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THE CIRCULATION OF FEELINGS ON POLITICISED INSTAGRAM

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In the spring of 2021, the Finnish influencer marketing agency, PING Helsinki, organised a webinar entitled *Why do I end up in the middle of a shit storm when I just want to do good?* The virtual event reflected influencers' increasing social responsibilities but also aimed to support them 'in the middle of contrasting expectations, the numerous comments and social media storms' (PING Helsinki, 2021, para 4). As illustrated by the webinar's theme, although social media offers a space for social belonging, commenting and passing on critical issues—through, for instance, the Instagram Stories feature—this exchange does not happen without affective costs.

In this paper, we ask how popular Finnish social media influencers experience the new possibilities and restrictions of politicised Instagram. To do this, we use Lauren Berlant's (2008) analysis of 'intimate publics' to examine Instagram as a platform for vague intimacy, where feelings and commercial exchange flourish and circulate in proximity to the political. Through the concept of vague intimacy, we develop an idea of intimacy, which is based on a combination of sharing, product placement and therapy talk with a post-feminist twist. Our paper grapples with the contention that while the intimate publics *should* feel like democratic, non-hierarchical social worlds where everyone's voices and struggles are heard and supported, the experience is somewhat different when it collides with the realities of the cold world.

By starting from this perspective, the paper focuses on a larger cultural shift in which the line between social media content creators and those traditionally perceived as influencers, such as politicians, activists and experts, has blurred. Finnish social media influencers have previously been known to avoid addressing issues like immigration, politics, sexuality, gender and the environment due to fear of negative feedback (PING Helsinki & Mediapooli, 2019). In recent years, however, a growing number of influencers

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have started using their online spaces to discuss political questions (Suuronen et al., 2021), and even actors known for light lifestyle content have become increasingly vocal about social justice issues.

The study builds on an online observations of a wide range of Finnish lifestyle influencers and eight semi-structured interviews: four with influencers who work with advertisers, two with non-commercial influencers and two with influencer agency representatives. The interview data comprise a mixed-race, hetero- and homosexual sample of six women and two men living in Finland. 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.

The political potential of Instagram is woven into larger discourses of authenticity when influencers use their lifestyle narratives and platforms to personalise and promote causes related to politics (Duffy & Hund, 2019; Abidin & Cover, 2019, p. 217; see also Caldeira, 2021). Although the way influencers 'make politics look easy' (Riedl et al., 2021, p. 3) and engage in meaningful conversations with their followers may (and is supposed to) seem effortless, the balance between inclusive politics, commercial visibility and protecting one's own boundaries is hard work. Our informants emphasise the ways in which their politically oriented Instagram content naturally intertwines with their everyday lives and values, but they also speak of the exhaustion caused by algorithms, contradictory demands, and overflow of private messages from followers searching for meaningful discussion.

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 intimate communication with an 'imagined audience' (Marwick and boyd, 2010, p. 116). 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.

Furthermore, the air of authenticity that forms the basis for influencers' affective relationships with followers (Cotter, 2019, p. 897) requires influencers to be seen for them to share in the lived experiences of *real* people (Duffy & Hund, 2019). Our participants 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. 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, p. 10) that offers 'un-anxious sociality' (Berlant, 2008, p. 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.

Our investigation into influencers' experiences of politicised Instagram through the concept of vague intimacy offers a nuanced perspective on the ways these intimate publics operate through feelings, intensities and a sense of commonness among participants rather than through concrete political activity or a clear ideology. At the same time, our paper contributes to the investigations of politicised online platforms and their impact by considering new modes of Instagram activism and by critically mapping out the possibilities and constraints of digital voices on social media.

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