes of the robbers derived from the Samnytt news story ("I will fuck you!"). The video demonstrates that discourses can migrate from one side of the right-wing media ecology to another and across platforms (Mortensen & Neumayer, 2021). However, this process simultaneously requires the adaptation of the message to fit the features of the platform where it occurs. In this case, it involves the utilisation of much more personal and intimate forms of political expression (Vijay & Gekker, 2021). The majority of all postings during the election period had a distinctly more positive appeal, Needless to say, these videos did not obtain nearly as many views.

6 Conclusion

This chapter has analysed new experimental forms of digital political communication that have become significant for "postmodern" campaigning practices, includ-

ing strategies of micro-targeting (Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2014). In an increasingly hybrid and complex media system, political actors' struggle for attention propel trialling new formats, styles, and collaborations. This has become particularly evident in relation to the fragmentation of the electorate on various digital platforms. The adaptation of political messages to the short video format on TikTok, a platform populated mainly by young and emerging citizens, mirrors this struggle for attention. As we have illustrated by the two cases, this also includes experimenting with various dimensions of so-called "influencer politics", embedding political discourse within the performances and appearances of lifestyle users, or by using already established users and their social media following as a gateway for political campaigning. In this process political communication has become increasingly performative and intimate, as a way of adapting to the characteristics of social media platforms. In the case of TikTok, this carries various specific traits connected to the way the platform is managed and consumed – for example, through the way music, storytelling, and bodily performances are utilised to convey political messages to audiences/users not exposed to political campaigning elsewhere. Music is often considered to be a specific feature driving engagement within the short video format on TikTok, as influencers can connect with other users by mimicking their performances, re-mixing their content, changing lyrics, or performing ironic lip-syncs. While these features were used extensively, they did not characterise the most viral content. This makes political influencers of the type we have studied here quite specific. Nevertheless, their hybrid positions provide them with a communicative flexibility that can attract large fan bases, which is essential in order to reach out on a regular basis.

The chapter has also shown that influencer politics on TikTok can build on very different logics of authenticity work (Arnesson, 2024; Banet-Weiser, 2021). For the actors in the influencer campaign produced for the Left Party, the authenticity was attached to the shared lived experiences and emotions of citizens residing in so-called vulnerable communities. Here, socio-cultural proximity was key to the affective dimensions of the storytelling and visual representation. These videos also revealed how political discourses can be implicit and artistically performed in a way that differs from traditional political campaigning. At the other end, the authenticity of the Sweden Democrats' videos built on a constructed position of vox populi and mundane ordinariness and on the adaptation of the most characteristic performative features of TikTok. Political messages were designed to fit the everyday flow of performative content. Despite the differences between the two cases, both disclose how political actors strive to manage authenticity, through a complex combination of ordinariness (for identification) and extraordinariness (for attention). Key to platform visibility and impact seem to be a combination of various forms of "performed connectivity", particularly addressed through affective deliv-

ery, including both storytelling and bodily practices (Ekman & Widholm, 2017a, 2017b). Here the interconnectedness between the political actor/influencer and the audience/user is constituted through an interplay of trust and identification. To conclude, the adaptation of political campaigning to new online platforms seems to stimulate experimentation and exploration of political communication in rather unorthodox ways. This points to the fact that political communication strategies are in constant flux as political actors adopt both professional and user-generated practices and formats.

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A human behind the politics?

Personalisation and interactions in the comments sections of Swedish politicians' YouTube channels

Abstract: This chapter examines the intersection of influencer strategies and political communication through the comments sections of the YouTube channels of Swedish politicians Ebba Busch and Annie Lööf. It analyses viewers' comments to explore their impact on the emerging concept of the influencer politician. The study finds that comments reflect influencer-like communication strategies used by politicians, resembling realistic social interaction. Two-way interactions, such as politicians responding to comments, enhance viewer engagement and contribute to an active commenting environment. Comments also serve as reflective engagement, characterised by immediate and emotionally charged responses, typical of lifestyle influencer content. The results also highlight positive reactions to conversational engagement and concerns about insincerity in politicians adopting influencer personas.

Keywords: professionalisation, perceived political authenticity, influencer politician, social media, parasocial interaction

1 Introduction

Research has long recognised that voters' evaluations of politicians increasingly centre on personal traits, identity, and lifestyle (Pels & Corner, 2003). This indicates a shift towards individualisation and privatisation of politics, and blurs the line between the political and the personal in political communication (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Holtz-Bacha et al., 2014; Van Aelst et al., 2012). The development also aligns with the networked permanent campaign strategy, where political actors use digital platforms to communicate directly with potential voters in dynamic communication spaces (Joathan & Lilleker, 2020). Recent research further underscores the significance of successful personalisation, emphasising politician–audience interactions and behind-the-scenes visuals that showcase the politician's work and feelings about it, when trying to reach younger audiences (Ashley & Rasmussen, 2021; Parmelee et al., 2023).

In line with these developments, new styles of personalisation can be expected through, for example, increased user engagement (Zamora-Medina, 2023) and

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adaption of textual as well as visual aspects of social media fame. The emergence of the "influencer politician", as discussed by Ashley and Rasmussen (2021) and Starita and Trillò (2022), is, from this point of view, a natural development in modern political communication. This concept represents a shift from the traditional celebrity-politician narrative towards a model more like that of an influencer, representing an expansion of how politicians engage with and are perceived by the constituents in the digital age. Self-branding, calculated amateurism, and cultivating a personal affective relationship with the audience – i. e. potential voters – are some of the micro-celebrity practices associated with social media influencers that characterise this new "ideal type" of politician (Starita & Trillò, 2022).

This chapter is part of an ongoing study that focuses on the above-mentioned trends in digital political communication. It is based on case studies of two Swedish female political leaders, Annie Lööf and Ebba Busch, who, between two elections, launched their own YouTube channels. At the time of data collection, Lööf was the leader of the liberal Centre Party, and Busch was leader of the conservative Christian Democrats. The videos on the two channels borrowed typical genres, tools, and tactics from lifestyle influencers, not least a focus on interaction, dialogue, and cultivating an intimate relationship with the audience. We regard these vlogging politicians as examples of the ongoing transformation of political communication into a "highly professionalized, personalized communication environment" (Lilleker, 2014, p. 20) influenced by current communication trends, adopting and adapting commercial strategies to a political context (Falasca & Grandien, 2017).

YouTube is one of the largest platforms for *vlogging*, a form of video-based blog where content creators share insights into their daily lives. Success on the platform often builds on engaging the audience, and creating a perception of familiarity and collaboration between them and the vlogger. Interactions through comments or posts are encouraged by the platform affordances and are employed for communication purposes such as sharing ideas, showing appreciation, and answering questions (Madden et al., 2013). The vlogs allow the viewers to experience a sense of intimacy when more personal content is shared, and interaction in relation to the content is made possible through the comments section (Rihl & Wegener, 2019).

In the interaction between content creators and viewers, the boundary between interpersonal and mediated communication often gets blurred and a (perceived) intimisation of the relationship arises (Rihl & Wegener, 2019). Recent research has highlighted how different influencer strategies are used by politicians to cultivate a sense of authenticity, accessibility, and community (e. g. Ashley & Rasmussen, 2021; Starita & Trillò, 2022). In this chapter, we want to turn the attention towards the audience, specifically viewers' reactions to the content and communication strat-

egies used by the two politicians. The aim is to explore and discuss the mediated interactions between politicians and the viewers taking place in the comments sections of the two YouTube channels. The research questions used to guide the analysis are: (1) what types of comments can be found on the two channels; (2) how do viewers' comments relate to the video content and the topics the politicians bring up; (3) what kind of strategies do the two politicians use when they interact with the viewers?

The remainder of the chapter is organised as follows. First, we discuss the transformation of political communication in the digital age, and highlight the shift towards personalisation and influencer-style tactics by politicians to create intimate, parasocial relationships with their audience through social media. Second, we present the two cases in a bit more detail, as well as the chapter's methodological approach. Thereafter, audience comments and reactions to the content and communication and the mediated interactions between the politicians and the viewers are analysed and discussed. Lastly, some conclusions are drawn about the comments sections of the YouTube channels.

2 Personalisation in the influencer era

The landscape of political communication is undergoing changes marked by increased personalisation, individualisation, and the intertwining of private and public personas. This transformative phenomenon encompasses the rising focus on specific politicians over parties or issues, portraying politicians as private individuals, and the expressive disclosure of emotions, all contributing to a dynamic where political figures adopt influencer-like strategies.

Personalisation of political communication means increased individualisation, privatisation, and emotionalisation (Van Aelst et al., 2012; Van Santen & Van Zoonen, 2010). Individualisation of political communication entails an increasing focus on specific politicians rather than parties, issues, or institutions, whereas privatisation suggests a tendency on the part of politicians to portray themselves as private individuals rather than representatives in public roles (Adam & Maier, 2010; Holtz-Bacha et al., 2014; Van Aelst et al., 2012). Disclosure and expression of emotions is argued to be another important element of personalisation (Metz et al., 2020), but also a gendered process within the current emotionalised landscape of mediated political communication (Yates, 2019). Empirical studies support the notion that self-personalisation helps politicians to connect emotionally with viewers and foster favourable impressions (Colliander et al., 2017; Lee & Oh, 2012; Peng, 2021). A study on viewers' interactions on social media with politicians showed that citizens preferred privatised and emotionalised posts (Vuckovic, 2023). As dis-

cussed earlier, younger audiences also express a preference for communication that presents the politician as trustworthy and personally relatable through two-way interactions and sharing details about their everyday life. Digital natives want politicians to show their political job in the form of a "backstage pass", where they get to see and know what the job really looks like and how the politician feels about it (Parmelee et al., 2023).

2.1 Influencer politicians and parasocial experiences in social media

In research, the "celebrity politician" has long been understood as an official who adopts the style of a celebrity to advance their public image, or a former celebrity entering politics (Street, 2004). Social media has, however, changed the way that politicians craft their public persona, and the celebrity styles that they might strive to imitate. Historically, politicians were to a large extent dependent on traditional mass media to reach and engage with the public – today, they have the opportunity to circumvent journalists and instead communicate directly to people through Facebook, Instagram, X, and YouTube. Rather than being *re*-presented by the media, politicians – just like celebrities – might "gain control of their *self*-presentation" (Starita & Trillò, 2022, p. 333) on these platforms.

Starita & Trillò (2022) argue that the self-presentation techniques used by "everyday influencers" (Abidin, 2018) are crucial to understanding contemporary celebrity politics and the emergence of influencer politicians in digital media. Such influencers build their celebrity status on a perceived ordinariness, sharing mundane aspects of their life to build trust, community, and relatability. The content they produce often involves parenting issues, "day-in-the-life" vlogs, personal routines, and "backstage" views of their personal and professional lives. Perceived authenticity plays a central part for these influencers, similar to the mediated performance of political authenticity that politicians engage in (Luebke, 2021). It involves the audience forming impressions of politicians to assess whether they come across as authentic (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018). In such assessments, interactions and engagement in the form of comments and replies between politicians and the public might play a crucial role.

This chapter specifically focuses on commenting on the two politicians' YouTube channels, and how they seek to foster a personal relationship with the viewers. The notion of parasocial experiences is often used to describe the one-sided connections individuals form with media personas or characters, conceptualised as either parasocial *interactions* or parasocial *relationships* (Giles, 2002, 2023). While these concepts both concern interactions individuals have with media fig-

ures, they encompass some important analytical and theoretical differences. Parasocial interaction refers to superficial, transactional, and short-term engagements or responses triggered by media content without the depth of emotional attachment, while a parasocial relationship involves a perceived emotional bond and attachment with a media figure resembling a genuine social relationship (Giles, 2002, 2023). Parasocial relationships have recently begun to interest researchers in a new way, since social media enables a more realistic social interaction (Rasmussen, 2018). Viewers can comment, post messages, or email a social media celebrity, which simulates real social interactions. The viewers often experience, and behave as if, they know the person in question, just like a friend, acquaintance, or family member (Reinikainen et al., 2020).

These ideas are particularly relevant for analysing political communication on social media, not least in view of the increasing personalisation and intimisation of political communication (Cohen & Holbert, 2021), which blurs the boundary between interpersonal and mediated communication. Research shows that rather than exclusively depending on a political candidate's ideology and authority, certain individuals seem to employ interpersonal frameworks to comprehend and establish symbolic closeness with specific political figures (Hakim & Liu, 2021). Also, these symbolic relationships with political figures are positively linked to heightened political interest, increased elaboration of political information, and enhanced internal political efficacy within the studied sample groups (Dunn & Nisbett, 2014; Hakim & Liu, 2021). Politicians who share personal information and engage with their viewer in the comments sections have the potential to create a perceived intimate relationship between themselves and their audience. Over time, a viewer can develop the experience of having an intimate relationship that resembles a real social interaction, especially when the viewer receives information about the famous person's private life. Research has shown that content that includes private elements, self-disclosure, or emotions positively impacts audience engagement, indicated through, for example, reactions, shares, and comments (see, for example, Bene, 2017; Gerodimos & Justinussen, 2015; Kruikemeier et al., 2016; Metz et al., 2020). To contrast this, more professionally oriented content focusing on individual political qualities and activities may collide with the social nature of social media (Larsson, 2016).

2.2 Commenting on YouTube

Commenting on media content of some sort can be an expression of an emotion or an opinion, a way of adding information, correcting, or giving a personal perspective (Stroud et al., 2016). Viewers also have specific ideas of how to communicate on

different platforms, depending on how they view the socio-technical affordances (De Ridder et al., 2016; Nagy & Neff, 2015). YouTube provides different tools to maximise viewer participation, such as thumbs-up and thumbs-down buttons to rate both videos and comments (Lee & Barton, 2013). The platform also provides a range of functions such as subscribing, private messaging, commenting on a profile, and options to share, rate, and comment on individual videos, to allow viewers to interact with each other and to share their responses to content (Madden et al., 2013). The person who uploaded the video can also adjust settings to allow only certain viewers to comment, require moderation of comments before publishing them, or disable the comments facility completely.

Commenting constitutes an elaborate form of interaction on social media, however, since it allows the expression of emotions and calls for an investment of time and effort (Tur-Viñes & Castelló-Martínez, 2019). Despite YouTube's technical and social affordances, only a minority of viewers seem to make use of them (Madden et al., 2013; Thelwall et al., 2012). According to Tur-Viñes and Castelló-Martínez (2019), commenting behaviour on YouTube has some known characteristics. The level of interaction between the YouTuber and commenter is relatively low and YouTubers rarely reply. Also, commenters rarely have a dialogue with one another, and this interaction is not always related to the video context (De Fina, 2016; Tur-Viñes & Castelló-Martínez, 2019). Also, triggering or polarising topics generate more opinions than more neutral topics (Thelwall et al., 2012). Commenters on YouTube have various motivations for leaving comments. One common reason is in response to a direct question or invitation from the YouTuber. Additionally, viewers may write comments to express their emotions or opinions, seek clarification on certain information, show their appreciation towards the YouTuber, or discuss the most captivating aspects of the video (Tur-Viñes & Castelló-Martínez, 2019).

Madden et al. (2013) provided a comprehensive framework for categorising and understanding the diverse types of comment on YouTube, encompassing a wide range of interactions and expressions. The study found, for example, that viewers request more information or clarification, give or request advice, express immediate reactions to the content, express their viewpoints or opinions about the content, and express feelings or emotional responses. Understanding the characteristics of comment types contributes to the broader comprehension of viewer engagement on YouTube.

3 The case studies: Swedish politicians on YouTube

This chapter focuses on viewers' comments on the YouTube channels belonging to two Swedish politicians, Annie Lööf and Ebba Busch. At the time of data collection, they were the only party leaders in Sweden who had launched this kind of personalised channel on the platform. The comments from viewers are also compared with the content in the videos, allowing an analysis of viewer engagement with different types of video content. In total, we collected 57 videos that are between 4 and 20 minutes long, 26 from Lööf's channel and 31 from Busch's channel. The first video on Lööf's channel was published in August 2020. The channel has 7,000 subscribers and the views range between 1,700 and over 100,000. The first video on Busch's channel was published in September 2019. Her channel has around 6,800 subscribers and views vary between 2,000 and 30,000.

3.1 Methodological approach

Viewers' comments were analysed using qualitative content analysis focused on inductively generated categories – that is, summarised in a coding schema (Krippendorff, 2018; Silverman & Marvasti, 2008). The total of 2,304 comments were examined to identify types of comment. Firstly, the comments extracted from YouTube were reviewed to get an overview of the data. Secondly, initial codes were generated through an inductive approach, addressing each comment to develop rough categories. Thirdly, the comments were more thoroughly reviewed in a process where similar and dissimilar observations were compared to create meaningful classifications.

Comments posted by the party leaders were highlighted and analysed separately. These comments were examined in relation to the video content when applicable. The cases when this was applicable were when the party leader answered questions from the comments section as part of the video content. Since this chapter also aims at connecting viewers' comments with the video content, illustrative examples from each identified category from the viewers' comments are linked to video content when applicable. When comments reflect video content, the example from the video is used to contextualise. Comments presented in the article were translated from the original language Swedish into English.

4 Four types of viewers' comments

According to Madden et al. (2013), only a minority of viewers make use of the commenting function on YouTube in general, a pattern that is true for the cases analysed in this chapter as well. Common motivations for leaving a comment are in response to a direct question or invitation from the YouTuber or viewers write comments to express their emotions or opinions or appreciation (Tur-Viñes & Castelló-Martínez, 2019). On an overall level, four categories of comments are the most salient here. Firstly, viewers frequently express "impression" type comments that express their immediate reaction to what they have seen in a video. These comments typically contain, as Madden et al. (2013) specify, exclamation marks and emoticons and have features that convey personal responses and imitate features of spoken conversation.

> You are so awesome! 😍 Beautiful inside and out.♡♡ (Annie Lööf, 2020, comment: 18 December 2020)

> Gosh, do you get up at 4:30 in the morning Ebba? Fighter!! (Ebba Busch, 2020, comment: 23 January 2020)

Secondly, viewers request the politicians' point of view or give their own point of view on a video, person, object, or topic. These types of comments can be about the (political) issues or topics addressed in the video, about the person in the video, or about the content in general. The two comments below, from Lööf's channel, exemplify different types of points of view-oriented comments from the material.

> Next time you have a Q&A session, please answer what you think about mink farms. Saw that the Centre Party wants to keep them. Please explain how you think.😊 (Annie Lööf, 2021, comment: 5 March 2021)

> Interesting that you open up in this way and remind us that there is a human being behind the politics. It doesn't change my opinion that the politics of the Centre Party is completely inept, but this is quite likable. (Annie Lööf, 2020, comment: 28 August 2020)

Thirdly, offering different types of advice is a frequently occurring type of comment. The advice can be about political issues but also about other content in the videos that is unrelated to political issues. Below is an example of a comment on Busch's channel that is advice but that has nothing to do with an issue brought up in the video: rather, the comment is about the production of the video.

> Keep vlogging. Nice to see more of you. Until next time, get a better microphone/ better audio recording settings. (Ebba Busch, 2020, comment: 18 September 2020)

Fourthly, expressions of personal feelings are frequently displayed in the material, in comments where the viewer describes personal sentiments or emotional responses to the video content or the video topic. According to Madden et al. (2013), they are often longer and have more detail, and will make use of adjectives describing emotions like "happy", "sad", or "angry". The comment below is from a video where Lööf talks about the premature birth of her daughter.

> I am moved to tears by your story. My youngest daughter and I also had a tough start, although in completely different ways. Thanks for sharing! Hope you don't get too much hate in the comments this fall. Keep in mind that it shouldn't cost too much in personal health. Take care of yourself! (Annie Lööf, 2020, comment: 28 August 2020)

In summary, the comments sections are dominated by comments that express immediate reactions to the videos, often accompanied by emoticons. According to Thelwall et al. (2012), lifestyle YouTube videos are primarily watched shortly after they are released. The comments sections mirror this: short reactions rather than more elaborate and reflective comments and discussions are typical for this material.

5 Nurturing connection through personalised content

YouTubers often aim to establish a feeling of intimacy with their viewers to capture their attention (Raun, 2018). This type of content has the potential to create a conscious or subconscious social bond between the YouTuber and the viewer. In this case, the videos use personalised content strategies in their communication and the comments sections often reflect the strategies used. Comments manifest and assess the strategies used in both positive and negative ways. Firstly, comments express appreciation that the political leaders show a more personal or human side of themselves, that it is a positive to get to know the person behind the professional role. Secondly, comments express negative opinions about political leaders trying or pretending to be something that they are not, or doing something that they should not be doing in their professional role.

There are several examples of private, personal, intimate, and emotional content in the videos. The first video Lööf published on her channel was a vlog where she talked about how her daughter was born prematurely and what happened after that. This video was published when Lööf had been on parental leave for one year and was returning to her job as a party leader. This video received more than 350 comments, making it the most commented on video in the studied

material. The video was recorded in Lööf's house. The comments to this video can largely be divided into three types: welcoming Lööf back to politics, saying something supportive about having a premature baby, or positively welcoming the YouTube channel. This is an example from one viewer who represents all the mentioned categories:

> I don't agree with you politically but I'm glad you and your daughter did well and that you are strong enough now to come back, good that you are opening up to some privacy so people don't forget that there is a human being behind politics and serious questions, I subscribed! :) (Annie Lööf, 2020, comment: 28 August 2020)

In the example above, appreciation of the fact that there is a real human being behind the politician is expressed, a recurring feature in the comments section of this video. Viewers frequently comment that they like seeing the real person behind the politician. Lööf responds with a heart emoticon to many comments in the thread and answers some with general conversation – for example, saying thank you.

The comments sections for Busch mirror the slightly different content strategy used in the videos. There is less intimate, private, and emotional content. Rather, the videos embody more family-oriented qualities and femininity at the same time as they demonstrate decisiveness and authoritative leadership norms (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Jamieson, 1995). Busch engages in less personalised communication and portrays elements of being a decisive and strong leader. Comments on videos are thus less personal, relational, and intimate. The comment below is an example that mirrors and summarises the content in the posted video.

> What a power woman you are! Is there anything you don't do? You do vlogging, are a mother of young children, exercise, do Instagram and do politics for the good of Sweden – absolutely incredible I must say! (Ebba Busch, 2020, comment: 20 February 2020)

Regardless of the level of intimacy or emotionality in the videos, the more personal vlog format allows viewers to depend not only on ideology or authority to relate to political figures (Hakim & Liu, 2021). Also, the vlog format constitutes a recognition factor for viewers, who are used to consuming lifestyle influencer content, and the comments sections reflect the typical language used in that context. In the same sense, the vlog format enables more realistic social interaction, and the comments sections reflect a common understanding or unspoken praxis of expression in influencer contexts.

6 Fostering and realising engagement: strategies and contrasts in interaction

Earlier research on political figures on social media indicated that social media is primarily utilised for one-way communication by political actors and genuine interaction with citizens is still limited (Gerodimos & Justinussen, 2015; Lilleker, 2016). However, research shows that younger people especially prefer authentic, personalised, and engaging content from politicians on social media (Parmelee et al., 2023). They value transparency, two-way interactions, educational material, and a mix of visual elements that align with their preferences for relatable and honest communication.

On a general level, the two political leaders studied here have different patterns when it comes to their presence and interactions in the comments section. Reference is explicitly made to the two party leaders, but there is no certainty that they are the ones personally commenting or responding. It is plausible that an employee handling their social media accounts could be managing these interactions. Lööf generally likes (with a heart emoticon) comments on each video. She also replies to comments frequently. Content wise, Lööf replies with short comments in a general conversational style, saying "thanks" or posting a positive emoji.

> Comment: What wonderful energy! 😍
>
> Lööf: Thanks! Nice to hear ☺ (Annie Lööf, 2021, comment: 21 December 2021)

Lööf rarely leaves longer comments on political issues or personal experiences and never enters a longer discussion. Some of the longer replies that she posts address accusations of her as a politician "acting as an influencer".

> Comment: Seriously Annie. The last thing we need is a politician trying to become a YouTuber. What you should do is focus on your job. Don't sit around and talk about the pandemic to light music, like an influencer trying on new shoes.
>
> Lööf: I am not trying anything. But I think it is important to be where people hang out to be able to tell what we think, what we do and to receive input. (Annie Lööf, 2020, comment: 20 November 2020)

The comment and reply above also shed some light on the strategy behind the YouTube channel – to have a presence in an arena where potential voters from target groups are already present.

Busch has a different strategy for interacting in the comments sections. Busch has a recurring segment in her vlog, "Ebba online", where she enters the com-

ments sections of her YouTube channel and the video shows her answering questions that are posted. In the videos, she frames the answer with more talk and context about the specific issues on which she is commenting. Busch answers some questions that are politically oriented, and she is more direct in the comments. The three videos most commented on by viewers are the videos that Busch comments on live. The number of comments on the video is not reflected in the number of views, however. The example below is from the video with the fewest views, but it is the third most commented on video. One of the comments concerns the lack of interactivity from Busch's side:

> This channel needs to improve on interaction. Even Annie Lööf responds in the comments sections on her channel. You or the person responsible for the channel needs to engage much more with the viewers, otherwise it becomes a one-way communication and eventually people get tired of just listening. (Ebba Busch, 2021, comment: 2 February 2021)

If it was a result of the comment above, or for some other reason, Busch answers several questions in this thread. The answers Busch gives are factual answers to policy-related issues. Even though this video has the fewest viewers, it has more comments than most videos on the channel. There are threads of comments where viewers are discussing the issue of elderly care addressed in the video. The longest commenting threads are the ones that Busch herself has commented in.

> Commenter: The funny thing is that it was you who prevented several elderly people from getting a place. YOU closed several elderly homes! You don't want to lower taxes for the elderly, you don't want to give every elderly person a place in an elderly home. This government has set up a plan to build more than 100 new elderly homes.
>
> Busch: Hello! We converted a lot of so-called service houses into sheltered housing. As a result, they were no longer classified as SÄBO (special housing for the elderly), but they became more easily accessible to many more elderly people, as the municipality does not have to approve moving into an assisted living facility. With our budget, there will be significantly more nursing home places than with the government's. (Ebba Busch, 2021, comment: 2 February 2021)

Going back to the common motivations for leaving a comment, like responding to a direct question or invitation from the YouTuber (Tur-Viñes & Castelló-Martínez, 2019), this is a strategy that the two political leaders have used, and it is reflected in the comments sections. Invitations to comment are communicated in the videos as well as written in the episode description. In one video, Lööf talks about the importance of vaccination against Covid-19, and she asks the viewers to comment on whether they will take the vaccine or not. This question is also written in the episode description. The question is answered in the comments section:

> Of course, I will take the vaccine! I can't wait until it's my turn! 😉 Thank you Annie for using your platform to spread important societal information! 👆 (Annie Lööf, 2021, comment: 21 January 2021)

Busch also addresses the viewers and encourages comments and interactions in a Q&A video where she answers questions from her different social media platforms. She says that she always reads the comments after a video is published but that she does not have the capacity to answer all comments, and she refers viewers to her official email address if they want to be guaranteed an answer. She ends the video by encouraging viewers to comment on the video if they want more videos of this type. The following is also written in the video description:

> 👇Do you like this type of video? Or is there something else you'd like to see? Leave a comment below👇

Commenters react to her prompt:

> YES!!! More more more videos… very nice. Like the concept. Stripped down and personal. Simply super nice ☺👍 (Ebba Busch, 2021, comment: 9 March 2021)

In summary, the comments posted by the party leaders propose a more relaxed and personal language, even when the comment is about politics, creating a sense of intimacy or friendliness. The frequent use of emoticons by both the politicians and the viewers adds to this impression. However, the use of emoticons can also be interpreted as an adjustment to or standard practice in the YouTube environment. Going back to Parmelee et al. (2023), viewers appreciate two-way interactions with politicians through the platform features that afford real-time interactions. This study shows that viewers become more active by commenting when the politicians themselves comment on the videos or answer comments in the videos.

7 Conclusion

This study set out to explore and discuss audience comments and reactions to the content and communication strategies employed in videos by Annie Lööf and Ebba Busch, and mediated interactions between the politicians and the viewers. Typically, comments express impressions, points of view, advice, and feelings, and, in general, these types of comment have little or nothing to do with politics. The common themes in the comments resonate with the manifestation of the influencer politi-

cian as the result of an unspoken agreed praxis of content and comments borrowed from the mainstream influencer context.

Comments express both positive and negative reactions to politicians showing a more personal or human side, and the results suggest that regardless of the level of intimacy in videos, the vlog format enables more realistic social interaction, aligning with the language used in influencer contexts. The study also underscores the importance of engagement strategies in political communication on social media, the findings suggesting that two-way interactions, such as responding to comments, contribute to increased viewer engagement.

The examples further suggest that viewers' commenting behaviour is influenced by the active participation of politicians in the comments sections. Politicians who respond to comments or engage in two-way interactions contribute to a more active commenting environment. This finding aligns with the desire of viewers, especially those who are younger, for authentic and interactive content from political figures on social media. Commenting also seems to serve as a form of reflective engagement for viewers. The immediate and emotionally charged nature of comments aligns with the characteristics of lifestyle YouTube content, indicating that viewers are more inclined to share personal reactions and impressions rather than engage in lengthy or elaborate discussions.

Comments also play a role in shaping perceptions of perceived political authenticity. The results point towards a tendency wherein the politicians are perceived more positively when they respond to comments in a conversational style. Conversely, comments reflect concerns about politicians appearing insincere or trying to adopt "influencer-like" personas, suggesting that the perceived authenticity of political figures is a factor that helps shape the online discourse.

This chapter also addresses parasocial interactions, highlighting the one-sided relationship viewers develop with the two Swedish political leaders on YouTube in light of the relatively few comments and replies from the party leaders. The study notes that parasocial interactions can be fostered through the personal and informal style of the politicians' videos, which mimics influencer-like content. This blurs the traditional boundaries of political communication, making it more relatable and engaging for viewers, yet also raises questions about authenticity and the sincerity of the politicians' online personas. To develop these interactions into a parasocial relationship, however, takes time and engagement. It would also involve cultivating a sense of community on the platform where followers, in addition to interactions with the politicians, also engage with one another.

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Greenfluencers and environmental advocacy

Sustainability representations and appeals to action in content by Scandinavian influencers

Abstract: Greenfluencers, also known as environmental influencers, intertwine environmental issues with personal lifestyle content. Their digital platforms provide spaces where social media users engage with and interpret sustainability issues. However, despite their advocacy for environmental action, greenfluencers operate in a realm marked by commercialisation. This chapter explores the representation of environmental action and agency within greenfluencer platforms. Specifically, we examine how greenfluencers urge followers to take specific actions, unravelling the reasons and motivations they articulate. Employing a rhetorical analysis on a select group of influencers from Norway and Sweden – countries where greenfluencers play a prominent role in the environmental discourse – we explore their efforts to raise awareness about environmental issues and advocate for sustainable lifestyles.

Keywords: greenfluencers, influencers, sustainability, agency, Scandinavia

1 Introduction

Meeting global targets to combat climate change and safeguard biodiversity requires heightened individual awareness and willingness to alter consumption habits (Wiedmann et al., 2020). While influencers are often highly valued by marketers and advertisers due to their ability to influence their dedicated followers' purchasing decisions and brand preferences (Casaló et al., 2020; Duffy, 2017), many inadvertently contribute to the proliferation of unsustainable overconsumption. However, amid escalating concerns about pollution, climate change, and biodiversity loss, a subset of influencers is emerging as advocates for adopting a more environmentally sustainable way of life.

Environmental influencers, or "greenfluencers", intricately blend environmental topics with personal lifestyle content (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2023). In doing so, they address our global environmental challenges by focusing on the domestic sphere as the arena for environmental action. The digital platforms of greenfluencers serve as spaces where social media users navigate and make sense of sustain-

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ability issues. Consequently, greenfluencers not only have the potential to inspire their followers to alter consumption patterns (Breves & Liebers, 2022; Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2022; Johnstone & Lindh, 2018, 2022) but also to provoke critical reflections on consumerism and advocate for political reform (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2023; Joosse & Brydges, 2018; Schmuck, 2021).

However, while advocating environmental action, greenfluencers also operate within the realm of commercialisation. Similar to corporations, influencers have been found to capitalise on the positive connotations of sustainability while inadvertently encouraging unsustainable consumer practices (Frig & Jaakkola, 2023). Moreover, their focus on everyday lifestyle practices may limit the perspective on what qualifies as environmental action (Frig & Jaakkola, 2023).

The communication of environmental problems significantly shapes people's understanding of these problems and influences how they respond to them (Andersen, 2023b; Fløttum, 2017). In order to understand how greenfluencers may shape both consumption practices and political dispositions, we, therefore, argue that it is crucial to gain more insight into how their communication invites their followers to understand and respond to environmental issues.

This chapter explores the representation of environmental action and agency within greenfluencer platforms. Specifically, we examine how greenfluencers appeal to their followers to take specific actions, unravelling the reasons and motivations they provide for acting. To do so, we conduct a rhetorical analysis (Iversen & Villadsen, 2020) of a small sample of influencers from Norway and Sweden – two countries where greenfluencers have been prominent figures in the environmental debate. The selected influencers have, in various ways, made their mark in public through efforts to raise awareness about environmental issues and advocate for sustainable lifestyles, both in- and outside of their own social media channels.

2 Greenfluencers and green lifestyle politics

The focus on lifestyle and the domestic sphere as the arena for environmental action is a defining trait of greenfluencers' social media content. They have been defined as influencers "who promote a sustainable lifestyle and eco-consciousness" (Pittman & Abell, 2021, p. 70) by interweaving "environmental topics [...] with diverse lifestyle content on their channels" (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2023, p. 2). They typically do so by educating followers about sustainability (Maares & Hanusch, 2020), endorsing sustainable products, brands, and voices (Frig & Jaakkola, 2023), and advocating political action (Allgaier, 2020; Knupfer et al., 2023).

In doing so, they may be essential in cultivating heightened environmental consciousness among their followers. Previous studies suggest that the environ-

mental advocacy of greenfluencers may increase sustainability awareness and strengthen pro-environmental behaviour intentions among their followers (Breves & Liebers, 2022; Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2022), especially among young people (Johnstone & Lindh, 2018, 2022). Moreover, by representing green lifestyles in desirable ways, influencers may contribute to normalising pro-environmental behaviour, thus overcoming social barriers to green behaviour adoption (Chwialkowska, 2019). However, the impact of greenfluencers transcends shaping and altering consumer inclinations; it extends to shaping political opinions and driving political engagement (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2023).

Focusing on individual agency and the domestic sphere as a place for environmental action, greenfluencers often translate the complex landscape of sustainability into everyday lifestyle practices (Joosse & Brydges, 2018; San Cornelio et al., 2021; Schmuck, 2021). Previous studies have found their promotion of green lifestyles to focus mainly on the personal benefits of adopting sustainable practices, overshadowing considerations for environmental benefits (Chwialkowska, 2019). By addressing the issue of sustainability as a hyper-individual project, greenfluencers may inadvertently promote individualisation of environmental issues (Joosse & Brydges, 2018; San Cornelio et al., 2021), potentially deflecting serious questioning and critique of the underlying systems that need to be changed in order to address environmental problems. Their simplifying of complex societal issues into matters of individual responsibility may also fuel political cynicism and apathy (Schmuck, 2021; Schmuck et al., 2022). Furthermore, the commercial nature of influencers introduces potential tensions between promoting consumerism and advocating for environmental action. This raises the risk that greenfluencers might simply harness the positive associations of sustainability for the promotion of unsustainable consumption practices (Frig & Jaakkola, 2023).

As suggested by previous research, the range of sustainable lifestyle practices displayed by different greenfluencers might differ significantly, encompassing non-political and attainable lifestyle choices, such as shifting to more sustainable products and brands, to more radical redefinitions of consumption (Frig & Jaakkola, 2023; Joosse & Brydges, 2018). Moreover, influencers' engagement with environmental issues may wield influence in shaping the meaning of a sustainable life, affecting its associations with specific aesthetics, tastes, styles, and cultural codes (Chwialkowska, 2019; Frig & Jaakkola, 2023).

In this chapter, we look closer at a small sample of two Norwegian and one Swedish influencer to allow for an in-depth analysis of greenfluencers' environmental communication, focusing on how they represent environmental action and agency and the reasons they offer their followers to act.

3 Approaching greenfluencers through Swedish and Norwegian case studies

Norway and Sweden are affluent nations in the Global North, where consumption rates rank among the highest globally (Our World in Data, 2020). Both countries have a history of ambitious environmental policies firmly anchored in a long-standing political consensus on the importance of tackling climate change (Linde, 2018). Citizens of both nations display high levels of worry about climate change, and many express a willingness to adopt more environmentally friendly lifestyles (Fløttum, 2017; Frøshaug & Andreasson, 2020). Still, some national differences are apparent, with Norwegians exhibiting higher personal consumption levels than their Swedish counterparts (Our World in Data, 2020; Statistics Norway, 2022), and expressing less climate concern and less willingness to reduce their consumption (Frøshaug & Andreasson, 2020).

Enabled by the two nations' high internet penetration, alongside high levels of social media use across the populations (Newman et al., 2020), greenfluencers have emerged in the public debate as agenda setters and role models regarding environmental issues. An example of how Swedish influencers have contributed to shaping environmental discussions is through their central role in spurring a public debate about "flight shame", a term that has circulated across global environmental discourses (Larsson, 2019). Similarly, Norwegian greenfluencers appear regularly in national news media in stories about sustainable living (e. g. Nipen & Audestad, 2021; Vikås, 2019), and are embraced by environmental organisations (e. g. Regnskogfondet, n.d.; Skrede, 2019; Wibe, 2020).

Our three cases are a purposeful sample that provides in-depth knowledge about how greenfluencers communicate about an environmentally sustainable way of life. Our sample included three influencers dedicated to environmental issues frequently recognised in the mass media as greenfluencers. While addressing similar lifestyle topics, above all sustainable fashion, their profiles and the size of their follower base vary, as do the themes they address, the style they employ, and the substance of their appeals.

– In the Norwegian press, the sisters Anette and Susanne Bastviken (@radicalbroccoli) are typically described as "greenfluencers" (Nipen & Audestad, 2021) or "environmental bloggers" who "document the climate battle and convey simple tips on how to live more sustainably" (Vikås, 2019). Environmental organisations also embrace them. Among others, Nordic Ocean Watch has featured them in their series "Havets Helter" (literally, "Ocean's Heroes") (Skrede, 2019). Their main Instagram account has 23,000 followers as of August 2023. Additionally, they have the accounts @radicalbroccolishop, where they pro-

mote their products, and @rbmembership, where they promote activities for members of the Radical Broccoli community.

- Jenny Skavlan (@jennyskavlan) is a Norwegian redesign influencer focusing on fashion and sustainability, mainly through her Instagram account, which has 479,000 followers as of August 2023. Skavlan has been named fashion influencer of the year by Vixen Influencer Award three times (2019, 2021, and 2022), and was awarded the "Green Price" by celebrity magazine *Se og Hør* in 2014. She has published two books about redesign. Since 2016, she has been creative director for the second-hand app Tise and started the redesign company Fæbrik in 2020, which sells books, patterns, and courses. She is also co-founder of Stiftelseninsj, which works to raise awareness about sustainability in the influencer industry.
- Swedish writer, activist, and lecturer Johanna Leymann (@johannaleymann.se) is mainly known for her green fashion activism and opinion writing in Sweden. Her Instagram account has 20,500 followers as of August 2023. She has released four books on slow fashion and repairing clothes. In addition to her Instagram page, she has a website with resources for those who want to get involved, reflected in her Instagram handle (johannaleymann.se), as well as a podcast called the "Slow fashion podcast" (*Slowfashionpodden*). She is often referred to as an "expert in sustainable fashion" (Aftonbladet, 2022) and a "recycler profile" (Fundin, 2023).

We first reviewed posts from these influencers' Instagram accounts during 2022 and the beginning months of 2023. First, we searched for regularities and interesting irregularities in how the influencers addressed environmental issues and appealed to their followers to take action. Based on this initial distant reading, a sample (n = 15) of concrete posts was collected for subsequent rhetorical close reading (Iversen & Villadsen, 2020). Rhetorical analysis examines how specific texts function, i. e. how the audience is invited to think, feel, or act. In our analysis, we attended to both the visual and textual appeals to environmental action in the greenfluencers' posts, interpreting the posts from the perspective of the text's implied audience to establish how the text invites the audience to understand and act upon their messages (Iversen & Villadsen, 2020).

4 Greenfluencers' appeals to environmental action

The emphasis on the domestic sphere as the primary arena for environmental action is a defining trait of greenfluencers (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2023). Thus, it is no surprise that the three greenfluencers in our study primarily advocate for individual lifestyle action. However, beneath these appeals for personal action to address environmental challenges, a nuanced distribution of responsibility and agency emerges, extending beyond the individual level. Indeed, on an individual level, responsibility is placed directly on individuals through appeals to their sense of responsibility, aspirations, and individual agency. On the industry level, the responsibility shifts to brands and businesses through appeals to individuals to exert pressure to green the industry. On the system level, the responsibility is mainly placed on decision-makers with appeals to individuals to advocate for policy change. In what follows, we examine the resonance of three overall appeals employed by the greenfluencers, the *feel-good appeal*, the *transformation appeal*, and the *condemn and commend appeal*, across these three levels of responsibility, examining how they invite their followers to understand and act upon environmental problems.

4.1 Feel-good sustainability: shifting consumption and the self

All influencers addressed environmental action on the individual level through appeals to their followers' sense of personal responsibility, agency, and aspirations. In these appeals, the engine of change was placed on the individual, who was called upon to act primarily for personal reasons, thus appealing to a "feel-good" sustainability. Followers were encouraged to make small adjustments in their daily lives, such as swapping unsustainable products for more eco-friendly alternatives. Such appeals were grounded in three premises that were emphasised to varying extents in the influencers' posts, namely that (a) everyone bears the responsibility to contribute to a better world (accountability), (b) individual actions have a meaningful impact (agency), and (c) individuals will personally benefit from these actions (aspiration).

A particularly poignant example of the "feel-good" appeal to environmental action occurred on Radical Broccoli's Instagram, where sustainability was promoted mainly as a matter of individuals' changed consumption. Their messaging underscored individuals' capabilities to effect change through manageable everyday ac-

tions, like reducing meat consumption, recycling, and buying eco-friendly products. Their posts often contained advertisements, some containing discount codes for clothing, make-up, and skincare. These products were typically endorsed as "natural", "sustainable", and "recycled" and were promoted as products that do not harm, or in some cases improve, the environment.

The environmental message was further underscored through the visual content's reliance on the aesthetic qualities of nature. For example, an advertisement for recycled swimwear showed the two sisters in a scenic outdoor environment, as the caption read: "We love finding more eco-friendly alternatives to anything", followed by the hashtags #ecotips, #ecofriendly, #sustainability, and #sustainablefashion (6 June 2022). Moreover, their advertisements often included advice on how to live more sustainably. An example is an advertisement for skin care products featuring a video of one of the sisters cleansing her face (22 November 2022). Text was added to the video stating that "3 min with the tap off when you wash your face can save 4 litres of water". In the caption, the text in the video was expanded on, emphasising the "small" measures each of us can make to make a "big" difference:

> We are inspired to find small ways to show LOVE to the planet and ourselves every single day. Small changes do actually make a big difference, from the words we speak to ourselves to the actions we take every single day.

Central to Radical Broccoli's messaging was the intertwining of self-care and environmental care. They posit that caring for oneself and the environment are interconnected and that a healthy environment contributes to individual well-being and vice versa. For example, they write in one post promoting the Radical Broccoli membership: "We call it sustainability from the inside-out!" (26 August 2022), which in another post is elaborated: "When we take care of ourselves from the inside out we truly are able to shine and give back to the planet. A true sustainable way of living ♡♡♡♡" (8 February 2022).

The Radical Broccoli sisters also shared personal stories and reflections about living sustainably. In this type of content, nature was typically portrayed as the source of all things good. Nature was – aesthetically and textually – portrayed as pure, orderly, and inviting. Moreover, ecology was connected to spiritualism and self-realisation through a seamless blend of meditation, manifestation, astrology, and crystals with appeals to care for nature. An elaborate example of this appeal was found in a post from 1 May 2022, containing two photos showing the two sisters on a beach, each holding a surfboard. In the post's caption, they explained how their engagement to "make the world more sustainable" had spurred them to

take better care of themselves – "to create true inner sustainability". Further, they expanded on nature's inspirational worth:

> Nature has always inspired us. When we felt ill, we could understand what nature felt like being polluted by our poor habits. Nature also taught us how life moves in seasons. How everything has a cycle. No day will be the same, and we need to accept change. Nature helped us feel how we are inherently worthy, that not one single thing, being or person is the same and that that is our gift. Nature also showed us the biggest secret – how abundance is our natural state.

Thus, their appeals align both with self-help literature, where the aim is to improve one's inner self, and a New Age tradition seeking healing properties in nature and natural products (e. g. Frig & Jaakkola, 2023, p. 10). Moreover, environmental action was represented as a hyper-individual project through appeals to their followers' accountability, agency, and aspirations. While they frequently emphasised the need for change, the agency to bring about change was placed solely with the individual, who was called upon to act mainly for personal benefits (cf. Chwialkowska, 2019). Their approach underscored individuals' capacity to drive change and portrayed sustainable lifestyle choices as personally fulfilling and impactful, thus aligning sustainability with "hedonistic enjoyment" (Frig & Jaakkola, 2023).

Moreover, they mainly promoted responsible consumption as the solution to environmental challenges. By promoting products that can be purchased to create a "sustainability-minded lifestyle", their sustainability messaging, above all, offered a green identity that can be bought with money (Frig & Jaakkola, 2023, p. 8). As such, the feel-good approach to environmental action, mainly served as means to capitalise on the positive connotations of sustainability to sell products (Frig & Jaakkola, 2023).

4.2 Transformative sustainability: changing norms and policies

A different approach to individual accountability, agency, and aspirations could be found in Jenny Skavlan's do-it-yourself (DIY) content. Through videos, images, and captions with simple "hacks" and detailed descriptions for repairing, altering, and repurposing garments, her communication was oriented towards empowering her followers to reduce their consumption. While appealing to her followers to act, she did not do so by urging them to take responsibility but instead by equipping them to do so. Thus, while focusing on individuals as the engine of change, she shifted focus from conventional consumption to hands-on engagement to reduce consumption. The transformative potential of individuals was underscored by the aes-

thetic representation of redesign, typically by showing the transformation of the clothes she sews from defective or unfinished to new and improved.

Moreover, the individual aspect of redesign was frequently intertwined with political statements. For example, responding to a news report about "mountains" of discarded clothes illegally dumped by Western clothing businesses in the Chilean desert, Skavlan posted a series of posts in January 2022. In one of these posts, containing screenshots from the reportage, Skavlan wrote that "these mountains of clothes are a catastrophe for nature", and argued for political regulations of the fashion industry. In the caption, she wrote:

> ♻ It is necessary to strike at the root of this problem. We must not improve at putting clothes in recycling bins; we must buy less, better and used. [...] 👜👖👚 But with discount codes and sponsored collaborations, as far as the eye can see, the industry is not exactly making it easy to shop less. Political regulations are needed here.

While placing the responsibility to act on politicians, Skavlan primarily appealed to her followers to reduce their consumption. Although focusing on the detrimental effects of consumption in the Global North on the environment and the marginalised communities in the Global South, her communication also highlighted the personal benefits of a reduced consumption lifestyle. For example, another post about these mountains of clothes contained a video labelled "Second-hand shopping haul" introduced with the caption: "⛰ Speaking of clothing mountains in Chile: I have been second-hand shopping and found some new wardrobe favourites" (14 January 2022). In the video, Skavlan presented her new, trendy outfits in a humorous manner. In the remaining part of the caption, she offered second-hand shopping advice on how to find quality clothes that can last and do not pollute.

Several of her posts were oriented to normalising non-consumption, thereby challenging mainstream consumer culture. Thereby, she promotes a more radical shift in consumption than simply consuming differently. In another post concerning a news report about mountains of disposed clothes, this time in Kenya (23 February 2023), the post consisted of a video showing Skavlan posing in the same outfit – but worn differently – seven days the same week. In addition to summarising the conclusions from a report by Changing Markets about the export of disposed clothes to Kenya, criticising fast fashion, and appealing to politicians to regulate the fashion industry, she also appealed to the individual consumer "to be inspired by #ukesplægget (literally: outfit of the week). A challenge where we wear the same outfit for a whole week to remind ourselves that the most sustainable clothes are the ones we already own".

An often overlooked barrier to adopting a sustainable lifestyle is the influence of social norms (Chwialkowska, 2019). Much attention has been given to factors like lack of awareness and practical barriers such as limited alternatives and the economic costs of eco-friendly living. However, many individuals may also struggle to embrace more environmentally friendly lifestyles due to the fear of being perceived as deviant and facing social marginalisation (Andersen, 2023a; Bennett & Williams, 2011). Influencers like Skavlan, who combine success with a trendy appearance, may be crucial in normalising reduced consumption and potentially serve as positive role models (Chwialkowska, 2019).

In addition to highlighting the negative environmental impacts of our consumption, Skavlan's posts also invited her followers to contemplate the societal ramifications of consumption. An example is a post from International Women's Day, March 8, 2023. The post featured a picture of the Fæbrik team celebrating the day. In the caption, Skavlan reflects on their privileged position and emphasises that the act of sewing, which they find liberating, holds a starkly different reality for many women worldwide, for whom sewing represents the opposite of liberation:

> They are among the world's lowest-paid workers with few rights and protections. As I sit and sew, I often contemplate these women, recognising that we are physically engaged in the same activity but with vastly different degrees of opportunities and self-determination.

Thereby, Skavlan directed attention to both exploitative practices and negative environmental impacts of fast fashion and overconsumption as reasons to consume and produce less. While emphasising personal efforts to reduce consumption, Skavlan consistently underscores that the primary responsibility to act lies with politicians. Moreover, Skavlan's engagement transcends mere critique, as she proposes concrete policy measures like environmental taxes on clothing, VAT exemptions for clothing repair, product lifetime labelling, and improved clothing warranties. Thereby, Skavlan exemplifies influencers' capacity to amplify their influence beyond individual spheres of action. Her calls for political regulations position her followers as potential agents of collective pressure on policymakers. Thus, Skavlan served as an intermediary between her followers and political change, urging individuals to channel their concerns and aspirations for a more sustainable future into advocacy for systemic reforms. As such, her appeals expand the conversation around environmental responsibility, underscoring the importance of policy changes alongside individual actions to transform mainstream consumption culture.

4.3 Condemn and commend sustainability: scapegoating and praising actors

The third approach to individual action found in our material was appealing to individual consumers to leverage their power to pressure brands and businesses to adopt more sustainable practices. While the emphasis on individual agency was central to this appeal, centred on condemning actors promoting unsustainable consumption and commending actors driving positive change, these appeals spotlighted the industry's accountability. A particularly poignant example of this appeal was Johanna Leyman. She often urged her followers to do their bit to contribute to a more sustainable world by consuming less, stating: "What we need to do, is consume less (sorry for nagging). And use what we already have longer" (8 June 2022). However, while appealing to individuals to reduce their consumption, the responsibility to enable this change was placed on the industry. For example, one post featured a banner-like image with the text: "Consumer power? Yes, but we shall never settle with that!" (7 December 2022). Moreover, she also criticised the idea that responsibility should be placed on the individual consumer, as it deflects attention from those truly responsible, stating:

> I believe in consumer power. Based on the belief that we all bear a moral responsibility for everything within our capacity. And that we should, of course, seize every opportunity to leverage our influence. BUT I do not believe this to be the only way to drive change. No, I dare go as far as to say that all the talk about individual responsibility serves as a smokescreen, diverting attention from the truly big. The companies, the politicians, and the lawmakers. By talking about the importance of making good and wise choices in our shopping carts, companies avoid having to account for their entire operation.

In order to place responsibility on the industry, Leyman often called out specific brands, highlighting their unsustainable practices. Many of her posts were visually designed like banner: short advocacy texts placed on a colourful background. Sometimes, these were "open letters" to various businesses and brands, where she called out corporate wrongdoings and greenwashing. Other times, they took the form of short slogans, which were then elaborated on in the post's caption.

One of the brands that was condemned in one such post was the Chinese fast fashion brand Shein, which was criticised for including "sustainability labels" on their clothes, which Leymann wrote have become "hard currency and are used as an argument to sell larger volumes" (29 February 2023). Similarly, she called out the online fashion and interior shop, Ellos, for greenwashing when claiming to "challenge the fashion industry" with their new swimwear collection made from recycled nylon, labelled with Ellos's eco-label, "A better choice" (5 May 2022). Leyman called Ellos out for this, writing:

> So, in what way are they challenging the industry? Well, I actually don't get that. Because, as far as I can understand, it's business as usual: a completely ordinary collection produced in the same volumes as always, with the aim of triggering our desire to buy something new. [...] I'm sorry, but this is a prime example of greenwashing. And I don't think a company should boast about that.

Furthermore, she criticised mass media in her posts for perpetuating fast fashion by featuring stories on the latest fashion trends. A notable example is her call-out of the Swedish public broadcaster SVT for their piece titled "Here are the fashion trends for spring", asserting that "there is something profoundly problematic when even public service outlets unquestioningly present trends as absolute truths" thereby "uncritically fuelling a billion-dollar industry with an enormous climate footprint" (23 January 2023).

However, Leyman did not solely blame unsustainable actors; she also actively promoted and praised those who made responsible choices. In a post from 27 February 2022, Leyman shared a screenshot of a news article about Swedish influencer Therése Lindgren's commitment to cease brand deals with fast fashion brands in 2022. In the post, Leyman disclosed her role in helping Lindgren articulate the criteria for her brand deals and commended Lindgren's decision. Moreover, Leyman applauded Lindgren for leveraging her influence wisely: "So THANKS, @therese, for really DOING this". Additionally, Leyman highlighted and commended brands and businesses that exemplify sustainable practices, such as a second-hand shop for children's clothing, which she applauded for "lowering the bar for shopping second-hand – and thereby shifting the norm" (2 June 2022).

As such, Leyman's appeal to environmental action primarily centred on condemning prevailing mainstream market practices and discourses and the actors contributing to their perpetuation. Notably, she called out fashion brands and businesses for corporate wrongdoing and greenwashing, and mass media's role in perpetuating industry practices is also scrutinised. Moreover, Leyman actively appealed to corporate actors to contribute positively to change, giving them praise and a public platform.

5 Conclusion

This chapter has explored how Norwegian and Swedish greenfluencers invite their followers to interpret and act upon our shared environmental challenges. Focusing on how they appeal to their followers to do so, we found that although they shared a strong focus on individual lifestyle action, their diverse appeals contribute to varying perceptions of environmental action and agency. The *feel-good appeal* re-

duces sustainability to a purchasable identity. Thereby, the feel-good appeal encompasses both a critique of the consumer society and a consumer-oriented solution to environmental problems, allowing greenfluencers to capitalise on the positive connotations of sustainability (Frig & Jaakkola, 2023). The *transformation* and *condemn and commend appeals* encourage a more radical departure from conventional consumption practices. The first does so by challenging prevailing consumption norms and advocating for a transformation of individual consumption patterns, as well as policies. The latter does so by exposing unsustainable narratives and greenwashing practices while also commending the positive efforts of various actors, thus centring on fostering a more informed consumer base.

While the feel-good appeal aligns with the conventional approach of "ordinary" influencers, often centred on self-branding and product marketing (Casaló et al., 2020; Duffy, 2017), we thus, suggest greenfluencers' environmental communication may also signify a departure from typical influencer practices by actively challenging mainstream consumer culture. Moreover, although focusing on the domestic sphere as the arena for environmental action, greenfluencers' appeals to individual action distribute responsibility on different levels, casting followers in different roles. On the one hand, they may be invited to act as responsible consumers shaping environmental agendas through sustainable purchasing practices or by applying market pressure on businesses. However, they may also be invited to act as citizens seeking to influence policies. Thus, the different appeals attribute distinct agency to individuals – either as market agents or as citizens wielding political influence to address broader environmental challenges.

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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.

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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.

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Mathilde Hogsnes and Tor-Morten Grønli

Body and beauty pressures in the Norwegian influencer industry

Exploring media discourses on influencers and their impact on beauty standards

Abstract: The impact of social media on body and beauty pressure has become a significant political issue in Norway, with much of the debate centring on the role of influencers. While influencers have received much criticism in recent years, many have criticised the associated debates for lacking nuance and portraying influencers as the sole cause of the issue. Women are often expected to embody the role model persona and they are only deemed acceptable if they conform to the traditional image of a "nice" girl. This chapter is intended to provide an understanding of the various viewpoints surrounding influencers' impact on the issue of body and beauty pressures in Norway. To achieve this, a media analysis was conducted, and two main discourses were identified related to (1) influencers' roles and expectations and (2) the consequences of their practices. The results are discussed in view of established literature in the field.

Keywords: social media, influencers, body pressures, beauty standards

1 Introduction

Social media has become an integral part of people's lives. According to Statista (2023a), over 4.59 billion people used social media across the globe in 2022. This number is expected to increase to nearly 6 billion by 2027. While social media has several benefits, including connecting people from different parts of the world, it has also been linked to several societal problems. One of the significant concerns is the constant exposure to idealised social media imagery, which can negatively impact body satisfaction, as shown by multiple studies conducted by Holland and Tiggemann (2016), Fioravanti et al. (2022), Vandenbosch et al. (2022), and Prichard et al. (2023). The pressure to conform to the unrealistic beauty standards perpetuated by social media can have severe consequences for public health, including body image concerns and eating disorders (Holland and Tiggerman, 2016).

One of the primary differences between social media and traditional media is that social media content is created by its users (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Users

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can share their photos and videos, browse others' content, and follow accounts they enjoy. However, research suggests that users often carefully curate their images to present their best selves (de Vaate et al., 2018). These users may include individuals, businesses, and social media influencers. Influencers can be defined as everyday internet users with large followings on social media platforms who share content about their personal lives and monetise their social media activities (Abidin, 2021). Unfortunately, many groups of influencers promote stereotypical presentations of beauty standards, which often prioritise thin and toned figures (Prichard et al., 2023). This can contribute to expectations among young women to live up to specific ideals.

In Norway, body and beauty pressures are recognised as a significant political issue, concerned with mental and physical health (Stortinget, 2019). The topic of how influencers impact body and beauty pressures, particularly among young women, has garnered significant media coverage of this issue (e.g. Agerup & Senel, 2018; Debatten, 2018, 2019; Johansen, 2022). According to a report from Press (2018), an organisation committed to combating the systemic violation of children's rights, over 50 % of Norwegian girls between 12 and 13 years of age expressed a desire to change their physical appearance. Additionally, a more recent study by the Norwegian Media Authority (2023) revealed marked disparities in the type of influencer-created content to which women and men are exposed. Specifically, the report found that one-third of all TikTok and YouTube videos that Norwegian women viewed contained sexualised content created by influencers (Medietilsynet, 2023). While influencers have received much criticism in the past years, many have criticised the associated debate for lacking nuance and aggressively portraying female influencers as the cause. It is argued that women are often expected to embody the role model persona and that they are only deemed acceptable if they conform to the traditional image of a "nice" girl (Rindal et al., 2023). Moreover, the debate recognised a disparity in the way men and women are criticised, with men being given more leeway to discuss sensitive topics, such as sex (Støre, 2021). It is also argued that different rules exist for different body types where some bodies seem to be "celebrated" while others are not (Haus, 2020).

In other words, while there is a form of political consensus regarding the issue of body and beauty pressure in Norway, influencers' impact on the issue is subjected to a complex and nuanced debate. The aim of this chapter is to gain a deeper understanding of the various viewpoints surrounding influencers' impact regarding this issue. We seek to answer the following research question: What are the main discourses surrounding influencers' impact on body image and beauty pressures in Norway?

To answer this research question, we conducted a media analysis of Norway's four most prominent media outlets: *Verdens gang* (VG), *Dagbladet*, *Norsk rikskring-*

kasting (NRK), and *Nettavisen.* By analysing the discourses in the media, we were able to identify the standpoints and arguments, and gain an overview of the public perception of the underlying beliefs, values, and attitudes regarding influencers' role in the issue. This helped us better understand the connection between influencers' practices and the societal issue of body and beauty pressures. The findings derived from the analysis were compared to studies on the influencer industry (e. g. Abidin et al., 2020; Hudders et al., 2021; Wellman et al., 2020) and existing literature that has explored influencers, sex, beauty standards, and body image (e. g. Dobson, 2014; Duffy & Hund, 2015; Tiidenberg, 2014). In this chapter, we aim to contribute to the literature on influencer marketing by providing a broad overview of the different perspectives and viewpoints regarding the impact of influencers on the political issue of body and beauty pressures. Through a media analysis, we obtained valuable insights and provide reflections on the matter from all stakeholders within the industry.

The opening of this chapter provides an overview of the Norwegian influencer industry, tracing its progression from the marginal and gendered phenomenon of "pink bloggers" to being a vital player in contemporary business. Next, the chapter outlines the issue of body image and beauty standards before presenting the analysis and conclusion.

2 The Norwegian influencer industry

In Norway, influencers were first understood within the feminised and underestimated concept of "pink bloggers" (Klausen, 2015). Globally, the content bloggers posted, which resembled online diaries, covered topics such as daily activities, fashion, music, and interests and soon attracted thousands of young followers (Abidin, 2018). As argued by Professor Jill Walker Rettberg (Klausen, 2015), the term "pink bloggers" trivialised and devalued a large group of commercial bloggers who obtained more readers than major Norwegian newspapers. Over the years, however, there was a notable surge in the professionalisation and commercialisation of pink bloggers. The term was gradually replaced with "influencers", who have become an integral part of the marketing industry, with many commercial agencies investing heavily in influencers to display their products, services, and ideas in their social media content. The rise of social media platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, and, later, TikTok also played a significant role in the growth of the influencer industry, providing opportunities for influencers to reach larger audiences and establish themselves as experts in various niches (Hudders et al., 2021).

The influencer industry in Norway has experienced remarkable growth, establishing itself as a valuable collaborator for numerous prominent corporations and advertisers. Influencer and content marketing accounted in 2018 for roughly 4 billion Norwegian kroner (NOK) of the total NOK 20 billion spent on advertising and media marketing within the country (Anfo, 2019). The value has likely risen since then, since the influencer industry has more than tripled its market value since 2019 globally (Statista, 2023b). The influencer industry has become an integral part of the marketing landscape, offering businesses authentic and relatable content creators who can connect with their target audiences meaningfully (Hudders et al., 2021). Furthermore, several companies with new business models have emerged over the years, such as influencer management companies (e.g. United Influencers), public relations firms (e.g. Mildh Press), platforms for influencer collaborations (e.g. Inzpire.me), and analytical tools for influencer statistics (e.g. Klear).

With the commercialisation and establishment of the industry, lawmakers, consumer authorities, and organisations in Norway began to question the influencer industry's ethics. The industry was especially criticised for its over-display of hidden advertisements (Forbrukertilsynet, 2022a), promotion of false product information (Johansen, 2023), and for including children in advertisement messages (Rachline, 2023). This is reflected in the academic literature as well, in which much research is concerned with disclosure and the ethical implications of audiences not being able to recognise sponsored content (e.g. Abidin et al., 2020; Borchers & Enke, 2022). In addition, studies have investigated influencers' reflections on the ethical decision-making process they use to help them determine which brands to work with and what to include in sponsored posts (Wellman et al., 2020). Another issue that has received attention in Norway is the discussion of body and beauty pressures. The next section will dive more deeply into this issue.

3 Body and beauty pressures in the Norwegian influencer industry

Social media's negative impact on body and beauty pressures has been shown by multiple studies (Fioravanti et al., 2022; Prichard et al., 2023; Tiggemann, 2022; Vandenbosch et al., 2022). In a study emphasising gender, media, and new technologies, Gill (2007) questioned why many young women pursued the same sexy version of femininity. According to Gill (2007), the constant need for beauty products and new fashion clothes makes women believe that certain aspects of their lives are lacking and that consumption habits can help remedy this. In the case of influenc-

ers, they are found to represent forms of normative femininity (e. g. slim waists, large breasts, long hair, and hairless bodies). They are found to reinforce the existing hierarchies of class, gender, aesthetics, and taste (Duffy & Hund, 2015; Marwick, 2013). They are measuring sticks against which one can compare oneself, as followers identify with their favourite influencers and aspire to their lifestyles (Prichard et al., 2023).

In Norway, the massive media coverage and attention given to social media and influencers on the issue of body and beauty pressures have resulted in political proposals from representatives of the Norwegian parliament (Stortinget, 2019). As a result, over the past five years, new guidelines and regulations from consumer authorities have emerged, as well as adjustments to the Norwegian Marketing Act to ensure ethical practices (e. g. Forbrukertilsynet, 2022a, 2022b). For example, authorities including the Consumer Authority, the Norwegian Health Authority, and the Norwegian Medicines Agency developed new rules and guidelines to prohibit the promotion of prescription drugs, such as Botox (Forbrukertilsynet, 2019). Additionally, a political decision was made to amend the Marketing Act. From 1 July 2022, all advertisements that alter a body's shape, size, or skin through retouching or other means must be marked with a standard identifier (Forbrukertilsynet, 2022b). These rules and guidelines were not only created for the influencer industry, but for all forms of advertisement.

Beyond the formal political initiatives, in 2019, a committee was developed called the Committee for Influencer Marketing (FIM). In contrast to the other regulations and guidelines, FIM focuses especially on ethical practices in the influencer industry (FIM, 2021). This committee works in collaboration with the Norwegian Advertisers' Association (Anfo) and the Media Companies' National Association (MBL) to ensure ethics with regard to body image and body standards in influencer advertisements. The participants in the committee are consumer authorities, influencers, influencer marketing experts, and advertisers who are actively engaged in the industry.

FIM and the overall debate, however, has been criticised for applying different rules based on gender (Rindal et al., 2023) and body type (Haus, 2020). For example, FIM has come under fire, particularly from influencers themselves, for focusing only on women's contributions to body and beauty pressures rather than addressing those of male influencers as well. These influencers argue that they are positive about the rules and regulations being developed but, at the same time, feel that there are different rules for women and men in the industry (Støre, 2021). It has been found that over 95 % of the issues addressed by FIM are related to female influencers (Støre, 2021). Moreover, many argue that bodies should be celebrated regardless of size and shape and that criticism tends to be levelled at only the "ideal" body type (Haus, 2020).

These perspectives are found in the academic literature as well. Tiidenberg's (2014) study entitled "Bringing sexy back: Reclaiming the body aesthetic via self-shooting" explores how the culture of shame often sanctions bodies and images of them. Tiidenberg's research provides a detailed analysis of how social media influencers construct themselves as "beautiful", "sexy", "devious", and "more than just a mother and an employee" through the images of themselves and the blogs they share on social media platforms. According to Tiidenberg (2014), the internet has created new opportunities for visual and sexual cultures, with a high potential for self-reflexivity and self-care. Social media influencers and their followers can use these practices to reject the culture of shame and promote positive self-acceptance. They note that taking and posting selfies can be a therapeutic practice in that it can lead to accepting one's body and creating a safe space in which to explore one's embodied identity as a sexual being. Moreover, in Dobson's (2014) study of data from MySpace profiles, they found that young women's general sexual identity performances are often framed for viewers through the proclamation of confidence. According to Dobson (2014), these practices may be a way to resist the dominant understanding of contemporary femininity.

In both theory and practice, it is recognised that social media contributes to creating body and beauty pressures, and influencers' practices are often discussed in political conversations on the issue. The goal of this chapter is to gain a deeper understanding of the various viewpoints surrounding influencers' impact regarding this issue. The media discourse will be presented in the following section.

4 Discourses on influencers' impact on body and beauty pressures in Norway

This chapter's aim is to analyse the discourses in the media on influencers' impact on body and beauty pressures in Norway. Our study employed a qualitative media analysis (Altheide & Schneider, 2012) of 60 articles from Norway's most prominent news outlets, including *VG*, *Dagbladet*, *NRK*, and *Nettavisen.* These articles, spanning from 2018 to 2023, covered a range of topics related to body image and beauty standards, featuring news stories, opinion pieces, and in-depth investigative pieces. We began our analysis by using specific search terms, such as "influencer" and "body pressure", to identify relevant articles in each outlet. After carefully reviewing each article, we narrowed down our selection to the 60 articles that were most relevant to our research.

We implemented a qualitative process that utilised open, axial, and selective coding strategies to reveal connections and trends (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Our in-

itial open coding phase involved the manual coding of the media discourses on influencers' impact on young women's body issues and beauty standards. This involved documenting information in Excel one article at a time. We wrote down each article's main argument with regard to the issue at hand. We then moved on to the axial coding strategy, using colour coding to draw connections between data that were linked in specific ways, such as similar arguments. Finally, the selective coding process allowed us to create central categories based on the colour codes provided in the axial coding process and to connect the codes. Through this process, we were able to provide comprehensive categories to describe the media discourse on this issue (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

In the media analysis, we identified two main discourses. The first discourse contained contradicting viewpoints on influencers' roles and expectations. The second discourse contained contradicting viewpoints on the impact of influencers' practices. In addition to presenting our findings, we will discuss them in view of the established literature on the influencer industry (e. g. Abidin et al., 2020; Hudders et al., 2021; Marôpo et al., 2020; Wellman et al., 2020) and existing literature that has explored influencers, sex, beauty standards, and body image (e. g. Dobson, 2014; Duffy & Hund, 2015; Tiidenberg, 2014). The two discourses are presented below.

5 Influencers' roles and expectations

We identified discoursers with contradicting viewpoints on the perceived roles and expectations of influencers. We identified three distinct perspectives: (1) influencers as providing support and intimacy; (2) influencers as mere embodiments of a broader, more complicated issue; and (3) influencers as commercial actors with social responsibilities.

5.1 Influencers as providing support and intimacy

We identified multiple interviews of influencers in which they argued that they created environments for collective support and intimacy. For example, in an interview, one influencer shared a personal story in which she expressed insecurities about her body from a young age. After receiving criticism for her transparency regarding plastic surgery, she argued that surgeries are never shown as leading to happiness. Instead, such posts often contain expressions of insecurity or the recounting of a history of being bullied for one's appearance. Similar stories were identified in interviews with other influencers, who argue that they tend to talk

about their own insecurities with their followers. As such, instead of providing a "romantic picture" of plastic surgery or beauty injections, their focus, according to these influencers, is to create a space for collective support. Abidin (2015) argues that the appeal of influencers is rooted in their ability to connect with their followers in a way that creates a sense of exclusivity and intimacy. This is achieved through both digital and physical interactions, in which the notion of "intimacy" is defined by the followers' perception of how familiar with and close to the influencer they feel. In other words, influencers can create a sense of personal connection with their audience. This is why they are so effective in building and maintaining loyal fan bases.

In this context, a group of influencers felt that their freedom and sense of liberation were being curtailed by those who aggressively criticised their content. According to these influencers, their social media presence reflects their personal lives. Therefore, they feel strongly about the importance of protecting their right to post content that is true to themselves. Many influencers shared these views in interviews, believing their success could primarily be attributed to their ability to form intimate and authentic bonds. These viewpoints can be linked to the concept of authenticity in the academic literature (Fritz et al., 2017; Jorge et al., 2018; Marôpo et al., 2020; Marwick & boyd, 2011). Social media emulates an environment that is accessible to ordinary users, allowing for greater authenticity compared to traditional celebrities (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Influencers are thought to influence others because they are perceived as an equal and as authentic by their audiences. They are also close in age to their audiences and capable of creating content that fits within the audiences' current frame of reference (Jorge et al., 2018). In a study by Marôpo et al. (2020), influencers are perceived as more authentic when they share the details of their personal lives. Followers greatly valued sincerity and spontaneity and often emphasised how much they trusted influencers in their comments. The above-mentioned research showed that although influencers rarely interact with their followers in a one-on-one manner, their followers requested exclusivity and attempted to build an intimate bond. Influencers can provide a common language and generate social ties and elements to share and recognise (Andò, 2016).

5.2 Influencers as mere embodiments of a broader, more complicated issue

In our media analysis, we have encountered various viewpoints from influencers, activists, a comedian, and a professor. According to an opinion article written by a professor in the Norwegian Sports Academy, people are exaggerating influencers

capabilities regarding body and beauty pressures. The professor argues that people have always been exposed to influence from phenomena, such as romantic novels in the 1960s, with stereotypical presentations of women. However, they "shake it off and move on". One argument put forward in an opinion article by a comedian is that body and beauty issues are significant and prevalent problems but are not necessarily rooted in the influencer industry. The opinion article's arguments focused on the fact that it is essential to assume a broad perspective and consider how people have been exposed to an overemphasis on looks, dieting, and plastic surgery in the mass media. These perspectives were supported by an influencer known for open conversations regarding women and sexuality, who argued that it is essential to consider societal structures, views, and values and question why so many young women do not feel good enough as they are.

In another opinion article written by two activists with influential voices on the issue of body and beauty pressures, the authors argue that there is a massive industry behind every retouched Instagram photo. They argue that it is easy to point the finger at a single influencer but that the issue is much broader than their individual practices. While influencers may contribute to these pressures, according to the activists, they are also a result of being subjected to the consumption of these stereotypical presentations. They contend that a long tradition of the stereotypical representation of women in the media has resulted in women internalising stereotypical ways of presenting themselves.

These perspectives and viewpoints can be linked to the study by Dobson (2015). Dobson urges us to carefully examine and analyse the power dynamics involved, instead of making hasty moral judgements about the way girls and young women use media. They argue against generalising about digital practices and highlight the intricate nature of gendered self-representation in digital culture. These views were shared by influencers appearing in interviews in news articles who found that critics held them responsible for a development they had, in fact, been subjected to.

5.3 Influencers as commercial actors with social responsibilities

While there has been a broad discussion about body and beauty pressures that extends beyond the influencer industry, one common argument is that influencers are commercial actors who should be held to the same standards as any other commercial entity. An opinion article written by two professors and one associate professor argues that many influencers lack an understanding of their roles and responsibilities as commercial actors. They argue that freedom of speech is a

human right but being an influencer is not. The issues at hand have sparked much debate among not only academics but also influencers themselves.

A group of influencers shared these views and were critical towards their peers. They argued, in news articles and columns, that influencers are personal brands and professional enterprises that make a living by persuading their audiences for commercial gain. Consequently, they assert that these influencers should participate in debates, respond to critics, and adjust their practices accordingly, just as any other commercial entity would be expected to do. They also spoke about their close relationships with their followers and the fact that their posts are followed "religiously". They emphasised how their livelihoods depend on the content they create and how they are responsible for fostering a safe and accountable environment for everyone involved. Influencers have shed light on how their industry contributes to unrealistic beauty standards and body ideals. They believe they can make a difference by being more mindful of the harm they might cause and adjusting their actions accordingly. One ethical practice they can adopt is carefully choosing the commercial collaborations in which they participate. These influencers have taken a stand by saying no to specific brand deals that are not aligned with their values and morals.

These perspectives are reflected in the discussion of influencers, ethics, and authenticity in the academic literature. First, the common conceptualisation of influencers is that they are commercial entities on social media who capitalise on their social media presence (Hudders et al., 2021). As a commercial entity, authenticity becomes one of the guiding ethical principles in influencer marketing, according to Wellman et al. (2020). When faced with decisions regarding working with commercial brands and producing sponsored content, the ethical thing for influencers to do is to remain true to themselves and their audiences. The ethics of authenticity, as conceptualised by Wellman et al. (2020), can be linked to practices found in the media discourses. In many interview articles we came across, a collaboration between influencers, the Ministry for Children and Family, and consumer authorities was arranged. According to the news articles, the collaboration took the form of a meeting in which the participants shared their experiences and brainstormed, aiming to improve ethical practices in the influencer industry, benefit their followers, and ultimately contribute to a healthier and more responsible social media landscape than the current one. In the articles, the meeting was portrayed as involving influencers taking an active approach to the issue, with headlines such as "Influencers together in the fight against body issues". For example, in one article, the journalists portrayed influencers as actively facilitating a healthier social media environment by sharing their personal experiences and the reactions of their followers regarding body issues. As such, these influencers were, seemingly, as Wellman et al. (2020) suggest, choosing to prioritise their brands

and audiences, instead of attempting to please commercial brands or generate revenue.

6 Practices regarding body and beauty pressures

In the previous section, we delved into the differing opinions on the roles and expectations of influencers. Now, our focus turns to discoursers with contradicting viewpoints on the consequences of their practices. We have identified two such viewpoints: (1) influencers' advocacy of individual choice and pleasure and (2) influencers' reinforcement of stereotypical beauty standards.

6.1 Influencers' advocacy of individual choice and pleasure

Based on interviews in the studied news articles, many influencers view their social media content as a reflection of their individuality and personal preferences. They argue that their posting habits deliberately challenge the societal expectations and stereotypes placed on young women, especially those expected to conform to narrow standards. One influencer even shared that Instagram had deleted her pictures because they were deemed too sexual. In response, this influencer continued to post their content, viewing these actions as evidence of society's demands for young women to live up to a narrow stereotype of the female gender. Consequently, these influencers see their social media profiles as a means of breaking free of societal norms and expectations, as reflected in Dobson (2014), who found such practices to be a way of resisting the dominant terms in which contemporary femininity is understood. Furthermore, interviewees described different rules for men and women in the industry, as well as that rules and regulations tend to focus on the practices of female influencers, as opposed to male influencers. Another argument identified from the interviews was that there were different rules for different body types. One influencer argued, in several interviews, that all bodies should be celebrated, including those of the "ideal" type. She argued that she is criticised because she belongs to the ideal and that her body, in contrast to others, is therefore viewed as "dangerous". These perspectives can be linked to Catherine Hakim's theory on "erotic capital", which refers to the social power an individual or group accrues due to their sexual attractiveness and social charm. Certain styles of dressing tend to be associated with the view of women as "tramps" or having low self-esteem (Hakim, 2010). They argue, however, that sex appeal, self-presentation, and social skills are basic forms of power for women, which conservative feminists have traditionally delegitimised. Moreover,

according to Hakim (2010), many women are unaware of this because men have taken steps to prevent women from exploiting their unique advantages and even persuade women that erotic capital is worthless. According to this perspective, influencers utilising their erotic capital can be viewed as progressive, seeking to resist the narrow standards of what it means to be a woman.

While some influencers were driven by a desire to demonstrate against what they perceived as unfair standards for women, others were motivated by amusement and enjoyment. According to one influencer who participated in an interview in a news article, their posting practices, which were criticised by many for being overly sexualised, were not necessarily motivated by any ideology or political opinion. Instead, they enjoyed playing with their sensual expressions and felt empowered by them. The influencer argued that their actions were no different from enjoying other social activities, such as reading a book, walking, or watching a movie. They believed such practices were unimportant and did not attach any significant meaning to them. They encouraged their followers to enjoy their sexuality and sensual expressions without any reservations because they found it enjoyable. Concerning these views, Tiidenberg's (2014) research shows that bloggers' self-image can encourage their followers to view their bodies positively and reduce their anxiety regarding their own appearance. The study also highlights the importance of self-shooting, which is the process of taking self-portraits, in promoting a positive body image. She notes that self-shooting can provide a unique perspective on one's body, help individuals reclaim their aesthetics, and encourage a positive self-image. Thus, by adopting these perspectives, influencers' posts can be seen as an example of rejecting the culture of shame and promoting positive individual choices and pleasures.

6.2 Influencers' reinforcement of stereotypical beauty standards

Despite positioning themselves as promoting individual choice and pleasures, influencers have come under fire from a range of critics, including academics, politicians, and their peers, for promoting an unrealistic and highly idealised version of beauty. For example, arguments focused on providing details about how much one eats and weighs and the size of one's clothing. An author and podcast host who used to work as an influencer argues that influencers tend to provide a kind of recipe that one can follow to look like them. These findings can be linked to the influential study "Notes on the perfect" by Angela McRobbie (2015, p. 7). McRobbie argued for how various technologies bring the perfect into life, as an everyday form of self-measurement. For example, being slim and remaining so

are subject to calculation. To gain weight is to "let oneself down", risk social disapprobation, and lose status and self-respect. In the context of influencers, they become forms of measuring sticks against which one can compare oneself (Prichard et al., 2023). Furthermore, we identified opinion articles written by activists and influencers who criticised certain influencers for openly discussing plastic surgery or injections with their followers. The argument is that this contributes to the normalisation of such practices, leading to an unhealthy obsession with appearance and an unrealistic standard of beauty.

Moreover, various news articles identified by our analysis pointed to the unhealthy beauty standards caused by the commercial activities' influencers engage with. For example, an activist with an influential position in the debate on beauty and body pressures argued that the influencer industry generates income from the message that young women can better themselves. The activist points out the massive promotion of day creams against wrinkles and lipsticks that plump up the lips, which make money from young women's insecurities. The news articles identified via the analysis also point out that many ways in which influencers promote plastic surgeries, protein drinks, and collagen powders, as well as expensive beauty treatments, create a false sense of pressure on young women to change their appearance. For example, FIM, the Committee for Influencer Marketing, criticised influencers for promoting unhealthy body and beauty standards in their advertisement posts. One example of such criticism is the promotion of protein drinks by influencers through bikini photos. In this case, influencers use advertisement posts in which they not only promote products related to outward appearances but also pose sexually while doing so. We also identified articles in which influencers were critical of their colleagues for promoting products related to outward appearances. Such arguments are supported by the findings of Duffy and Hund (2015), who argued that this socially mediated self-enterprise upholds the myth that women should work through and for consumption. These perspectives are also reflected by Gill (2007, p. 154), who questioned why many young women pursued the same version of femininity – hairless body, slim waist, etc. As Gill (2007) argued, in the context of television shows, the constant need for beauty products and new clothes makes women believe that aspects of their lives are lacking and that consumption habits can help improve the situation. As such, the beauty and fashion industries have become an integral part of women's lives as they attempt to conform to societal beauty standards. As reflected by Duffy and Hund (2015), this creates challenges in achieving greater gender diversity and representation.

7 Conclusion

The issue of body and beauty pressures has become a significant political issue in Norway, and influencers' role in the issue has attracted much attention in political conversations. While influencers have received much criticism in recent years, many have criticised the debate for lacking nuance and portraying influencers as the sole cause of the issue. Our goal in this chapter was to gain a deeper understanding of the various viewpoints surrounding influencers' impact regarding this issue. Specifically, we sought to answer the following question: What are the main discourses surrounding influencers' impact on body image and beauty pressures in Norway? To accomplish this, we conducted a thorough media analysis of Norway's top four media outlets: *Verdens gang* (VG), *Dagbladet*, *Norsk rikskringkasting* (NRK), and *Nettavisen*. The media plays a crucial role in communicating meanings and perspectives to the public, and thus, the way in which influencers' body and beauty pressures are discussed in the media can help us better understand the underlying beliefs, values, and main arguments and views on the issue.

Based on our previous understanding of the topic, it seemed that there is a general agreement, in Norway, that body and beauty pressures are significant political issues that must be tackled. This consensus is also reflected in the media analysis, which shows that the discussions of influencers do not revolve around differences of opinion on regulatory measures or political initiatives. Instead, the discourse mainly focuses on moral issues within the influencer industry concerned with (1) influencers' roles and expectations and (2) consequences of their practices against the consensus of a body and beauty issue. Some influencers view their effects on young women's bodies and beauty pressures as providing a collective environment for celebrating their sexuality. Some were motivated by a desire to resist the narrow standards of the "good girl", as Dobson (2014) points out, as well as by individual choice and pleasure. On the other hand, others argue that influencers seem to pursue the same version of femininity with their practices acting as a form of recipe that can be purchased through consumption. As reflected by Duffy and Hund (2015), this creates challenges in achieving greater gender diversity and representation.

Regarding influencers' roles and expectations, we found how influencers are, on one hand, argued to be subject to the same type of stereotypical presentations of body and beauty pressures that guide their practices. Influencers can facilitate an environment for collective support as they shared personal stories about their struggles with body image and beauty standards reflected in theory of authenticity (Jorge et al., 2018; Marôpo et al., 2020; Marwick & boyd, 2011). However, the study demonstrated an opposing viewpoint, which holds that influencers are professio-

nal commercial entities who make a living posting on social media. As commercial entities, many argue that they should be held to the same standard as any other commercial actor and engage in ethical practices with their audience in mind. Influencers are not merely everyday social media users, but also commercial actors who derive profits from their social media activities. As such, it is essential to recognise them as actors with considerable influence over the social structures on social media platforms.

In sum, it is worth highlighting the role of commerce and the conflicting role of influencers, who are, on the one hand, "regular" people with an appeal based on authenticity and, on the other, commercial entities with social responsibilities. Social media facilitates an environment for personal self-expression interconnected with commercial interests and agendas. This results in conflicting roles for the individuals involved. To conclude, it is worth mentioning that the majority of individuals featured in the media articles were influencers. These influencers expressed varying viewpoints on the issue at hand. These findings suggest that there is potential for productive discussions on this matter, given that certain influencers are already invested in and committed to engaging in the discourse of body and beauty pressures.

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Instagram as an affective battlefield

Patriotic inspirational influencers as strategic narrators

Abstract: This chapter studies the different roles Ukrainian social media influencers have adopted during the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine that started in February 2022. Using social media data gathered from influencers' Instagram profiles and an online questionnaire sent to prominent Ukrainian social media influencers, this chapter shows how the war affected the influencers' practices and how they participated in communicating about the war. Drawing from social media influencers' politization scholarship, the international relations conceptualization of strategic narratives, and theories of affectivity in the public sphere, this chapter shows how influencers navigate between commercial, political, and lifestyle content in the communication environment changed by the war. They function as information disseminators by spreading information and amplifying Ukrainian strategic narratives, as social activists by calling their followers to participate by donating, and as patriotic inspirational influencers promoting Ukrainian culture and nationalistic narratives of history. Influencers bring the horrors and the exceptionality of the war to their followers while also showing and living its everydayness.

Keywords: social media influencers, Ukraine, war, strategic narratives, affective economy

1 Introduction

When Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, digital spaces were instantly included as battlefields. Social media platforms filled up with shocking images depicting collapsing buildings, civilians evacuating from Ukrainian cities, and soldiers and civilians alike taking up arms. Regular Ukrainian social media users started sharing information about war events and urging the international community to react and NATO to close the sky over Ukraine. By January 2024, the war had continued for almost two years, and Ukraine had managed to stay in the media spotlight and on the political agenda both in Western countries and globally. Ukraine has arguably benefitted from the power of social media, effectively leveraging civilian and military influencers, following the lead

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of Instagram-savvy president Volodymyr Zelenskiy (Helmus, 2023; Plazas-Olmedo & López-Rabadán, 2023).

Adding to citizen journalists – that is, everyday citizens reporting online from conflict zones (Allan et al., 2007) – and dedicated war commentators such as milbloggers and warbloggers (Hellman & Wagnsson, 2015; Wall, 2005), a new group of professional and semiprofessional social media users has adopted war content in their feeds: social media influencers. Social media influencers are generally active social media content creators with either a remarkable following or a smaller but dedicated audience, who mainly address lifestyle topics and may participate in commercial collaborations (Borchers, 2019; Freberg et al., 2011). Since February 2022, Ukrainian lifestyle influencers have worked to bring the reality of the war from an ordinary person's perspective to their followers and to a broader audience with English language content (Divon & Krutrök, 2023; Sato, 2022). While lifestyle influencers' recent emergence as "war influencers" has not gone unnoticed, their activities remain understudied.

Prior to the Russian invasion in 2022, many Ukrainian influencers used online platforms for commercial activities by monetizing their everyday lives as lifestyle influencers or marketing their companies' products and services. Influencers' close and even intimate relationships with their audiences (Abidin, 2015), authenticity, and perceived relatability make their product recommendations and endorsements effective (Pöyry et al., 2019). As recent studies have shown, influencers may also have a powerful role in shaping the political opinions of their audiences (Harff & Schmuck, 2023) or function as ideological intermediaries (Arnesson, 2023). Not surprisingly, different actors have realized the potential of lifestyle influencers and aim to use their reach and persuasion skills to promote a desired viewpoint, give a human touch to state strategic communication (Reinikainen et al., 2022), or disseminate propaganda (Pelevina, 2023; Ryan et al., 2022).

In the information realm, the parties to a war try to justify their actions to multiple audiences. International relations scholars have introduced the concept of strategic narratives, which refers to narratives intentionally produced or put together by political elites, usually state actors, to legitimate their actions (Colley, 2019; Miskimmon et al., 2014). In digital media spaces, different actors participate in narrative battles. Holding central positions in the information web, many popular lifestyle influencers have harnessed their platforms and used their skills to amplify the Ukrainian perspective.

Lifestyle influencers typically have their own established communication strategies and ways of branding their content (Enke & Borchers, 2019). They typically rely on highly visual platforms, such as YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram, and focus on specific audiences and topics. Therefore, politicization (Pöyry, 2023; Riedl et al., 2021; Suuronen et al., 2022) often marks a shift in lifestyle influencers' typical

communication patterns and forces them to find ways to balance different types of messages. Because political content coexists with the lifestyle and commercial content typical of online platforms, influencers must negotiate a combination of different roles and communication styles. In the case of Ukraine, this means combining war reporting and related strategic narratives with lifestyle content.

In this chapter, we study how Ukrainian influencers have participated in communicating about the war, disseminated the strategic narratives, and negotiated their roles, genres, and practices in a media context transformed by war. Theoretically, we draw from scholarship on social media influencers' politicization (Arnesson, 2023; Suuronen et al., 2022), the international relations conceptualization of strategic narratives (Miskimmon et al., 2014; Roselle et al., 2014), and theories of affective economy and the affective public sphere (Ahmed, 2004a, 2004b; Nikunen, 2019; Papacharissi, 2015). To do this, we focus on prominent Ukrainian social media influencers, ranging from nanoinfluencers to macroinfluencers (Abidin, 2021; Woolley, 2022) residing in either Ukraine or abroad, who have participated in posting war-related content on their social media platforms. Our social media data come from Instagram, which is especially popular among young urban citizens and widely used by politicians, writers, artists, journalists, photographers, and other influential characters and opinion leaders (Antonova et al., 2020) as well as commercial actors. The most popular local influencers have millions of followers (Plusone Social Impact, 2023).

Overall, this chapter extends our understanding of the tensioned role of social media influencers in conflict situations and contributes to the emerging research on influencers "going political" (Suuronen et al., 2022) in the context of global political conflicts. Based on an online questionnaire and social media data from February 2022 to September 2023, we show how influencers adopted different practices and negotiated the ways in which they combined strategic, affective, and commercial viewpoints during the first year and a half of the full-scale invasion. They functioned as (1) information disseminators, providing first-hand information from Ukraine; (2) activists, mobilizing their followers to support; and (3) inspirational patriots who have helped build consciousness of a shared past and understanding of current events and the paths to a desired future. By adopting these roles, the influencers have intermediated strategic narratives and engaged in shaping Ukraine's collective memory and national identity at a time of war.

2 Strong, united, and European: Ukrainian national identity and strategic war narratives

During the current war, Ukrainian resilience has gained much attention in Western media (Kudlenko, 2023), while Ukrainian strategic narratives seem to have resonated well among Western audiences. Referring to narratives carefully produced by political elites to convince their audiences, strategic narratives are a "means to construct a shared meaning of the past, present and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors" to "extend their influence, manage expectations, and change the discursive environment in which they operate" (Miskimmon et al., 2014, p. 2). Successful narratives appeal to the values, interests, and prejudices of the target audience and draw on existing, enduring identity narratives or political myths (Bottici, 2007; Krebs, 2015; Schmitt, 2018).

The Ukrainian narratives targeting Ukrainian, European, or Western audiences more broadly, construct Ukraine as a strong united nation fighting for its independence and sovereignty (Zakharchenko, 2022) and also, later, for freedom and democracy beyond Ukrainian borders. These narratives highlight the revival of national traditions, culture, and language, as well as identifying with Europe. Russia is represented as the occupier, the aggressor, and a terrorist state "driven by Moscow's ancient hatred of all Ukrainians and by its baseless imperial dreams" (Zakharchenko, 2022). The image of Russia as the enemy also draws from familiar Cold War imagery and discourses of communism versus capitalism, now formulated as autocracy versus democracy – framing that resonates with Western audiences (Kaneva, 2023). Stressing sacrifice, the narratives depict Ukraine as (historically) enslaved by Russia (or the Soviet Union). The experience of the collective tragedy of Holodomor, the famine caused by Stalin's regime in the 1930s, constitutes the basis for national integration and identity (Kiryukhin, 2015). Hostility toward Russia, adherence to the nationalist narrative of Ukrainian history, and support for the predominance of the Ukrainian language have become the cornerstones of the widely shared and promoted strategic war narratives and national identity (Kulyk, 2023, cited by Korostelina & Toal, 2023).

During the conflict, various actors, from political power holders and army personnel to ordinary citizens, have participated in disseminating and producing Ukrainian strategic narratives (Zakharchenko, 2022). These "narrative intermediaries" (Hellman & Wagnsson, 2015; Zhabotynska & Velivchenko, 2019) include social media influencers – individuals who have accumulated a dedicated audience online. Influencers' relatability, authenticity, and ability to cultivate parasocial relationships with their dedicated followers make them interesting actors for political elites to reach wider audiences on visual social media platforms – further high-

lighting the increasing importance of emotional appeals and visuality (Crilley, 2015; Miskimmon et al., 2014, pp. 22, 112).

2.1 Creating affective alignment with strategic narratives

Overall, social media platforms have become an arena for rival perspectives and narratives, where multiple actors, including states, politicians, army personnel (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2009), insurgent actors, media (including war correspondents), and ordinary people alike try to get their stories heard. As Van Noort (2020) suggested, the persuasiveness of narratives about the past depends on their ability to translate historical ideas across time and space. Strategic narratives draw from existing discourses, and the power of narratives relies on their ability to resonate with the intended audience's values and emotions (Freedman, 2006, p. 23; Grigor & Pantti, 2021; Miskimmon et al., 2014, p. 112). One prominent approach to theorizing the emotional resonance of narratives comes from the cultural theorist Sara Ahmed (2004a, 2004b), who set out to understand the circulation of affective narratives in society, specifically in connection to nations and nationalism. According to her theorizing of the affective economy, strategic narratives and nationalism gain power from collective, shared affects that accumulate value through the repetition of the signs and figures to which they are attached. Individuals, therefore, align with communities through emotions that make identification with the collective body possible (Ahmed, 2004b). Therefore, emotions are a resource for those in power or aiming for power. One way for political actors to exercise power is by changing the emotional atmosphere of a society or by generating new "regimes of feeling" (Reddy, 2001).

Affective strategic narratives thus work by mobilizing specific signs to create affective attachment and alignment with a nation (Ahmed, 2004b). It has been suggested that such emotionally resonating communication can be quite powerful in shaping public opinion (e. g. Davies, 2018), and consequently, it has been adopted to strategically narrate war and conflicts (e. g. Crilley & Chatterje-Doody, 2020) and, more broadly, in nationalist discourses (e. g. Horsti, 2016). Nevertheless, affects always work in a contextual setting, which makes them volatile. Ahmed's theory of circulating affective signs also highlights the social and collective nature of affects; they are influenced by cultural norms, social structures, technologies, and practices (Ahmed, 2004a; Nikunen, 2019; Wetherell, 2012). Therefore, affects should be studied with sensitivity to the social context and include both national and technological elements.

It has been argued that affectivity is particularly embedded in the current platformed media ecosystem. Affects not only mediate information and narratives but

also invite actors to express their emotions. Affectivity and affective attunements are essential for creating a digital presence, surfacing collective feelings, and forming networked publics in digital environments between virtual bodies (e. g. Ahmed, 2004c; Papacharissi, 2015; Persson, 2017). Hence, as an infrastructure, social media platforms support and encourage the sharing and circulation of affective content.

Correspondingly, both the media practices and content types typical of Instagram are profoundly affective. First, it has been recognized that social media influencers play an important role as producers of affective atmospheres through their affective labour (e. g. Abidin, 2015; Kolehmainen & Mäkinen, 2021; Reinikainen et al., 2022). Second, visual content, in particular, is typically easily imbued with affects (Blair, 2004). Digital images are sticky surfaces on which affects nest (Ahmed, 2004a; Horsti, 2016), and they have the capacity to bring visibility and urgency to the issues to which they are attached (Pantti, 2016). In visual content, complex social and political issues can be reduced to simplistic visual frames that promote certain problem definitions, causal interpretations, or moral evaluations (Coleman, 2010; Zelizer, 2010), albeit accompanied by a more accentuated risk of alternative interpretations. Images carry with them the historical repetition of meanings that gives them power as political tools, thereby making their circulation relevant for both strategic narratives and affects. Indeed, previous studies emphasized the centrality of visual content for digital political communication and political rhetoric (e. g. Laaksonen et al., 2022; Leaver et al., 2020; Luhtakallio & Meriluoto, 2022; Seo, 2019). Likewise, in war reporting, images convey political messages and function as affective anchors (Grigor & Pantti, 2021). There is, therefore, reason to believe that affectivity is even more highlighted when strategic narration takes place within the affective and visual cultures on Instagram.

3 Methods: studying “Instagram as a battlefield”

Studying a country at war requires paying special attention to methodological processes, as we learned when engaging with our empirical field, our methodological approach being a combination of online observation, an online questionnaire, and qualitative analysis of social media content. When Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, we noticed how popular Ukrainian social media influencers started sharing information, images, and footage from the war zone and asking for help from the international community. During the first days, many also tried to appeal to their Russian counterparts. Since the beginning of the invasion, we have followed some influencers and paid attention to their consistency and perseverance in war-related postings. While mainstream (Western) media outlets’ attention started to shift to other topics, influencers continued posting about the war.

In the spring of 2023, one year after the invasion, our intention while planning this chapter was to interview Ukrainian influencers who had posted war-related content. We approached a Ukrainian influencer marketing company and prominent influencers directly. However, the promising collaboration proved challenging. The overall atmosphere in Ukraine was tense. The country was eagerly awaiting a counterattack by the Armed Forces of Ukraine that would change the dynamics on the battlefield. Influencers, although grateful to their foreign networks for their help, also started to feel fatigued by constantly having to convince them. Hence, we decided instead to opt for an online questionnaire. In July 2023, we reached out to prominent Ukrainian social media influencers (n = 42) using an open-ended questionnaire. We started with a list of influencers who one of the authors had followed for years, updated the list using the online ranking site Statista's listing of popular Ukrainian influencers (Statista, 2023), and asked Ukrainian university students to share the names of the influencers they frequently followed. The inclusivity of the sample was emphasized by targeting influencers across different tiers, ranging from microinfluencers with smaller audiences to macroinfluencers with tens of thousands of followers (Abidin, 2021; Woolley, 2022). Some influencers would exclusively target Ukrainian audiences, while others residing outside the country would convey information to their local subscribers.

The English version of the questionnaire yielded 12 responses, while the Ukrainian version resulted in more substantial participation, with 23 respondents out of 42. However, some influencers hesitated to open the questionnaire link, citing repercussions such as account suspension or closure due to unfair practices, and refrained from participation. In their responses to us, some complained of significant restrictions on their activities due to Instagram's policy for publishing war-related content. This illuminates the multifaceted ways in which Instagram functions as a battlefield, and it portrays the platform not only as a space for social interaction but also as a battleground on which issues of content sensitivity, policy compliance, and research outreach intersect.

The questionnaire included a set of background questions to identify the influencers' profiles (e.g. content type, adopted platforms, intended audiences, language, professional age), ten Likert-style questions to identify the changes in their practices, and nine open-ended questions to describe these changes in more detail. The questionnaire played a central role in understanding the thoughts and experiences of Ukrainian influencers during a year and a half of the war. The Likert-style questions allowed us to gain an impression of the prevalence of the observed changes, while the open-ended questions provided more qualitative insights into the ways in which the influencers described and justified their experiences and articulated their new roles.

To enhance the picture drawn from the questionnaire data, we decided to analyse the Instagram posts of the influencers in more detail. The Instagram profiles of the same sample of 42 influencers were studied using both the CrowdTangle tool offered by Meta and the Instagram app, which was used to access their stories and highlights. We analysed the influencers' posts from February 2022 to September 2023, focusing on war-related posts, including their frequency, content, style, and affective attunement. This was done by the first and second authors. While browsing through the influencers' profiles and posts, we noticed how, at the beginning of the Russian full-scale invasion, they had constantly posted about the war, but gradually, the number of war-related posts diminished, and many influencers started addressing other topics. In the findings section, we show how, through an analysis of the questionnaire data, the influencers adopted various positions and adjusted their content to fit the changing situations juxtaposing social media content during a year and a half of conflict.

4 Information, inspiration, and calls for help

The outbreak of the war in 2022 hit Ukraine's advertising and marketing industry hard (IAB Ukraine, 2022), forcing commercial actors, companies, and influencers to take sides, and fused commercial and political spaces. When we initiated our online observations in February 2022, we noticed how the Russian attack marked a change in many influencers' normally well-curated, even serene, Instagram feeds. Regular Instagram content – fashion shots, gym selfies, and morning coffees – were replaced with images or videos of airstrikes, footage from bomb shelters, and calls for help aimed at the international community (Figure 1a). Images and textual content first conveyed shock, then anger and sadness.

The influencers described the start of the full-scale invasion as a profound change – a "shock to many" that affected both their social media practices and their state of mind. They, too, were citizens who had to react to the situation and were faced with the same emotions as their fellow citizens – fear, anger, and mental paralysis – thereby depicting emotions that became collective for the entire nation (Ahmed, 2004b).

> It had a negative effect; the strength to do something disappeared. (R16, Instagram/TikTok influencer)

The influencers adopted different strategies and adapted their roles to fit the new reality. In the following sections, we describe the four major roles we identified for

the influencers – namely, information disseminators, public activists, war diarists, and patriotic inspirers.

4.1 War enters Instagram

The start of the invasion changed the influencers' social media practices. While some mentioned using social media less than before the war, others reported that they had started to adjust their posting strategies to the situation and shifted from depicting their personal lives to sharing news and information. Almost all respondents had regularly or occasionally shared war-related information aimed at foreign audiences or audiences in their countries of residence (e. g. news links, videos of war events) as well as personal content about their daily lives during the war. Most had also shared requests for help, such as links to charitable organizations' campaigns. The majority also reported having shared content targeted at Ukrainian audiences, such as information about aid campaigns or motivational content. Thus, they engaged in circulating signs for solidarity in the affective economy (Ahmed, 2004a).

Graphic content depicting war events was common, especially at the beginning of the invasion, when the aim was to show the world the atrocities Russia was committing in Ukraine, and later, when something unusually brutal happened or was revealed, such as the uncovering of mass graves in Bucha in April 2022 or the destruction of the Nova Kakhovka dam in June 2023. Visually similar to news reporting or the traditional imagery of wars or catastrophes, the images used in posts and stories show the ugly side of the war – the bombings, the suffering of civilians, and the destroyed buildings. Shocking images evoke negative emotions, anger, and hate, as well as sadness and compassion, and motivate foreign audiences to help.

As time passes, sharing such imagery typically decreases – perhaps the images lose their shock effect – a phenomenon known as compassion fatigue (Moeller, 2002). Yet, the influencers continued to engage in other practices to keep the war alive on Instagram.

> I will try to do everything to make people aware and not forget that we still have a war going on. (R19, Instagram influencer)

Many influencers regularly used Instagram Stories to share graphic war-related content while occasionally posting appeals or statements that stood out from their otherwise serene feeds, following visual conventions typical of Instagram activism (Figure 1a – c). In addition to informative content and appeals, posts includ-

Figure 1a, b, and c: An influencer's post aimed at foreign audiences calling for NATO to deploy forces to Ukraine (a). Other influencers' posts calling Russia a terrorist state (b) and reminding audiences that the war, "Russian hell", had lasted for seven months (c).

ed statements and simple visualizations of the Ukrainian war narrative depicting Russia as the enemy (Zakharchenko, 2022). Like citizen journalists, influencers share information and disseminate the Ukrainian perspective, which serves to amplify strategic narratives.

4.2 Public social activism

Apart from sharing information, the war situation also encouraged influencers to act in concrete societal and political ways. Many started volunteering or acting as public activists. This role was also linked to distributing information, but it was most clearly characterized by volunteer work, donating to the army or NGOs, and mobilizing followers.

> 70 % of volunteer content now. 30 % for everything else. (R12, Instagram influencer)

Many influencers regularly asked for donations and linked to donation or charity organizations through their profiles and highlights (i. e. permanent stories pinned to their profiles). They helped collect donations from different NGOs for the army or directly for soldiers on the frontline. For example, influencers promoted an initiative in which ordinary people collected and sent warm clothes and stoves to the armed forces and sought donations (Figure 2a – c). Different from traditional humanitarian campaigns, during the war in Ukraine, influencers also participated in gathering funds for military equipment, such as drones (Figure 3a – c). Visuals of military equipment and militaristic vocabulary differed from most influencers'

Figure 2a, b and c: The Ukrainian influencer and the founder of the Association of Ukrainians in Pietarsaari (Finland) Yuliia Bondarchuk (@juliia.bondarchuk) promoted an initiative through which people collected and sent warm clothes and stoves to the armed forces.

Figure 3a, b and c: The influencer Ihor Lachenkov's posts (a) and (b) depict daily efforts of fundraising for drones by some of the most famous influencers who consistently support the Armed Forces of Ukraine: (a) from left to right: Serhiy Sternenko (@s_sternenko), Serhiy Prytula (@prytula.ua), and Ihor Lachenkov (@lachen_tyt); (c) the influencer Lidiya Kosharska (@lidiya_kosharska) asks for donations for drones in her Instagram story.

typical commercial lifestyle content. While humanitarian efforts generally appealed to audiences' feelings of empathy, calls to participate in crowdfunding for the war required affects such as hate and anger to be evoked.

A specific type of activism relates to language politics. The social media data showed that some of the influencers used different languages while targeting different audiences – that is, Ukrainian for fellow Ukrainians and English for foreign audiences. Historically, many Ukrainians would use the Russian language on social media. Despite the ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine since 2014, many commercial lifestyle influencers did not cut ties with the Russian market, due to its size

and importance for both global brands (Castillo-Abdul et al., 2022) and individual influencers. During the first weeks of the invasion, some appealed to their followers in Russia to protest against the Kremlin without much success. In the survey, several respondents confirmed our observation that many Ukrainian influencers stopped posting in Russian after the invasion began. One influencer frequently framed the situation and their activity as a broader cultural war:

> Calls to abandon Russian music in order not to sponsor the enemy, also calls to abandon companies that have not left the Russian market [...] Spread the importance of abandoning Russian culture and transitioning to Ukrainian. (R17, Instagram influencer)

While some influencers explicitly called for cancelling the Russian state and Russian culture, music, and language, others encouraged their followers to familiarize themselves with Ukrainian literature, thereby promoting a nationalistic spirit. In the survey responses, some respondents mentioned Russian followers who had unsubscribed from their feeds or provided negative feedback. This was also visible in the social media data, since some influencers received and sometimes even commented on Russian followers' comments.

4.3 Living and blogging – the exceptional in the everyday

Influencer culture has its roots in blogging. Like bloggers, influencers typically share their feelings, thoughts, and everyday lives with their followers (Abidin, 2015). During the war, their Instagram profiles resembled online war diaries. In addition to destroyed buildings, casualties, and soldiers, influencers shared the relatable everyday lives of Ukrainian citizens, images of urban dwellers in coffee shops in downtown Kyiv, and photoshoots in the city centre of Lviv.

Sometimes, awareness of the constant presence of war was conveyed only through the affective states present in the images and captions. A photo of a child celebrating Easter was accompanied by a caption depicting the strength of Ukrainians in the face of the centuries-old brutality of the enemy. Thus, war also involves everyday things and small relatable moments (Heikkinen & Meriluoto, 2022). In Instagram, the exceptional coexists and merges with the everyday (Manovich et al., 2014). An image of a beautiful sunset in Kyiv with the caption "The moment after an air alert" at the same time captures the absurdness of the situation and its everydayness, following the rules of Instagram aesthetics.

The influencers developed a new strategy of balancing in situ. Many influencers did not post about politics or social issues before the war. When asked about their role, some stated that they felt a *responsibility* to use their status to spread

information and mobilize people. Some survey answers also indicated that the influencers considered critically their posting strategies and adapted them to the new reality by, for example, avoiding posting on days of heavy air strikes:

> I started thinking about what and on what days to post (if [a missile] flew somewhere, I usually wouldn't shoot on that day). (R17, Instagram influencer)

Our questionnaire responses also suggested that audiences expected influencers to post about the war. Half of the respondents stated that the feedback they received changed after the invasion started. The influencers mentioned how audience comments became more serious and conscious, and one respondent even reported receiving aggressive feedback after posting regular content. Thus, pressured by social expectations, the influencers were invited to reinvent their professional identities. Emphasizing their role as influencers during this exceptional and hard time, one summarized:

> I feel that I inspire and motivate people to live. (R2, Facebook influencer)

4.4 Patriotic inspiration

In addition to sharing information, keeping war diaries, and mobilizing their followers, influencers also shared inspirational nationalistic content. First, they shared historical posts to explain and give context to Russia's actions. History was typically invoked by telling stories about Holodomor, the famine caused by Stalin's regime in the 1930s during a period of struggle by the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (Figure 4a and b). These posts may have served to educate followers about Ukrainian history, support the nationalistic writing of history, and amplify the official strategic narratives and current war efforts by highlighting Russia as the historical enemy and oppressor (Kiryukhin, 2015; Korostelina & Toal, 2023).

By appealing to the collective memory of past sacrifices, these historical posts evoked deep sadness, hate, and anger toward the aggressor. Influencers participated in building national identity through past sacrifices, which is one strategy when reviving strategic narratives (Miskimmon et al., 2017). The message to fellow Ukrainians was, "We must not forget". The stories of Holodomor merged atrocities committed by the historical Soviet Union with the actions of contemporary Russia and helped justify and legitimate the war effort. As Sara Ahmed's (2004b) put it, collective expressions of hate and fear become "patriotic declarations of love" (p. 129).

Another type of war-related content was inspirational content, which took on a nationalistic tone and drew from common cultural signs. These posts did not

Figure 4a, b, and c: Posts by the Ukrainian influencer Yuliia Slyvka (@slyva_jalova_lova) tell a personal story about Holodomor (a), provide information about the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (b), and share her memories of celebrating Easter (c).

show images of war and sometimes did not even mention it; instead, they amplified official narratives by promoting the Ukrainian nation, its culture, and its history (Kiryukhin, 2015; Korostelina & Toal, 2023). Influencers often placed familiar signs/objects, such as flags or the colours of the Ukraine flag (Figure 5b), in their posts and dressed up in traditional costumes or shared photos from national romantic countryside locations. Strongly imbued with affect, these images evoke a sense of unity and revive a nostalgic imaginary past, thereby participating in building and strengthening a shared national identity and identity narrative. Combining modern trendy lifestyle and urban surroundings with traditional clothing, such as *vyshyvanka* shirts, brings the past to the present (Figure 5a and c). Inspirational content evokes a sense of pride in one's country and traditions.

Influencers also mentioned praying for peace and longing for the peaceful times of the past, expressing hope and belief that the future would bring peace. Posts portraying a peaceful future did not always mention the enemy; rather, the affective tone was nostalgic, hopeful, and empowering. The future orientation of strategic narratives (Miskimmon et al., 2014, p. 2; Roselle et al., 2014) was visually embodied in images of children, signifying that the war effort would lead to peace, reconstruction, and prosperity for children (Figure 5c).

Despite promoting patriotism and representing Ukraine as a united nation, the influencers also discussed domestic political issues that foreign war correspondents did not cover (Semchuk, 2023). They shared petitions to grant a fallen soldier war hero status, criticized Zelenskiy's language politics regarding the status of English in Ukraine, and shed light on gender inequality issues and corruption in the country. Influencers thus participated in negotiating national identity and citizenship not only by stressing the official strategic narratives and promoting national

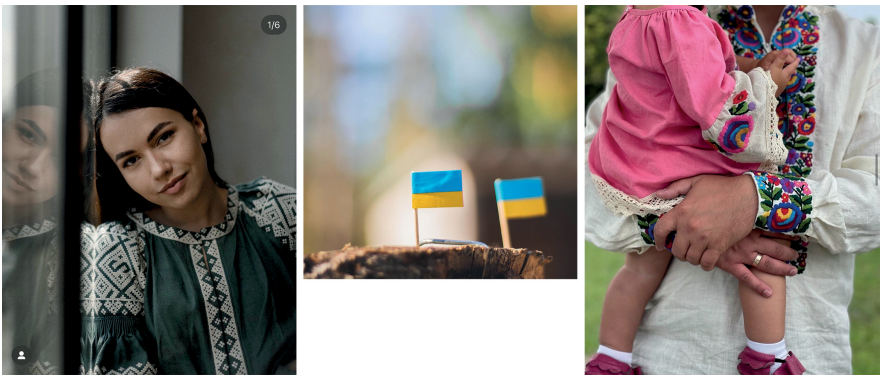

Figure 5a, b, and c: (a) the influencer Lidiia Kosharska (@lidiya_kosharska); (b) a post of two Ukrainian flags, published by another influencer; and (c) post by the Ukrainian influencer Yuliia Slyvka (@slyva_jalova_lova) of a woman and a child wearing traditional Ukrainian shirts (vyshyvanka).

romantic imaginary but also by challenging powerholders by offering diverse perspectives on internal political issues, thereby pushing the country toward the democratic ideals it aims to live up to.

5 Discussion: combining the commercial and the political

Overall, our empirical materials highlight how influencers adopted multiple roles in narrative battles during the war. First, they acted as information distributors, which was also a role highlighted by the survey respondents. In addition to sharing information and showing the world what was happening, influencers collected donations and acted as social activists. Reaching Ukrainian and foreign audiences alike, they helped amplify official strategic narratives of the war and participated in producing real-time narratives by functioning as new kinds of narrative intermediaries (Hellman & Wagnsson, 2015; Zhabotynska & Velivchenko, 2019). Influencers constructed themselves as the face of a brave, united Ukraine, a courageous nation fighting the aggressor – an imperialist and terrorizing enemy. Their calls for Ukrainians and their allies to support the army, participate in the volunteering effort, and cancel the culture of the occupiers repeated the Ukrainian war narratives (Zakharchenko, 2022) while also extending their role beyond the information domain to activism and crowdfunding the war (Boichak, 2017). The influencers participated in the national identity construction project by promoting Ukrainian cul-

ture, literature, and art and informing or reminding their followers of "our" common history, thereby strengthening the nationalist narrative of Ukraine (Kiryukhin, 2015).

As a platform, Instagram is a prime example of our increasingly visual digital culture, and its affordances, features, and conventions impact the way influencers communicate and disseminate information (Leaver et al., 2020). Influencers are bound by platform affordances and attune their patriotic content to Instagram aesthetics, vernaculars, and stylistic conventions. In our analysis, the combination of the typical aesthetics of Instagram influencer culture and nationalism came together in the patriotic inspirational role – that is, influencers expressed patriotism and discussed the war using subtle signs within the traditional visual genres of Instagram. In the affective economy (Ahmed, 2004b), patriotic inspirational content gains power from the collective – shared affects that accumulate value through the repetition of affective signs and figures. Familiar images evoke a feeling of unity and personal stories, while collective memories from history tie current events to a shared past (Miskimmon et al., 2013). At the same time, they also project aspirations for a glorious and peaceful future that will arrive after the war. A specific feature of contemporary Ukrainian Instagram is the strong presence of influencers who have emigrated or are in exile. While influencers in Ukraine reminded their audiences outside Ukraine that the war was not over, those residing in other countries also seemed to remind their followers in Ukraine that *they* had not forgotten.

Most lifestyle influencers combined war-related content with light, entertaining everyday lifestyle and commercial content. The patriotic and the political coexisted with the commercial. Such a smooth coexistence has been shown to be typical for influencers addressing social, meaningful issues (Riedl et al., 2021) as well as those promoting radical ideological positions (Leidig, 2023). The war was often present in influencers' posts as minor signs, such as a pin with a Ukrainian flag on a jacket, a sticker on a laptop, or text on a T-shirt. While showing everyday life in Ukrainian cities, influencers in Ukraine also reminded their audiences that life goes on despite the constant presence of the war. Indeed, apart from living, the influencers also had to make a living. Their survey responses also showed how they strived to combine their role as disseminators in the information war with more traditional modes of being influencers. While the majority reported that their commercial collaborations had declined as a result of the invasion, some experienced the opposite. Eight reported that they had collaborated with Ukrainian NGOs or official/state actors after the invasion. A year and a half after the Russian full-scale invasion, some Instagram influencers had returned to their commercial (or lifestyle) activities and combined them with occasional war-related content.

The art of being authentic, relatable, and commercially friendly at the same time is difficult in times of peace and requires further balancing in times of war. Authenticity on commercial social media has long been a subject of discussion (e.g. Pöyry et al., 2019; Tolson, 2010), but it is framed by a profound tension in Ukraine. In Instagram's hyper-commercial space, influencers cultivate authenticity, appearing real while being extremely produced. During the war, influencers have had to adapt to the new reality and their new roles. Being authentic and real means combining the harsh reality of war with polished brand content, making war *consumable.* Despite the tremendous hardships the industry has faced, Ukrainian brands have gained global fame, and some Ukrainian influencers have reached new international audiences (Hawkins & Newbold, 2023). The Ukrainian influencer marketing scene has developed uniquely amid the war by bringing the political and commercial together. In a way, taking a stance during the conflict may have served the business interests of both companies and individual influencers.

6 Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore how Ukrainian influencers have participated in the production and projection of strategic narratives and engaged in shaping the nation's collective memory and national identity in a time of war. By analysing Ukrainian influencers' Instagram content and contextualizing it using data collected from an online questionnaire, we showed how the influencers have adapted to the war and adopted new roles through their communication. We identified four specific yet overlapping roles – namely, those of information disseminators, public activists, war diarists, and patriotic inspirers. While engaging with these communicative roles, they have also become mediators of shared affects and strategic narratives. By fusing the visual and affective genres of Instagram with war-related content and strategic narratives, they have constructed a shared past and hopeful future on the mediated battlefield of Instagram. The influencers, thus, have acted not only as narrative intermediaries who have amplified the official narrative of a brave united Ukraine fighting the enemy to convince their followers – locally and globally – of the importance of continuing to support Ukraine, but also as patriotic inspirers who have promoted national romantic imagery among their Ukrainian followers. Furthermore, while showing normal life amid a war that is largely not present in the global mainstream media, the influencers have added a new layer of everydayness to their country's official image – that is, Ukraine is a country at war, but not just a country at war. Social media influencers are, at the same time, ordinary and extraordinary – regular people with a wide or dedicated audience on social media. In today's participatory war, they have been transforming

their professionalism and persuasion skills acquired in marketing into the field of global politics.

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