

Grief labour on Instagram

Resilient influencers and platformed grief

ANU A. HARJU & LINDA PENTIKÄINEN

MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION STUDIES, UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI, FINLAND

ABSTRACT

Drawing on the postfeminist notion of resilience, in this article we explore female influencers in grief who, after losing their spouse, share their practices of grieving on Instagram. We examine how, in the narrations of grief, the grieving self is constructed as a resilient subject able to move forward in the “grief journey” through exercising control at the site of the self. The article shows how reconciling the strain of coping with loss with influencer culture and platform requirements demands significant affective labour. We argue that such grief labour, a concept we introduce in this article, is rooted in the neoliberal regime of control targeted at the self. Utilising a digital media ethnographic design and multimodal content analysis, this study sheds light on influencers’ complex affective practices of resilience in the context of death; furthermore, the study advances knowledge on the normative aspects of platformed grief and further elaborates on the commercialisation of personal grief in the current platform economy.

KEYWORDS: influencer, grief labour, postfeminist practice of resilience, digital media ethnography, Instagram

Introduction

“It’s up to us whether we falter, or open our eyes, appreciate life, and move forward...”

(18 July 2019)

Half a century ago, Philippe Ariès, in his seminal work *Western Attitudes Toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present* (1974), observed the presence of “doctors of grief” who, besides family and friends, assisted people in coping

with grief. Today, however, the bereaved may turn to social media (Arnold et al., 2018). Contemporary grief culture has evolved in tandem with digital media technologies and the related social and cultural changes (Walter, 2014), and death has become increasingly present in our mediated society (Jacobsen, 2021; Sumiala, 2021). Already a decade ago, death studies scholar Tony Walter (2014: 10) noted how, due to mobile media technologies, the widespread uptake of social media could be considered as significant as “urbanisation and industrialisation in changing mourners’ social relationships”, signalling a return to pre-industrial ways of mourning and the return of community. This sentiment has been echoed more recently by Jacobsen, Lund, and Petersen (2021), who argued that despite increased individualisation characterising grief culture today, reflected, for example, in evolving grief-related practices both on social media and elsewhere, the need for collectivity remains.

In the context of today’s commercial social media platforms, Instagram grief influencers, the focus of this study, can be viewed as mediated incarnations of doctors of grief in contemporary society. As digital media continue to reconfigure community for the bereaved (Christensen et al., 2017) as well as others sharing in remembering on various platforms (Döveling et al., 2018), new forms of communicative practices and genres premised on affective narration (Giaxoglou, 2021; Stage & Hougaard, 2018) have emerged. Such platform vernaculars (Gibbs et al., 2014) are shaped not only by the practices adopted by the users, but also by the sociotechnical specificities of the platform. The functionalities of Instagram, for example, emphasise visual communication and a certain aesthetic (Georgakopoulou, 2022; Leaver et al., 2020). In the context of online grief, vernacular expression is furthermore shaped by the social and cultural norms governing expressions of and reactions to grief online (Wagner, 2018; see also Döveling et al., 2018).

Despite growing research on death and grief on social media, research in the specific context of Instagram is still scarce. However, prior studies have explored the communicative aspects and communal potential of image-sharing and the adjoining hashtag use in times of grief (Gibbs et al., 2014; Giaxoglou, 2021; Meese et al., 2015) and how these can also function as memory objects, shaping how the bereaved remember the dead (Thimm & Nehls, 2017). More recently, Fahd (2023) examined the practice of death photography on Instagram visualising infant loss at the moment of birth, illustrating how public sharing of these images functions to destigmatise infant death while affording a new type of community for grieving mothers by making both their grief and the short life of the baby visible.

Influencer research is likewise lacking in studies on grief, even though some studies have shed light on the entanglement of Instagram influencers’ grief practices with the contemporary attention economy. Abidin (2022) has, for example, shown how influencers adapt to the institutional logic of commercial social media while highlighting how public grieving has evolved into *publicity* grieving, where grief-related hashtags are hijacked to promote one’s own brand or celebrity status.

In this article, we address this gap in the literature and draw on postfeminist studies (Gill, 2017; Gill & Kanai, 2019; Gill & Orgad, 2018; McDermott, 2022) to examine female grief influencers on Instagram through the conceptual lens of resilience. The postfeminist notion of resilience is rooted in Rosalind Gill's (2017) understanding of postfeminism as marked by an emphasis on the body, self-surveillance, self-discipline, as well as choice and empowerment. Approaches to resilience have commonly viewed it either as an ability to maintain stability and functionality when faced with difficult circumstances or as an ability to respond positively to adversities (McDermott, 2022).

We set out to examine how the grieving self is constructed as resilient in the female grief influencers' multimodal narrations on Instagram, paying particular attention to the ways in which the influencers seek to balance and reconcile the strain of grief after the loss of their spouse with the demands of influencer culture embedded in and shaped by the platform economy. To better understand the contours of influencers' grief practices, we introduce the notion of *grief labour*, an affective practice of resilience where the focus is on healing the grieving self through intentional work on the self, located somewhere along what influencers call the "grief journey".

The study adds to the understanding of platformed grief by highlighting the dimension of commercialisation of personal grief in the current platform economy. It empirically illustrates how, entwined with platform labour and the related precarities (see, e.g., Duffy et al., 2024), personal grief becomes the object of value extraction through the process of grief labour as well as a tool for self-branding in the influencer economy. In this way, the article offers a contribution not only to media studies but also to death studies by advancing knowledge on commercialisation and instrumentalisation of death and grief. We conclude the article with a discussion of the normative aspects of platformed grief arising from the postfeminist culture of resilience and how this illustrates the workings of neoliberal control infiltrating one of the most private realms of emotional life where the controlling gaze becomes one of self-surveillance.

Vulnerability and resilience in influencer culture

In recent years, feminist theorists (Gill & Kanai, 2019) have highlighted the entanglement of neoliberal capitalism with gendered mediated practices. Gill (2017: 609) has argued that postfeminism operates "as a kind of gendered neoliberalism", spread out and intensified across contemporary culture while becoming increasingly dependent upon a psychological register built around cultivating the "right" kinds of dispositions, such as confidence, resilience, and positive mental attitude, qualities attributed to neoliberal subjectivity. The postfeminist understanding of resilience thus entails highlighting the need for positive thinking, affirmation, and gratitude, where the goal is not only to "bounce back" but to turn difficulties into strength and empowerment (Gill & Orgad, 2018).

In the context of the platform economy, the presence of, if also the demand for, the adoption and display of such upbeat dispositions arising from the neoliberal

demands on the self is well noted in prior research on influencers, who regularly need to engage in emotional labour in an effort to manage the multiple tensions arising from platform-dependent labour (e.g., Duffy et al., 2024; Lehto, 2022; Tiisanen, 2023; Yalın, 2024; see also Calder-Dawe et al., 2021). Influencers, often young women, must navigate a delicate balance between their personal lives and the public networked communities; in addition to personal and social vulnerabilities, influencers also need to manage the platformed vulnerabilities inherent to platformed labour (Duffy et al., 2024).

Often seen as harbingers of the positive and inspirational, influencers are typically linked to self-branding and incorporation of commercial products into narrations of their personal life (Abidin, 2015; Khamis et al., 2016). However, the ability to monetise their online presence or possessing the required technical and self-promotional skills alone is not enough; influencers also need to be able to navigate the algorithmic visibility game (Cotter, 2019) and adhere to the platform ideals of acceptable visuality (Leaver et al., 2020). Furthermore, as highlighted by Scolere and colleagues (2018), influencers must learn to negotiate the material qualities of platforms and their cultural features. This requires adapting self-presentation strategies and personal branding, not least to enhance engagement.

Managing the demands of self-branding thus requires constant work. To foster engagement, influencers often draw on tactics of authenticity, accessibility, and autonomy (Baker & Rojek, 2020). Intimacy can be achieved through “perceived interconnectedness” online (Abidin, 2015) but also through the practice of sharing highly personal content; sharing vulnerable stories makes influencers more approachable through the production of affectively relatable selves (e.g., Kanai, 2019). This is not without problems, however, and the increased visibility comes with increased risk as the distinction between the personal and professional collapse (Duffy et al., 2024; see also Lehto, 2022).

On social media, influencers’ displays of vulnerability are often linked to the logic of resilience. As noted by Yalın (2024), to establish a resilient persona, influencers need to engage not only in affective labour but also self-governance; attempts to control or overcome hardship is where this is most clearly observed. Vulnerability thus functions as the underlying precondition of resilience as it has become a central feature of self-improvement discourses (Ciccone, 2020). As the demand for resilience is increasingly addressed towards women, Gill and Orgad (2018: 479) highlighted how middle-class women “are interpellated as possessing the material and psychological resources to actualise resilience” and in this way become ideal neoliberal subjects. As such, Gill (2017) argued, postfeminism works as a powerful regulatory force.

With grief influencers, grieving is subjected to the platform economy where it becomes entwined with influencer culture in ways that not only commodify grief and the self but also render grief influencers into resilient subjects. In the context of personal loss and tragedy, McDermott’s (2022: 120) concept of suffering resilience is particularly useful, referring to not only being able to overcome but also capitalise on trauma to benefit the social order.

Material and methods

Using digital media ethnography for observation and data collection (Hine, 2015), the empirical material was gathered from Instagram during 2023–2024 and includes content posted prior to this period. We traced posts back to when the death was announced, and moved onward from there. The bio descriptions with mentions of the death of the spouse and often also of “grief journey” or “grief coach” contextualise the accounts. The search and selection of accounts was informed by specific death- and grief-related hashtags (e.g., grief, grief journey, widow, widower, grief coach, loss). The empirical material consists of 30 English-speaking female influencers in grief with 10,000–209,000 followers who, at a relatively young age, have lost their husbands due to unexpected illness or accident. Some of the influencers have young children at home; however, neither age nor family status were used as selection criteria. Likewise, as we used grief-related hashtags as search words, a possible previous influencer status was not a selection criteria, although some had clearly been, for example, lifestyle or mummy influencers, evident in the content posted previous to the death event. Only public accounts which could be classed as influencer accounts, based on the number of followers, were selected.

During the ethnographic observation, certain thematic patterns emerged (e.g., initial shock, turning to exercise, setting up grief coaching services, etc.). When the material reached a saturation point where no new type of content relating to the phenomenon under study emerged, we selected three grief influencers’ accounts, which we considered representative of the empirical material, for a closer qualitative analysis. The material analysed in this study includes all grief-, death-, and loss-related posts from these three influencers (a total of 999 posts). The analysis focused on texts, images, and videos on the posts (Instagram stories are excluded as they are designed to disappear within 24 hours) as well as bio descriptions. Of these three, one was already a lifestyle influencer from before, and the other two became influencers after the death of their spouse.

Digital media ethnography (Hine, 2015; Postill & Pink, 2012) enables the observation of the grief influencers and the tracing of their posts on social media platforms over a longer period of time. This is particularly useful when examining narrations of grief, including the temporal progression regarding coping with grief. Notes were taken during the observation phase on how grief influencers narrate their grief and how this narrative changes, after which a multi-modal content analysis (Serafini & Reid, 2023) – a variation of qualitative content analysis operating within an interpretivist research design framework – was carried out on the selected three cases to delve deeper into the different modalities present within different datasets. Texts have thus been analysed in conjunction with the related audio and visuals. The posts of the three grief influencers were thus categorised thematically, resulting in and reflecting the four phases of the grief journey presented in the analysis.

Research ethics are essential when studying grief-related topics (e.g., Giaxoglou, 2017). On social media, the researcher must consider not only the simul-

taneous public and private nature of the material (see, e.g., Myles et al., 2019), but also whether the research subjects are in a vulnerable position. As stated in the Internet Research Ethical Guidelines (franzke, 2020: 17), “the greater the vulnerability of our subjects, the greater our responsibility and obligation to protect them from likely harms”. Some emotional states, such as grieving, can be considered to place a person in a vulnerable position (franzke, 2020). Even though the influencers in this study have public accounts and can be seen as public actors, permission to use their content has been granted and usernames anonymised. Furthermore, the names of the deceased spouses have been omitted as well as any commercial product names advocated by the influencers.

Re-writing the “grief journey” – capitalising on grief through resilience

The temporal development of the “grief journey”, as narrated by the grief influencers, reveals four overlapping phases from the moment of loss to being a full-fledged grief influencer. The transformation from the position of being newly widowed into an inspirational figure whose guidance others seek is not only reflected in the increasing number of followers but also in the gradual commercialisation of grief visible in the professionalisation of content and self-branding as a grief influencer.

Mobilising the notion of resilience, the analysis unpacks the overlapping phases as follows: 1) the establishment of the grief journey, 2) self-discipline and the shift from initial shock to “not wallowing” in grief, 3) actualising resilience through mental and physical work on the self, and finally, 4) guiding others on the path of healing through inspiration. As a culmination of the transformation of the grieving self, we see the emergence of coaching services and grief-related products (e.g., sportswear), illustrating the professionalisation and commercialisation of personal grief in the wider context of influencer culture. The different phases also shed light on the complex relationship between individualised grief practices and the search for community as carried out on and conditioned by the platform.

“This journey is anything but pretty”

The journey concept is well recognised in influencer studies, where a “compelling narrative revealing [the] transformation from a state of pain and misery to one of success and well-being” (Baker & Rojek, 2020: 60) is key to success. Appearing regularly also in grief influencers’ narratives, the beginning of the journey can also be considered the starting point of self-branding. Through the temporally developing grief journey, influencers’ new lives as influencers *in grief* are narrated and curated into being.

Initially, most of the grief influencers bring up the seeming uncommonness of sharing personal grief online. They motivate their own public grieving as a way to challenge perceived taboos surrounding grieving on social media and the related self-presentation, aiming to diversify what grief “looks like”:

This journey is anything but pretty....it is actually brutal and raw and relentless, but I have no other choice, but to walk through the fire. I wonder what the social media feed would look like if everyone was equally showing the world their pain as much as the beautiful moments? I think it's so important to show both, so people feel less alone. (30 November 2021)

In the accompanying image, the influencer stares directly into the camera, crying. While this can be seen as a display of authenticity used to foster engagement (Baker & Rojek, 2020), producing a sense of authenticity and intimacy requires various forms of affective labour (Berryman & Kavka, 2018; Yalın, 2024; Raun, 2018). Writing about Instagram stories, Georgakopoulou (2022: 267) highlighted how authenticity is in-built in the design that encourages not only imperfect sharing of life-in-the-moments but also deploying “specific genres of small stories so as to anchor the tellings onto the here and now”. These sociotechnical affordances apply more generally to Instagram videos and guide storytelling practices; more importantly, they produce authenticity and grant credibility, as illustrated in the quote above and the description of the image.

Sharing grief online functions as a coping mechanism for the influencers in grief while also providing support to others. Many keep a blog to share their journey which also contributes to building a community of mourners:

Writing has been instrumental in helping me ADAPT after [name] passed away. It's been therapeutic and a way to seek meaning through tragedy. Yet, sharing my story with YOU has given me the love, support and encouragement I needed to start my blog [...]. You can call it optimism, spreading the stoke, a “can-do” attitude, or for me — [name of the blog]. [emphasis original] (2 September 2019)

From the beginning, the posts are coloured by positivity and assurances to others of being allowed to feel “positive” despite grief, even explicitly advocating a “can-do” attitude as in the quote above. The posts echo the postfeminist ideal of facing adversity with positive thinking and, crucially, positive reaction and action.

Interestingly, mentions of resilience start appearing in grief influencers' posts soon after the documentation of their journey begins, often coupled with sentiments of gratitude. Vulnerability discourse, however, as Tiusanen (2023: 3695) has noted, creates “shared experience and an honest affective space” that can be turned into resilience:

I wouldn't wish this journey upon my worst enemy. Yet, grief has taught me valuable lessons about life. By facing grief head-on, I have learned to live more fully, authentically, and with gratitude. ⚡ Ultimately, this journey with grief is also a journey of self discovery. I have greater self-awareness and a profound appreciation for the beauty and fragility of life. Through grief, I have found strength, resilience, and a renewed sense of purpose. (16 August 2023)

Facing grief “head-on”, as the influencer here describes, offers a route to self-discovery; grief becomes a resource for gratitude, allowing experiencing life with a new perspective. Grieving “the right way” is strongly conditioned by the platform, where influencers need to strategically adapt their behaviour to align with algorithmic preferences (Cotter, 2019), for example, which might also demand disclosing highly personal information. It is here that grief influencers start laying the groundwork for the professionalisation of grief through expertise gained from personal experience.

Although often described as a path fraught with setbacks, depictions of the grief journey are typically premised on a happier future, which might, for example, include a new loving relationship. While these mediated grief practices aim to normalise grieving on a social media platform focused on beauty and happiness (i.e., Instagram), they also resist the traditional, more private ways of grieving governed by implicit social rules regarding how to grieve or for how long. In this way, grief influencers are rewriting the “grief journey”, and not only by way of commercialising their own grief, but also by ostensibly exhibiting, embracing, and encouraging resilient ways of grieving and doing this in a highly public way, carving out a space of visibility for new ways of grieving that utilise the mechanisms and logics of influencer culture.

“We are not going to wallow in our grief”

Sharing grief in mediated spaces governed by attention economy and algorithmic logic requires constant emotional labour. Here, “neoliberal feeling rules” (Gill & Kanai, 2019; Kanai, 2019) orient how grief influencers present themselves as grieving subjects in ways agreeable to their followers by performing resilience and positive attitude. As a remedy for avoiding the appearance of wallowing in one’s circumstances, the current positivity ethos posits “intensified work on the self and an ethics of moving on” (Calder-Dawe et al., 2021: 566). Sharing vulnerable stories allows resilience-building by displaying positive reactions to adversity.

Soon after the death event, the grief influencers describe feelings of suffering and loneliness, feeling uncertain about how to cope. They are often mothers left alone with their children, wondering how they will survive (sometimes also financially) after the death of their spouse. Yet, perhaps surprisingly, discussions of inner strength, finding happiness, and ultimately surviving emerge relatively soon, which can be seen as a need to adhere to feeling rules that make grief “fit” in the influencer context. Grief influencers balance between expectations and actual feelings, which can result in multiple emotions within a single post:

Today marks 2 weeks since [name] passed. How are we doing? The overwhelming pain that grief brings is not one that words can adequately describe. [...] But life goes on, we are not going to wallow in our grief. The boys and I feel the waves of emotion, we give ourselves time and space to grieve and then we move forward. [...] This past 14 days have been both healing and incredibly painful. [...] But everyday we make a choice to find joy in the journey and look for the light. ⚡❤️🙏. (28 July 2022)

In line with resilience being the ability to react positively to adversities, being resilient does not mean being able to avoid rough life circumstances, but rather having the ability to bounce back by combining intensive self-management strategies and a positive mental attitude. Drawing on these inner capacities, grief influencers are able to recover and adapt to their situation. One of the recurring narratives is finding joy again, framed as a choice one can make:

One lesson from losing my 32-year-old husband [name] to cancer — JOY IS POSSIBLE. In the beginning we won't believe it. We might even despise people like me who make such statements. I get it! [...] We HAVE to temporarily live in darkness when tragedy occurs. We must embrace the full range of emotions evoked by grief. And only when we are ready, can we make THE CHOICE to choose joy. (It is a choice!) [emphasis original]. (15 February 2021)

To reinforce the message, posts of this kind are often accompanied by images of influencers laughing and looking happy. Denial of negative feelings is central to today's positivity talk. As argued by Calder-Dawe and colleagues (2021: 551), the twenty-first century "marks a distinct moment in the history of happiness as the push for positivity spills into science, policy and everyday practice with new reach and intensity". Gill and Orgad (2018) have similarly noted how the Western culture is suffused with pressure towards self-love and positive affirmations urging individuals to take the responsibility for their own psychological change. A major part of grief influencers' rhetoric reflects such inspirational content where happiness and well-being are presented as choices, and thus achievable. One of the influencers described feelings of gratitude as follows:

Life has a way of surprising us, currently my life looks nothing like I thought it would 5 years ago. [...] These last few years have been the most nightmarish and traumatic years of my life. The pain is indescribable, but one thing that has helped me to endure, is GRATITUDE. Everyday, I look for things to be grateful for, and the more I search, the more I see. [emphasis original]. (6 March 2023)

While inspiration might serve as a pathway to resilient subjectivity, as remarked by Gill and Orgad (2018: 489), being grateful demands significant emotional effort (Tiusanen, 2023), first of all, because of the need to find what to be grateful for, and then being able to sustain the feelings of gratitude. Gratitude, as reflected above in the statement, "the more I search, the more I see", is considered to be recoverable through conscious action and positive attitude.

"Good old sweat therapy"

The rhetoric of bouncing back is closely tied to the notion of taking control of one's life. Influencers regularly map out solutions to negative experiences and turn them into lessons of resilience. In the context of death, this means taking control of grief by taking action in ways that require self-discipline. Grief influencers showcase their ability to choose both their actions and their emotions in ways that help them along the journey to healing, for example, exercise. Although

grief influencers express negative emotions and talk about wanting to give up, they emphasise the importance of moving forward and making decisions that help in the process of taking control.

The narrative of control is infused with the rhetoric of self-love and self-care, common in the digitally mediated landscape:

The phrase “put on your oxygen mask first” is often used as a metaphor for taking care of yourself before taking care of others. This is something I have always struggled with, and once I became my husband’s full time caregiver, my own needs became non essential. But part of my awakening and self discovery after loss, includes intentional acts of daily self care. (3 May 2023)

Physical health and a fit body are presented as outcomes of self-control; even in the face of personal loss, grief influencers have managed to exercise. The posts discussing the importance of exercise often feature images of grief influencers in active sportswear, in different yoga poses, or working out at the gym. Filled with happiness, energy, and physical strength, the images align with the Western beauty ideals encouraged by Instagram (see Leaver et al., 2020). Some present their physical strength at the gym and note how exercise helps with getting along on the “grief journey”:

Exercise gives you endorphins. Endorphins make you happy. 😊 [...] And yes endorphins are a part of that, but we also store so much shit in our bodies — stress, anxiety, trauma and GRIEF! Moving helps us literally MOVE THROUGH these difficult emotions. [...] In sharing my experience, I hope to emphasize that there is a healthy alternative that actually WORKS and requires you to literally jump off the couch and put on shoes (or not!). JUST KEEP MOVING! Good old sweat therapy. [emphasis original]. (20 November 2019)

Grief influencers’ performances of physical activity reflect the co-called “fitspiration” trend on Instagram (i.e., fitness and inspiration) encouraging people to enhance their well-being through exercise and healthy eating; however, the underlying ideology of fitspiration draws on postfeminist understanding of empowerment (Daudi, 2023) emphasising the freedom to choose (e.g., fitness) coupled with work on the self. In sharing their exercise routines with their followers, the grief influencers examined here openly advocate physical activity as a tool for coping with grief and difficult emotions. The emphasis thus remains on working on the self when dealing with grief, only this time through physical activity and a focus on the body. The grief influencers examined here, while displaying their toned bodies in line with the platform’s beauty ideals, use their own bodies and their regimented and personalised grief practices as markers of successful grieving:

When I felt powerless, movement helped me realize that I could take back control over my life and reminded me that I was capable of moving forward...
⚡ With every HIIT workout, my outer STRENGTH reminded me of inner RESILIENCE

⚡ Every time I RAN, I experienced FREEDOM in a world where I felt trapped

⚡ In YOGA, I accessed PEACE and gained TRUST that despite living my worst nightmare, I would be ok. [emphasis original]. (8 November 2022)

In the video, the influencer displays different outfits from her own collection (designed after the death of the spouse and related to coping with grief) in a cheerful manner. The reel was made a few years after the death of the spouse, and the influencer talks about regaining freedom through exercise and how physical activity reminded her of how resilient she was. She further links finding a new love with the result of getting rid of “negative feelings” through exercise:

Movement allowed me to FEEL my emotions in a way that talking about grief couldn’t access. [emphasis original]. (8 November 2022)

These examples illustrate the workings of neoliberal postfeminist culture, where women are “interpellated as active, autonomous, and self-reinventing subjects, whose lives are the outcome of individual choice and agency” (Elias & Gill, 2017: 64), permeated with strict self-surveillance, self-monitoring, and discipline. Furthermore, seeking solutions from within and working on the self reflects the self-help discourse typical of contemporary therapeutic culture. When faced with a loss, exercise offers a way for grief influencers to cope under the pressures of the neoliberal ethos while, at the same time, reproducing its core values.

“...guiding you to the path to healing”

A significant change occurred in the online content and follower numbers when the women examined in this study started to openly narrate their grief journey on Instagram. As argued by McDermott (2022: 116), the “social viability for women and girls increasingly relies upon their capacity to perform resilience”. For grief influencers, this means transforming the loss into financial and social capital. Moreover, to validate the grief-related online programmes and other products they offer (books, guides, sportswear with grief-related texts or inspirational quotes), grief influencers must demonstrate that their own grief journey led to “healing”, manifested through self-improvement.

Presenting personal growth through the temporal narration of the grief journey transforms into a process of self-branding. It is through self-branding and monetising one’s following that influencers are transformed into experts in grief. Establishing grief-based coaching services and providing guidance on coping with grief are often framed within a narrative of personal development, thus legitimising the expertise:

When my 32-year-old husband died, I didn’t view my loss as an opportunity to grow. I just wanted to survive. Yet somewhere in the darkness – in the space of forced expansion – I couldn’t help but see the inner magic taking place. ✨ I never asked to be more resilient, more grateful, more curious and intentional about who I was and how I desired to live my life. But the experience of loss delivered me a new version of SELF [emphasis original]. (14 December 2022)

Adhering to the idea that positive emotional management is a path to success, the grief influencer continued to expand on how she managed to turn the tragedy into something positive, a rediscovery of a more resilient self. Through appeals to community and peer support, she offered these insights to others as professional services:

It's within this space that I completely transformed my life – thru tragedy – and now, I want to share my practices with YOU! I know that grief work and rebuilding your life after a loss is slow. Transformation is painful. Sometimes you need a guide, a community and some tips to support you along the way. That's why I created my new year-long metamorphosis thru grief – [name of programme] [emphasis original]. (14 December 2022)

A new kind of community (Walter, 2014), premised not only on support but also a commercial relationship, is constructed. Collaborations and grief-related services speak to the ethos of “suffering resilience” (McDermott, 2022), where not only does trauma become the object of value extraction, but the different grief programmes offered by the grief influencers examined here also provide evidence of their own resilience while suggesting customers can achieve the same by following the programme. However, the grief programmes can be pricey:

In the [name of programme], you get access to ALL [name] programs and special bonuses like quarterly coaching calls for HALF YOUR INVESTMENT. (And if you enroll before the New Year, you can save an additional \$1000 🍀 [emphasis original]. (14 December 2022)

Embedded in the prevailing positivity discourse of today, terms like thriving, transforming, rising, or healing are abundant in the grief influencers' posts, where the path to healing suggests recovery from pain and a positive outcome of grief through the commercial programme:

I don't want anyone to suffer the way I did, so I created a grief program that provides the framework that finally helped me heal. ✨ I have helped hundreds of grieverers RISE with their grief, and I would be honored to walk along side you & hold your hand while guiding you to the path to healing 🧡 [emphasis original]. (27 February 2024)

A single image or video often includes an array of emotions, from sorrow to joy, and combines text with the visual narration of the temporal evolution of the grief journey, from the moment of loss to the present day. The videos are highly emotional, filled with explicit displays of sadness, yet the caption conveys a sense of optimism.

One video, for example, begins with the influencer crying, explaining that her “heart just feels really, really, really heavy today”, while reflecting on what makes her sad. The carefully curated video narrative then cuts to a text “three minutes later”: While the influencer still feels sad, “the weight of heaviness is not as intense” after allowing all the emotions to flow through her body instead of resisting them. She explains that even though her body wants to push emotions

away, she chose to face them. The video, exemplifying what we would call a “micro grief journey”, summarises the grief journey by showing the temporal development from the death event to the present day, ending with an advertisement for the influencer’s grief coaching brand and an uplifting promise:

You have to feel, so you can heal. 🧡 ✨ Someone said something to me this morning, that just really triggered my grief. (No fault to them, they were not trying to be unempathetic.) And I allowed the tears to flow. 😭 This is how you process grief, if you need extra support, if you feel like you’ve hit a wall and are stuck in your grief, I can help you not just survive but thrive! ⚡ (19 October 2023)

This video portrays a resilient individual able to transform moments of vulnerability into visibility and attention capital. These affective practices of resilience speak to the grief labour the influencers engage in as they negotiate the tensions between the personal grieving self and the public influencer self. However, the entrepreneurial influencer self is often infused by anxiety. While influencers are expected to display a certain level of vulnerability, and performing anxiety can even become a form of capital, they are also supposed to create content that is easy to follow and not too heavy (Lehto, 2022).

Some of the grief influencers expressed the desire to leave Instagram, to let go of the need for external validation. The pressure to conform to neoliberal feeling rules and the demands this places on grieving in the context of influencer culture can ultimately prove too much. An illustrative example is an influencer who decided to leave Instagram. The reel attached to the post shows images from past years (a black-and-white image of her late husband in his final days, a colourful one of the influencer with her new partner, friends and happy moments she has experienced since the loss of her husband) with the following caption:

This is the last post you’ll read from me... For now. ❤️ I have to get away. Away from social media, the external validation and outward focus on impact; from “coach”, “influencer” and other identities that my ego has attached to. [...]

💧 Who was free.

💧 Who felt her divinity.

💧 Who didn’t try to fit in or follow the rules, but instead ...

[...] I feel lazy, indulgent ... worthless, when I’m not DOING or pouring energy into something outside of myself that will get me that accolade. Now, it’s time to stop the cycle. 🛑 [...] I couldn’t have survived some of the darkness [sic] moments of my life without you ... truly. ❤️ 🩹 You’ve given my loss meaning, a platform to share my voice, and a community where I feel held and seen [emphasis original]. (22 June 2024)

After five years of narrating her grief on Instagram, the time came to move away from “coach” and “influencer”. The positive emotional management skills that being resilient demands also means being able to make rational choices; thus, the resilient grief influencer is able to leave the platform to rediscover the “real” self. The desire to exit highlights the toll of Instagram grieving. The influencer’s experience of being lazy, indulgent, and worthless when not meeting external demands exemplifies how influencer culture turns against itself when the personal cost becomes too high.

Conclusion

Throughout this article, we have discussed the practices that female grief influencers who have lost their spouse engage in to negotiate the multiple demands they face on Instagram. To better understand the complexities underlying influencers’ grief practices on the platform, we have offered the concept of grief labour, conceptualised here as an affective practice of resilience. The findings shed light on this affective practice where grief labour becomes visible through affective narration entwined with intentional mental and physical action and discipline directed at the self. The multimodal snippets of grief created by the grief influencers on Instagram offer the followers a view to their everyday coping with grief through amateur aesthetics. While this practice lends credibility and authenticity, granting grief influencers authority as experts of grieving, and thus supporting their commercial endeavour, our study finds that balancing performances of vulnerability and resilience requires a lot of emotional work.

We argue that grief labour has become a mode of coping for female influencers in grief who, although dealing with a deeply felt personal loss, nevertheless operate within the platform economy. Grief influencers are thus simultaneously subjected to platform labour-related demands and vulnerabilities, but also the social and cultural norms and expectations regarding online grief embedded in and shaped by the wider influencer culture. To “make grief fit” the expectations placed on influencers, grief influencers resort to what we call resilient grieving, which comes with positive undertones and inspirational goals. Inspirational content is premised on intermittent displays of personal vulnerability, which translates into “authentic” grief (e.g., crying on camera) instrumentalised for relatability, intimacy, and community. However, as noted by Raun (2018), the underlying labour may not even be recognised as such, and what is more, it is often the platform that benefits more than the influencers.

The findings resonate with a recent study by Yalın (2024) on how YouTube influencers responded to the Covid-19 crisis by balancing between expressions of resilience and neoliberal vulnerability to maintain the aspirational self, often expected of influencers. Like the pandemic vloggers who constructed “a self-trajectory that strives toward productivity and progress” (Yalın, 2024: 2), grief influencers also utilise a temporal framework – the grief journey – to exhibit progress and to narrate the transformation of the grieving self into a resilient subject able to navigate and manage grief through hard work and control.

In this process, in line with neoliberal aspirations of productivity, grief becomes subject to curation in accordance with the logics of platform economy, where not only the grief influencers but also emotions are placed under control and scrutiny. Grief is rendered into a commercialised product, offered to followers as a tool for self-improvement, wrapped up in hope and inspiration. Bound by the neoliberal feeling rules, the grief influencers in our material play to the self-responsibilisation and individualisation inherent in the postfeminist cultural ethos. As the study has shown, the grief influencers' resilient grieving – grief labour – is entrenched in neoliberal discourses of choice, positivity, and agency that can be located as part of the wider positivity imperative addressed to women, as noted by Calder-Dawe and colleagues (2021).

We thus further argue that while grieving on Instagram requires substantial grief labour, engaging in grief labour also produces a specific form of commercialised platformed grief where personal acts of grieving become infused with – and governed by – the platform's commercial, cultural, and social logics of operation.

Our study has shown that, for influencers, integrating expressions of vulnerability into narrations of grief constitutes an essential part of platformed grief, notably as it offers opportunities for intentional and aspirational work on the self through affective practices of resilience. With this, a certain normativity emerges that governs platformed grief, which, while feeding into the platform economy, leaves some mourners outside. As not everyone is able to perform resilient grieving, the new community of mourners might not be available to all.

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