

Ambivalent influencers: Feeling rules and the affective practice of anxiety in social media influencer work

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ecs**Mari Lehto** 

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Abstract

This article investigates the intimate cultures of Finnish influencer mothers. Through in-depth qualitative interviews with four Finnish influencer mothers and online observation of their social media accounts, the article asks how influencers negotiate the feeling rules that govern maternal femininity on social media and attempt to cope with the emotional weight of precarious social media work. The article argues for using the *affective practice of anxiety* as a theoretical concept to explore the influencers' routinized emotional behaviour in their attempts to decrease the discrepancy between their emotions and cultural expectations. The article suggests that although anxiety can be considered a negative side effect of stressful social media work, sharing it on social media can also be understood as a tactic that plays a central role in the lifestyle influencer industry. Drawing on Loveday's analysis of the 'neurotic academic', the article suggests that the construction of an entrepreneurial influencer self is underpinned by anxiety. This argument is formulated through the figure of the 'neurotic influencer' that is the embodiment of the ambivalent nature of gendered influencer work.

Keywords

Affective practice, anxiety, feeling rules, influencers, motherhood

Introduction

It is difficult because many big life changes have to be considered from the point of view of 'Damn, how am I going to tell this?' because eventually, it has to be done anyway. And you can't tell either, because you need to respect your readers that

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much. And eventually, it's going to come out nonetheless, and then it's going to be an even bigger storm if you haven't told.

–Maija, lifestyle influencer

In 2019, a Finnish public relations agency published a survey reporting that almost one in three Finnish social media influencers has considered quitting social media. The research revealed that the stressful nature of the social media environment and the constant race to publish high-quality content is experienced as highly exhausting¹ (Manifesto, 2019). Meanwhile, numerous Finnish influencers are participating in social media campaigns encouraging people to speak openly about fatigue, depression and anxiety. This article discusses this phenomenon by exploring the intimate cultures of Finnish social media influencers who share family-related content. Through in-depth qualitative interviews with influencer mothers and online observation of their social media accounts, I investigate how influencers negotiate the social and cultural norms that govern maternal femininity on social media and attempt to cope with the emotional weight of precarious social media work. The study sample is small but offers valuable interpretations of the ambivalent lived experiences and emotional pressures of the 'do what you love and love what you do' ethic (e.g. Duffy, 2016), whereby emotional investment in one's work encompasses all areas of life (Dobson et al., 2018).

The work and working conditions of bloggers and other social media influencers have been examined extensively (e.g. Abidin, 2016; Duffy, 2017; Duffy and Hund, 2015), and questions regarding affect are central to many discussions about new forms of emotional labour and the responses to the precariousness of neoliberal working life (Gill and Pratt, 2008; Hardt, 1999; Wetherell, 2014: 10). This article shifts the focus towards the affective negotiations of lifestyle influencer mothers in relation to the feeling rules (Hochschild, 2003 [1983]; Kanai, 2019b) regulating maternal femininity and anxiety. Sociologist Arlie Hochschild's (2003 [1983]) concept of feeling rules refers to the social norms dictating what an appropriate feeling should be in a given situation. Feeling rules are essential to orienting individuals in relation to others in social settings (Kanai, 2019b). In her 1983 book *The Managed Heart*, Hochschild pointed to flight attendants' and bill collectors' conscious management of feelings – either their own or others' – to fulfil the emotional requirements of their jobs. In the study, Hochschild differentiated between private-sphere 'emotion work' or 'emotion management' and public-waged 'emotional labour'. Akane Kanai (2019b: 64) suggests that due to the broader postfeminist, neoliberal emphasis on a highly entrepreneurial sense of individuality, the distinction between these affective economies has become blurred.² While the women in Hochschild's research mobilized emotion for their employers who were in immediate contact with the customers, in contemporary digital life, social media influencers narrate their personal lives and manage their feelings for an unlimited number of unknown readers. This means that the personal and the general intertwine while the borders between work and leisure collapse (Kanai, 2019a: 149).

Drawing on this line of thought and the idea that feeling gives us a sense of place within the social (Kanai, 2019a), I employ social psychologist Margaret Wetherell's (2012, 2014) concept of 'affective practice' to analyse the ways in which the influencer's self, both in

private and in public, is continually managed. I adhere to the view of affect that highlights the flexibility of its conceptual boundaries (Koivunen, 2010); instead of viewing emotion as distinct from affect, I see them as sliding in together and becoming embedded within social and cultural discourses (Ahmed, 2004; Wetherell, 2012). In my analysis, affect refers to a structural level that transcends but is also related to subjective experience. The notion of affective practice (Wetherell, 2012) focuses on the emotional as it appears in social life; it refers to one's routinized emotional and corporeal behaviour in social situations (Wetherell, 2014). Instead of considering affect as only a feeling that is aroused in the moment that a certain encounter or experience occurs, I also examine the recollection of it as a type of 'affective practice' (Loveday, 2016: 1145; Wetherell, 2012, 2014).

Applying Wetherell's insights and Kanai's (2019a, 2019b) implementation of Hochschild's work in the context of digital media, I ask how feeling rules shape the ways in which Finnish influencer mothers work to produce selves that are agreeable to their followers and decrease the discrepancy between their felt emotions and cultural expectations. I concentrate on the *affective practice of anxiety* through which the influencers perform feelings to their followers by following, challenging or capitalizing on the feeling rules. My point of view underscores social nature of anxiety rather than presenting it as solely the property of individuals. As Gill and Pratt (2008) note, this perspective is highly relevant in fields of work in which individuals are judged on what they produce. Lauren Berlant (2008: 13) identifies anxiety as 'the affective copy of ambivalence'. I suggest that although anxiety can be considered a negative side effect of stressful social media work, sharing it on social media can be understood as a tactic that plays a central role in the lifestyle influencer industry. Drawing on Loveday's (2018) concept of the 'neurotic academic', which describes the contradictions within contemporary academic work, I suggest that the construction of an entrepreneurial influencer self is underpinned by anxiety. This argument is formulated through the figure of the 'neurotic influencer' that embodies the ambivalent nature of gendered influencer work.

Research context and material

This small-scale interpretive study draws on four in-depth interviews with Finnish mothers who have large social media followings and online observation of the textual and visual content of the participants' blogs and Instagram accounts between December 2018 and June 2019. I have been observing Finnish lifestyle blogs for more than 10 years – first, as personal entertainment and then, since 2013, from a research perspective as well. I am interested in the meanings that influencers give to their lives and work. My data do not allow for the possibility of generalization but are rich, nuanced, and offer insight into one method of investigating the ambivalent lived experiences of social media influencers.

In Finland, the emergence of influencers can be traced to fashion and lifestyle blogs that were written primarily by young women in the mid-2000s (e.g. Noppari and Hautakangas, 2012). In 2009, one of Finland's most popular fashion bloggers started publishing her blog on a women's magazine website, and the popularity and influence of lifestyle blogs began to draw more attention. Concurrently, the co-operation between brands and bloggers became more common. However, the term 'social media influencer' did not become part of the general vocabulary until 2016 (Manifesto, 2019). A similar development can be seen

with regard to parenting influencers. The emergence of mommy blogging on a large scale at the turn of the decade overlapped with this development of commercial services that targeted bloggers and owned by big media houses (Mäkinen, 2018: 130).³

Drawing on the work of digital anthropologist and ethnographer Crystal Abidin (2015, 2017), I define social media influencers as ordinary Internet users who exercise their power in social media strategically and for profit and attract a large engaged following on their platforms of choice. Their content consists of the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles, and they monetize their following by integrating commercial content into their blogs or social media posts (Abidin, 2017). Abidin (2017, 2018a: 72, 88) defines influencers as microcelebrities (Senft, 2013)⁴ for whom social media work is not merely a hobby nor a source of additional income but an established career, noting that the influencer industry may differ depending on a region's sociocultural climate and ideo-geographies.⁵

Because the influencers in question are relatively well known in Finland, my research raised ethical concerns related to anonymity. Taking this into account, I invited the participants to choose pseudonyms, and I omitted details that could make participants' identities recognizable to some Finnish readers. As soon as each informant agreed to be interviewed, I started to conduct daily observations of their online profiles. I read blog posts, followed Instagram feeds and watched Instagram stories. My goal was to understand their communicative practices, self-branding strategies and general norms before meeting with them to conduct the interviews. All four in-depth semi-structured interviews took place in person and lasted from 50 minutes to 2 hours. One participant visited me at home, I interviewed one at a café and the other two invited me to their homes. Our discussions were held in Finnish, recorded with the participants' consent, and then transcribed and translated by the researcher. The topics of discussion included participants' backgrounds and areas of expertise, their use of social media platforms, their branding and marketing campaigns, their relationships with followers and family members, their reflections on the different types of feedback they encounter and how they respond to these experiences.

The interviews underwent several rounds of thematic analysis. I was interested in how the influencers negotiated intimacy in the 'attention economy' (Senft, 2013: 350); consequently, I started by highlighting all the interview sections related to this. After this first round of coding, I began a thorough examination of the nature of these discussions. The key themes that emerged from the data analysis were the ambivalent negotiations regarding cultural and social norms and the relentless circle of self-evaluation of the influencers struggling to meet their followers' expectations. After I focused on feeling rules and the affective practice of anxiety as relevant theoretical approaches, the coding became more theoretically informed. This process eventually led to the themes that are addressed below.

Feeling rules for ordinary mothers

In the fall of 2019, Finnish fitness entrepreneur, reality star and mother of one, Rita Niemi-Manninen, announced on Instagram that she was leaving her role as a newly appointed influencer of the Finnish Association for Breastfeeding. Niemi-Manninen felt that other mothers' criticisms of her on the Internet had been so severe that she did not

want to continue. She stated that she was criticized, for example, for giving her baby formula, and her interest in fitness and her physical appearance were seen as reasons why she should not be a breastfeeding influencer. This example reflects the norms and pressures of motherhood that can lead to intense self-observation and cause deliberate performance of motherhood in ways that conflict with mothers' actual experiences and difficulties (Heisler and Butler Ellis, 2008; Lehto, 2019: 2; Mannevu, 2016; Morrison, 2011). Much like Niemi-Manninen, the participants in this study post a variety of content and have wide-ranging audiences, but as mothers and so-called lifestyle influencers, they have traits that make them attractive to a certain demographic profile. That is, they are followed primarily by other women, many of whom are also mothers. As a result, the participants often find themselves debating the cultural norms of motherhood in their digital estates. I start by exploring the feeling rules regulating motherhood through which influencer mothers manage their social media performance.

Being among the 'early adopters' of social media, parenting influencers helped set the pattern for this form of media use (Archer, 2019). Much of the early scholarship on mothers online focused on their engagement with mommy blogging. Mommy blogging was described as a 'radical act' (Lopez, 2009: 731), with mothers motivated by the connection that allowed them to find social support and solidarity with other mothers online (e.g. Friedman and Calixte, 2009; Morrison, 2011; Powell, 2010; Webb and Lee, 2011). Blogs were seen as spaces in which to resist the good mother–bad mother dichotomy and present multiple subjectivities (Powell, 2010).⁶ Lately, the traditional blog has lost ground to other channels, and Instagram has become the most popular content channel in the Finnish influencer industry (Manifesto, 2019). One ex-blogger who favours Instagram is Meri, a journalist and social media influencer who shares a great deal of family content on her popular Instagram account. She used to write a well-read lifestyle/family blog but stopped updating it a few years ago. Meri states that at that time, she had been 'a young, excited mother who wanted to discuss parenting and stir up a conversation'. She had wanted to challenge the prevalent norms; however, the intense discussion culture of the 'mamasphere' (Friedman, 2013) had eventually become too much to bear:

When I was still writing the blog, there was so much criticism about everything that I wrote about children or family. Everything was worth complaining about, and there were horrific shitstorms. It's exactly that kind of stuff that I no longer have any strength for . . . absolutely not.

The above example is connected to a common idea that parenting discussions online are antagonistic and that social media amplifies the set of rivalries between mothering philosophies and practices (see, for example, Abetz and Moore, 2018). Following this line of thought, more recent studies on mommy blogs and online parenting culture have explored how the digital landscape of motherhood can both liberate and constrain (e.g. Abetz and Moore, 2018; Lehto, 2019; Orton-Johnson, 2017).

In the interviews, the feeling rules governing normative motherhood become visible when the participants discuss their followers' attitudes towards their lifestyle choices. Maija, a professional family and lifestyle blogger who remarried after her divorce from the father of her child, struggles to meet her followers' expectations:

Like, can I talk about the hecticness of motherhood when I have only one child who is already so old and who is away from home every other week? Many people question it. Like, is something like that motherhood at all? And in the same way, (they question) the easiness of our relationship. That we get time alone is a problem in a sense, too. If we were here all the time with porridge in our hair and changing diapers, maybe it would be more socially acceptable.

Maija battles the norms of motherhood and femininity that are seen as natural rather than culturally and are, as Kate Orton-Johnson (2017) argues, technologically constructed. Finland is a Nordic welfare state in which gender equality is often taken for granted; however, the cultural expectations of parenting in Finland commonly favour the mother as the primary caregiver (see also Lehto, 2019). Although the Finnish family-leave system is designed to support both men's and women's reconciliation of gainful employment, in heterosexual families, mothers use the majority of family leave, and the majority of single parents are women (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, 2018). The cultural perception that good mothers are strong survivors (Berg, 2008; Jokinen, 1996; Katvala, 2001) implies that motherhood is indeed supposed to be hard. This plays into the long-standing idea of the importance placed on the self-sacrifice that is inherent in the mother identity (Morrison, 2011).

Meri's and Maija's experiences reflect the change that occurs when engagement with other mothers online becomes more commercialized and writing about one's life is no longer simply a hobby. As the number of readers increases, other parents who are following are seen more as audience members, and the narration of experiences easily turns into performances of aspirational motherhood rather than peer support (Hunter, 2016). Nonetheless, the value of the brands that influencer mothers build is strongly based on relatability as a form of ordinariness. Despite their microcelebrity fame, influencers must work to brand themselves as ordinary by creating an idea of common experience that suggests generality to an unknown audience (see Kanai, 2019a: 3–4; Pedwell, 2014). In her study on Finnish mommy blogging, Mäkinen (2018: 136) notes that in the context of motherhood, ordinariness is made of everyday stories of a not-too-fancy 'macaroni casserole life'. In the same manner, for Tiia, a blogger and Instagram favourite, discussing motherhood seems to function as an important claim for ordinariness. Tiia, who focuses primarily on fitness and health, demonstrates her relatable ordinariness by sharing stories about her daily family life. She believes that being a mother makes her more relatable to her followers and even helps her acquire *marketing* campaigns:

I do feel that I am in many ways more credible regarding some things because I have children of my own. Maybe I am easier to identify with than if I didn't have children, especially for those who have a family. [. . .] The awareness for the readers that I'm just an ordinary family mother . . . I believe that it makes it easier to identify with me and is definitely a part of my personal brand.

This kind of ordinariness is presented as relatable because it is considered to be authentic. Influencers state that their content is authentic because their actual lifestyles and sentiments are genuine (Abidin, 2015) and they truly like and use the products they promote. However, as Marwick (2013a: 120) points out, 'authenticity is not an absolute quality, but a social judgment made in distinction to something else'. It has been argued that media imagery and texts define maternal bodies that are in need of size control and

fitness discipline (Bordo, 1993; Dworkin and Wachs, 2004). To be relatable in this particular context depends on the narration of the self through maternal body troubles that are understood as general (cf. Kanai, 2019a: 32). By presenting herself as ‘an ordinary family mother’, Tiia communicates that the sporty lifestyle she promotes is attainable for other working women with families. In other words, her motherhood serves as an affirmation of the genuineness of the lifestyle she promotes.

Affective practice of anxiety

The study participants are ridden with ambivalent negotiations about anxieties and uncertainties within their constructions of the relatable influencer (mother) identity. Influencer work requires persistent monitoring of the self and can lead to a relentless circle of self-evaluation. I suggest that the affective practice of anxiety can be seen as a response to this ambivalence, and this notion is useful as a theoretical concept in exploring the influencers’ routinized emotional behaviour in their attempts to decrease the discrepancy between their felt emotions and cultural expectations. Analysing affective practice helps us to understand the affective styles of influencer mothers – that is, the different ways in which they express and mobilize emotion. Anxiety is frequently seen as a personal problem, and in the context of precarious workers, it has often been considered a failure to adequately deal with the demands of the job, a lack of abilities, or the failure to adjust to an increasingly competitive and demanding environment (Gill and Donaghue, 2016; Loveday, 2018). Viewing anxiety as an affective practice allows me to delve into the suppressive and productive possibilities of this highly ambivalent emotion in relation to influencer work. When anxiety is considered from this point of view, it becomes recognized as a structural problem and not solely as the property of individuals.

Operating a complicated private emotional system is an intrinsic part of influencers’ social media work as they strive to maintain professionalism in a context of self-revelation, assumed intimacy and closeness (Mäkinen, 2018: 140). The women who were interviewed for this study discuss their personal lives as the central themes of their content, but what they share on social media is simultaneously curated in a careful manner. First, they police themselves diligently to appear authentic, approachable and amicable. The interviewees describe various strategies that they use to cope with the emotional pressures caused by the conflicting nature of their work. These strategies include taking time to calm down before responding to negative comments and carefully editing their responses before publishing them. Kati, a journalist and lifestyle blogger, wants to make use of Instagram stories as an outlet for her ‘uncensored feelings’; however, publishing content amid any emotional turmoil leaves her feeling anxious and ashamed. Tiia admits to habitually ‘dwelling on those issues’. That is to say, she feels bad about negative feedback but does not want her own negative feelings to show. Tiia tends to ask her husband to proofread her responses to negative feedback ‘in case I seem provoked’. Maija considers some amount of provocation to be necessary for her to remain interesting, but she acknowledges that this leaves her struggling to circumvent ‘shitstorms’.

The participants’ deliberations reveal the highly ambivalent nature of mediated intimacy (e.g. Andreassen et al., 2017). In it there might be a promise of familiarity and continuity, but one never knows whether one’s investment will be recognized or returned (Bollmer, 2018:

48). This is particularly true when it comes to the relationships between influencers and their followers. Influencers work hard to be considered relatable. In her study of the practices and politics of relatable femininity in intimate digital social spaces, Kanai (2019a: 19) argues that being considered relatable requires the feelings being expressed to be understood as 'average' and 'normal' with regard to dominant ideas about femininity. That is, to be able to produce and present the influencer self in this manner, one needs to be able to reflect others' experiences and feelings to them in a way that affirms shared desires to meet the neoliberal gendered benchmarking (Berlant, 2008; Kanai, 2019a: 181).

Exploring the role of gender in the affective practice of anxiety, I return to the subject of Maija's divorce. Maija, like all the participants, benefits from her family being a part of her brand, but this also makes her vulnerable, as her followers' expectations and negative feedback relates directly to her personal life. The expectation of intimacy that Abidin (2015) terms 'perceived interconnectedness' is enacted by followers because they have followed the influencers closely over a long period and consequently impose expectations and even demands on them. Maija explains this as follows:

When I got divorced, people were like 'You have lied all these years'. It's like, I wasn't lying, but I couldn't . . . I didn't want to talk about it here. And then it seems like I came up with it five minutes ago. [. . .] It sort of takes away a lot of the credibility from the blogger for some people if your life takes so-called surprising turns. Because many people imagine that your blog is your whole life in real time. I think people want that kind of security. That if they have experienced, for example, five years ago, that hey, we are in the same life situation and they are still in that same situation, they might start to feel that that one (the blogger) has nothing to offer anymore.

Maija suggests that after her 'surprising' divorce, she was no longer identifiable to certain followers and therefore ceased to be relatable for them. According to her, criticism from her followers multiplied after the breakup. After she remarried, she has continued to deal with disapproval that is directed at her new blended family. When an avalanche of negative comments appeared under the first picture of her child and her new partner together, Maija decided to no longer show her child's face on social media. She states,

If I even talk about us as a family, what we are, every single time, someone is like 'Why you try to explain this new family as a nuclear family when you are not that?'

Maija is working within a deeply gendered context, and neoliberal media culture accelerates historical expectations of women's emotional work (see Kanai, 2019a). She describes having developed a 'strong inner censorship' but worries that this new approach might take away from the authenticity of her brand. Examining Maija's struggles through the lens of the affective practice of gendered anxiety advances the understanding of how and why relatable femininity is work (see Kanai, 2019a: 15). The flexibility of the digital culture enables middle-class influencer mothers to monetize family domesticity (Wilson and Chivers Yochim, 2017); however, the protection and maintenance of the product of family happiness rest heavily on their shoulders. Maija's story reveals patterns in the types of gendered family values that are encouraged or discouraged, and she works with the subjectivities that are available to her.

The neurotic influencer

In 2015, a popular Finnish influencer attended therapy as part of a marketing campaign with a private clinic. Her post about it resulted in an intense debate among her followers concerning whether it was ethical to profit from mental health issues, and the influencer eventually deleted it. Today, mental health is commercialized on social media with new vigour. Finnish influencers now openly promote private therapy services⁷ and discuss their mental health while posting links to commercial products, such as sportswear.⁸ These types of online performances have been criticized for glorifying anxiety and depression without proper context⁹ and blurring the line between personalized empowerment and sponsored content.¹⁰ Using one's personal experiences to relate to others who are in similar circumstances can no doubt have a positive social impact; however, performative vulnerability raises important questions regarding structural inequalities and what can count as a shared experience (see Koivunen et al., 2018: 16). Next, I take a closer look at the role of this type of performative anxiety in social media influencing.

The notion of affective practice is useful when contemplating what affects such as anxiety *do* (Ahmed, 2004: 4; Loveday, 2016: 1148). The experience of anxiety is viscerally felt at the individual level, but it is also important to consider the roles of anxiety and insecurity on more a structural level. From the influencer industry's point of view, anxiety is useful, as it works to drive a relentlessly renewed resolution to make a self who is appropriate to and acceptable within the system (see Davies, 2003: 93; Loveday, 2018: 156). In other words, instead of paying attention to the conditions that enable or constrain the formation of subjectivities, an individualized subject chooses to be responsible for those conditions and concentrates on managing anxieties and insecurities (Isin, 2004: 226; Loveday, 2018; Rose, 1992: 142). Drawing on this, I propose that although anxiety can be seen as a negative side effect of the psychologically taxing nature of online communication (cf. Duffy and Schwartz, 2018: 2981), it has a bigger role to play in the lifestyle influencer industry. Next, I discuss how opening up about the affective practices of anxiety is transformed into a *tactic*.

Previous research on microcelebrities has shown that too many unequivocally positive posts can produce negative feedback from some followers because they regard this kind of content as superficial (Hänninen, 2018; see also, for example, Abidin, 2017, 2018b). Emotions that seem raw and unfiltered show social media performance as real, ordinary and authentic (Abidin, 2017; Berryman and Kavka, 2018; Grindstaff, 2002). The interviewees acknowledge the need for intimate revelations and expressions of vulnerability. For example, Tiia states that the analytics of her blog show that 'sensitive subjects' attract the biggest readership. Despite specializing in fitness, she shares a considerable amount of personal content. She writes quite extensively about her marriage and has shared her past difficulties with fertility issues, while Meri goes as far as defining 'openness' as her personal brand. Meri builds up and maintains this particular brand by employing a tactic that Marwick (2013b: 237) describes as 'privacy through disclosure'. Namely, by coming out with issues that are considered sensitive, she can avoid being called out for steering clear of topics that she prefers not to discuss. Among other issues, she has spoken up about suffering from a panic disorder and advocated for therapy:

You always get likes if you say ‘I have had panic attacks, I’m sad, I’m depressed . . .’ So, is it about peer support and getting comfort? Or is it some form of delight in the misfortunes of others? I don’t know, but that is what people are interested in.

Here, anxiety becomes a kind of capital – a tool for visibility (see also Abidin, 2018b). Illouz (2007: 66) argues that over the course of the 20th century, a particular emotional style became valued and that emotional style is crucial to how people build networks and social capital. That is, the ability to perform the self in a way that showcases a transparent and authentic expression of internality has become a cultural precondition for happiness and well-being (Dobson et al., 2018: 12; Illouz, 2007). The appropriate balance in the context of influencer performance requires the management of a wide range of feelings if one strives to remain both relatable and aspirational (cf. Duffy and Hund, 2015). While the sharing of a certain amount of vulnerability is expected, influencer women must still be able to generate engaging content that is not too overbearing. Kati explains this as follows:

People hate it when you act like a victim. Like ‘I had a bad day and that comment makes me feel bad’. They want to read blogs in a way that the blogger is someone to . . . not to look up to but at least not to feel sorry for. [. . .] Because then people feel bad about me feeling bad. They feel sorry for me, and that is not the feeling they are after when they come to the blog. [. . .] But, for example, if we’ve been sick for two weeks, I’m definitely like ‘This is horrible’. Because I have realized that there needs to be a narrative arc in the blog. To be able to write that I have had a really good time, there need to be a couple of posts that say I’ve had it horrible. To maintain ‘the taste of life’ in it.

Kati’s quote above demonstrates how feeling rules command appropriate feelings in a given social setting: If one does not experience them, they must work to have them (Hochschild, 2003 [1983]). Kati sees this as being sensitive to her followers’ expectations; followers who enter her social media spaces are expecting to feel a certain way themselves. Succeeding in this kind of environment demands articulating presumably shared negative affects but ensuring that the affective balance is maintained (see Kanai, 2019a: 31). In other words, there is a need for a narrative strategy that offers a resolution to a problem (cf. Lehto, 2019; Mannevu, 2016).

Being authentically sad is a serious business. When vulnerable narratives are normalized within the digital landscape, it suggests the possibility of mobilizing experiences of trauma to gain both cultural visibility and political advantage (Berryman and Kavka, 2018: 88; Koivunen et al., 2018: 16). In the context of social media influencer work, anxiety operates as a push to govern the self in order to produce audience commonality. This connects to new organizations of digital labour where it is still essentially a women’s burden to transform by working on their own selves – by monitoring their feelings, thoughts and behaviours (see Orgad, 2019: 33). Given the influencers’ specific status as mothers, the anxiety they articulate is firmly tied to their efforts to manage the continuous strain of having their motherhood publicly evaluated. Since parenting influencers are not just offering advertising space but selling interactions (Taylor, 2016: 119), the sharing of these anxieties is productive of capital.

Drawing on Loveday's (2018) analysis of the 'neurotic academic', I suggest that the construction of an entrepreneurial influencer self is underpinned by anxiety. In her study of academic staff working on fixed-term contracts, Loveday (2018) notes that anxiety can be conceptualized as a kind of tactic of 'neoliberal governance' (Isin, 2004): 'It is both produced and productive, it is both an effect and affective' (Loveday, 2018: 163). Applying Loveday's (2018: 162) insights, I consider the 'neurotic influencer' to be an entrepreneurial figure that is governed through anxiety while being expected to take responsibility for the self-management of this anxiety. From this point of view, opening up about the affective practices of anxiety can be interpreted as a tactic through which the influencers perform feelings by either following the feeling rules or challenging but also capitalizing on them. In other words, the neurotic influencer as a figure governs itself through responses to anxieties, not in spite of them (see Loveday, 2018: 161).

The appeal of the neoliberal, individualistic narrative of 'from vulnerability to resilience' is its strong contemporary public discussions and media cultures (Koivunen et al., 2018: 12). The neurotic influencer is a figure of this neoliberal media culture. The performances of anxiety offer evidence of its claims to authenticity; however, at the same time, this entrepreneurial figure is expected to self-manage the structural anxieties that are outside of its control. The ambivalent influencer culture fosters sentimental discourse that, in keeping with Berlant (2008: 1–2), criticizes structures and 'bad ideologies' about women's suffering while retaining faith in many of the promises that originally caused the suffering. Anxiety pushes the influencers to exceed themselves in their work whilst all the while creating relatable social media subjects.

Conclusion

Even if you try to share those bad and normal everyday moments on social media, the fact that you share them already creates an image that it probably wasn't so bad because you shared it here.

–Meri, lifestyle influencer

In this article, I have analysed the ways in which Finnish influencer mothers produce selves that are agreeable to their followers, decrease the discrepancy between their felt emotions and cultural expectations, and at the same time convert their anxiety into relatable social media performance. The interviewees operate in a geographically, culturally and linguistically small area in which White, middle-class heterosexual motherhood is still repeatedly positioned as general and is therefore often assumed to be relatable. Investigating their individual experiences has nevertheless allowed me to use the notion of the affective practice of anxiety as a sense-making lens through which to conceptualize the ambivalent and gendered connections of the influencer industry and to analyse both performative anxiety and the vulnerability that visibility can bring.

This study has focused specifically on influencer mothers and the feeling rules governing motherhood on social media. Based on an examination of how the study participants articulate their experiences, it appears that the feeling rules regulating motherhood intensify the pressures of social media work. Wilson and Chivers Yochim (2017: 57) describe

the ‘mamaspheric overflow as a deeply gendered form of “infoglut” that doubles the government of mothers’. Influencers’ affective load is all the more intensified by their visibility, which entangles them in a seemingly endless loop of self-surveillance. The figure of the neurotic influencer materializes in particular in what it means to be an influencer mother – vulnerable but always resilient.

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Notes

1. The agency has been monitoring the development, trends and changes in the Finnish social media influencer industry since 2009.
2. Kanai (2019b: 64) also argues that this vagueness is affected by many social media platforms, on which private subjects are ‘always public’ (Chun, 2016), as well as by the blurred social contexts of online media environments (Marwick and boyd, 2011).
3. Although the study participants do not identify as parenting influencers per se, motherhood and family issues are an intrinsic part of their lifestyle brands, and the content they share overlaps with that of mommy bloggers and family influencers who write about children, motherhood and other parenting-related topics.
4. ‘Microcelebrity’ was first coined by Theresa Senft in her work on Camgirls (2008) to describe a burgeoning online trend of people striving to gain popularity by employing digital media technologies.
5. The population of Finland is only 5 million, and the language is vastly different from other Scandinavian languages. The number of people working full-time as social media influencers in Finland is small, but the part-time activity can be considered noteworthy considering the size of the language area. It has been estimated that in 2019, there were only 50–100 influencers making a decent or significant living through their social media work in Finland (Manifesto, 2019), while influencers who gain profit from commercial deals, advertisements or corporate gifts are likely to be in the thousands (see, for example, Somessa.com, 2019).
6. Furthermore, researchers have noted how the popularity of Facebook and Instagram as platforms for documenting family life indicate how digital media has shaped familial and maternal connections (Friedman, 2018: 170; Tiidenberg, 2015: 1746).
7. <https://www.lily.fi/blogit/start-living-your-best-life/mental-health-monday-aloitin-terapian/>.
8. <https://blogit.terve.fi/piiapajunen/kayn-psykoterapiassa-eika-haveta/>.
9. <https://mashable.com/article/anxiety-depression-social-media-sad-online/?europa=true>.
10. <https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-10653082>.

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