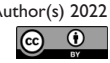
Article

new media & society
1–17



DOI: 10.1177/14614448211064302
journals.sagepub.com/home/nms


‘Endorsing a dictatorship and getting paid for it’: Discursive struggles over intimacy and authenticity in the politicisation of influencer collaborations

Johanna Arnesson
Umeå University, Sweden

Abstract
Politically motivated criticism of influencer collaborations with certain brands or organisations is a recurring feature on social media today. This article is based on a case study of followers’ reactions to collaborations between two popular Swedish influencers and Visit Dubai, the governmental tourism agency of the United Arab Emirates. Drawing on critical discourse analysis, the article takes a sociocultural approach to influencer marketing and examines how and why politicisation happens in comments to sponsored posts. The analysis focuses on discursive struggles over the construction of political issues and the role of influencers, as well as expressions of perceived interconnectedness and authenticity work among followers. It offers a qualitative understanding of audience perceptions of influencers’ political power and responsibilities, and argues that this is connected to how the role of influencers is constructed – as a friend or as promotional professional.

Keywords
Audience reactions, authenticity, collaborations, influencer politics, intimacy, social med influencers

Introduction

In October 2019, two popular Swedish influencers went on vacation to Dubai. It might not have been their first visit to the city, and it may not be their last. What set these trips

Corresponding author:
Johanna Arnesson, Department of Culture and Media Studies, Umeå University, Umeå SE-901 87, Sweden.
Email: johanna.arnesson@umu.se

apart from others, however, was that they were commercial collaborations with Visit Dubai, the governmental tourism agency of the United Arab Emirates (UAE). This means that the sponsored content the influencers shared on social media during their trips was not just vacation photos where they enjoyed the beaches, restaurants and hotels of Dubai – it was also a promotion designed to attract others to do the same. These collaborations with Visit Dubai proved controversial and sparked heated debate on gender equality, political oppression, and human rights violations in the UAE. Criticism came from faithful followers as well as occasional readers, and from organisations such as Amnesty. The controversy was also picked up by news media in Sweden, which reported on the criticisms directed towards the influencers.

The reactions were not unique; politically motivated criticism of influencer collaborations with certain brands or organisations is a recurring feature of today's digital culture. In line with a general shift towards political brand cultures and 'moral corporations' (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Lury, 2011), the political accountability and power of social media influencers has been discussed in the media (e.g. Harrington, 2020) and attracted attention in academia, in relation to both traditional party politics and contemporary lifestyle politics (e.g. Abidin, 2019; Beta, 2019; Joosse and Brydges, 2018; Maly, 2020; Wood, 2020). Furthermore, discussions about the responsibilities of influencers frequently appear on their own platforms, where the communication genre of *comment* gives the audience an opportunity to 'talk back' to the influencer, as well as to other followers.

This study is part of a research project seeking to examine the intersections of politics and promotion in contemporary influencer culture. A key question for the project is what kind of power influencers have in terms of how their followers relate to and engage in political issues. And if they do have some kind of power, does this mean that they also have responsibilities? In contrast to influencers who actively take a stand on certain issues, the Visit Dubai case is an example of influencer collaborations that become politicised by the audience; they are interpreted as promoting specific politics and therefore become subjects of disagreement. The aim of this article is to analyse how and why this politicisation happens, by answering three research questions: (1) What discursive struggles are present in the comments – that is, what are people reacting to and arguing about? (2) How are influencers' responsibilities discursively constructed by the audience? (3) What role do notions of *intimacy* and *authenticity* play in these discussions? The third question draws on research showing that the relationship and trust between followers and influencers is a crucial aspect of influencer culture (Abidin, 2015; Abidin, 2017; Coco and Eckert, 2020; McRae, 2017; Whitmer, 2020).

Previous research has suggested that digital 'micro-celebrities' (Khamis et al., 2017), in addition to promoting certain consumption choices, can strive to influence their followers in terms of beliefs and political engagement. What this study brings to the table is its focus on how followers make sense of this perceived influence, as well as how influencers' digital platforms can become sites of everyday political discourse. Drawing on critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2015; Machin and Mayr, 2012), the article contributes to the growing field of sociocultural research on influencer marketing by examining discursive struggles over meaning and values among the audience, rather than whether or not organisational goals are reached (Edwards, 2018).

Theoretical framework

A general definition characterises influencers as individuals who display a narrative of their personal lives on social network platforms or in personal blogs, and who, in different ways, interact with and capitalise on the following they accumulate through these platforms (Abidin, 2015). Based on this definition, the theoretical discussion starts by considering commercial collaborations as a promotional practice, and how influence builds upon interactions and different dimensions of intimacy. It then addresses the importance of authenticity in influencer culture, and how this can be discursively constructed and deconstructed in the comments sections of influencer platforms.

The influence of intimacy

Influencer collaborations are a form of branded content that can be designed in different ways, for example, reviewing a product that has been sent to the influencer, or – as in the present case – presenting the product or endorsed brand as part of the influencer's lifestyle. The focus is often to advertise a certain product or service; however, Coco and Eckert (2020) argue that it is also an important tool for organisations that want to build long-term relationships with consumers. In fact, *relationships* – both to the brands they endorse and to their own followers – lie at the heart of the influencer phenomenon and the power that influencers are perceived to hold over others, whether or not this entails politics or consumption choices. Celebrity endorsements build on co-branding, where symbolic meaning is transferred both from the celebrity – in this case social media influencers – to the partner brand, and from the brand to the (self-)brand of the celebrity (Ambroise et al., 2014). This meaning transfer model takes into account the deeper cultural significance of celebrity endorsement, as celebrities can represent a variety of meanings and social distinctions related, for example, to age, gender, class and lifestyle (Schimmelpfennig and Hunt, 2020).

While source credibility, source attractiveness and the congruence between endorser and brand are of course important aspects of influencer collaborations, the process of meaning transfer is central because successful collaborations build on co-creation between actors, including the audience. As Schimmelpfennig and Hunt (2020) point out, the 'final step' in meaning transfer is conducted by the consumer, who recognises and interprets the cultural connotations of the celebrity. Such negotiations over meaning also include the co-construction of social relations and brand communities around influencers. Celebrity endorsements 'facilitate a feeling of belonging and social connectedness' (Pöyry et al., 2019: 339), and an essential condition for such feelings is the *parasocial interaction* (PSI) between social actors, that is, the ways in which audiences 'interact, relate to and develop relationships with a celebrity' (Lueck, 2015: 94) and how these interactions create an illusory sense of closeness – a form of 'friendship'. PSI has been extensively studied in relation to influencer marketing, often focusing on its effects on purchasing intentions and credibility (Bond, 2016; Jin et al., 2021; Kim, 2020; Labrecque, 2014; Rasmussen, 2018; Reinikainen et al., 2020; Sokolova and Kefi, 2020). This article, however, takes another approach and, in line with Edwards (2018), strives to analyse social and political dimensions of PSIs, rather than develop fixed models of 'best practice' cause and effect.

Crystal Abidin (2015) talks about the relationships between micro-celebrities and their audiences as *perceived interconnectedness*, which describes how influencers act in certain ways to give the impression of intimacy. The concept includes four different dimensions: commercial, interactive, reciprocal and disclosive intimacy, which together contribute to both the economic and social capital of the influencer. By asking for feedback and input on content, interacting with followers and sharing intimate details about their everyday lives, influencers can create and maintain a close relationship with their audience. Abidin claims that perceived interconnectedness differs from 'traditional' parasocial relations in certain ways, for example, through '. . . a more democratic and equalising infrastructure [where] influencers and followers co-produce and shape the conversation' (Abidin, 2015: 10). The co-production of meaning is central to this article, as the framework is used to study the audience rather than the influencer; specifically, how followers actualise different dimensions of intimacy in their reactions to influencer collaborations and how this is related to authenticity.

Authenticity work and discursive struggles

Authenticity – a notion that combines honesty, truthfulness and originality – is one of the few intrinsic values of otherwise disparate digital spheres (Shifman, 2018) and has historically been an ideal for self-promotion in social media settings (Salisbury and Pooley, 2017). It is also inherently connected to intimacy, since a precondition for someone being considered 'real' rather than 'fake' is that others can base their assessment on (perceived) intimate knowledge of that person (Raun, 2018). Authenticity has consequently been argued to be a 'defining criterion' for influencers' impact and long-term relationship with followers (Coco and Eckert, 2020; Hunter, 2016; Marwick, 2013; Pöyry et al., 2019). Being 'true to oneself and one's followers' is expressed as an ethical ideal among influencers, especially in relation to commercial collaborations (Wellman et al., 2020). Inconsistency and perceived unoriginality can otherwise lead followers to recognise an influencer as constructed rather than genuine, which means that the influencer must engage in a form of *authenticity work* that is dependent on the 'genre expertise' of the audience (Banet-Weiser, 2021; McRae, 2017). Audiences are, however, increasingly aware that authenticity is *performative*, that is, not something you *have* but rather something you *do*. Their evaluation is based on the consistency and transparency of that performance in relation to an influencer's brand, rather than expectations of an unfaltering 'true' self (Whitmer, 2020). For example, influencers with an environmentally conscious appearance, who often highlight recycling and secondhand goods, have been criticised by their own followers for still encouraging an unsustainable interest in consumption. Such a discrepancy between self-brand and what is promoted can be perceived as a betrayal of the 'friendship' and may take on emotional dimensions (Lueck, 2015).

Social media has been described as an environment where authenticity is 'simultaneously promised, demanded, and disputed' (Shane, 2018: 3) in an ongoing process where the tensions and contradictions of performative authenticity become visible (Banet-Weiser, 2021). One of the online spaces where this can be observed is the comments sections of influencer platforms, where different actors can participate in ongoing conversations as part of the brand community. As a genre, comment is reactive, short and

asynchronous; as a communicative practice, it is collaborative, reciprocal and cumulative. For some, comments are a nuisance that draws attention away from legitimate content and feeds online hate, while for others they are part of the participatory practices which enable 'collective intelligence' and shift power hierarchies between media producers and media consumers (Reagle, 2015). For influencers, commenting is essential for creating and maintaining a successful digital brand. The comments sections of influencers' platforms function as an extension of the published content, where the audience can discuss specific topics, ask questions, give praise or critique and provide feedback. It is also a space where discursive struggles over politics and influencer responsibility can be found, as followers, critics and the influencers themselves might hold different views on what being an influencer actually means, and what kind of responsibilities that entails.

This article draws upon critical discourse analysis to examine such disagreements, which are characterised in the current material by blurred boundaries between the private and the public, and between friendship and exploitation. Discourse is here understood as 'the use of language in context' – as a social practice that constructs representations in certain ways, depending on the choices made by social actors, the options available within a certain genre and the sociocultural context (Edwards, 2018; Fairclough, 2015). By analysing the construction of political issues and the role of influencers, as well as expressions of perceived interconnectedness and authenticity work among followers, it aims to achieve a qualitative understanding of audience perceptions of influencers' political power and responsibilities. This does of course entail limitations to the study, since it does not presume to establish correlations between certain themes and topics, nor claim to be generally representative of all interactions between influencers and their audiences. Instead it focuses on the fluidity and complexity of the discussions, and how different understandings of the social and discursive practices of influencer culture are both contested and converged.

Material and methodology

This article is based on a case study of the commercial collaborations between two Swedish influencers – Kenza Zouiten and Alexandra Bring – and Visit Dubai, the official tourism agency of the UAE. These two collaborations, which took place during the autumn of 2019, constitute a strategic selection for analysing the process(es) of politicisation in influencer collaborations; both were questioned and criticised by followers and/or occasional readers, criticised by Amnesty and mentioned in newspaper coverage in Sweden.

The collaborations

Kenza Zouiten (born 1991) began blogging more than 10 years ago and has been part of shaping the influencer industry in Sweden. She was born and raised in Stockholm, although she spent a few years in her father's homeland of Morocco when she was a child. Her blog already had more than 100,000 daily readers in 2009 and laid the foundations for her career. Kenza is also one of the most popular Swedish influencers on Instagram, with around 1.8 million followers.

Alexandra Bring (born 1990) comes from Umeå, in northern Sweden, and now lives in Stockholm. She has profiled herself as a health and workout influencer and has around 600,000 followers on Instagram today. She has a podcast together with her sister – another successful Instagrammer – where they discuss fashion, lifestyle, family and life 'behind' the social media stage, as well as a blog about training and exercise, family, interior design and healthy living.

The collaborations between these influencers and Visit Dubai mainly consist of sponsored posts on Instagram, which construct an image of luxury, carelessness, modernity and exclusivity. The influencers are only shown in desirable settings, enjoying themselves and the food, nature and culture of Dubai. Kenza Zouiten posted two photos from her vacation marked as sponsored by Visit Dubai. Both imitate candid shots, one on the beach and one in a restaurant, while still being purposefully staged. The vacation in Dubai is also featured on her blog, although these are not sponsored posts. When the collaboration was criticised, she posted a promise to respond to the criticism, which she later did in a postscript to an unrelated blogpost.

Alexandra Bring posted three sponsored posts on Instagram during her stay in Dubai; photos that resemble editorial pictures while being 'candid' vacation snapshots. The first shows her having 'tea with a view' at one of Dubai's luxury hotels, and the other two show her at different beach locations. On her blog, Alexandra also published one sponsored post with pictures from the trip and short accounts of the different sights and activities. There is no mention of the criticism the collaboration had caused, either here or in any of her other blogposts where the vacation is featured.

The comments

The focus of this study is the politicisation of the collaborations that took place in the comments sections, where followers reacted to the partnership with Visit Dubai. Hence, the analysed material consists of, in total, 1042 comments posted on either Instagram or the two blogs.[1] While the initial data set includes all the comments available at the specific date and time of data gathering, it is important to remember that comments are not static – online content can change depending on the actions of commenters, moderators and the influencers themselves.

To gain an overview of the material and a first look at the focus of the discussions, all comments were initially coded according to influencer and platform, with a majority being reactions to Kenza Zouiten's collaboration and posted on Instagram (see Appendix 1). They were then grouped together into four overarching categories based on the content and attitude: those that *criticised* the collaborations, those that *defended* the collaborations, those that were *unrelated* to the political discussions and those that were *replies* from influencers. Discussions about the collaborations' political implications make up half of the material ($n=517$), and among those who engage in debate there is a clear tendency towards critical comments that question the collaborations ($n=370$). In this half of the material, almost 90% of the comments are directed at Kenza Zouiten. This distribution might be explained by Kenza's larger audience and more prominent position as a social media celebrity. The majority of the other half of the material (the *unrelated* category) consists of emojis, or comments about the influencers' fashion, family or other miscellaneous topics. It is worth noting that

none of the influencers' replies in the comment sections acknowledge the criticism of the collaborations – when Kenza talks about it, she does so on her own blog.

Analytical tools and process

The analytical process was conducted in two steps; first looking at *what* was said in the discussions and then *how* it was said. All comments that *criticise* or *defend* the collaborations were initially coded into themes, for example, 'responsibility', and then topics such as 'influencer responsibility' or 'follower responsibility'. The approach for identifying themes and topics was abductive, that is, led by preunderstandings based on the literature review and research questions (looking for comments on responsibility or authenticity, for example) while still remaining open to other recurring themes in the material (such as the emotional aspect of the discussions). Keywords such as 'responsibility' [*ansvar*] or 'influence' [*påverkan*] were used in the process, as well as inductive coding based on the researcher's interpretation (the description of someone being 'down to earth' was, for example, coded as an articulation of authenticity). These are not necessarily mutually exclusive categories – a comment might contain articulations of both influencer responsibility and authenticity, for example.

Second, themes and topics were synthesised into discursive struggles, or overarching arguments, and studied using discourse analytical tools such as *lexical choices*, that is, how social actors are described or attributed different characteristics and qualities. An example of how lexical choices contribute to meaning-making is the description of Dubai as both an oppressive dictatorship and a land of vision and ambition. The analysis also examines the use of *representational strategies* highlighting certain aspects of an actor or practice, and obscuring others (Machin and Mayr, 2012: 30–49, 79–85). Such strategies include, for example, functionalisation – referring to social actors in terms of what they do, rather than who they are – or suppression, where some things are omitted from the text. Drawing on previous research on influencer culture (Abidin, 2015; Coco and Eckert, 2020; McRae, 2017; Wood, 2020), the analysis also focuses specifically on how notions of intimacy and authenticity are actualised – that is, rendered visible – and what role they play in these discursive struggles.

Analysis

The analysis is divided into three main discursive struggles that were identified through several re-readings of the comments. While the material is dominated by comments from Kenza Zouiten's platforms, these three overarching arguments were found in both data sets. We start with the politics of the UAE and, by extension, the influencers, and then move on to the collaborations and economic motivations behind the promotion of Dubai. The third argument involves different ideas of 'taking responsibility' and influencers' lack of response to criticism.

Politicisation and protest

The criticism of the influencers and their collaborations with Visit Dubai is based on issues such as human rights, gender equality, LGBTQ rights and freedom of speech. It is

clear that the attention from Amnesty has had an impact from the way in which commenters refer to information from the organisation, or reply to its comments. From this perspective, the criticism becomes part of a collective and organised reaction against the collaborations. A comment on one of Kenza Zouiten's Instagram posts, for example, highlights several problematic aspects of the UAE:

> How can you support this country?! And urge your followers to go on holiday to a dictatorship where homosexuality can be punished with imprisonment, [where] men according to Amnesty have certain rights to beat their wives, where if you report a rape there is a risk that you as a woman will be imprisoned, where regime critics are imprisoned and tortured and where guest workers from Asia – who make up 85 percent of the country's population – lack basic civil rights and live as second-class residents. Thought more of you. . . 😔

Comments expressing this kind of criticism and objecting to the collaboration describe the UAE in very negative terms, such as being 'a state built on slave labour', a 'corrupt' or 'shitty' country, and 'one of the worst dictatorships in the world', run by a 'terrible' and 'oppressive' regime. Such lexical choices contribute to specific representational strategies, for example, structural oppositions – if the UAE is a 'dictatorship' that should not be supported, this suggests that there are other countries which are 'democratic' and worthy of support (Machin and Mayr, 2012: 39). The criticism serves to construct the UAE, and by extension the collaboration with its official tourism agency, as something out of the ordinary and subject to legitimate criticism. It can also create an 'us' versus 'them' dichotomy, where Dubai and the UAE become an 'other' that deviates from supposed preunderstandings and cultural norms regarding equality, sexuality and workers' rights (Machin and Mayr, 2012: 84).

At the same time, this criticism is voiced by individuals who position themselves as dedicated followers. The example above is addressed directly to the influencer; it starts with 'how can *you* support this country' (my emphasis) and ends with the statement that she or he 'thought more of' Kenza than this. Similar statements can be found in comments directed towards Alexandra Bring, with followers talking about how the collaboration clashes with her 'good values'. This suggests that it is not just the UAE that deviates from presupposed notions of 'good' and 'bad' – it is also the influencers themselves. The objections actualise a disclosive intimacy between follower and influencer (Abidin, 2015), since they build on a perceived knowledge of the influencers' values and ethics, and imply underlying assumptions about their political opinions. By previously sharing their views on specific issues, Kenza and Alexandra have given their followers 'behind-the-scenes' access to their politics – Kenza, for example, has promoted Amnesty's campaign 'Write for Rights' on her blog.[2] This access now causes reactions since the audience expects compliance with those previously stated opinions. The perceived lack of consistency with the online persona that the influencer has built for herself – or rather, followers' ideas of that persona – is interpreted as a lack of authenticity (McRae, 2017; Whitmer, 2020).

On the other side of the argument, however, there are followers who construct the issue in a different manner. One topic arising among those followers who defend the collaborations is that the objections are based on 'disinformation' and are therefore untrue.

One follower says that the criticism is only 'prejudice' and invites all of Kenza's followers to 'come and see for themselves' if the UAE is a dictatorship or not. Another describes Dubai as 'the world's greatest city' and hopes that Kenza is enjoying her trip. In the comments section for another post, the UAE is described as a land of 'vision and ambition' and this follower suggests that the critics' views would be different if they had actually been there. These are examples of lexical choices whereby Dubai and the UAE are ascribed positive, rather than negative, attributes and the critics are characterised as ignorant or having opinions based on stereotypes. It also involves strategies of self-representation, since the statements involve a form of functionalisation through which followers position themselves as 'experts' based on their firsthand experiences. As Machin and Mayr (2012: 81) write, functionalisation can connote legitimacy, and in this case it serves to present these followers as more informed and authentic than others.

Another strategy among those who defend the collaborations is to compare the UAE to countries such as Turkey, Thailand, the United States and Sweden. A difference here is that these followers do not necessarily argue that the objections are untrue; instead, they argue that they are unfair, or examples of double standards:

> You don't have to answer for all the problems that exist in the UAE. There are so many double standards in the criticism you receive. I mean, those who mention guest workers for example, criticise everyone who buys clothes at H&M or other clothing chains, it's the same group of people who work in their factories. Are they criticising the people who go to the United States? There are some political problems there, including violations of human rights. The world is not as safe as Sweden. . . . Tourism is a major contributing factor to change in the UAE and, I mean, how often do people in burkas, bikinis, veils and you name it get together on the same beach without any problems? It's impressive that they've succeeded in creating that tolerance. Hope you have a great holiday!

This example illustrates how comparison with other countries, in this case the United States, is used to characterise the criticism of the UAE as unjust, or inauthentic. Instead of a structural opposition, where one country represents 'good' and the other 'bad', both the United States and the UAE are categorised as a generic type (Machin and Mayr, 2012: 80–81); they are both countries with 'political problems', including violations of human rights. Since they are essentially the same from this perspective, it becomes inconsistent to criticise one and not the other. In a similar sense, it is not the politics of the influencers that is inauthentic for these followers, but rather the politics of the critics. The political act of boycotting is presented as inauthentic, because – according to the followers' perception – it is used inconsistently. Furthermore, commenters question boycotts as a strategy at a more fundamental level – instead, it is tourism and cultural exchange that forms the basis for a 'process' of change. The opening statement that Kenza does not have to 'answer for all the problems' in the UAE, and the friendly personalised greeting at the end reveal a perceived intimacy with the influencer, with the follower taking her side in the conflict and drawing on an 'us' versus 'them' dichotomy to evoke a feeling of closeness and support.

While the follower in the example above has a rather positive view of Sweden as a 'safe' country, others who express a similar idea of double standards do so by comparing the

UAE with negative images of Sweden, which is characterised as a country where people 'whine' about 'where others go on holiday'. The promotional aspect of the trip to Dubai is suppressed (Machin and Mayr, 2012: 85) in such comments, that is, rendered invisible, and instead it is the notion of individual freedom that is highlighted; people should 'mind their own business' and not judge others for their choices. Another feature is the characterisation of critics as 'hypocritical', 'bitter' and 'jealous' – specifically positioning jealousy and envy as part of Swedish culture. Sweden is described as 'not much better than any other country' and the issue of gender equality is evoked by followers who claim that Swedish courts 'free refugees from rape accusations' and argue that women's rights are just as much an issue there as in the UAE. Such statements evoke a right-wing, anti-immigrant discourse to defend the collaborations, while others argue instead that the criticism is based on racism and anti-Muslim prejudice. Objections are part of 'a witch hunt of everything that has to do with the Middle East' since Islam is 'the worst thing Swedes know'. Thus, while issues such as gender equality, LGBTQ rights and freedom of choice form the basis of criticism against the collaborations, other political issues are used to counteract this criticism. This demonstrates how politicisation involves discursive struggles over which issues are relevant, in addition to ongoing negotiations around intimacy and authenticity.

Promotion and profit

The economic and promotional aspect of the collaborations, that is, the fact that the influencers are paid to go to Dubai and advertise the city, is also a reason for criticism. Followers stress that it is not the trip per se that they object to – 'everyone can of course choose where to travel' – it is the combination of promotion, profit and politics. Followers say that they do not object to sponsored posts – they understand that influencers need an income – what they do object to is the specific choice of partner in this collaboration; that the influencers are 'endorsing a dictatorship and getting paid for it'. This shows both how perceptions of an inevitable clash between authenticity and profitability are negotiated and reconfigured (Banet-Weiser, 2012), and the 'genre expertise' among followers who are aware of, and make judgements based on, the difference between sponsored and non-sponsored content, as well as the brands or services that are being promoted (McRae, 2017).

Followers' feeling that they have a close relationship with the influencers is expressed in the emotional and behavioural dimensions of these discussions (Lueck, 2015), where different forms of intimacy are actualised in followers' expressions of admiration or disappointment, as well as anger and frustration. The influencers' partnership with Visit Dubai makes some feel 'sad', 'miserable' and 'surprised', based on the perceived conflict with the influencers' values discussed earlier. Others talk of how they feel 'disgusted' and 'pissed off' by the fact that the influencer – described as 'a hypocrite', 'naïve' or an 'idiot' – has agreed to accept 'blood money' from the UAE; a characterisation and hateful tone predominantly directed towards Kenza Zouiten. Both variants are framed by references to a long and close relationship, whereby the follower has got to know the influencer in an intimate way:

> I've been a fan and reader of yours since the very first years [when] you started blogging. But all this around the trip has TOTALLY changed my image of you. I get so terribly disgusted and

> pissed off that it's so FUCKING EASY to basically piss on an entire people SUFFERING from their oppressive leadership, JUST because you get paid by them ?? !!! . . . Since you make so much money because people choose to 'follow' you, I don't understand how you have the nerve to ignore the questions as you do. Damn you.

Criticism is not just directed towards the economic aspect of the collaboration, but also the fact that it clashes with how followers perceive the influencer – the values she stands for and what kind of person she is – and the kinds of feelings to which this 'breach of contract' leads to. The example above is particularly interesting, since the follower demands an answer from the influencer, not just because of the reciprocal intimacy of the 'friendship', but also because of the commercial intimacy actualised through a form of consumer power discourse. Since followers are a prerequisite for the influencer's success, she owes them an explanation for her actions. The follower expresses a feeling of lack of respect, both for the audience as friends and as a commodity. Comments like this one can also include statements where the follower says 'goodbye' to the influencer and declares that they will stop following them from now on.

Others express similar feelings of disappointment, but emphasise that they are not quick to judge, and have given the influencer the benefit of the doubt since they appreciate and admire her work. Instead of anger, these followers express themselves in a caring, respectful and polite way. One follower commenting on Alexandra Bring's Instagram writes, for example, that she 'likes [her] very much' and supports her in almost everything she does, but is 'genuinely interested' in her ethical considerations over the collaboration. Another describes how she actively decided that she should not jump to conclusions when she heard about the trip to Dubai, because she felt that she knew Alexandra so well. By stressing their benevolent attitude, these followers construct their disappointment over the collaboration as being even greater than if they did not have this long relationship with the influencer, and an intimate knowledge of her character and values. In addition, such actualisations of perceived interconnectedness overlap with the authenticity work among followers – by representing themselves as 'long-term followers' with a positive attitude towards the influencer, they make their objections more difficult to dismiss as expressions of inauthentic 'jealousy' or 'trolling'.

Responsibility and reciprocity

Opinions about whether or not influencers should be held responsible for the (potential) political impact of their collaborations differ among followers. Commenters who defend the collaborations seem to hold influencers accountable to a similar degree as any other social media (prod)user. One, for example, argues that 'Kenza has no greater responsibility than anyone else just because she has more followers on insta[gram]'. This denial of responsibility includes how and why influencers choose partners to collaborate with, and the perceived politics of their choices. A commenter on Alexandra Bring's blog describes the criticism as unfair and out of place:

> . . . You can't claim that they're not smart. You do know they only share things they want? You also know their blogs are not politically oriented? They write about their everyday life, fashion,

> food, exercise, etc. . . . Of course, I agree that maybe you should do your research, but despite that, everyone has their free will. . . .

The breach of contract here is not caused by the influencer but by the (critical) followers – their demands and responses to the collaboration are described as disproportionate to the perceived offence, as well as the wrong way to take responsibility. Instead, responsibility is constructed as being accountable for one's own feelings and actions; instead of 'whining', those who take offence should share their disagreement 'thoughtfully, with class and respect' and then 'unfollow her and move on'. Emotional language is present here as well, although this time in the form of compassion and empathy. One follower says that she 'feels a little sorry' for influencers, who are 'questioned for every choice' they make, and calls for a more collective criticism than that directed at individual influencers. Another follower with a similar perspective calls the critics 'vampires' who only want influencers to 'feel bad' and be ashamed to boost their own egos, rather than to contribute to positive change.

Such statements are, however, met with counterarguments that emphasise the right to criticise influential professionals, and to hold them accountable for their perceived political ignorance and refusal to take responsibility. Critics seem to regard influencers as powerful, and therefore accountable, due to their reach and promotional function:

> . . . As a media person followed by a huge number of people, Kenza decided to use her presence in a pro-Dubai campaign and got probably tons of money for doing so. This Instagram account is not about sharing nice family pictures, it's about selling things and in this case posts like this are very irresponsible and show that she's either blind, ignorant, and thoughtless or, which would be even worse, knows what's going on and still decides to sell publicity and promote tourism (money flow) to a country that's oppressing the very basic human rights that should not be optional but given for any person born into this world. . . .

This construction of responsibility is built upon assigning influencers attributes such as greed, ignorance and/or calculated malice, together with functionalisation, that is, references to their profession and the perceived power of digital micro-celebrity. Or, to paraphrase another pop cultural phenomenon: with a great audience comes great responsibility. Followers with this perspective tend to describe influencers as 'people in power' and 'public figures' with certain responsibilities for what they represent and promote, rather than private individuals who happen to have a popular Instagram account or blog. Responsibility is described as being 'a good role model' for the audience, specifically for young girls who are characterised as particularly vulnerable to 'bad influence'.

Critics also express a certain frustration over what they see as an 'abuse of power' and unwillingness to take responsibility – influencers either do not understand their own power or they refuse to acknowledge it, and this has an impact on their trustworthiness. Examples can be found in the replies to Kenza Zouiten's explanation of her reasoning behind the Visit Dubai collaboration. In the blogpost where she addresses the criticism, she does so in a postscript, stating, 'I don't know what you want me to say because no matter what I write, it will be wrong' and that she has been in contact with Amnesty, which shares her opinion that tourism is a good way for people to meet and learn about

other cultures. However, it becomes clear that this attempt at reciprocal intimacy is perceived as inauthentic in the comments section to the blogpost, where commenters point out that she herself promised an explanation and that this is 'too little, too late':

> What an incredibly bad answer. It was you who said you would respond to the criticism, no wonder people then wonder when you don't. Describe how you think tourism has a positive effect on Dubai in particular. The only people you met were probably staff at facilities, and I guess you didn't talk to them and learn from their culture? How do you think your trip there did something better? . . .

Lack of reciprocity, and inconsistency between what is said and what is done, is highlighted by followers, who argue that Kenza's explanation is yet another proof of her 'non-existent' morals and that she is either too dumb or too clever to admit to her own role as a promotional intermediary. Commenters also demand a specific responsibility to be 'conscious' about potential controversies or political aspects of one's actions, and that influencers should 'read up on' the brands, countries or organisations they collaborate with; they have a responsibility to be informed rather than ignorant.

Interestingly, the responsibility to be conscious also extends to the audience. Holding influencers accountable is sometimes seen as a civil duty, rather than just consumer rights. One follower engaged in a comment thread on this topic argues that people *must* criticise and hold influencers accountable because 'lots of other people are indirectly affected by [their] stupid choices'. This statement actualises an obligation to be aware of the economic and promotional aspects of influencer culture. Other comments include both explicit and implicit calls to see sponsored content for what it is: advertising meant to influence the audience to make certain choices and consume certain products or services. One follower, for example, points out that influencer collaborations are 'a known strategy' for regimes such as the UAE to shift attention away from human rights issues, and instead cultivate their image as a glamorous tourist destination.

Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to examine the politicisation of influencer collaborations, by analysing how influencer responsibility is discursively constructed by the audience and the roles that intimacy and authenticity play in these discussions. To do so, I have looked at lexical choices and representational strategies (Fairclough, 2015; Machin and Mayr, 2012), combined with dimensions of intimacy and authenticity work (Abidin, 2015; Coco and Eckert, 2020; McRae, 2017; Whitmer, 2020), in comments on sponsored posts on Instagram and in blogs. These posts were commercial collaborations between two popular Swedish influencers and Visit Dubai, the governmental tourism agency of the UAE.

The collaborations with Visit Dubai became politicised in a way that the influencers themselves might not have envisioned, or had hoped to avoid. The controversies raise questions about influencer accountability, and the values associated with their self-brand. Furthermore, they highlight the fluid borders between the personal and the public, as well as the intimate relationship between influencers and their followers – two things

that are crucial for successful micro-celebrities to manage. The very idea of being an influencer is based on an intensified commodification of the self, in order to 'inspire' the audience to make specific choices (Khamis et al., 2017). Nevertheless, this study shows a certain reluctance among followers to acknowledge this inherent idea of promotion and persuasion – some do not perceive the collaborations as advertising, others do not care if they are.

Discursive struggles over politics and responsibility are linked to how commenters regard influencers and their relationship to their audience. Those who highlight the public role of influencers take accountability for granted, drawing on a perception of power that stems from a large audience. In contrast to a general tendency to regard commercial content as inauthentic (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Coco and Eckert, 2020), it is the combination of promotion, profit and politics that causes concern here. Inconsistency between the perceived persona of the influencer and the politics of the UAE means that the influencers have failed to tell the 'true story' about their vacations in Dubai, as well as about their own values (Coco and Eckert, 2020). Followers who regard influencers as just one individual among others, who happen to have a large following on social media, instead tend to highlight influencers' exposure to harsh criticism for something that is considered to be a private choice. The paradox in this situation is, of course, that the intersection of these two spheres – the public and the private – is exactly where the profession of being an influencer is situated, since much of the phenomenon is based on commodifying one's personal life and relationships.

Furthermore, responsibility is attributed to followers as well as influencers. Depending on how the collaborations and the role of the influencer are perceived, commenters actualise different notions of 'follower responsibility'. Appeals to see the commercial purpose of the specific sponsored posts, and of influencer collaborations in general, draw on a discourse of advertising literacy, that is, that media audiences should have knowledge about, and be able to critically assess, the persuasive intent of the advertising and different promotional techniques that surround them. Others suggest that follower responsibility concerns being accountable for one's own feelings and reactions, and to unfollow influencers if they do not comply with the way you think they should behave. Both these notions of responsibility are constructed as an individual responsibility to (re)act in a certain way.

While generalised conclusions can be hard to draw from a case study like this, the perceived interconnectedness (Abidin, 2015) between influencer and followers seems to have an impact on the politicisation of the collaborations, and on how responsibility is constructed. Factors such as popularity and persona does, however, play into the process, as well as cultural and national context – it is not self-evident that these particular collaborations would have been criticised the same way in another country or at another time. Still, political disapproval might be one of the things an influencer 'does not intend, but cannot escape' (McRae, 2017: 24); it is an integral part of the commodified relationships that are a prerequisite for success. It is not just 'anti-fans' who deconstruct the authenticity of influencers – similar negotiations over inconsistency and performativity occur among followers who see themselves as fans, and who claim a long and close relationship with the influencer. By actualising different dimensions of intimacy, followers who criticise the influencers and their collaborations perform a kind of authenticity

work that serves to legitimate their objections as stemming from genuine concern and friendship. In line with a general 'emotional turn' in mediated political discourse (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019), emotions – both positive and negative – also seem to play a role when followers hold influencers, or each other, accountable. Future research could pursue this further and consider such expressions as a form of 'affective intimacy' that *does things*; emotions mediate the relationship between influencer and followers and bind them together (Ahmed, 2004). Emotions are also powerful political tools, and therefore relevant to scholars who are interested in the political power and significance of social media influencers.

Author's note

The author has agreed to submission and the manuscript is not currently being considered for publication by any other print or electronic journal.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Johanna Arnesson https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7833-8787

Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. Comments from Instagram were retrieved through data scraping of selected posts, with help from the technical and intellectual infrastructure *Humlab* at Umeå University. Data gathering of comments from blogs was accomplished using the NCapture feature of *NVivo*, a programme used for qualitative multimodal research. NVivo was also used for coding, analysing and archiving all the materials. Quoted comments were translated from Swedish into English by the researcher. The process of gathering, storing and handling empirical material was reviewed and approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority.
2. Zouiten, Kenza (2014) 'Skriv för frihet' available at http://kenzas.se/2014/11/10/skriv-for-frihet/

References

Abidin C (2015) Communicative intimacies: influencers and perceived interconnectedness. *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, & Technology* (8): 1–16.

Abidin C (2017) #Familygoals: family influencers, calibrated amateurism, and justifying young digital labor. *Social Media + Society* 3(2): 1–15.

Abidin C (2019) *Minahs* and minority celebrity: parody YouTube influencers and minority politics in Singapore. *Celebrity Studies* 12(4): 598–617.

Ahmed S (2004) Affective economies. *Social Text* 22(2): 117–139.

Ambroise L, Pantin-sohier G, Valette-florence P, et al. (2014) From endorsement to celebrity co-branding: personality transfer. *Journal of Brand Management* 21(4): 273–285.

Banet-Weiser S (2012) *Authentic™: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture*. New York: NYU Press.
Banet-Weiser S (2021) Gender, social media, and the labor of authenticity. *American Quarterly* 73(1): 141–144.
Beta AR (2019) Commerce, piety and politics: Indonesian young Muslim women's groups as religious influencers. *New Media & Society* 21(10): 2140–2159.
Bond BJ (2016) Following your 'friend': social media and the strength of adolescents' parasocial relationships with media personae. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* 19(11): 656–660.
Coco SL and Eckert S (2020) #Sponsored: consumer insights on social media influencer marketing. *Public Relations Inquiry* 9(2): 177–194.
Edwards L (2018) *Understanding Public Relations: Theory, Culture and Society*. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE.
Fairclough N (2015) *Language and Power*. London: Routledge.
Harrington J (2020) The new wave: influencers and politics. *PR Week*, 20 January.
Hunter A (2016) Monetizing the mommy: mommy blogs and the audience commodity. *Information, Communication & Society* 19(9): 1306–1320.
Jin SV, Ryu E and Muqaddam A (2021) I trust what she's #endorsing on Instagram: moderating effects of parasocial interaction and social presence in fashion influencer marketing. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management: An International Journal* 254(4): 665–681.
Joosse S and Brydges T (2018) Blogging for sustainability: the intermediary role of personal green blogs in promoting sustainability. *Environmental Communication* 12(5): 686–700.
Khamis S, Ang L and Welling R (2017) Self-branding, 'micro-celebrity' and the rise of social media influencers. *Celebrity Studies* 8(2): 191–208.
Kim H (2020) Unpacking unboxing video-viewing motivations: the uses and gratifications perspective and the mediating role of parasocial interaction on purchase intent. *Journal of Interactive Advertising* 20(3): 196–208.
Labrecque LI (2014) Fostering consumer–brand relationships in social media environments: the role of parasocial interaction. *Journal of Interactive Marketing* 28(2): 134–148.
Lueck JA (2015) Friend-zone with benefits: the parasocial advertising of Kim Kardashian. *Journal of Marketing Communications* 21(2): 91–109.
Lury C (2011) *Consumer Culture*. Cambridge: Polity.
Machin D and Mayr A (2012) *How to Do Critical Discourse Analysis: A Multimodal Introduction*. London: SAGE.
McRae S (2017) 'Get off my internets': how anti-fans deconstruct lifestyle bloggers' authenticity work. *Persona Studies* 3(1): 13.
Maly I (2020) Metapolitical new right influencers: the case of Brittany Pettibone. *Social Sciences (Basel)* 9(7): 113.
Marwick AE (2013) 'They're really profound women, they're entrepreneurs': conceptions of authenticity in Fashion Blogging. In: *International conference on weblogs and social media (ICWSM)*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, July, Association for the Advancement of Artificial Intelligence.
Pöyry E, Pelkonen M, Naumanen E, et al. (2019) A call for authenticity: audience responses to social media influencer endorsements in strategic communication. *International Journal of Strategic Communication* 13(4): 336–351.
Rasmussen L (2018) Parasocial interaction in the digital age: an examination of relationship building and the effectiveness of YouTube celebrities. *The Journal of Social Media in Society* 7(1): 280–294.

Raun T (2018) Capitalizing intimacy: new subcultural forms of micro-celebrity strategies and affective labour on YouTube. *Convergence* 24(1): 99–113.
Reagle JM (2015) *Reading the Comments: Likers, Haters, and Manipulators at the Bottom of the Web*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
Reinikainen H, Munnukka J, Maity D, et al. (2020) 'You really are a great big sister': parasocial relationships, credibility, and the moderating role of audience comments in influencer marketing. *Journal of Marketing Management* 36(3–4): 279–298.
Salisbury M and Pooley JD (2017) The# nofilter self: the contest for authenticity among social networking sites, 2002–2016. *Social Sciences* 6(1): 10.
Schimmelpfennig C and Hunt JB (2020) Fifty years of celebrity endorser research: support for a comprehensive celebrity endorsement strategy framework. *Psychology & Marketing* 37(3): 488–505.
Shane T (2018) The semiotics of authenticity: indexicality in Donald Trump's tweets. *Social Media + Society* 4(3): 1–14.
Shifman L (2018) Testimonial rallies and the construction of memetic authenticity. *European Journal of Communication* 33(2): 172–184.
Sokolova K and Kefi H (2020) Instagram and YouTube bloggers promote it, why should I buy? How credibility and parasocial interaction influence purchase intentions. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* 53: 101742.
Wahl-Jorgensen K (2019) *Emotions, Media and Politics*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
Wellman ML, Stoldt R, Tully M, et al. (2020) Ethics of authenticity: social media influencers and the production of sponsored content. *Journal of Media Ethics* 35(2): 68–82.
Whitmer JM (2020) 'Between a regular person and a brand': managing the contradictions of the authentic self-brand. *The Sociological Quarterly* 62(1): 143–160.
Wood R (2020) 'What I'm not gonna buy': algorithmic culture jamming and anti-consumer politics on YouTube. *New Media & Society* 23(9): 2754–2772.

Author biography

Johanna Arnesson is associate senior lecturer in Media and Communication Studies at Umeå University. Her research includes critical perspectives on promotion, political communication and popular culture.