

# ‘People tell me quite intimate things’: The circulation of feelings and vague intimacy on politicised Instagram

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## Abstract

In recent years, Instagram has become an increasingly politicised platform. Even those who have become popular for producing lifestyle content have begun to merge societal issues with personal and commercial posts. In this article, we explore how popular Finnish influencers experience the new expectations set for them and how they handle the mixture of intimate and algorithmic logics of Instagram. Our analysis draws from eight semi-structured, in-depth interviews with influencers and influencer agency representatives. Theoretically, we use the lexicon of cultural and media theory to examine Instagram as a platform for vague intimacy, where feelings and commercial exchange flourish and circulate in proximity to the political. The article revolves around three interconnected themes arising from the data: problems in producing political content for everyone, Instagram as a platform of likeness and the fear of an exploding inbox.

## Keywords

influencers, Instagram, politics, social media, intimacy

‘Why do I end up in the middle of a shit storm when I just want to do good?’ asked the title of a webinar arranged for Finnish social media influencers in April 2021. The virtual event, organised by marketing agency [PING Helsinki \(2021\)](#), addressed influencers’ increasing involvement in political discussions and the problems related to this, such as followers’ contrasting expectations and social media storms. In the seminar, one of Finland’s most famous lifestyle influencers, Jenni Rotonen, described the current situation as paradoxical: for years, influencers have been accused of focusing on trivial subjects, but now, when some of them have started to advocate for political and social justice causes, they face even more criticism ([PING Helsinki, 2021](#)). As the topic of the seminar indicates, the mixed feelings Rotonen described are shared by many of her peers, who are learning to operate on politicised Instagram.

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Influencers as assets for political campaigns (Goodwin et al., 2020) and politicians as Instagram influencers (Relman, 2018) collectively represent a new global trend that is also occurring in Finland. For instance, Finland's 37-year-old Prime Minister Sanna Marin is a highly popular Instagram figure with 995,000 followers as of December 2022. Finnish politicians and societal influencers use social media for self-promotion but also for practical reasons. Finland is a technologically advanced, internet-intensive country with 5.5 million citizens. It has, however, a very low population density. While trust in traditional media among Finns remains high, young people in particular get their news through social media, making social media an easy way to reach constituents and inform citizens about urgent issues. Thus, even the Finnish government has jumped on the influencer bandwagon: influencers have become part of Finland's emergency contingency plans. In 2020, during the coronavirus pandemic, the government recruited popular influencers to mediate research-based knowledge of the virus. (Heikkilä, 2020). Previously, Finnish influencers had tended to keep a safe distance from politics (PING Helsinki, 2019).

In recent years, however, even influencers who have become popular for producing lifestyle content have started engaging with political topics (Suuronen et al., 2021) or publicly supporting their favourite politicians. This development has been especially evident on Instagram, where the aesthetics of influencers' content have shifted towards a greater reliance on sharing impactful verbal content whilst moving away from visual theatrics (Abidin, 2020: 84). Instagram, released in 2010 as a simple photo-sharing platform for iPhone only, was acquired by Facebook (now Meta Platforms) in 2012. Since then, it has developed into one of the world's most important social networking sites (Caliandro and Graham, 2020). While selfies, lifestyle content and marketing campaigns still dominate Instagram, the platform is now best understood as one with a multiplicity of cultures (Leaver et al., 2020). Thus, people also use Instagram for political purposes and to seek out meaningful, intimate discussions.

The politicisation of Instagram has been noted in previous research. Studies have analysed the platform's recent evolution, for instance, from the perspectives of personalised politics (Larsson, 2019), promotional practices of political campaigning (Pineda et al., 2022) and its political potentiality for young women (Caldeira, 2021). Yet the question remains: How do social media influencers experience the new possibilities and restrictions of politicised Instagram? As politically oriented content intertwines with personalised content produced on the platform, it must have an impact on Instagram influencers' decisions and work routines. To investigate how Finnish influencers utilise and adapt to the politicisation of Instagram, our analysis focuses on in-depth interviews with six influencers and two influencer agency representatives. Theoretically, we analyse politicised Instagram as a platform for vague intimacy, where feelings, politics and commercial exchange flourish and circulate conjointly. Our research indicates that while politicised Instagram supports influencers in creating a societal impact and widening their career prospects, they may also find the platform exhausting and overwhelming.

This paper extends recent discussions on the professionalisation of Instagram influencers. In their study, Loes Van Driel and Delia Dumitrica (2021) argue that for the Instagram influencers to be perceived as successful, they must negotiate a tension between appearing authentic to their followers and employing a strategy that appeals to advertisers. Furthermore, the influencers must learn to live with the fact that algorithms impact their choices and possibilities for content production (Van Driel and Dumitrica, 2021: 70). Therefore, van Driel and Dumitrica are calling for research that focuses on the ways that changes to social media platforms impact those who live off their accounts. Our analysis answers this call by investigating how Instagram's functionalities change followers' expectations about speedy responses and intimate engagement. We also examine how Instagram

influencers deal with the ruthless logic of algorithms and negotiate in unpleasant situations where social justice issues merge with an explicit commercial logic.

The article begins by reviewing the contextual background of the research. First, we provide an overview of the theoretical framework, followed by a brief methodological note. The subsequent analysis revolves around three interconnected themes arising from the data: problems in producing authentic content for everyone, Instagram as a platform of likeness and the terror of an exploding inbox. By joining the lively discussions about cultural circulation in networked media, the analysis offers a nuanced perspective on the ways in which social media influencers raise social justice issues on Instagram and why this leaves them with ambivalent feelings.

## Microcelebrities in intimate publics

When digital technology made it possible for ordinary people to bypass the traditional entertainment industry to achieve fame, it created new forms of celebrity. The term microcelebrity was coined by global studies scholar [Theresa M. Senft \(2008\)](#) in a study focused on ‘camgirls’ – that is, women attempting to employ digital media technologies, such as videos, blogs and social media, to gain popularity. Soon after, communication scholar Alice [Marwick \(2013\)](#) expanded the theory of microcelebrity in an ethnographic investigation into Silicon Valley in the early 2000s, where she studied microcelebrity as a networking tool based on a consciously curated online persona that *feels* authentic. In the social media era, these burgeoning microcelebrities are dubbed, for instance, as influencers, bloggers, tweeters and snappers. Therefore, media scholars [Stuart Cunningham and David Graig \(2021\)](#) have proposed the use of the umbrella term *creator* in research focusing on professionalised and commercialised cultures on social media. Notwithstanding this, in this article, we apply the term (Instagram) influencer because it is generally used in Finnish academic and popular discussions focusing on the growing impact of Instagram microcelebrities.

Indeed, being an Instagram influencer has become a full-time vocation for social media professionals in Finland. These new influencers can be considered microcelebrities because they maintain a sizable following on Instagram, are sometimes visible in traditional media, exercise their power strategically through personalised content production and utilise the value of creating a feeling of intimacy with strangers ([Abidin, 2018](#); [Banet-Weiser, 2012](#)). This shift in media, however, did not originate online but can be traced back to the early 1990s with the popularity of talk shows and reality TV that commercialised ordinary people’s private lives and turned them into public spectacles ([Abidin, 2018](#); [Khamis et al., 2017](#)). The *primus motor* of the idea of commodified intimacy was Oprah Winfrey, a television personality and successful entrepreneur who, in the 1980s, realised the potential value of connecting social issues with girl talk, promotional products and a daily dose of suffering ([Berlant, 2008](#): x). With her irresistible persona, positive tone and faithful followers, Oprah became a political force who was not afraid to take a stand. Our analysis places Instagram influencers on this continuum of the history of vague intimacy, which is based on a combination of sharing, product placement and therapy talk with a post-feminist twist.

To analyse politicised Instagram as a platform for vague intimacy, we employ Lauren [Berlant’s \(2008\)](#) analysis of ‘intimate publics’ as loosely organised, market-structured spaces where people are attached to each other by feelings, experiences and the search for unanxious social membership. On personalised platforms, such as Instagram, the connections *feel* intimate and discussions revolve around societal issues, but the relationships to intimacy, politics and capitalism remain complicated. Indeed, these digital platforms share similarities with women’s culture, materialised by Oprah, where the *subject of politics* turns into a *subject of feeling* ([Berlant, 2008](#): 145–146). This shift towards personalised politics means that these intimate publics operate through feelings, intensities

and a sense of commonness among participants rather than through concrete political activity or a clear ideology. More precisely, these platforms invite users to take a stand on an individualised basis, accompanied by the circulation of stories that are connected to personal narratives, confessions and feelings.

In our theorisation, we acknowledge that Berlant's analysis of the U.S. public sphere is not directly applicable to social media research in Finland. Rather, we use the theorisation of intimate publics as an analytical tool to scrutinise how Instagram functions as an intimate public sphere that triggers influencers to produce personalised political content. Our theorisation on vague intimacy is also inspired by the work of media scholars [Anne Soronen and Anu Koivunen \(2022\)](#), who have used Berlant's theories on intimacy to analyse social media as 'platformed intimacy' that characterises Finnish actors' platformed lives. By platformed intimacies, these scholars refer to the ways in which intimacy on platforms works as a structuring relationality which does not have tacit rules or a stable structure but rather works through contradictory desires and attachments. Therefore, the work of connecting on these platforms creates ambivalence: while the social media presence produces work opportunities and empowering connections, it also creates feelings of anxiety, especially when one encounters the power of algorithms ([Soronen and Koivunen, 2022: 14](#)). Needless to say, this ruthless logic of algorithms causes feelings of discomfort when social justice issues merge with a commercial mindset.

## **Investigating politicised Instagram**

To investigate the recent evolution of Instagram, our analysis draws from eight semi-structured interviews with influencers and influencer agency representatives. Our research participants were recruited after extensive online observations of a wide range of Instagram influencers between 2020 and 2021. In the interviewee selection process, the condition of inclusion was that participants had to have a distinctive online image and an engaged following and had to be participating in politicised discussions on Instagram. Four of these eight participants work with brands and two are non-commercial influencers. While the term influencer is usually used to describe creators who integrate commercial content into their social media posts ([Abidin, 2018: 94](#)), we extend its meaning to describe two non-commercial participants, who are well-known online personas precisely because of their engaging social justice content and who take part in many of the same discussions that vocational influencers do. The last two participants are influencer agency representatives who have a deep understanding of the field and its communicative practices.

All interviews were undertaken as part of a project designed to understand the mediatisation of politics and science in the contemporary landscape of ubiquitous connectivity. Five were conducted between April and June 2021 by a research assistant Niina Kari and three in January 2022 by Mari Lehto. The interviews were held in Finnish, recorded with the participants' consent and then transcribed for analysis using a professional transcription service, after which the analysis began. Participants were asked questions to elicit some background information and a series of open-ended questions. The topics of discussion included views on social media, activism, social justice issues, sharing researched information and the different types of feedback encountered on Instagram. Although these data do not give a complete picture of the Finnish influencer scene, they provide insight into the ways in which Instagram pulls our participants towards certain topics and pushes them away from others (see also [Lehto and Paasonen, 2021](#)).

As most of the participants are relatively well known in Finland, they were provided anonymity. Anonymisation was important for enabling the participants to openly discuss their feelings, experiences and working conditions. With this in mind, we assured them that we would conceal their

identities by leaving out identifying details out of publications. The interview data comprise a small, hetero- and homosexual, mixed-race sample of six women and two men living in Finland. For the analysis, all participants were assigned a pseudonym P1... P8, and we refer to them either by that or through their work as commercial influencers (P1, P2, P3 and P4), two communication agency representatives (P5 and P6) or as those whose activity on social media is non-commercial (P7 and P8).

The data are specific but also rich, in-depth and rife with nuance. Interviews may initially seem too personal and anecdotal, but when generalised, we consider them to exemplify something shared socially and structurally (Paasonen, 2021: 25). Indeed, analysing politicised Instagram requires a qualitative methodological approach that allows for exploring the tensions and demands associated with taking a stand as an influencer. Our analysis involved several rounds of closely reading the transcribed interview material. We analysed the transcripts from the bottom up by identifying patterned and recurring themes and deliberations participants reported they had especially when they were discussing politics on Instagram. This method is best described as a thematic analysis that can be used with different guiding theories to capture, identify and analyse patterns in research material (Braun and Clarke, 2021). In the following, we present the analysis through three interconnected themes arising from the data that we decided required a nuanced investigation in relation to vague intimacy: politics for everyone, platform of likeness and the terror of an exploding inbox.

## Politics for everyone

Self-promotion, authenticity and commercial exchange are all essential features of making a living in the attention economies of social media. The fine art of subtly connecting these elements is crucial on a social media platform where ‘publicity (performing for the public) and intimacy (one’s persona and embodiment) are integral elements and key resources’ (Soronen and Koivunen, 2022: 2). This also applies to producing politicised content that rarely refers to formal processes and institutions but instead to lifestyle-based topics that can be connected with feelings, personal experiences and lifestyle narratives (Abidin and Cover, 2019: 217; Suuronen et al., 2021: 3–4). On Instagram, the terms ‘political’ and ‘social justice’ mainly refer to issues related to, for example, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and class or social actions, such as climate activism. In turn, along with ideals such as fairness, equality and democracy, the notion of social justice is often used as an overarching concept on social media to criticise and call out various things seen as morally wrong (Abidin and Lee, 2022).

For our participants, feminism, climate change activism, anti-racism and body positivity are not superimposed but are part of their everyday lives and interests (see also Caldeira, 2021: 12). In other words, their work as influencers relates to their personal values (P4) and often to their own experiences (P2). Nevertheless, the difficulty in finding an appropriate balance between political issues and lighter content came up frequently in the interviews. Influencers realise they are often criticised for focusing on subjects perceived as too frivolous, but at the same time, followers may experience social justice issues as arduous. One participant explained as follows:

I have talked about this with people and there was a lot of feedback from my followers that although it is important that you talk about society, it gets really heavy if everyone’s Stories are full of rants about what has gone bad and wrong. (P2)

In a similar vein, referring to the coronavirus pandemic, the agency representative (P5) noted that during hard times, people need entertainment to escape. Thus, determining an appropriate combination of therapy talk, lifestyle content and politics may be a responsible decision to not burden and wear out one's audience. This example shows how an 'imagined audience' (Marwick and boyd, 2010: 116) encourages influencers to search for 'best practices' in their communication (Van Driel and Dumitrica, 2021: 73). Mixing entertaining lifestyle content with political deliberation is nonetheless only seemingly effortless:

I get a lot of praise for being able to talk about earwax and party politics together on the same day in a way that it just flows. It's always nice feedback to get because finding that balance is really challenging. You must navigate between them, so the content doesn't get too heavy because it's hard to produce as well. (P1)

The dual pressures that arise when approaching difficult questions lightly is one of the features of Instagram culture that participants confessed makes them feel uneasy. Paraphrasing Berlant (2008: 6-7), it seems to cause ambivalent feelings for them to decide what to do in an intimate public that is supposed to be affective and engaging while also offering momentary relief from the cruel world. In other words, Instagram politics should be impactful yet easily accessible. Similarly, Riedl et al. (2021: 3) noted that the appeal of politicised Instagram lies in the way the content is represented: influencers should make politics look easy and casual with a down-to-earth appearance that communicates authenticity. At the same time, the art of creating a feeling of casual communication is a professional skill that one learns by doing and experimenting. A participant working at an influencer marketing agency pointed out that taking a political stand should be considered a question of professional development. As vocational influencers want to be taken seriously, they do not wish to be profiled as people who only focus on trivial topics (P5).

Consequently, platforms for vague intimacy, such as Instagram, rely on the idea that influencers should project themselves as responsible, ordinary and real (Abidin, 2017). Yet previous studies have shown that in the context of influencer performance, projections of responsible authenticity are narrowly defined. While professional influencers are expected to generate content that is real and engaging, they may find themselves dealing simultaneously with complaints that they are being 'too real' or alternatively 'not real enough' (Duffy and Hund, 2019: 4985; see also Lehto, 2022). These mixed expectations of intimate publics therefore require constant 'affective and emotional recalibration' (Berlant, 2008: 273). In the interviews, participants revealed a sense of vague intimacy in their struggle to balance between being emotional, personal and political but not too weird, radical or full of pathos. Participants seemed to worry that content that is too real could potentially overburden or drive away their followers. This search for the right kind of authenticity is problematic, however, because it may lead to the increased standardisation (Van Driel and Dumitrica, 2021: 77) of political content on Instagram.

The idea of standardised content relates to the idealistic view of Instagram as a democratic platform that should give a voice to everybody. Some participants believe that social media platforms connect people who would not otherwise meet, like ordinary people and politicians. While these democratic features of social media surfaced often in the interviews, they did not seem to refer to Finnish political culture, where top politicians appear regularly in their constituencies (Raunio and Ruotsalainen, 2018: 46). Rather, the participants seemed to have a global perspective on making grassroots connections. Two of them mentioned, for instance, that new social media channels, like Clubhouse, are places where 'people are equal'

(P6) and ordinary people can potentially discuss with chief executive officers (CEOs) of multinational corporations (P4). The latter, however, mentioned with frustration that ‘privileged’ journalists have condescending attitudes towards social media discussions. Nevertheless, our participants expressed a strong belief in social media’s capacity to generate visibility for those who have traditionally been overlooked by the mass media. One participant, for instance, noted that the internet and social media have played important roles in giving a voice to people of colour and have thereby noticeably advanced the way racism is discussed in Finland (P7).

From a societal perspective, social media platforms nevertheless challenge these democratic ideals when the logic of capitalism merges with activism. A non-commercial influencer, who used to write a widely read blog about identity and politics, pointed out that while new digital technologies have made impactful activism possible with minimal resources, they now mix with promoting different products. This participant was very critical of ‘the constant capitalisation of serious matters’ (P7) and had chosen to withdraw from brand–influencer collaborations. Similarly, another non-commercial participant, who identifies as a social media activist, expressed disapproval of influencers’ brand collaborations around social or political issues. She mentioned environmental activism as an example, arguing that if you want to prevent climate change, and you do it with a company that makes a profit, then there is a conflict, because capitalism and environmental activism simply do not correlate (P8).

Interestingly, such boundary drawing was expressed solely by the non-commercial participants, whilst they admitted that their social media presence has been pivotal for their career development. Influencers who work with brands seem to have a more pragmatic attitude to the connections between activism, self-promotion, attention economies and capitalism. Or, as one participant put it, ‘that’s the way it is; you got to get the money from somewhere’ (P4). At the same time, influencers making a living through Instagram may criticise ‘those’ algorithms that force them to combat the threat of invisibility and prioritise posts with higher engagement (Van Driel and Dumitrica, 2021: 75; see also Bucher, 2012). Our study confirms this idea that influencers try to differentiate their own motivations from the platform’s conditions. Doing business on Instagram, however, requires playing by the rules, as discussed in the following section.

## Instagram as a platform of likeness

It is hard work to please a large audience on social media platforms, where various types of content are vying for attention and relentlessly overshadowing each other (Abidin, 2021: 4). This applies equally to Instagram, where to achieve fame, one must be able to captivate an audience in ‘hyper-competitive attention economies’ (Abidin, 2021: 4). Our participants reflected on the demanding nature of this race for publicity and the need to stay vigilant about societal discussions that might attract their followers. Indeed, attention economies are economies of *inattention*—‘I’ am only attentive to what ‘we’ pay attention to collectively (Citton, 2017: 17). Yet it is impossible to please everyone in economies of attention: ‘if you are talking about climate change, then suddenly you should be talking about something else—human rights, for example’ (P6). Furthermore, to succeed, influencers must have their voices heard beyond their own little circles and ensure that platforms show their content so they can get more followers.

In her study on Instagram influencers' interactions with algorithms, critical data researcher Kelley Cotter (2019) found that influencers are acutely aware of algorithmic power. They pursue visibility as if playing a game that requires learning the rules established by the platform (also Van Driel and Dumitrica, 2021). Despite having some leeway in the tactics they use to gain visibility, having to work within the bounds of algorithmically enforced rules gives them a sense of vulnerability and powerlessness (Cotter, 2019: 902). Similarly, our participants displayed attitudes towards algorithms and contradictory demands from their followers varying from anxiety to adjustment or simply to a refusal to play the game. One participant reflected that it has become practically impossible to live up to followers' expectations and to react swiftly (P3). To manage this, one of the influencers described trying not to react 'during the first hour' to each political debate but to instead let the thoughts and ideas 'ripen a bit' (P1). However, hesitation may be risky for an influencer trying to create a societal impact *and* make a profit on a platform grounded in algorithmic logic.

If one attempts, for example, to add some nuance to polarising political conversations with carefully pondered posts, it can lead to a situation where 'one is no longer interesting enough' (P1). This participant also confessed to having grown somewhat tired of the homogeneous nature of his primary audience. Minority rights are close to his heart, but he expressed feeling frustrated about preaching to the choir and thus expressed a wish to break out from the political bubble:

Everyone is just nodding and sending me a hundred flame emojis. It gives a bit of a feeling that okay, here, one is again blowing one's own horn. [ . . . ] That is why I am currently consulting on these same topics elsewhere, where I can reach wider circles. (P1)

In the quote above, P1's frustration about 'like-minded nodding' and the need to take political deliberations elsewhere can be seen as descriptive of how the intimate public may offer only particular fantasies and modes of togetherness. In the collective sociality and personalised politics of Instagram, a smooth user experience entails diminished negativity and avoidance of unpopular opinions. The standardised homogeneity makes these intimate publics non-political spheres of vague intimacy where communities are built on the expectation that there *should* be 'a common emotional world' (Berlant, 2008: 10) that offers unanxious sociality (Berlant, 2008: 146). From this perspective, Instagram can be analysed as an intimate sphere where people are attached to each other through a vague intimacy that should nonetheless give them a sense of belonging and empowerment.

The fantasy of shared emotions and sameness can be theorised further using the idea of *homophily*, a concept originally defined as a 'tendency for friendships to form between those who are alike in some designated respect' (Lazarsfeld and Merton, 1954: 23). On social media platforms, the idea of homophily merges with algorithms; it drives and shapes connectivity, but it may also lead to filter bubbles premised on sameness. In their exploration of feminist humour, media scholars Jenny Sundén and Susanna Paasonen have underlined how the power of networked affect creates not just pressure to take similar stances but also the expectation of *affective homophily*—that is, 'the love of *feeling* the same' (Sundén and Paasonen, 2019: 4). On politicised Instagram, affective homophily averts dissonance, as our participants also pondered, albeit with different concepts. For example, P3 suspected that the demands directed at influencers to participate in every ongoing social justice debate carry the danger of making it hard to deal with differences and various desires:



These (social justice) issues really evoke a lot of feelings. Often, it shows in the way that influencers get messages from followers that, 'hey, take a stand on this'. It's kind of awful if, when you don't take a stand, people draw a conclusion that it's not important to you. (P3)

The excerpt above demonstrates the pressure to accommodate followers' hopes and desires. Influencers may feel pressured to react to social justice issues in a certain way: if you act or feel differently, it may be interpreted as you possibly not sharing the same values (Sundén and Paasonen, 2019: 4). The culture of circulation in intimate publics, then, is based on a loose idea of 'generic-but-unique' (Berlant, 2008: 6) normative likeness. Although users might be searching for political debates, they may expect these debates to form around the same understanding and experience of a cruel, unequal world.

When an influencer achieves success and their account grows, they become increasingly concerned with what their followers might like (Van Driel and Dumitrica, 2021: 75). On the contrary, the two participants whose social media presence is non-commercial expressed less worry about how to post political content. P7 even takes breaks from social media and has no plan for posting or consistent themes about which to post. P8 recognises the expectations and pressures but has simply chosen not to care. In other words, they both have decided to react to various discussions at their own pace. For the latter participant, this approach has arisen from the boundaries she has set as an activist and her perspective that societal crises and political issues 'are not going to pass quickly' (P8). Compared to others, this approach is noticeably unambiguous and lacks forced reciprocity: 'I have decided not to try to educate people who disagree with me (...) I don't engage in dialogue anywhere in my social media' (P8). As an activist, this participant focuses openly on a certain target group.

Our study indicates that our participants' deliberations are rife with the ambiguity they experience when they try to take a stand while playing the 'visibility game' (Cotter, 2019: 896). They realise that they need to produce fresh and engaging content to remain interesting, but they try to do this by creating a positive and affirming atmosphere. Nonetheless, politics cannot be saved from conflicts and heated discussions. Connecting intimately on social media platforms thus requires awareness and reflexivity regarding distinct and overlapping audiences (Soronen and Koivunen, 2022: 13). For most of the professional influencers, who make a living with social media, the possibility of negative feedback seems to lead to constant anticipation of what followers might like and how they might react. Unlike what is often assumed, this wariness is not because they would be unable to handle criticism. Instead, the evolution of Instagram has led to a point where they have neither the time nor the emotional energy to deal with an avalanche of messages coming their way.

## The terror of an exploding inbox

Like many social media platforms, Instagram is filled with trolls and provocateurs. As this is part of an influencer's job, these microcelebrities are all too familiar with negative comments directed towards, for example, their lifestyle choices (Hänninen, 2018; Lehto, 2022). While growing a large audience, they often encounter various forms of gendered online harassment and hate speech (e.g., Duffy and Hund, 2019). Thus, our participants indicated that male influencers get relatively small amounts of 'insanely awful feedback' (P2). Our male participant summarised the situation wryly by stating that he is 'social media's golden boy' who talks about important issues, but if a female colleague takes a similar stand, she receives 'a terrible shit storm' (P1). Two female participants (P4, P7) stated that they have reported several instances of racist and misogynistic online harassment to the Finnish police to no avail. With that experience

in mind, one of them considered the possibility that the fear of these experiences may encourage many influencers not to take part in certain discussions related to, for example, immigration or feminism (P4).

Curating one's online presence is yet another example of the 'tactics of boundary management' (Lehto and Paasonen, 2021: 10), which is familiar to Finnish politicians (Mannevu, 2022) and journalists (Kantola and Harju, 2021), who have neither the time, energy nor interest to discuss with hatemongers. Sometimes, tactics of boundary management may also refer to dealing with circulating stories about misery, pain and suffering, which tend to crawl under the skin – even though they are meant to be impersonal triggers for action. Previously, these affective and circulating stories, such as pictures about children in need, relied on the impersonality of the structure: as the respondent, *I* am expected to be someone who can feel an emotional attachment to others and then urgently act with respect to it (Berlant, 2001: 42). In some cases, this logic still operates on Instagram, for instance, in Greta Thunberg's personalised and politicised content that bypasses traditional politics and speaks directly to the responder (Kissas, 2022). Yet something has changed – users do not necessarily read the circulating stories calling for action as impersonal messages. One reason for this change is Instagram's Stories feature.

When the Stories feature, essentially copied from competitor Snapchat, was launched in 2016, it first seemed to lighten the influencer's load by offering a space for less polished, informal content. As the lifespan of an ephemeral Story is 24 h, and followers got used to it quite fast, influencers began spending more time on the platform and even started posting multiple times a day (Leaver et al., 2020: 27). Although Instagram allows the user to save Stories to a repository within their profile, the Stories are often seen as spaces where people feel comfortable sharing and discussing their everyday lives instead of publishing polished, more permanent content on their main timeline (Constine, 2018). Consequently, the Stories are mainly understood as an arena for presenting 'mundane realness' (Duffy and Hund, 2019: 4992), and thus they also serve the need for 24/7 ubiquitous connectivity (Paasonen, 2021: 19). Slowly, this new feature slid into Instagram influencers' private direct messages (DMs).

In 2018, the Stories feature was upgraded by enabling users to share other accounts' posts.<sup>1</sup> Since the launch of the new affordance, the circulating stories have become even more personalised by creating a sense of intimacy between the influencer and the follower. Our participants said that the volume of DMs has increased, and many followers seek private, intimate discussions. These side effects of the Stories feature constituted a recurrent theme in the interviews, and they have made the influencer's work more stressful and sometimes even impossible to manage. A participant explained:

I feel particularly burdened by those private messages. People tell me quite intimate things sometimes. Maybe the private message causes an illusion. That one person probably feels that they are the only one I'm communicating with. But I might get 600 messages a day. (P3)

Instagram, in other words, has become a personalised platform for vague intimacy. As the followers' written responses or reactions to Stories come via private DMs, they increase the desire for intimate connections, although popular influencers may receive hundreds or even thousands of messages every day.<sup>2</sup> The flow of messages has complicated the influencers' possibilities for boundary management, and all our participants expressed that this transformation had caused a strain.

When all the content is concentrated on the main feed, it is less personalised, commenting is rarer and as a participant stated, ‘before, the discussion took place in public’ (P1). Indeed, the Stories feature seems to have changed the nature of both the content itself and the creators’ relationships to their work and followers. They know what kind of Stories they should produce to get their audience to engage, respond and possibly share them, but they expressed that they are mainly preoccupied with boundary management. This finding aligns with previous research that has shown how content creators need to continuously adjust to the changes on platforms (Nieborg and Poell, 2018; Soronen and Koivunen, 2022). Our study indicates that these seemingly small changes may even shake the very foundation of Instagram influencers’ expertise and work routines when it becomes laborious to maintain the communication style that gives followers the impression of an exclusive, intimate exchange.

The flood of DMs made one participant speculate that the changes on the platform may lead to a situation where influencers are mainly public figures – ‘like little stars’ – who do not have to be available all the time (P2). While this might be possible, it is worth noting that influencers are microcelebrities, not stars in a traditional sense. Before the digital age, fame or celebrity was a relatively rare experience enjoyed by those who were born into it or who had attained it through certain achievements or talents, supported by media coverage and/or the entertainment industry (Abidin, 2018; Turner, 2004). Today, even traditional stars and celebrities are participating in the same competition for attention, and they face increasing expectations to engage with their audience through social media (e.g. Baym, 2018; Abidin, 2018). Yet their relationship with the audience is different from that of influencers, whose celebrity is based on an illusion of intimacy (Abidin, 2018: 8). Consequently, they may feel a sense of duty towards followers who pour their hearts out. A participant clarified:

I start having quite deep conversations with people, and then I might feel at some point that I’m totally exhausted and can’t handle it anymore. I can’t always control it and have a bit of a bad conscience about it. I started it and now can’t finish it. (P7)

When therapy talk transforms from performative repetition and the circulation of wounds between strangers into reciprocity between people, there are surprising emotional costs. Some participants considered emotional bargains to be part of the job: they have already ‘grown up, changed, fallen in love and broken up together with their followers’, and during the course of their career, they have encountered even ‘suicidal and self-destructive types’ (P1). Nonetheless, Instagram’s transformation into a platform for vague intimacy with one-sided expectations of reciprocity has required influencers to reconsider the processes that make their work and connectivity manageable.

Instagram’s Stories feature may turn the focus from managing connections to managing disconnections. In their theorisation on disconnections, Tero Karppi et al. (2021: 1609) remind us that we should pay attention to ‘disconnection as rapture—a joyful ecstasy—instead of rupture’. Drawing from the Spinozist formulation of the body’s capacity to affect and become affected, these scholars’ idea of disconnection focuses on the individual’s capacity to act and ways to increase that capacity. In the broader context, where network connectivity has become more of a necessity than the kind of additional communicative layer that it used to be (Paasonen, 2021: 9), these movements

towards and away from connectivity may, therefore, be strategies to continue working and living with an exploding inbox.

## Conclusion

In the panel discussion at the end of the PING Helsinki webinar, influencer Jenni Rotonen brought up how newspapers screenshot and publish parts of influencers' political Instagram Stories, taking them out of context and making them 'into something more substantial than they really are' (PING Helsinki, 2021). As this quote shows, Finnish influencers are currently in a process of defining their new role. While becoming more politically active may help them promote causes they consider important and legitimise their efforts to be taken more seriously in the eyes of a broader audience, it inevitably increases the volume of personalised and sometimes critical messages.

Our investigation into influencers' experiences of politicised Instagram through the concept of vague intimacy reveals the complex interplay of authenticity, politics, values, commercialised exchange, intimacy and feelings. Our study shows that influencers' social media engagement comprises mixed feelings and ambiguity as they struggle to manage their visibility and meet followers' expectations. Their politically oriented content on Instagram intertwines with their everyday lives but not without a cost: their inboxes overflow with DMs from followers seeking meaningful discussion. Although influencers seek to make politics look easy and engage in meaningful conversations with their followers, balancing between inclusive politics, commercial visibility and protecting one's own boundaries is hard work.

The evolution of Instagram challenges the idea of an intimate public as shared yet impersonal. Our study shows that social media work on politicised Instagram has become considerably more laborious, not just because of demands for ubiquitous connectivity but also because of the way the Stories feature encourages one-on-one conversations. That is, the flood of DMs has comprehensively altered the way popular content creators engage with their followers and has had significant consequences for the influencer profession, which has been based on creating an impression of communication with an imagined audience.

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## Notes

1. In the wake of TikTok's massive growth in 2020, Instagram launched Reels, but our participants did not discuss this feature.

2. At the time of the interviews, any response you would send to someone about a Story, whether it was an emoji or a message, would land in their inbox. In February 2022, Instagram introduced a feature called ‘Private Story Likes’, which allows users to react to a Story without sending a DM.

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