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Influencers as ideological intermediaries: promotional politics and authenticity labour in influencer collaborations

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Abstract

Though politics and promotion have never been completely separate, the convergence between the two spheres is increasingly prominent in today's digital culture. To broaden our understanding of such promotional politics in social media, this paper examines commercial collaborations between four Swedish influencers and two private companies that offer services enabled by specific neoliberal reforms during recent decades, and how they strive to present these services in a way that attracts an affluent but socially conscious middle-class. It argues that the political potential of influencers might not always be as spokespersons for a cause or party, but rather as 'ideological intermediaries' who promote a lifestyle to be inspired by, and aspire to. The analysis identifies the discourses that influencers draw on to achieve the promotional and ideological outcomes of commercial collaborations, as well as the authenticity labour that they perform in the texts. Further, the paper analyses how notions of authenticity also impact audiences' interpretation and politicization of the collaborations, in the comment sections to the sponsored blogposts.

Keywords

authenticity, discourse, influencers, politics, promotion, social media

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Introduction

There are several examples of how social media influencers have become part of the global political landscape over the last decade. Some personify and/or promote issues such as sustainability, feminism, and queer activism on their platforms, while others build their self-brand around conservative values and/or right-wing views (Abidin, 2019a, 2019b; Joosse and Brydges, 2018; Lewis, 2020; Maly, 2020; Wood, 2021). Some engage in institutional politics and encourage followers to vote, or might publicly endorse a certain party or ideology (Karlsen, 2015; Shmargad, 2022). So-called 'nano' or 'micro' influencers, who have a very dedicated audience within a certain segment, also play an important role in political campaigning today (Grandien and Falasca, 2020).

Influencer culture has also had an impact on politics in the way that politicians might socialize with well-known social media celebrities or adopt similar promotional strategies (Casero-Ripollés, 2020). One such strategy is the idea of *authenticity* as a core value of both contemporary politics and social media (Enli, 2015; Serazio, 2017; Shifman, 2018). Characteristics like trustworthiness and 'realness' can be used by politicians to dismantle a rising political distrust (Valgarðsson et al., 2021) and position populist politicians as authentic outsiders rather than part of the 'elite' (Enli, 2015, 2017). Similarly, authenticity is crucial for influencers since a central aspect of micro-celebrity is the ability to craft and maintain a self-brand that is genuine and relatable, yet still unique (Khamis et al., 2017; Whitmer, 2021). It can even be described as a form of *labour* that is necessary for influencers to perform in order to manage the audience's expectations of them and adhere to consistent personal ethics, thereby cultivating a persona that is both aspirational and ordinary (Banet-Weiser, 2021; McRae, 2017). Authenticity – in terms of being 'true to oneself' and to one's audience – is also a main ethical principle for influencers when it comes to commercial collaborations and sponsored content (Wellman et al., 2020).

Based on these overlapping characteristics, this paper examines authenticity labour and promotional politics in influencer marketing. It argues that the political potential of influencers might not always be as spokespersons for a cause or party, but rather as 'ideological intermediaries' who promote a lifestyle enabled by specific policies. It provides a case study of commercial collaborations between four Swedish influencers and two private companies who offer services made possible by neoliberal reforms over recent decades. These collaborations are not just advertising – they are also a form of public relations practice that strives to 'frame ideas, direct perceptions, shift attention and create connections between people and organisations' (Edwards, 2018: 46). While still being one of the most equal countries with a high living standard on a global scale, Sweden has undergone rapid changes during the last 30 years. Since the 1990s, income inequality has increased faster than in any other OECD country (OECD, 2015), and a number of policy changes have led to growing disparities in lifestyles between rich and poor. Massive tax cuts, subsidies on household services, and the privatization of education and health care has changed Swedish society substantially. Corporations whose business model builds on these changes are to a significant extent part of this ideological as well as institutional process. Collaborating with influencers that possess a certain social and cultural capital

is a way to normalize and depoliticize the services these companies provide and shift the perceptions of otherwise hesitant consumers.

Though specific to Swedish circumstances, the cases offer an insight into how influencer marketing serves ideological as well as commercial purposes. Particular politics are embedded into an idealized lifestyle to be inspired by, and aspire to – which in turn might cause debate in a digital public sphere. Through a critical discourse analysis of content and comments on influencers' blogs, the study examines the role of authenticity in the discursive construction of the collaborations and how the promoted services are made to appeal to an affluent middle-class consumer base. It also analyses how the collaborations are interpreted by the audience, and how promotional and political authenticity is deconstructed. A starting point is that authenticity is always in flux, dependent on social actors that are involved in discursive negotiations over meaning and interpretation. While influencers have a certain impact on their followers, it would be a mistake to assume that this impact is direct and uncontested. The analysed blogs are therefore regarded as sites of 'everyday politics' where discursive struggles over promotion, politics, and authenticity take place (Casero-Ripollés, 2020; Masip et al., 2019; Sinanan et al., 2014).

Authenticity labour, promotion and politics

Today's influencer culture exemplifies the 'messiness' of authenticity (Banet-Weiser, 2021), since much of influencers' appeal lies in the ability to be relatable simultaneous to their platforms functioning as sites of fantasy where followers can escape reality. Furthermore, authenticity is perceived differently depending on whether it is *external* or *internal* (Shifman, 2018). External authenticity involves an 'Enlightenment-anchored' notion of authenticity where the factual truth is central, and where it is possible to make a distinction between the 'real' and the 'fake'. Internal authenticity concerns coherence between statements and the kind of 'core inner essence' an individual might have, where being 'true to oneself' can be more important than an objective description of the world. Because of its close ties to individualism, internal – rather than external – authenticity might be a more fundamental concern for social media influencers, for whom self-representation is central. Their followers are, however, increasingly aware that authenticity is *performative*, and evaluation of authenticity labour is often based on the consistency and transparency of that performance in relation to the influencer's self-brand (Whitmer, 2021). This means that authenticity is dependent upon the 'genre expertise' of different audiences, as there might be a wide range of issues or practices that lead followers to recognize an influencer as inauthentic (McRae, 2017).

Authenticity is also especially important for female influencers who are affected by gendered conceptions of entrepreneurship and ambition, and who frame their own success as growing in an 'organic' fashion, rather than being dependent upon deliberate marketing (Duffy and Pruchniewska, 2017). The evaluation of products should be perceived as 'on brand', as well as genuine and based on their own experience rather than motivated by economic interest (Pöyry et al., 2019). Being paid to endorse a product or brand can otherwise create a crisis of authenticity, linked to a 'common-sense' understanding that authenticity is lost when profitability is gained (Banet-Weiser, 2012), both

among the influencers themselves and their followers. Thus, business deals between organizations and influencers are often referred to as 'collaborations' rather than advertising.

Shifting notions of authenticity and ambition

Opinions about authenticity have, however, begun to shift, impacted by neoliberal endorsement of female entrepreneurship and an increased professionalization of the influencer industry (Duffy, 2017; Stoldt et al., 2019). The popularity of influencers correlates with an increase of 'entrepreneurial femininity' in digital contexts (Abidin and Gwynne, 2017; Duffy and Hund, 2015; Duffy and Pruchniewska, 2017; Petersson McIntyre, 2020). The image of the 'girl boss' who builds her own brand and capitalizes on her fame is important for both successful and aspiring female influencers today. This persona resonates with a neoliberal discourse of individualism, self-governance and empowerment through self-confidence, consumption, and political brand cultures (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Rather than being called 'fake' or a 'sell out' for the promotional aspect of their profession, influencers today are celebrated as entrepreneurial role-models, and their followers are increasingly understanding of the demand to get paid for what they do. However, self-professionalization means standardization; individuality might be lost when 'best practice' strategies to gain and maintain a commodifiable audience are favoured (van Driel and Dumitrica, 2021). Financial and ethical imperatives are also often in conflict, resulting in a dilemma of authenticity – it means saying no to collaborations that do not fit the self-brand, a rejection that demands a certain degree of economic freedom (Duffy, 2017; Wellman et al., 2020).

Another shift within influencer culture is the strive to be 'real' rather than 'perfect'. 'Realness' can include behind the scenes access to the influencer's working day or sharing the everyday messiness of a family with small children and a hectic schedule. It also includes an emotional side, where influencers share 'ugly' feelings such as depression, jealousy, or fear of failure as a contrast to the staged perfection of a supposedly happy and care-free lifestyle. The influencer both opens up to the audience and invites followers to contribute with their own stories and insecurities, a strategy that strengthens the parasocial relationship between them (Abidin, 2015; Bond, 2016; Lueck, 2015; Reinikainen et al., 2020). This commercialized 'friendship' is important, since influencers' economic success depends on their ability to commodify their audience in a way that attracts advertising revenue (Hunter, 2016; Raun, 2018; van Driel and Dumitrica, 2021). Emotions are therefore used to guarantee the authenticity of the influencer's evaluation and endorsement and bind people together in strong brand communities.

Promotional politics as persuasive discourse

Influencer collaborations are a form of branded content, that is, advertising paid by an external partner but designed as everyday updates in line with the influencer's personality and image (Hardy, 2021). As a form of co-branding, collaborations generate associative value for the influencer at the same time as the partner gains from being represented

by, and associated with, the influencer (Ambroise et al., 2014). This 'meaning transfer model' includes the audience, who interpret the cultural and social connotations of the collaboration and fill it with associative meaning (Schimmelpfennig and Hunt, 2020); a form of 'immaterial labour' that creates both symbolic and economic value for influencers and their partners (Arvidsson, 2005).

However, influencer collaborations can also be regarded as a form of public relations practice, since they build (on) long-term relationships with consumers (Coco and Eckert, 2020; Hardy, 2021). According to Edwards (2018), *discourse* – in the form of both text and image – is crucial in this practice, as it is used to shape, and sometimes shift, the audience's perception of brands and products. Discourse is understood as 'the use of language in context' – 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 socio-cultural context. These choices are connected to the persuasive objectives of promotional texts and practices and the particular perspectives of the world that these are meant to convey.

This discursive approach actualizes questions of power, since discourse, as Foucault has argued, can be understood as a form of 'governance' that persuades people to adopt hegemonic values and world-views that serve the interest of already powerful groups (Edwards, 2018). Promotional politics is therefore inherently both persuasive and ideological since it affects, and is affected by, power relations within society and the use of specific discourses can help to frame a social practice, such as paying for domestic work, so that it speaks to an ideal subject position that the audience must negotiate a relationship with (Fairclough, 2015: 78). In a commercial collaboration, the influencer both conveys this subject position to the followers and personifies it by being an inspirational role-model.

Influencer marketing can be exploitative in that it, for example, might obscure its promotional intentions and seek to commodify audiences. It can also, however, provide ways and settings in which hegemonic discourses can be challenged. Audiences and producers are increasingly involved in negotiations over meaning when it comes to media content (Edwards, 2018: 50–51), and such discursive struggles are also present on influencer platforms. That authenticity is performative, for example, means that its meaning depends on the influencer, the context, and the audience(s) that are involved. Banet-Weiser (2021) describes the labour of authenticity as an 'endless feedback loop' where contradictions and tensions become visible through the work that female influencers put into crafting and maintaining an 'effortless' authenticity. Such tensions are also found in the comment sections, where the audience has an opportunity to 'talk back' to the influencer. Critical research sometimes overlooks what Fairclough (1995) calls discursive practices – the production and consumption of texts – in favour of making direct connections between texts and social practices. This paper In an attempt to address this tendency, this paper examines what role authenticity plays for both influencers and followers in the discursive construction of promotional politics. It shows how 'tools of the trade' are rejected and turned against the influencer herself, and the brand that she promotes, when followers politicize and criticize branded content.

Collaborations and contextualization

The collaborations in question were published between 2018 and 2020. Two of the influencers – Sandra Beijer and Isabella Löwengrip – collaborated with *Kry*, a health care provider that mainly works with digital care. The campaign launched the company's new mental health service.[1] The other pair – Elsa Billgren and Sofia Wood – promoted home cleaning services provided by *Hemfrid*, one of the biggest cleaning companies in Sweden.[2] The influencers are all women, in their 30s, and middle to upper class; and at the time of the collaborations, they all lived in Stockholm. Three started their careers as bloggers more than 10 years ago and have been part of shaping the influencer phenomenon in Sweden. They have also expressed political views and values more or less explicitly over the years – Beijer has blogged about feminist issues on several occasions, Löwengrip has publicly endorsed both centre-right and liberal parties, Billgren has jokingly referred to herself as a 'champagne leftist', and Wood has blogged about issues such as anti-racism and social inequality.

The collaborations sparked debate in the comment sections of the blogs, where discussions mainly centred round questions of taxation and public service funding. A core issue was that the services that Kry provides are funded by a system where private health providers send a bill to the public regional health care for every patient they treat, no matter what kind of treatment or health issue. Critics argued that this drains public funding and redistributes tax money to private companies that profit on the minor ailments of a middle-class consumer-base. In a similar manner, the home cleaning that Hemfrid provides is to a large extent funded by an economic reform called RUT (an acronym for *Rengöring, underhåll och tvätt* [cleaning, maintenance and washing]), which allows individuals to receive a tax reduction on household services. Critical commenters claimed that the collaborations promoted a redistribution of public funding from schools and health care to the individual gain of private companies and an affluent urban middle class.

Material and methods

Initially, four blogposts and 280 comments were collected for this study.[3] The blogposts were identified by 'lurking' on several influencers' platforms, that is, observing without participating (de Seta, 2020; Ferguson, 2017). The method builds familiarity with the social norms of different platforms, a necessary process when analysing influencer culture (McRae, 2017). After an initial coding of contents, 229 comments that focussed on the political discussion were selected for analysis on a more detailed level. These include comments that criticize the collaborations ($n = 143$), as well as comments that defend them ($n = 84$). Replies from one of the influencers and one of the partner brands were also included. Critical comments make up around two-thirds of the analysed material for all influencers, except for Löwengrip who received slightly less criticism.

Blogposts and comments have been analysed with focus on discursive strategies that construct social actors as being 'authentic' (or not) through scripted performances – what Enli (2015) refers to as *illusions of authenticity*. Such illusions are often genre specific and based on an 'authenticity contract' between media producers and audiences, where

both parties agree on a set of conventions and techniques (Enli, 2015: 123). For influencers, this means *transparency* – sharing details of everyday life as well as emotions – and promotional *disclosure*, that is, being open about commercial content and what is sponsored. Professionalism and *credibility* – being true to your audience as well as yourself – is favoured, as well as *personal experience*, that is, only promoting brands that you like and use. Coherence and *consistency* in action and style (language, images, content) is also part of influencers' authenticity labour, as well as *intimacy* – cultivating a relationship with the audience to achieve an accumulation of shared memories and personal narratives (Wellman et al., 2020). Further, *relatability, originality*, and *spontaneity* are strategies used to strengthen authenticity and present the influencer as unique as well as inspirational (McRae, 2017).

To identify these strategies, the analysis uses tools from the discourse analytical tradition. The blogposts include images as well as written text, which calls for a multimodal approach where these different 'modes' of text, together with the comments, have been analysed as a *whole* rather than separate entities (Kress, 2013). By looking at semiotic and lexical choices, as well as representational strategies such as functionalization, structural oppositions, and suppression (Machin and Mayr, 2012: 30–48, 77–85), the analysis identifies discourses that influencers draw on to achieve the promotional and ideological outcomes of the collaborations, and how authenticity is constructed, and deconstructed, by the different actors involved.

Constructing and deconstructing promotional politics

The findings show that the collaborations build on discourses that are supposedly known and relatable to the audiences they seek to engage. In the case of Kry and their digital mental health care, both influencers use their own 'expertise of experience' (Joosse and Brydges, 2018) to authenticate their endorsement. They also a evoke postfeminist discourses of self-care to frame the promotional content as something other than plain advertising. In the case of Hemfrid, the influencers' authenticity labour highlights how characteristics of the company – such as being sustainable, socially aware, and professional – reflect characteristics of themselves. They also evoke a discourse of 'solving the life puzzle' and how being a woman who 'has it all' (career, family, and a social life) involves disagreements within the family – a description that constructs their endorsement as authentic based on their 'extra/ordinariness' (McRae, 2017). However, the audience deconstructs both the internal and external authenticity of the collaborations by characterizing them as inconsistent with the influencer's previous displays of values and political opinions, and by questioning the truthfulness of experiences and evaluations.

Personal stories of 'the need to talk to someone'

The blogposts by Beijer and Löwengrip, which were part of the launch of Kry's mental health care services, are somewhat similar, but also different. They both refer to personal experiences of mental health issues and talking to a therapist, though they also vary in their approach and tone.

Sandra Beijer's post builds on storytelling as persuasion, a format often used in contemporary lifestyle advertising (Leiss et al., 2005). It is a personal narrative of how she started therapy several years ago, when she had issues that limited her both mentally and physically in everyday life. Regularly meeting with a therapist and being provided 'new perspectives and personal tools' to handle her anxiety is presented as the solution to her problems, the end of the story. The narrative has the classical ingredients of initial disjunction which, through the guidance of a 'helper', turns to conjunction in the end. It is also a very personal and transparent story, an intimate retelling of a difficult time in a person's life involving difficulties brought on by someone who lurks in the shadows, someone whom long-time followers can put a name and face to by recalling Beijer's previous relationships. Thus, the story and service offered by Kry builds on a disclosive intimacy between influencer and followers (Abidin, 2015) through both her opening up and talking about her feelings and insecurities, and through the knowledge the audience already has of her life.

The story is an illustrative example of authenticity labour, since Beijer links her endorsement of Kry's service to her own experiences of dealing with mental health issues and seeing a therapist. By being 'real', both in terms of emotion and promotion, she ensures the reader that the collaboration is based on an honest and personal evaluation of the benefits of seeking help. Whether this help came from Kry, or from some other health care provider, is however omitted from the story, and the same goes for what the service that Kry offers entails in terms of cost, regularity, individual guidance, etc. Instead, accessibility and flexibility are highlighted; indeed, in the final part of the blogpost, she states that 'everyone would benefit from talking to someone' and testifies to the relief she felt when she started therapy. The service provided by Kry is presented as 'extra beneficial' since it can be used from the comfort and safety of your own home; the blogpost, however, is illustrated by photos of Beijer sitting on a sofa – looking at her phone – in what resembles a more formal waiting room. The lack of coherence between written text and images is noteworthy, since it might break the illusion of authenticity for the reader.

The post ends with an urge to everyone who feels like they 'need to talk to someone' to take the step and contact Kry; 'Everyone is worth it'. By constructing therapy as something her readers – predominantly women aged 18–44 – are worthy of, Beijer draws on a popular discourse of 'self-care' as a feminist practice that leads to empowerment and well-being (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, 2017; Norwood, 2013; Scott, 2016). The statement is also reminiscent of the classic L'Oréal slogan 'Because you're worth it', known as one of the first major advertising campaigns that, in the wake of the women's rights movement in the 1970s, focussed on women's own words, emotions, and self-esteem. Thus, the collaboration is framed by a form of postfeminist discourse focussed on women's emotional, as well as physical, health and wellbeing.

In comparison, the sponsored post on Isabella Löwengrip's blog starts off with a reference to her personal experiences of the Kry app and how happy she is to be working with this 'beloved' partner again. This description presents the collaboration as authentic, since it is built on an affective long-term relationship between the influencer and the company and is consistent with her previous endorsements. Then follows a paragraph that provides information about the app, which highlights the availability and flexibility

of digital health care. The post is illustrated with two photos: one where she is shown smiling and looking at her phone in what seems to be an office environment, and one that is a close-up of the phone and the Kry app. The main message is that the new service can contribute to combating a societal increase in anxiety, stress, and depression, and lower the threshold for individuals 'who need to talk and get professional help'.

Löwengip's authenticity labour also draws on personal experience, both of the app and of dealing with psychological issues, and she encourages her readers that if they ever thought of therapy, now is the time to try it. Just as Beijer, however, she does not specify what kind of issues she had, which tools she used to get her through her 'tough times', or whether it was through Kry she came into contact with her therapist. Instead, it is left to the readers to fill in the blanks by using their knowledge of her previous relationships and setbacks. The framing draws on a discourse of self-care similar to that found in the blogpost written by Beijer; however,it also highlights a more explicit popular discourse of de-stigmatization when it comes to mental health issues. Löwengrip's post ends with the statement that 'we need to get better at encouraging each other to get help, and not just sweep things under the rug'.

A gift of cleanliness that solves the life puzzle

The collaborations between Hemfrid and the influencers Billgren and Wood also have a similar message, though they differ in some respects. Elsa Billgren's family recently moved to a new apartment and celebrated their first Christmas there. She describes her new home in a very loving and caring way; she wants to 'give this apartment everything nice that [she] can' and 'tenderly take care of it'. The way that she personifies her home, and places the story in a Christmas setting, makes it possible to present the cleaning service that Hemfrid provides as 'a gift' rather than a commercial collaboration – a gift to the apartment itself, as well as to Billgren and her family. Showing this kind of intimacy constructs the collaboration as motivated by love, rather than profit. From the description it is clear that the cleaning is done while the family is away; they come home to an apartment that has been 'scrubbed clean' and filled with the smell of soap described as 'luxurious', and the retelling of how hidden toys have been gathered in small piles almost gives the impression that little Christmas elves are responsible. The persons who actually perform the cleaning are, however, missing in the text and images, as is any information concerning costs and tax deductions.

The authenticity of Billgren's endorsement is also expressed by reminding the audience that she has used the company's services before (for moving and cleaning the old apartment). She also highlights that Hemfrid has a collective agreement for their employees, and that they use their own brand of environmentally-friendly cleaning products. Both these statements make the company more attractive to a socially and environmentally aware audience, who might not have used services like home cleaning before. They also present her endorsement of the company as coherent and 'on brand' for herself, since her online persona is to a large extent built around vintage clothing and second-hand shopping – a practice often associated with sustainability.

Home cleaning is furthermore described as an 'everyday help for us with a family and a lot going on' and a service that makes it possible to save time and avoid conflicts

between family members. Billgren presents herself as relatable to her readers by performing authenticity labour that draws on 'aspirational extra/ordinariness' (McRae, 2017). Despite her success and fame – in addition to her own career in fashion and media, she is also the daughter of two well-known artists – she is a working mother who needs to manage the same everyday tasks and responsibilities as her followers. The post is illustrated by several highly stylized and edited photos of the apartment with Christmas decorations, flower arrangements, the Hemfrid cleaning products, and Billgren herself. It connects both the brand and service of Hemfrid to a way of life where the magically clean apartment becomes a *totem* for a middle-class lifestyle that is characterized by both cultural and economic capital (Leiss et al., 2005).

In contrast, Sofia Wood's blogpost contains no descriptions of what her home feels and smells like thanks to Hemfrid's cleaning service. Moreover, the pictures that illustrate the post portray the apartment in an exhibiting way, in dark tones and free of people. The decision to hire someone to do weekly cleaning is described as sprung out of conflicts between the influencer and her husband. She describes how they started to use the cleaning service several years ago to get 'a more sustainable everyday life' and avoid such arguments. Sharing intimate details of arguments between her and her husband is a strategy that both builds on and strengthens the perceived interconnectedness (Abidin, 2015) between her and the audience.

The retelling of conflicts resolved by Hemfrid can be understood as part of Wood's authenticity labour, both in terms of transparency and establishing her long-time commitment to the company, and that of presenting herself as a working parent who would rather spend quality time with her family than clean. Authenticity is explicitly addressed when she describes her relationship to Hemfrid as an 'honest collaboration' since she has paid for the service herself for a long time and will continue to do so in the future. She also describes the use of Hemfrid in a non-extravagant way: 'for us every other week has been enough, it is the framework we need to manage the rest of the time ourselves'. Thus, she distances herself from the stereotype of an upper-class person who never busies herself with cleaning her own home – an opposition that builds on her personal story of coming from a 'ordinary' background and growing up with a single mother. Hemfrid as a company is described as 'serious and sustainable', as well as 'caring' and 'professional', and their environmentally-friendly products and collective agreement are also highlighted in this post, which shows consistency and coherence with her own brand. In contrast, though, Wood specifically mentions the tax deduction for household services, and presents this as an opportunity to take advantage of 'if one wants to' when hiring Hemfrid.

Challenging political and promotional authenticity

Followers do not always, however, buy into what influencers are selling. Comments on these sponsored blogposts show how the influencers are criticized and questioned in relation to three main aspects: consumer authenticity, promotional authenticity, and follower authenticity. The reactions do, however, differ depending on the influencer's audience and self-brand. Criticism of the collaboration between Beijer and Kry tends to be personalized and intertwined with Beijer as a person, since the ideological connotations

of the collaboration are perceived as clashing with followers' understanding of her political values. In the case of Löwengrip, who has publicly endorsed centre-right and neoliberal politics, the criticism of the collaboration and Kry's economic model does not converge with criticism of her as a person to the same extent.

Similar evaluations based on perceptions of the influencer's political views are also expressed in the case of Hemfrid, where one commenter juxtaposes Billgren's self-proclaimed position as a 'champagne leftist' with the 'real' left who oppose the kind of tax-financed domestic services that Hemfrid provides. Another commenter says that, while it is not entirely clear where Wood stands politically, the collaboration is still 'surprising' since she previously expressed concern over issues such as growing racism and inequality. The commenter thinks that she should be aware that promotion from influencers like her is 'a dream' for powerful economic actors who want to 'normalize, intimize, and depoliticize' the issue of an increased private service sector based on tax deductions.

These are examples of how genre expertise among followers impacts the deconstruction of an influencer's authenticity labour and the promotional politics of the collaborations, as well as how specific content is interpreted by different audiences. Perceived inconsistency with previous representations of 'who she is and what she claims to value' makes followers less likely to accept influencers, and their commercial collaborations, as authentic (McRae, 2017).

There are, however, also recurring tendencies when it comes to consumer authenticity, no matter the influencer or collaboration partner. A common strategy is to represent the needs of Hemfrid's or Kry's customers as constructed, made up, or exaggerated, and therefore inauthentic. The RUT tax deduction, which has had a significant impact on the popularization of home cleaning services, is described as a 'subsidy to the rich' (defined as the affluent urban middle-class) and contrasted to the needs of those 'who actually need it' (defined as people with functional variations or older people with low pensions). This ideological squaring serves to both link tax reductions to deficient public services and characterize the stereotypical home cleaning customer as an illegitimate recipient of state benefits. Similar representations can be found in the discussions about Kry and digital health care services, where critical commenters argue that companies like Kry target 'the upper middle-class' and encourage them to seek help for 'things you don't really need help for'. A genericization of the average Kry app user as young, healthy, middle class, urban, and anxious – specifically as young anxious parents – recurs in such comments. Just like in the debate about home cleaning, the wants and desires of those who are 'selfish' is contrasted to the legitimate needs of the seriously ill who 'suffer'.

Another strategy is to question the promotional authenticity of the collaborations, and the influencer's personal evaluations/experiences of the services they endorse. In the Hemfrid case, some followers ask why Wood, who claims to have used the home cleaning services for several years, suddenly decided to blog about it. That she does so as part of a coordinated campaign is perceived as a sign of inauthenticity by these followers, since they see the endorsement as based on economic profit rather than genuine appreciation. Further, commenters express how the coordinated collaborations break the illusion of spontaneity and autonomy, and that collaborations 'lose a lot of credibility' when they appear simultaneously in several blogs. For some, this means that the influencer has 'sold' herself since she promotes the company as part of this campaign. Others express

an understanding of the need to get paid and say that they have no problem with this – they just want the collaborations to appear more spontaneous and not so calculated. Such negotiations show that authenticity and profitability are not necessarily contradictions for these followers. Instead, notions of authenticity are dependent on the influencer's ability to present a unique and individual blog with a voice of her own (Whitmer, 2021), even when that voice is speaking for someone else.

In addition, authenticity is questioned when followers perceive that the influencer has obscured the truth about her experience and knowledge of the service/company she is promoting. Both Beijer and Löwengrip are, for example, criticized by commenters who point out that the therapist they have been seeing for several years are not connected to Kry at all, and that their experience is probably very different from those who turn to a digital care provider for help. In Beijer's case, this also becomes a question of professionalism, as the collaboration is perceived as inconsistent with her normal 'well-informed' and genuine collaborations. When she defends her decision to collaborate with Kry by saying that she only wanted to contribute to a more open dialogue about mental health, and that she did not know about any political controversies around this kind of digital care, her comment is met by replies that question the authenticity of her statement since she has been known to (or should be expected to) do thorough research on the companies she collaborates with. Again, the genre expertise that comes from followers' long-time relationship with the influencer, and their intimate knowledge of both emotional and promotional aspects of her life and career, plays a significant part in these negotiations over authenticity and ideology (Banet-Weiser, 2021; Whitmer, 2021; Wood, 2021).

Authenticity strategies are also used by commenters in relation to each other. Those who criticize the collaborations are sometimes met with counterarguments, whereas others characterize the criticism as inauthentic since, they claim, it is built on misinformation, jealousy, or spite. Commenters also use personal experience to legitimize their point of view and present it as more authentic than others. One follower who comments on Billgren's blog, for example, claims that the 'white middle class' – which here is a genericization of the critical commenters rather than the Hemfrid customers – has the privilege of their 'noble values' because they lack the first-hand experience of the exclusion and unemployment that she and her family have. From this point of view, the RUT reform and companies like Hemfrid empower, rather than exploit, people who otherwise have a hard time finding a job and supporting themselves, thereby enabling immigrants to become 'integrated' into the Swedish society. In the case of Kry, several commenters draw on their own experience of a deficient public health care to argue for the necessity of private actors and digital alternatives, while others use personal experiences and the expertise that comes from working in the health care sector to authenticate their criticism of the company and the collaboration.

Conclusion

Though politics and promotion have never been completely separate, the convergence between the two spheres is increasingly prominent in today's digital culture. To broaden our understanding of such promotional politics, this paper has examined influencer collaborations that advertise commercial services enabled by specific neoliberal reforms

over recent decades and how these are presented in a way that attracts an affluent but socially conscious middle-class. It identifies the discourses that influencers draw on to achieve the promotional and ideological outcomes of commercial collaborations, as well as the authenticity labour that they perform in the texts. Further, the paper analyses how notions of authenticity also impact the audiences' interpretation and politicization of the collaborations in comments on the sponsored blogposts (Banet-Weiser, 2021; McRae, 2017; Whitmer, 2021).

The study shows how influencers, consciously or not, function as ideological intermediaries that legitimate neoliberal policies by personifying and promoting a lifestyle that is inspirational, aspirational, and deeply ideological. Authenticity strategies such as transparency, disclosure, personal experience, intimacy, relatability, and consistency are used by all four influencers in the sponsored posts, and these strategies in turn contribute to presenting the influencer, the partner brand, and the services they provide in a specific way. The mental health app turns into something the audience not only needs, but also deserves, and Kry becomes the actor that enables them to fulfil that privilege while simultaneously positioning the brand as socially responsible. Further, market-solutions enabled by a redistribution of public funds become the desired way to deal with gendered conflicts over practices such as cleaning the home, which have traditionally been labelled as women's responsibilities. Instead of solving such conflicts by challenging gender norms, both at home and in society, the solution is sought through Hemfrid and the labour of the working class (often other women) that facilitates the emancipation of the entrepreneurial, but still 'conscious', woman.

These ways of framing the collaborations and representing the actors involved can be understood as examples of justificatory discourses that strive to legitimize desires and practices that may otherwise not make sense to the imagined audience. Since they build on particular interpretations of the common good, such discourses are nevertheless continually tested and critiqued in order to be accepted. Edwards (2018) describes this as a cycle, an ongoing process that is fundamental to the ways that capitalist society continually reproduces itself: 'The dialectical relationship between justification and critique means that justificatory discourses are produced in response to critique, but also generate critique as they are articulated' (p. 55). By turning our attention to the interpretation of the collaborations, in the form of comments, we can see that the justificatory discourses do not go unnoticed by the followers; they are contested in different ways, often by deconstructing the authenticity labour of influencers.

While these particular cases are shaped by Swedish national politics and culture, the deconstruction of political and promotional authenticity is a general feature of a digital public sphere where different actors seek to influence people in different ways. As Casero-Ripollés (2020) put it, these actors '[. . .] attempt to condition the configuration of the public agenda and the public opinion through the exercise of technologically mediated personal influence' (p.171). In contrast to the idea of lifestyle influencers as trivial and self-involved, practices such as blogging can be understood as a form of public participation where '[. . .] the authors espouse and present aspiration to a particular lifestyle' (Sinanan et al., 2014: 203). Based on the findings in this study, it can be argued that it is not just the influencers themselves that express everyday politics in this way, but also the followers who demand accountability and politicize influencer content and

collaborations based on both political and promotional authenticity. Just as private and public spaces are difficult to separate in social media, the distinction between audience and public is becoming increasingly blurred (Masip et al., 2019). An influencer's accumulation of followers is both an audience commodity to be sold to advertisers and a public involved in participatory practices that can both praise and criticize their work.

Further research that takes the discursive practices of influencer culture into account could therefore contribute to a deeper understanding of the political power of influencers and influencer platforms as digital public forums where everyday politics happens. Such research could also turn the spotlight towards the actors 'behind the scenes' of influencer marketing – the partner brands, managers, and agents that contribute to, or even decide over, influencer content. That the collaborations analysed in this study are very similar to each other is no coincidence; there are many hours of work put into measuring traffic and interactions, target groups and the 'fit' between influencer and brand even before the collaboration is even suggested. Moreover, while the strength in influencer marketing is to make the branded content a natural part of the influencers' platform, expressed in their own language and aesthetics, there are still certain things that the client/partner brand wants to put forward, and others that they want to omit or mitigate.

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3. Online data gathering was done with the NCapture feature for *Nvivo*, a programme used for qualitative multimodal research. Nvivo has also been used for coding, analysing, and archiving all data. The process of gathering, storing, and handling empirical material has been reviewed and approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority.

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