

Influencers

*Navigating platforms, expertise, branding,
and authenticity*

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Introduction

Today's influencers wield pervasive social, cultural, political, and economic power through visibility on their "native" social media platforms and in a wide range of other contexts. Sustained visibility thus constitutes their main currency. However, "visibility labour" (Abidin, 2016) not only designates influencers but also shapes contemporary media and culture in a wider sense. This underscores how influencers both epitomise and augment key characteristics of our time: The "influence" in influencers has become still more pronounced, and their promotional logic of seeking visibility through authenticity and relatability has trickled down into many other domains.

Influencers not only post about their everyday lives but also target segmented audiences and strategically align their content with their perception of how platforms operate. By bridging mainstream culture and subcultures, influencers play a prominent role in bringing niche perspectives into broader cultural and political conversations. Influencers blur the lines between expertise and opinion, as well as between knowledge dissemination and profit-driven business models, as they propagate segmented worldviews in engaging and entertaining ways. In doing so, they reconfigure both *how* we talk and *what* we talk about in today's mediated public sphere.

To a still larger degree, influencers partake prominently in discussions across diverse societal arenas, serving as role models, framing debates, and providing guidance within a variety of genres – from make-up to health and from fashion to climate politics. They gain access to information streams that were previously reserved for actors performing a professional role within institutions and organisations and are featured as special guests at high-profile cultural and political events. A recent example is the invitation of influencers to attend White House press briefings, which used to be a privilege only enjoyed by legacy news media. Influencers transform the areas they engage with from within. And they transform how other actors within these areas operate, as they adhere to the logics of “influencer creep”, to use Sophie Bishop’s (2023) concept. The branding of a sellable authentic self to optimise and monetise visibility not only defines influencer culture; it “creeps” into our broader culture. Politicians perform sketches on TikTok, religious groups push their beliefs through content custom-made for social media platforms, and European royalties have embraced influencer communication by inviting their social media followers behind the scenes of their (far from ordinary) everyday lives. Ultimately, it is not just influencers themselves but also influencer tactics and practices that have become pervasive in today’s society.

The articles included in this issue investigate how influencers take central stage in our contemporary culture. This introduction sets the scene by presenting the platforms, expertise, branding, and authenticity of influencers: We first outline how influencers are both empowered and constrained by their perceptions of algorithms and platforms, before focusing on how they assume popular forms of expertise outside traditional institutions of expertise and looking into their communicative strategies of self-branding and authenticity. In the last section, we introduce the contributions of this issue. The eight articles discuss influencer agencies and how influencers operate within various niches and subcultures, including financial investments, ethical fashion, cultures surrounding grief, literary criticism, political advocacy, gendered beauty norms, and right-wing masculine communities.

Algorithms and the struggle for visibility

Influencer culture has evolved from practices developed by micro-celebrities from the late 2000s, in which influencers construct narratives, identities, and values that are recognisable and desirable to followers. Prominent influencers are managed by agencies and create themselves as brands by performing “authentic” scenes from their relatable ordinary or admirable extraordinary lives. Some influencers promote commodity goods to monetise on these self-branding strategies (Jerslev & Mortensen, 2023: 336). Others receive compensation from social media networks, such as YouTube, relative to the number of likes and followers they generate. Meanwhile, a different group of influencers do not subscribe to commercial business models; they are driven by social and political objectives and use their platform visibility to gain impact within these areas (Lewis, 2020;

Riedl et al., 2023). Regardless of their business models and driving forces, what matters most is the “visibility mandate” (Duffy & Hund, 2019).

The degree of visibility amounts to the degree of revenue. However, visibility is determined by a range of factors governed by platform algorithms, which are not only difficult to understand but are also unpredictable. As Bishop (2019: 2591) has described it, “the increasingly algorithmic nature of content distribution” places influencers in a field of tension between reciprocity, agency, control, and multiple forms of strategic work. This requires constant monitoring and self-monitoring in accordance with the (perceived) logics of algorithms, the essence of which is formulated by Kelley Cotter (2019: 896): “By establishing the conditions by which social media users are seen, algorithms serve as disciplinary apparatuses that prescribe participatory norms”.

A growing body of literature on the fast-expanding influencer industry deals with how influencers are concerned with and attempt to understand the algorithmic curation of data (Bishop, 2019; Hund, 2023; Leaver et al., 2020). Theoretically, this body of research relies on general cultural and technology studies, which address algorithms as disciplinary techniques and technologies for categorisation and ranking but also as cultural tropes and discursive framings. The “notion” of algorithms has become associated with social power (Beer, 2017) and the ways of thinking about algorithms an “imaginary” (Bucher, 2012).

This extended literature, which is often based on qualitative data such as interviews, analyses the power struggles between influencers and their perceptions of algorithms in relation to influencer industries and platforms. A group of studies have focused on influencers’ (lack of) knowledge regarding how algorithms work (Bucher, 2012; Cotter, 2019; Duffy & Meisner, 2023; Hund, 2023; Ritter, 2024). These studies have shown how influencers consider algorithms an invisible, yet omnipresent and omnipotent monster-like agent, which they must conquer to secure continuous visibility and withstand the risks and precarity inherent in making a living out of being an influencer (e.g., Bishop, 2019; Bucher, 2017; van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021).

Another group of studies have described how influencers test the algorithmic rankings of platforms in order to increase their power. They experiment to figure out the answers to questions concerning the metrics lying behind YouTube’s recommender system, Instagram’s timeline-curation, or Facebook’s choice of stories (Abidin, 2020; Bishop, 2019, 2020; Bucher, 2017; Duffy & Meisner, 2023; Leaver et al., 2020; Ritter, 2024). Across these studies, the interviewed influencers have almost unanimously expressed how they want to be better at “playing the visibility game” (Cotter, 2019). Their problem is that they do not know the rules of the game and, moreover, those rules change without warning. As Tarletan Gillespie (2014: 178) has eloquently put it, “algorithms can be easily, instantly, radically, and invisibly changed”.

Loes van Driel and Delia Dumitrica’s (2021) study of travel influencers is an apt example of the dread of invisibility and the constant struggle to both comply with what they think their followers might want and attempt to figure out the ranking systems of platform algorithms. In the end, the travel influencers

acknowledged that their evaluation of success in terms of follower reach might result in their images more and more resembling ordinary travel destination advertisements. This exemplifies how balancing self-branding, authenticity, and platform optimisation strategies may lead to a distance from followers instead of connection through intimacy and affect. It also shows the feelings of strain experienced by influencers, as they are faced with the opaque power of algorithms and the enduring attention to metrics, to cope with “the threat of invisibility” (Bucher, 2012) instead of “doing what makes me happy” (Hund, 2023: 53).

Crucially, as some algorithm studies argue, influencers “playing the game” affects how the rules change. Gillespie, for example, has discussed what he sees as an intricate relationship between users and the underlying ranking logic of platforms, noting that it is “of course, a moving target, because algorithms change, and the user populations and activities they encounter change as well” (Gillespie, 2014: 183). Algorithmic power lies in how algorithms order, systematise, and repeat – even enhance – existing patterns, be they gendered or racial, for example, as David Beer (2017) wrote. However, Beer’s argument also accords with points presented by Tarleton Gillespie (2014), Kelley Cotter (2019), and Taina Bucher (2017), among others, that algorithms are not only an impenetrable, powerful “black box” “out there”, but culturally and socially architected from the digital traces users have left behind. As Bucher (2017: 42) phrased it, “while algorithms certainly do things to people, people also do things to algorithms”.

Platform algorithms are powerful players, but their mechanised ranking of data in accordance with impenetrable criteria of relevance does not come out of the blue. Gillespie (2014: 183) referred to a “recursive loop between the calculations of the algorithm and the ‘calculations’ of people”. In addition, he argued that it is important to not focus on understanding algorithms in terms of their “effect” on people, but rather on the “multidimensional ‘entanglement’ between algorithms put into practice and the social tactics of users who take them up” (Gillespie, 2014: 183). Accordingly, “algorithms are made and remade in every instance of their use because every click, every query, changes the tool incrementally” (Gillespie, 2014: 173). However, what “people do with algorithms” remains hidden, and the agency and autonomy of influencers are continuously contested by the technological power of platforms and the underlying business models of social media.

As a corollary to the pervasive experience of algorithmic opacity, influencers functioning as self-proclaimed “algorithmic experts” have entered the field. They act as intermediaries, described by Bishop (2020: 1) as,

self-styled algorithmic “experts” who build brands, accumulate notoriety, and piece together careers by selling theorizations of algorithmic visibility on YouTube to aspiring and established creators.

Along these lines, Bishop has criticised two highly visible male algorithmic experts on YouTube who legitimise themselves as trustworthy influencers by continuously referring to how their expertise encompasses “objective” and

“hard” data. She argued that these self-asserted experts’ knowledge and analysis of how algorithms work depart from their cultural and individual assumptions and interpretations and are, in this regard, no different from other presentations of data. Accordingly, she designates their expertise as “algorithmic lore”, which is “a mix of data-informed assumptions that are weaved into a subjective narrative” (Bishop, 2020: 1) and that ultimately adheres to YouTube’s optimisation strategies. It is noteworthy, as Bishop has thoroughly argued, that this algorithmic expertise is gendered. This point expands on Bishop’s earlier work on the gendering of YouTube’s algorithm. It enhances the existing gendered bias in terms of visibility and invisibility and, likewise, the “cultural content is highly gendered on YouTube” (Bishop, 2018: 70).

All in all, algorithms seem to function as a disciplinary technique in different ways: They are an imaginary that accompanies influencers in their decision-making regarding what to post; a visibility machine which has economic power over influencers; and a platform technology that, so to speak, uses, organises, and intensifies existing cultural and social patterns.

Experts outside institutions of expertise

Influencers cover a great span of “popular expertise” (Lewis, 2008, 2010) and exert an influence on significant areas such as politics, news, finance, parenthood, fashion, and everyday culture. By creating a segmentation of perspectives and opinions, influencers have in recent years contributed to fragmentation and polarisation, while also offering more possibilities for subcultures to form and thrive across linguistic and regional divides. A conspicuous case in point is the promotion of far-right ideologies surrounding masculinity and femininity, which furthers the increasingly polarised opinions and representations of gender. For example, far-right female influencers project a binary view on gender and traditional family values as a form of empowerment and agency (Askanius, 2022; Bauer, 2024). Other influencers have fuelled alternative health ideas, crossing the line into conspiracy theories and playing a key part in the anti-vax movement during the Covid-19 pandemic (Baker, 2022; Mortensen & Kristensen, 2023). Influencers also contribute to shaping war narratives by reporting from their daily life in conflict zones (Divon & Krutrök, 2023), just as they disseminate knowledge about the environment and sustainability (Schmuck et al., 2022) and issues related to migrant life (Turkewitz, 2023). Meanwhile, many influencers perform catchy dances or dead-pan, comical scenes for young users on TikTok, who consume entertainment and information largely driven by promotional and commercial interests, even if they may also find role models to help reflect and refine their identities. The expertise enacted by influencers cover various combinations of being role models, inspirators, educators, agitators, brand ambassadors, and marketers.

Influencers do not gain legitimacy, voice, and visibility through traditional hierarchies or institutional roles but rather exert an influence based on “popular” and “ordinary” expertise (Lewis, 2008, 2010). The authority assumed by

“knowledge influencers”, to use Jessica Maddox’s (2023) term, is coupled to how trustworthy and relatable they are perceived to be. In this way, they strongly contrast conventional authorities and experts such as democratically elected politicians, medical doctors, civil servants, government officials, academics within universities and private companies, and so on. Knowledge influencers achieve this status through both formal and informal expertise. Formal expertise refers to education or a professional track record, which some knowledge influencers simultaneously use to maintain careers within traditional institutions or organisations of knowledge. Informal expertise covers “a relevant personal feature that may enhance the influencer’s perceived credibility and the message efficiency” (Nouira & Boukamcha, 2024: 1263–1264) and is linked to their personal success, narrative, and life experiences, which is often presented as a compelling before-and-after story: They overcame challenges, transformed themselves, and are now able to channel their “main character energy” (Chayka, 2021).

As self-styled and -proclaimed experts, influencers have “become new opinion leaders serving as brand ambassadors and sources of information” (Nouira & Boukamcha, 2024: 1261). They thus compete with conventional experts and authorities as well as with legacy news media – a foundational pillar of democracy. However, unlike traditional experts and journalists, they not only report news and facts but often act as active participants who contribute to shaping the field in question. For example, fashion and lifestyle influencers inform about the latest tendencies while also profiting from endorsement marketing and acting as brand ambassadors. Financial influencers – or finfluencers – not only change “the medium of financial advice; they are transforming its very nature”, that is, investment as a field (Hayes & Ben-Shmuel, 2024: 479). Similarly, political influencers communicate about and take part in forming political tendencies.

Whether knowledge influencers draw on formal or informal expertise, they rely on “communicating information to build a brand” (Maddox, 2023: 2726). They practice “calibrated expertise” and a “neoliberal self-presentation and information-sharing strategy” that leverages the algorithms and affordances of platforms (Maddox, 2023: 2744). Knowledge influencers possess dual expertise as an influencer and as an expert in a specific field. However, for the sake of being relatable and authentic, their expertise as influencers is usually downplayed, in contrast to their specialised expertise. Influencers build their authority through being or performing their authentic, accessible, and relatable selves as experts. In their performances of expertise, they “must appear to be true” to themselves, while simultaneously conveying in implicit and explicit ways that their following “could also achieve such status” (Maddox, 2023: 2729).

By being experts outside of institutions, influencers operate in the muddy waters created by what W. Lance Bennett and Steven Livingston (2020: 4) have described as the ongoing “crisis of legitimacy of authoritative institutions”, which contributes to a “democratic disruption”. Trust is generally declining in traditional forms of expertise, along with the authorities, institutions, and organisations associated with them (Mortensen & Kristensen, 2023). Meanwhile, knowledge influencers have carved out a space for themselves, as much of the

“distrust against experts lies in the *institution*, not necessarily the individual [emphasis original]”, according to the neoliberal tendency of “eschewing the systemic in favour of the individual” (Maddox, 2023: 2730). As Maddox (2023: 2727) has rightly asserted, influencers have emerged at a moment in history when they neatly “intersect with the dominant currents of neoliberalism and populist anti-intellectualism”. While influencers have consolidated themselves as key mainstream financial, cultural, social, and political figures, many continue to align with the widespread sentiment of anti-elitism and anti-establishment.

An example from the political realm illustrates how knowledge influencers blur boundaries between reporting on and impacting their field, and how they inhabit a paradoxical space between being inside and outside of “the establishment”. The conservative American influencer Charlie Kirk boasts a following of 5.6 million on TikTok, nearly 5 million on Instagram, 4.5 million on X, and almost 3 million on YouTube. Kirk accompanied Donald Trump Jr. on a highly publicised visit to Greenland in January 2025 related to President Donald J. Trump’s ambition to acquire this self-governing island within the Danish realm. Kirk later posted content from Greenland, including a video with a telling title: “I Went to Greenland and Learned Why We Need to Make It State 51”. In this video, featuring Greenlanders wearing Maga hats, Kirk claims that the local population had conveyed to Trump Jr. and his entourage that they “can’t stand their current Danish masters” (Charlie Kirk, 2025). This video sparked many comments, including several that contested his expertise and legitimacy: “You were there for three hours – THREE HOURS – and now you suddenly claim to be an expert on Greenland”. Kirk is neither democratically elected nor appointed to any official position, yet he is used by the American presidency as a political actor who, in his capacity as an influencer, blends traditional roles of reporter, tourist, diplomat, politician, and financial stakeholder.

Knowledge influencers go far beyond “arbitrating tastes and preferences” to impacting “how people see themselves” (Herther, 2021: 24) and behave, as well as how perceptions and opinions are formed. As experts outside of traditional institutions of expertise and authorities outside of formal hierarchies, their impact lies in a mix of networking, branding, persuasion, and advocacy. Moreover, it is based on the commercial business models of platforms, meaning that influencers are essentially commodities selling other commodities, and therefore far from neutral or objective experts. In their capitalist entrepreneurship, they combine non-institutional forms of knowledge, experience, and opinion with financial gain and self-branding.

The branded self

“Practices of personal branding are ongoing and involve a whole way of life”, Alison Hearn (2008: 205) proposed in the late 2000s. Such arguments concerning the branded self as a “site for the extraction of value” (Hearn, 2008: 199) testify to how today’s ubiquitous self-branding strategies are neither invented by social media nor by influencers, even though they have fine-tuned and proliferated

these strategies. Hearn's reflections followed in the wake of a range of studies from the beginning of the 1990s and onwards about self-branding, marketing, and the commodification of culture. The most prominent of these is Andrew Wernick's book-length discussion of the "culture of universal promotion", in which we are all "promotional subjects", and the self "continually produces itself for competitive circulation" (Wernick, 1991: 191–193). Later in the 1990s, the notion of the branded self was taken up by business management writer Tom Peters (1997) and enthusiastically hailed as "the head marketer for the brand called You". All you need, he argued, is to acquire the skills to stand out, be distinct, and to know that whatever you do, it is automatically part of a branding strategy: "It is that simple – and that hard. And that inescapable" (Peters, 1997).

Contemporary culture and the branding of self was similarly characterised by Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012) more than a decade later. However, she took a critical perspective which included the problematisation of postfeminist self-branding and empowerment strategies. Building a self-brand, she wrote, "is about building an affective, authentic relationship with a consumer, one based – just like a relationship between two people – on the accumulation of memories, emotions, personal narratives, and expectations" (Banet-Weiser, 2012: 8). However, with developments in media and capitalist cultures of promotion, most societal spaces (geographical, artistic, political, psychological, etc.) have been colonised and commercialised by branded ways of thinking. Hence, Banet-Weiser (2012: 5) proposed a broader diagnosis of contemporary (media) culture:

This transformation of culture of everyday living into brand culture signals a broader shift, from "authentic" culture to the branding of authenticity. Contemporary brand cultures are so thoroughly imbricated with culture at large that they become indistinguishable from it.

Accordingly, as Banet-Weiser (2012: 11) put it: "authenticity *itself* is a brand [emphasis original]" – a point to which we return in the next section.

Khamis, Ang, and Welling (2017: 205) continued the discussion of the ubiquitously branded self by connecting it to influencers and arguing that they had contributed to "the near-total extension of marketing logic and language into more areas of contemporary social life". The authors thus emphasised that, while self-branding strategies are not exclusive to social media and influencers, the visibility-creating and attention-seeking communicative strategies contributed to the intensification of "a cultural milieu increasingly primed for self-promotion" (Khamis et al., 2017: 205), imbued, as already mentioned, with neoliberal self-optimisation rhetorics (Baer, 2016) and main-character narratives.

However, the uniqueness and "triumphant individualism" (Khamis et al., 2017: 205) defining influencers may be hard to achieve within a social media logic where singularity and originality are key ingredients in the making of trustworthiness but where "algorithmic ranking determines who and what gains visibility" (Cotter, 2019: 896). This is the contradictory waters influencers must navigate, and in which they must brand themselves.

Performance and negotiation of authenticity

Authenticity “underpins influencer economies” (Arriagada & Bishop, 2021: 569) as its most valuable commodity, which promises relatability and closeness in exchange for followers’ affective attachments. The comprehensive literature about the commodification of authenticity in influencer culture emphasises that it is a complex and “messy” concept, difficult to define (Arriagada & Bishop, 2021; Banet-Weiser, 2012, 2021; Enli, 2015; Pooley, 2010). As a social and communicative ideal (Duffy & Hund, 2019) and the prime contributor to “influencer imaginaries” (Arriagada & Bishop, 2021), the claim to authenticity – as demand, as feeling, as “guiding ethical principle” (Wellman et al., 2020) – is everywhere on social media. The successful performance of an authentic self is key to monetising visibility for influencers and optimising the number of followers, which serves as a clear sign of successful self-branding strategies.

However, the construction of authenticity, or what Maares, Banjac, and Hanusch (2021) have called “authenticity labour”, is a hard task in a field where negotiations between influencers, their followers, their sponsors, and advertisers are persistent and where the algorithmic logic of the platform is fraught with ambiguities and tensions. In order to successfully perform sincerity, trustworthiness, and relatability, influencers must discursively juggle contestable, contradictory spaces between truth and fake (Heřmanová, 2022); authenticity and promotion (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021); self-promotion and expressions of vulnerability (Duffy & Hund, 2019); professionalism and amateurism (Abidin, 2017; Jerslev, 2016); labour and leisure (Duffy, 2017); naturalness and performance; as well as intimacy and strategic promotion (Jerslev & Mortensen, 2016). Jeff Pooley (2010) has thus precisely coined this oxymoronic nature of the concept within influencer culture as “calculated authenticity”. Similarly, van Driel and Dumitrica (2021) have used the term “strategic authenticity”. Moreover, the gradual professionalisation of influencer communication has led Abidin (2017) to launch yet another oxymoron, “calibrated amateurism” – that is, successfully manufacturing casualness and improvisation to appear recognisable, relatable, and reachable.

Importantly, this concept of authenticity did not arise from the many reflections on its ambiguities and complexities within influencer studies. It goes back at least to Lionel Trilling’s (1972) account for the cultural historical development of the terms sincerity and authenticity, as well as Arlie Hochschild’s (1983/2003) reflections on why authenticity has replaced sincerity as a sought-after value in a culture increasingly centred on the commercialisation and strategic management of emotions. Trilling (1972: 2) argued that sincerity lost its aura when its meaning changed from describing a moral “quality of the self” into being understood merely as a means to an end. Following in Trilling’s footsteps, Hochschild explained the ubiquitous presence of authenticity by pointing out that the branding of everything, along with the decline of cultural values such as closeness and community during the last century, had created a longing for what is missing: “The more the heart is managed, the more we value the unmanaged heart” (Hochschild, 2003: 192). The unmanaged is authentic, and along these

lines, the value of authenticity as a precious commodity in influencer culture lies in how it offers access to the rare “real”, the un-rehearsed, and the truthful.

From the twentieth century, a steady stream of genres have emerged that project experiences of authenticity, connectedness, and “the real”. The “ever shifting language and aesthetic of ‘realness’” (Hund, 2023: 7) changes historically and with media and genre; as Marwick and boyd (2011: 124) wrote: “what we consider authentic constantly changes, and what symbols or signifiers mark a thing as authentic or inauthentic differ contextually”. What might be termed “authenticity genres” create an impression of realness and immediacy that influencers both draw on and develop. For instance, in live broadcasts of sports events, the atmosphere of spontaneity and immediacy is enhanced by the heated voice of commentators, who take on a dual role as expert and emotionally engaged audience member. Similarly, the 1960s direct cinema documentary movement aimed to create closeness and capture raw reality by avoiding voice-over, music, and interviews, relying instead on fly-on-the-wall camera techniques. Early reality-TV played with the idea of the unscripted by provoking affective outbursts, along with confessional-style interviews seemingly addressing viewers directly. Radio and podcast genres also evoke authenticity, with the modulation of the voice and the use of sound creating the feeling of listening in on an intimate, unscripted conversation. Live entertainment events such as game show finales and transnational mega-events like the Olympics or the Eurovision Song Contest create an affective atmosphere of uncertainty when the outcome is still undecided, heightening the sense of the here and now (Frandsen et al., 2022). Photographic snapshots, such as paparazzi images, comprise another genre projecting the feeling of authenticity, seemingly capturing behind-the-scenes moments that give the impression of real, unposed events (Mortensen & Jerslev, 2014). Similarly, YouTube genres like drama videos, crying vlogs, negative-affect vlogs, coming-out videos, and apology vlogs showcase intimate and emotionally charged confessions, presented as direct addresses to viewers (see, e.g., Berryman & Kavka, 2018; Lewis & Christin, 2022). Berryman and Kavka (2018) suggested that the more negative or personal the content, the more “real” it is perceived to be, with audiences drawn to the raw, unfiltered nature of these emotional expressions.

This short media historical overview points to how influencers have appropriated strategies from existing authenticity genres and adapted them to the communicative affordances of social media platforms. To further understand the authenticity strategies employed by influencers over the past decade, Gunn Enli’s book, *Mediated Authenticity: How the Media Construct Reality*, provides a helpful point of departure in its outline of seven characteristics of mediated authenticity (Enli, 2015: 136–137): 1) predictability (consistency in self-performance); 2) spontaneity (lack of staging); 3) immediacy (a heightened sense of togetherness); 4) confession (affect-laden disclosure of intimate backstage information); 5) ordinariness (everyday relatability); 6) ambivalence (being ordinary through showing insecurities); and 7) imperfection (amateurish aesthetics and the revelation of flaws and mishaps). To the seven characteristics of mediated

authenticity proposed by Enli, we would like to add another four in the context of influencer culture. They include originality, that is, creating a distinctive persona and carefully using hashtagging (like #unfiltered or #nofilter; see also Heřmanová, 2022). Another distinct marker of authenticity is direct address to followers in a way that mimics dialogue by asking them questions and seeking their opinions. Finally, influencers evoke authenticity by advocating for influencer ethics (Borchers & Enke, 2022) by claiming in their posts, for example, that they want to be true to themselves and, consequently, to their followers (Hund, 2023; Maares et al., 2021; Wellman et al., 2020), or by arguing that they would never promote products that do not match their influencer persona (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021; Wellman et al., 2020). Which combination of these authenticity strategies influencers find most wise to cultivate depends on genre and platform.

However, influencers may end up feeling restricted or even imprisoned by employing authenticity as a pervasive and multifaceted strategy: consistency may lead to sameness and repetition; spontaneity may interfere with making appointments of sponsorships and advertisements; distinctiveness may slowly adopt mainstream aesthetic strategies; and ordinariness and closeness may be harder to construct the more visibility the influencer obtains. Selling authenticity is strategic work taking place in a commodified field of tension, in which influencers must – or at least think they must – adapt to their idea of what their followers want. Consequently, authenticity is always relative and negotiable. Authenticity is only authenticity when experienced by an audience or followers as authentic – and only becomes authentic when accepted as such (Jerslev & Mortensen, 2018; Scannell, 1996). Influencers have to study comments and likes carefully to try to understand the working of algorithmic rankings and recommendations, and at the same time they must maintain consistency in their persona construction. Authenticity labour is precarious because it involves different actors who must agree upon the ways in which authenticity can be performed and what authenticity feels and looks like.

Content

The eight articles included in this issue develop theoretical frameworks and empirical studies on how influencers traverse platforms, popular expertise, branding, and authenticity in different ways and within different areas. The issue opens with the article “Influencer autonomy: Navigating authenticity, agencies, and algorithms”, by Vilde Schanke Sundet, Kari Steen-Johnsen, and Mads Møller Tommerup Andersen, which takes an overall perspective on the balance between influencers’ feelings of autonomy and the different constraints inflicted upon them. Sundet, Steen-Johnsen, and Andersen define this autonomy as the sense of control and self-governing freedom that influencers experience in their everyday life and work, and they argue that by focusing on autonomy, they are able to shed light on both structures and actors in the analysis of influencers’ work life. Accordingly, they ask how autonomy is perceived at the intersection of

the cultural (authenticity discourses), the technological (algorithm curation), and the economic (influencer agencies). The article is based on interviews with three key groups of actors: 1) Norwegian influencers, who have first-hand experience with the challenges to autonomy; 2) influencer agencies and managers who shape and sell the careers of influencers; and 3) legacy media working with content production targeted at young people. Findings from the empirical study show that cultural, technological, and economic structures at once limit and enable the autonomy of influencers. Sundet, Steen-Johnsen, and Andersen conclude that the balance between autonomy and constraints varies – even though most of the interviewed influencers think of themselves as autonomous and free.

The remaining seven articles offer discussions of influencers who, having assumed the part of role models, popular experts, or opinion-makers, exert their influence in various niches and subcultures. Andreas Gregersen and Jacob Ørmen, in their article “The expertise of financial influencers and strategies of calibration towards monetisation”, explore financial influencers – or finfluencers – who offer advice and strategies related to the stock market and investments. Taking as their point of departure a theoretical framework of popular expertise and emerging forms of authority, as well as an analysis of empirical cases from Denmark, Gregersen and Ørmen develop a typology of four prevalent finfluencer strategies: 1) influencer classic, 2) academy operator, 3) platformised trader, and 4) veiled promoter. These four strategies represent different ways for finfluencers to calibrate their expertise and communicative style towards monetising various services and products for distinct groups of users, ranging from investment tips to concealed pyramid schemes. Across these strategies, finfluencers nurture gendered subtypes, aligning with platform logics to varying degrees (but always with consumer society), and establishing authority through expertise. Gregersen and Ørmen conclude that finfluencers epitomise the challenges that influencers pose to conventional notions of expertise.

Heidi Hirsto and Cecilia Hjerppe also study influencers and investment in their article, “Relevance, commitment, and impact: Aspirational formulations of investing-related influencer collaborations in the context of ethical fashion”. They focus on sustainable fashion and what they refer to as “investing-related collaborations”, that is, influencers investing in a company or promoting it as an investment opportunity. Based on influencer communication studies concerned with the promotional and the political, Hirsto and Hjerppe conduct a discourse analysis of two cases where fashion and lifestyle influencers collaborate on a campaign with two ethical fashion companies. The authors demonstrate how the influencers act as funders, owners, and activists in their collaboration with the two companies, where they not only promote sustainable fashion but also promote investment in these companies as meaningful consumption. Recurrent arguments presented by the influencers for the importance of this work at the intersection of the economic, the ethical, and the social include the novelty of this engagement, investment-based collaborations as a serious and lasting commitment, and finally, the importance of making an impact by funding the companies’ ethical work. Hirsto and Hjerppe conclude by suggesting that in the

context of influencer studies and fashion, their article contributes to the nascent field of the promotional politics of influencer communication.

In the article “Grief labour on Instagram: Resilient influencers and platformed grief”, Anu A. Harju and Linda Pentikäinen explore how female influencers engage in practices of grieving on Instagram. Such influencers share their personal experiences of grief – how they deal with vulnerabilities and come out on the other side as resilient female subjects. The authors refer to this as “grief labour”, a process that transforms subjective vulnerability into strength by extensive work on the self. These influencers offer practical advice to their followers regarding how to embark on the “grief journey” and turn into empowered individuals; as such, they commodify their own grieving experience. Building on postfeminist studies and analysis of 30 English-speaking female influencers on Instagram, of which three were selected as core examples, Harju and Pentikäinen show that the influencers’ “grief journey” took a similar narrative course. They go from being absorbed in grief, to mobilising some self-discipline, to working mentally and physically on establishing the resilient self, to finally being able to offer advice and guidance to others. Harju and Pentikäinen conclude that their analysis simultaneously shows the commercialisation of grief on Instagram and the postfeminist ethos that grief influencers adhere to.

In the article “When influencer logic and news logic converge in the scandalisation of an influencer: The exposure of literary critic and influencer Katherine Diez’s plagiarism”, Nete Nørgaard Kristensen and Anne Jerslev analyse the unfolding of an influencer scandal: the extensively media-covered case of Danish influencer and literary critic Katherine Diez, who was caught plagiarising some of her reviews in newspapers and on Instagram. Building on classical and newer scandal studies and an outline of Diez’s self-branding strategies as a highly visible and self-confident postfeminist influencer and critic, Kristensen and Jerslev discuss the reason for the uproar across newspapers, magazines, and social media. Borrowing the term “authenticity scandal” from Enli (2015), the authors argue that the strong reactions emerge due to two different logics enhancing one another, that is, influencer logic’s emphasis on the creation of an authentic, genuine, and consistent persona, and news media logic’s emphasis on trustworthiness, fact-checking, and credibility. Based on content analysis of the coverage of the scandal in the news media (mostly repair work), user comments from Reddit (mostly opponents), and Diez’s Instagram (mostly solidaric), Kristensen and Jerslev argue that it was not only the plagiarism that was scandalous. Diez’s deed undermined the communicative rules underlying both news media and social media, thus challenging the foundation of her cross-over persona as both an influencer and a literary critic.

As the title indicates, in her article “Influencing through advocacy: Parents of children with disability giving and seeking support on Instagram”, Stine Liv Johansen analyses how and why parents with disabled children utilise social media. The study builds on literature on social media “sharenting” and political influencers. Based on interviews with six Danish mothers of children with physical and cognitive disabilities, the article shows that they use social media,

and in particular Instagram, for three main purposes: sharing their personal experiences and creating a community with other parents with a similar everyday life; receiving and giving emotional support and sharing practical advice; and advocating for the destigmatisation of disabled children and fighting municipal bureaucracies. Johansen concludes that social media and influencer strategies are used in complex ways by these mothers, for personal storytelling and mutual support but also as a means for advocating social change.

“Reframing masculinity: Male beauty influencers, hybridity, and the digital Pakistani diaspora”, written by Rauha Salam-Salmaoui, Shajee Hassan, and Shazrah Salam, adds a new perspective to the growing body of research on beauty and fashion influencers and gender. Salam-Salmaoui, Hassan, and Salam analyse Pakistani influencer Adnan Zafar, who, in the context of the Pakistani diaspora, challenges gender norms. Based on literature about digital diasporas, digital platforms as “homelands”, and hybridity, as well as understandings of cultural identities and practices as fluid and performative, the article examines how Adnan Zafar subverts traditional Pakistani masculinity norms from his position within the digital diaspora. Salam-Salmaoui, Hassan, and Salam offer a non-Western centric view on influencer culture by analysing how Zafar confronts patriarchal and heteronormative beauty standards, particularly in Pakistani culture, where male beauty engagement is stigmatised as deviant. By investigating Zafar’s strategic persona performance on Instagram for two years, the authors distinguish three themes: 1) Zafar’s redefinition of masculinity through beauty and skincare practices, 2) the mixing of Pakistani and global trends in his persona, and 3) negotiation of the tensions between faith and marketability. Salam-Salmaoui, Hassan, and Salam conclude by emphasising the complexities in Zafar’s disruptions of patriarchal gender norms while working in a capitalist, algorithm-driven media landscape.

Finally, in “‘Heil Sol Brah’: Community-building practices around far-right masculinist influencers”, Joshua Farrell-Molloy and Eviane Leidig look at influencer culture from the perspective of the followers. Farrell-Molloy and Leidig examine how a right-wing bodybuilder community, a dedicated online far-right subculture on X, engages with the messaging of two distinct and very discussed male right-wing influencers, and how these messages were taken up by the followers. Drawing on the concepts “new cults of personality” and “message uptake”, through analysis of the accounts of the right-wing bodybuilder community and its followers, the authors conduct a study of more than 300 memes and images produced and circulated in these communities. Two practices meant to enhance community bonds and idolise the two influencers were detected: One was characterised as the “culting” of the influencers through production of humorous memes and the creation of shared in-group references, and the other as collaborative practices to reproduce and disseminate messages from the influencers. Overall, Farrell-Molloy and Leidig make the case that studying practices of follower engagement is key to understanding how influencers’ appeal is co-created by the influencers and their followers.

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