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VISUAL, POPULAR AND POLITICAL: THE NON-PROFIT INFLUENCER AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Luise Salte 

The influencer has become a common phenomenon in digital societies. The emphasis on exposure and popularity in social media is materialised through the growing prominence of these popular individuals with large audiences. This article examines the rhetoric of two “non-profit influencers” on Instagram, demonstrating that they can be understood beyond economics, fandom and traditional politics. Rather than being profit-focused as the more commonly known influencer, they are normatively oriented. Their communication reflects rhetorical demands prompted by the public matters they address and the social media environment. This study suggests that the non-profit influencer may be seen as a phenomenon crystallising social and technological emphases on the individual. It contends that the non-profit influencer may be located in the popular cultural public sphere, illustrating social media’s role as relevant arenas in deliberative democracy.

KEYWORDS influencers; cultural public sphere; social media; rhetoric; individualisation; communicative abundance

When talking about influencers, conversations often move into the realm of economic profit and self-curation. Research has also circled around these topics when investigating the phenomenon (Djafarova and Rushworth 2017; Carter 2016; Abidin 2016). In countries like Norway where social media is increasingly important to people’s interactions and political conversations (Newman et al. 2020; Skogerbø and Karlsen 2021), popular individuals that address issues of common concern online prompt questions about the influencer’s role in a democratic public sphere perspective (see, e.g. Wiken 2020).

This study provides an in-depth investigation of the communicative “ingredients” mobilised by two *non-profit influencers* in six cases exemplifying empirical displays of informal public figures’ rhetoric in the public sphere. There is common agreement in extant scholarship that one must look beyond the traditionally “rational” and “objective” to capture the range of communication forms relevant to democracies (e.g. Hauser 1999; Wessler 2018, 110). The influencers chosen for the purpose of this study do not just acquire attention, reflecting their role as popular public figures. They create engagement, which can be ascertained in the number of “followers”, “likes” and comments they and their posts enlist (e.g. Klinger and Svensson 2014). Moreover, they have gained attention beyond their “Instagram-audience”, stirring debate in the broader Norwegian public, often as a result of their Instagram activities. In-depth investigations of the rhetoric used by these non-profit influencers thus add insight to what gains people’s attention in digital publics. The research question guiding the study is: “What are the main rhetorical building

blocks used by the non-profit influencer, and how do their rhetoric inform our understanding of popular individuals in the public sphere?"

In the following, I will first outline earlier insights that help enlighten the phenomena of the social media celebrity. Theory relating to communication forms, emphases and circumstances in democratic publics will then be introduced. The sampling process providing the cases scrutinised in this study will further be described, as well as the method applied to conduct the close reading. The communicative tools found when treating the non-profit influencers' Instagram posts as arguments (Groarke 2014; 2017) will then be presented and considered. Lastly, the non-profit influencer's role and function in digital publics will be discussed.

Social Media Celebrity Phenomena

Popular public figures, or celebrities, have been shown to provide various functions (see e.g. Thompson 1995; Coleman 2003; Street 2004). Fan studies have, for example, revealed celebrities' guiding functions in respect of fans' life events and life processes (e.g. Stevenson 2009). In the political realm, studies have shown that celebrities have equipped citizens with "trustworthy" representatives with regards to traditional political questions (e.g. Coleman 2003). Street's (2004) notion of the "celebrity politician" has, for example, theorised two ways in which celebrities and politics intersect: when politicians become celebrities in their aim for political representation, and when celebrities take on political roles by speaking out on public policy. Although influencers appear on various platforms, they have proliferated on Instagram (Abidin 2016; Frier 2020, 128–129). Instagram offers various video formats ("Instagram television", livestreaming, "reels") alongside its traditional image sharing features (Kastrenakes 2021). Like other prominent social media, it facilitates low barriers to create and publish content. People can engage in such practices and interact with others through their "profile", as an online imprint of themselves as individuals. It is a "highly personalized" space both in terms of media production and consumption (Klinger and Svensson 2014). While users do have some agency in what they encounter (van Dijck and Poell 2013, 6), the distribution of content on Instagram is shaped by a "logic of virality" (Klinger and Svensson 2014). Rather than a selection of content that fits "professional codes and journalistic news values", content is distributed in an "attention-maximizing"-rationale (Klinger and Svensson 2014, 7). Attention has consequently become somewhat of a currency for those seeking exposure on social media (see, for example, Marwick 2015). The logic of virality which aims for maximum exposure of content and profiles materialises in a prominence of so called "influencers".

While influencers or micro-bloggers typically are popular individuals who profit economically from sponsorships or brand promotion (Djafarova and Rushworth 2017; Carter 2016; Abidin 2016), there is also a growing number of popular individuals using the platform to address societal and political issues (e.g. Wiken 2020). What I term the *non-profit influencer* shares traits with the better known and far more researched for-profit influencer. Neither can be seen separate from the distributive logic of social media. They both utilise and are indebted to the way social media values and enhances attention. The non-profit influencer may, for example, also profit off acquired attention and popularity. Their popularity can transgress social media borders and generate other public opportunities (van Dijck and Poell 2013, 7). The more commonly known (for-profit) influencer, however,

transfers their audiences¹ attention to revenue through promoting their own brands or being compensated for functioning as others' "marketing tool" (Campbell and Farrell 2020). They are explicitly profit-seeking², relating to their audience as consumers. While the for-profit influencers may disguise this part of their relationship with their audiences (see, for example, Munnukka, Maity, and Luoma-aho 2020), they are hence best understood as operating in a market logic, rather than in a normative logic (Landerer 2013, 244–245).

Publics and Their Rhetoric

The informal and the cultural provide crucial functions in deliberative democratic perspectives where decisions ideally are made collectively through equal access, reciprocity and informed opinions (Habermas 1992; Hauser 1999, 100). Aesthetic and emotional communication belonging to the cultural public sphere may carry vital political functions (McGuigan 2005), such as creating empathy for others (Gripsrud 2017) or contributing to the identification of "new" public matters (Young 2002). Expressions employing humour or stories may, for example, elicit ongoing contests about norms and morality that lie at the root of a democratic society's political decisions and self-understandings (Kjeldsen 2018; Gripsrud 2017). Humour may enforce or challenge norms, values and positions of power (Meyer 2000; Sundèn and Paasonen 2020; Wessler 2018, 111). When employed in "provocative style", for instance, humour may bring more attention to certain issues, in turn prompting public engagement and deliberation (Klujeff 2012, 109). Separating four primary rhetorical functions of humour³, Meyer (2000) shows that the "enforcement" and "differentiation" humour especially emphasises the violation and corrections of norms. By invoking ridicule, they aim to educate or correct certain people or groups and are hence typical for performing criticism (Meyer 2000, 321–322). Enforcement humour is typically at play when a speaker frames someone's violation of "appropriateness" or "correctness" as amusing. Differentiation humour, on the other hand, particularly enables boosting one's own position. The speaker enhances their own position as "more knowledgeable, woke or moral", taking on the role as an educator or "detector of wrongfulness or inconsistency" (Meyer 2000, 322). These varieties of humour, as examples of emotional communication, are not necessarily "a troublemaker, intruding where it does not belong and undermining the undisturbed use of our deliberative capacity" (Marcus 2002, 5). They may rather trigger cognitive capacities and engagement necessary for a well-performing democratic society. Storytelling may similarly call attention to public matters and make clear unquestioned assumptions or structures in society. Stories have proven their utility in negotiations of whether something should be seen as a matter of private or public concern, furthering identification, naming and recognition of public issues (Fraser 1990; Vivienne and Burgess 2012). The valuable functions of stories are especially evident when there is a lack of identification and language to name an injustice, or when shared premises and world views are lacking in the affected public (Young 2002). For example, while the Me Too movement could make use of an already-named injustice⁴, it further demonstrated the value of stories in making clear the continued persistence of the problem and its *extent*.

The way expressions stemming from the cultural public sphere, such as a tv show or a music performance, can be part of democratic public sphere processes (Gripsrud 2017) also pertains to social media content. It is the expression rather than the media technology or

space that is decisive (see, for example, Pruden 2019, 167; Vitis and Gilmour 2016). Kjeldsen (2016, 3) identifies how various expressions and interactions are a part of democratic conversations in a rhetorical approach to the public sphere, terming it society's "working through"⁵ of issues. The applicability of this term can be noticed when public perceptions of certain issues change (e.g. Kjeldsen [2018] on immigration in Denmark), or in changes in *what issues* are prominent in a public's conversation. For example, an increased attention to the self, existential issues, equality and morality has been connected to modern democratic developments (Giddens 1991; Mancini and Swanson 1996, 6). The individual's liberation from oppressing authorities and structures has been considered a culture trait of post-industrial society (Welzel and Inglehart 2014, 291–292). Both social and technological developments have come to explain an increased attention to these issues. For example, scholars have emphasised modern societies' lack of traditional social structures that provide shared and relatively stable understandings (Giddens 1991), as well as post-industrial existential security (Welzel and Inglehart 2014, 291)⁶. Others have stressed the rise and development of communication technologies (Thompson 1995, 180). Although theorised differently by different scholars (see, for example, Bauman 2000; Beck 1992; Giddens 1991), emphasis on the individual and its liberation is often seen connected to the emergence of ceaseless individualisation (Bauman 2001, xvi). While being widely used and defined (Mills 2007), the term individualisation can, in brief, be understood as the way in which identity moves from "a "given" to a "task"", where individuals are given "the responsibility for performing that task and for the consequences" (Bauman 2000, 31–32).⁷ Today, democratic societies have come to experience a plenitude of media and information; "communicative abundance" (Keane 1999). Social media provides copious sources of information, perspectives and ways of life. Publics are hence faced with numerous "truths" and choices.

Material and Methods

Instagram was chosen as an appropriate platform to investigate the rhetorical building blocks used by non-profit influencers when creating engagement. Not only is the platform considered a breeding ground for "the influencer", but it is also one of the most popular social media platforms in Norway (Ipsos 2021). The sampling process started by logging the frequency with which the 20 most followed Instagram accounts in Norway (Webstagram 2018) addressed an issue framed as a public issue. Here, something was considered framed as a concern for the public if it was framed as a problem relevant to society's perspectives and conversations (e.g. Young 2002). I chose 20 Instagram accounts as an exploratory point of departure in this qualitative overview. Starting with the most followed individuals was seen as appropriate, as the aim of this study was to scrutinise the rhetoric of non-profit-seeking individuals creating engagement with public reach. Sampling was in other words purposive (see, e.g. Campbell et al. 2020). Choosing 20 individuals as a point of departure proved sufficient for the research aim. Two individuals could be identified with regards to the criterion *topic* (orientation to public issues), within this selection already securing the criterion *popularity* (number of followers). Looking for an additional, third, individual with regards to the topic-criterion was, however, difficult if keeping to the criterion of popularity. Both criteria were thus captured in these two individuals.

The two profiles identified belonged to Ulrikke Falch ("ulrikkefalch") and Mads Hansen ("mads_hansen11"). They often addressed public issues on Instagram, while amongst the

most followed individuals in Norway. They had participated in controversies on other public platforms and arenas in Norway, often due to their Instagram activities (e.g. Solheim and Ertesvåg 2018; Hansen 2018). Both also had other public roles. Ulrikke Falch was known as an actor in the popular teen tv show “Skam”. Mads Hansen was known as a retired football player, particularly for his participation in the tv show “Alle Gutta” (a tv show where a camera crew follows the soccer team he was playing for at the time). They have since gained several other public roles, alongside their Instagram-activities. Ulrikke Falch is now also known as a writer (“The law of girls: Feminist first aid”, my translation), podcast-host and tv show host. Mads Hansen is now also known as a one-hit artist, one-hit producer, web tv co-host, podcast co-host and writer (“My Insta-story”, my translation). At the time of data selection, Falch had 918,000 followers and addressed public issues in 84 out of a total number of 173 posts. Hansen, while followed by a more modest 362,000 people, addressed public issues in 74 out of 922 posts. It is worth noting that despite Hansen having an online presence stretching back to 2012, thus accounting for the greater number of overall posts, the frequency of these posts increased from 2017 and has become a feature since March 2018.

Once Falch and Hansen were identified, the collection of data from their accounts was exploratory. First, their Instagram posts (images/short videos with adjoining text and features) were collected and coded in two separate sheets, providing an overview suggesting their character and topic. Second, using this sheet for navigation, posts addressing public issues were selected based on the most different case selection approach (Seawright and Gerring 2008) within each influencer’s profile, to reach a descriptive case study (e.g. Baškarada 2014, 4). Three posts from each actor were chosen for in-depth inquiry. Empirical saturation was achieved after these six posts were further investigated with regard to the task at hand, namely finding the main rhetorical building blocks used by the actors. The selected posts, the first published in February 2017 and the last in March 2019, tackled issues ranging from the normalisation of sexual assault to issues addressing social responsibility versus economic benefit on social media. I titled the posts by Falch: If I were a boy, Showing skin, The doll, and the posts by Hansen: The tent, Celebrity kiss, and Skiers and drugs.

While utilising visual means for their argumentative force is nothing new (e.g. Groarke 2014, 147), emerging social media notably facilitates visual communication (Highfield and Leaver 2016). In the words of Groarke (2014, 142): “In a digital age, we need a set of modes that accommodates digital communication and the ease with which it embraces images and sounds of all sorts”. As the posts were created in a multimodal social media environment and were framed as issues in need of the publics’ attention and evaluation, multimodal theory of argument was applied to the in-depth analysis, mobilised to recognise and order different aspects in the posts (Groarke 2014, 140). This method enabled identifying the key components used to construct the posts as arguments (in a broad sense of argumentation [see, e.g. Groarke, Palczewski, and Godden 2017, 230]). Specifically, this was done by adopting Groarke’s “Key Component”-table, coding each post into a separate table. Each table included, as guided by Groarke (2014), the following columns: “Act of arguing”, “Argument” and “Mode of arguing” (see Tables 1 and 2). In the latter column, the modes of communication were identified, along with their key components. While modes may be defined as the “material” speakers use, sub-modes describe “subsets of” such “more broadly defined modes” (Groarke 2014, 142). For example, both photographs, videos, real-life observations and diagrams are sub-modes of a visual mode when used to claim something. When used for argumentative functions, sub-modes are relevant to distinguish in tables, as a way of “dressing” an argument. Detecting sub-modes as parts of arguments hence requires

contextual sensitivity and interpretation by the researcher, as shown by Groarke (2014, 147): “the images we find within political cartoons are a sub species of visual arguing in which visual depictions are not meant to be understood literally, but metaphorically”. The tables thus facilitated a systematic way of differentiating modes and sub-modes, allowing for a detection of tendencies in the material, while requiring interpretation. Aspects particularly relevant to the post as arguments were considered in this process. After each post was coded into its own separate table, the sheets were compared. This allowed for a detection of similarities and differences, and overall tendencies in the material. Key Component tables for the cases about to be presented provide an illustration of how the “dressing of” the posts as arguments (Groarke 2014) enabled a systematic tool in the interpretative analytical process of identifying the main rhetorical building blocks.

Reaching the Rhetoric of Humour and the Self

Analysis showed that *humour* and *the self* could represent two main rhetorical building blocks. The self is employed in various ways to reach the rhetorical devices of storytelling and representation, providing *evidence*. Humour is employed in its different sub-forms, to uphold or challenge norms, and to point out moral wrongfulness. They both engage in pointing out problematic public issues and their importance and dimensions. For example, Falch uses the self as both a representational device and as a storytelling device. She frequently uses her own body and personal stories to highlight public issues. The post I entitled “If I were a boy” is one example. A close-up selfie depicting Falch wearing a moustache and a short (for her untypical) haircut, makes up most of the post’s image. In the picture, Falch has a serious facial expression, looking tired and discouraged. The caption under the photograph says: “Finish the sentence: If I were a boy ...”. The rhetorical tools used in this post are made up by visual and verbal modes. One being Falch’s use of herself visually. Within the modes, there are sub-modes, such as Falch’s facial expression. The latter can be seen as a means to communicate that what is addressed — the fact that something would be different if the social reality of gender was different — is not funny or insignificant. Sub-modes of the visual mode are, in other words, the visual ingredients that especially matter when treating this post as argument (see Groarke 2014, 140).

Seeing the post as constructing an argument, the following structure can be presented:

Premise: Falch is not a boy

(Implicit) premise: Different genders have different lives because of their gender (and this is problematic)

Conclusion: Falch would have had a different life if she were a boy, which is problematic (Table 1)

Falch argues that the lives of different genders are not similar, by referring to herself, her own life, and to the lives of others. Two verbal sub-modes are seen especially relevant to this post as argument; a reference to song lyrics, and an invitation to the audience to create alternative narratives (see Table 1). The verbal caption invites a possible connotative meaning by referring to the song “If I were a boy” by the artist Beyoncé⁸. In the song, Beyoncé tells a story about what she would do and how she would act if she was a boy; she would be and act freer. Coupled with the first part of the sentence (“Finish the sentence”), Falch furthermore invites others’ stories. In other words, she explicitly invites the audience and *their* experiences, illustrating a central normative ideal in democratic publics. Addressing her followers as a public, rather than as a passive audience, Falch

TABLE 1.
Key Component-table “If I were a boy”

Act of arguing	Argument	Mode of arguing
Encouragement: “Finish the sentence: If I were a boy ...”	Premise (b): things are different for girls and boys	Verbal (sub-mode: encouraging self-reflection and partaking in alternative narratives)
Possible connotation through implicit song-reference (“If I were a Boy” – Beyoncé)	Implicit premise (m): things are different for girls and boys in ways that especially limit girls’ lives	Verbal (sub-mode: song reference)
Depiction of Falch with typical male features	Premise (f): Falch is not a boy	Visual (sub-mode: selfie, costume)
The face expression of Falch	Premise (g): What is addressed is a serious, problematic issue	Visual (sub-mode: facial expression)
	Sub-conclusion (s): Falch is not a boy (like members of her “Instagram audience”), and therefore she has different life circumstances than what she would have had if she was a boy, which is a problematic issue.	Enthymeme
	Implicit conclusion (i): Gender inequality exists and is problematic	Enthymeme

Diagram illustrating the argument’s structure: b + f



invites a communicative space, reflecting Hauser’s (1999, 76–80) communicative norm of “activity” for deliberative public spheres. She invites imaginations of alternative realities, through the viewer’s self-creation of narratives. By placing herself and her own life, and the lives of others as subject, storytelling work as communicative means to create authenticity, serving as evidence. Visually, the body somewhat further legitimises her involvement in the issue (her concern and right to address it), and stories, coupled with the body, legitimise the issue’s right to be addressed (as she, and her audience, are presented as evidence for the issue’s legitimacy). The body is used not “to entertain [...], but to make a point – to demonstrate, describe, explain, or justify something” (Young 2002, 72). Thus, *the self* represents the broader societal issue of gender inequality.

In the other two posts chosen for in-depth inquiry, named “The Doll” and “Showing Skin”, sexualisation of girls and the normalisation of sexual assault are addressed respectively. Through foregrounding herself, she in a similar manner as in the “If I were a boy”-post uses the self as a representational and storytelling device. Humour is however especially employed in the “Showing Skin”-post. This post consists of a video of Falch dancing and pointing to different parts of her uncovered body, smirking with an occasional surprised look on her face. Together with a caption that starts out with: “Turns out showing skin exclusively means that you want to have sex”, she conveys a message ridiculing discourse that emphasises victims’ own responsibility for the sexual assault and violence committed against them.

While Falch mostly uses her own body and self for representation and storytelling, Hansen frequently employs others’ selves as a point of departure for contestations about broader issues, primarily as a representational device. Through foregrounding others as evidence of problematic practices, he has become known for criticising the behaviour of other bloggers, influencers and public figures, regarding them as morally deplorable, treacherous and as displaying unhealthy behaviours before the public (Hansen 2018). While Falch’s Instagram activities have been recognised by Norwegian mass media as central to her creation of engagement towards issues of gender equality and women’s rights (Gangnes 2018), Hansen’s posts have particularly been both criticised and cherished (e.g. Harm and Hegseth 2020). Debates have spurred over whether his Instagram posts are good or bad, and whether they are morally defensible or not (e.g. Hansen 2018). While Hansen does use his own and others’ selves for narrating purposes, his stories are fabricated and humorous. Subjective experiences and realities from the subject(s) involved do not work rhetorically to provide evidence as in the case of Falch’s communication. The self is first and foremost utilised to represent broader public issues and their problematic existence.

In Hansen’s post entitled “Celebrity kiss”, criticism is directed towards different perceptions of sexuality and assault, based on taken-for-granted gender realities. The post is a condemnation of mainstream media’s reporting on the artist Nicki Minaj kissing a 14-year-old boy on stage during her concert in Oslo in 2019. Often unquestioned nonconnections to sexual assault in the heterosexual gender relations of older female — younger male, as opposed to the older male — younger female case, is raised and problematised. The post is made up by visual and verbal modes, from one screenshot and a caption (see Table 2 for this post dressed as argument). The screenshot is taken from an online newspaper article using video and text, with a seemingly celebratory headline and caption explaining the event. The screenshot shows an image of Minaj smiling after the concert, next to an image of her kissing the young boy on stage, as depicted by the online newspaper. In his own caption, Hansen writes a story where he is kissing a young girl at a concert where he performs his one-hit wonder “Sommerkroppen”. Minaj and Hansen are used as representations and evidence, along with anonymous and victimised Emile and the young boy pictured on stage. Together with “the self” employed in this representational way, humour enables Hansen to bring taken for granted values and norms into public light.

Both influencers’ posts employ sarcasm and irony in creating attention to issues. Hansen, in particular, uses humour in a manner that mirrors classic ways of humorously criticising practices and positions in the social world (see, e.g. Wessler 2018, 111). As mentioned, he has become known for his criticisms towards the immoral behaviour of public figures in the Norwegian public. In the “Celebrity Kiss” post by Hansen, the building block of “humour” is constructed by components in Hansen’s verbal caption specifically. In the caption, Hansen

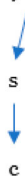
mimics the celebratory framing from the newspaper piece while using himself and the “2004-born girl Emile” as substitutes for Minaj and the 14-year-old boy.

Both differentiation and enforcement humour are at play in this post. Differentiation humour typically points at something that needs correction, serving as a “detector of wrongfulness or inconsistency”. Enforcement humour, on the other hand, typically facilitates the enforcement of social norms (Meyer 2000, 321), and is considered disciplinary. It stresses how a “common expectation or knowledge” is violated. To that end, it is conducive to upholding rules or knowledge regarded to be right or true. In the “Celebrity Kiss”-post, differentiation humour works to challenge and correct the seemingly taken-for-granted view that, “it is ok, even celebratory, that Minaj kisses a young boy”, as can be perceived to be communicated by the newspaper. Simultaneously, enforcement humour works to enforce that: “it is not ok that Hansen, as a man, kisses a young girl”.

TABLE 2.
Key Component-table “Celebrity Kiss”

Act of arguing	Argument	Mode of arguing
Depiction of an image of Minaj kissing a person on stage, placed on top of the front image of a video of Minaj waving, from the newspaper VG’s (online) reporting on Nicki Minaj kissing the young boy on stage	Premise (p): Nicki Minaj kissed a young boy during her concert in Oslo	Visual (sub-mode: photograph as depicted by the newspaper)
Depiction of the text (headline and video caption) in VG’s reporting on Nicki Minaj kissing the young boy on stage	Premise (t): The newspaper reported on the incident in a celebratory manner	Verbal (sub-mode: newspaper reporting’s headline and video caption)
An alternative narrative where Hansen takes the place of Minaj, and the young boy is replaced with a young girl	Premise (s): If Hansen did the same thing to a young girl the story would change character	Verbal (sub-mode: narrative)
	Sub-conclusion (s): The reporting of Hansen and a young girl’s kiss would not be reported like Minaj and the young boy’s kiss	Enthymeme
	Implicit conclusion (c): There are different views of whether something is an assault depending on gender relations	Enthymeme

Diagram illustrating the argument’s structure: $(p + t) + s$



Storytelling, the Visual and Enthymematic Reasoning

Certain modes and sub-modes may echo rhetorical demands following the issue and the social media environment (see Andersen 2019). Although inextricably tied together, when seeing the posts as arguments, the verbal sub-mode narrative, the visual sub-modes, and the enthymeme are especially interesting in this regard (see Tables 1 and 2). First, narrative is, as already shown, inherent in the posts' communication. Stories are useful in contests concerning whether something should be seen as an issue relevant to public concern (see Vivienne and Burgess 2012), as they are fruitful tools contributing to the identification, naming and recognition of issues (Fraser 1990). They may, for example, facilitate placing situated experiences in the eyes of a public not similarly located (Young 2002). To that end, the sub-mode narrative illustrates rhetorical demands put forward by the issues. The issues prompt negotiation of divides between private versus public matters, moral questions and point out taken for granted norms and structures. The visual sub-modes — ranging from a facial expression to screenshots as shown in the examples — may further be understood in light of the argumentative strengths of visual communication when attempting to address such issues. Visual means ease communication in cases where something may be difficult to express using words alone (Kjeldsen 2015, 201–202). The visual's ability to unite the general and the concrete particularly suits Hansen's rhetoric, as he employs individuals as representations for larger issues (Kjeldsen 2015, 202). Falch especially draws on the visual's enthymematic invitation by playing on visual clues. In both cases, the suitability of visual communication to leave out the premises, so that a logical conclusion does not exist without the spectators' contextual knowledge, is utilised (Breitholtz and Maraev 2019). Visual means especially enable leaving an argument incomplete, facilitating an audience's enthymematic processing, by demanding that the audience "put in" what is left out (McQuarrie and Mick 2003, 197–199). The argumentative force in solving a riddle and not being told *what* to think is considered more inherent to the visual's nature due to its lack in strict rules (Kjeldsen 2015, 200). Falch illustrates this function of the visual when using herself as a representation of issues without delineating clearly in the caption what her video or picture is meant to represent. Similarly, Hansen leaves the audience to put the pieces together as to what exactly, *in general*, is criticised in his posts. The context surrounding his social media presence may rather give audiences means to "reconstruct the implied arguments" (Kjeldsen 2015, 200). While the enthymematic mode is invited by the visual environment, it also suits the creators' humorous communication. Enthymematic processing is inherent to the pleasure of getting the joke right (Breitholtz and Maraev 2019). The modes and sub-modes hence illuminate how tailoring one's means to communicate problematic issues with ease, and yet in intriguing ways, is imperative in social media circumstances if aiming for attention (Marwick 2015; Klinger and Svensson 2014; Keane 1999).

Discussion

The non-profit influencer is different from the celebrity engaged in traditional politics. Street's "celebrity politician" is either someone aiming for political authority in the formal sense, or someone from outside politics speaking out on public policy. The non-profit influencers share some traits with the latter. They do not, however, address political issues as conventionally understood. Rather, they address issues that are seen particularly pertinent in modern political life, that is, the self and morality (Giddens 1991; Mancini and

Swanson 1996, 6). They address what is good and bad, right and wrong (Giddens 1991), in their criticism of social and hegemonic power (Welzel and Inglehart 2014, 292). Through their criticism, they probe the question of what counts as a public matter. This locates the rhetoric by the non-profit influencer in discursive disputes about where matters in society are to be handled, in the private or in the public (Fraser 1990). One example is when Hansen addresses influencers' social media practices as part of their business strategy, defying claims that these are merely personal matters (see Hansen 2018). Another is when Falch invites imaginative realities from her audience when addressing problematic gender structures in society. She points to a shared problem and thereby highlights taken for granted views that limit equality. Their communication reveals a normative logic (Landerer 2013, 244–245), in contrast to the commercially oriented, more commonly known, influencer (e.g. Djafarova and Rushworth 2017; Carter 2016; Abidin 2016).⁹

Despite the non-profit influencers not entering political discourses as conventionally understood, they may embody one trend mentioned by Street (2004) further. Street emphasises that political communication is “personalised” due to a turn to the personal. There is an increased focus on the individual politician and their persona on behalf of parties and politics. The non-profit influencer may embody a turn to individual figures, and the personal, in publics' common conversations (Hauser 1999). First, while mass media has accommodated such a “personalization of politics”, as described by Street, since before social media and the internet (Mancini and Swanson 1996, 13), social media may reverberate with and echo enduring individualisation (Bauman 2000, 31–32). It invites creations, publications and consumptions, all through one's personal “profile”, providing “highly personalized” surroundings (Klinger and Svensson 2014). Social media's distribution, alongside its person-focused and participatory character, conjunctly invites attention to selves. It both accommodates and reflects a focus on persona (Mancini and Swanson 1996; Street 2004). Second, the non-profit influencers of this study mobilise *bodies* and *selves* as grounds for moral judgements and the “working through” of norms and values (Kjeldsen 2016). Their rhetoric may in other words denote a turn to the personal in public communication. They use “the self” as a rhetorical tool, to represent or highlight public issues. A continued focus and relevance of the individual as “task” rather than “given” (Bauman 2000, 31–32) is mirrored in their communication. Third, they elucidate that the subject and subjective experience may function as sources of truth, in times when the internet provides many “truths” (Iyengar and Massey 2018). In accentuated information abundance prompted by the internet, manifold perspectives, experiences, ways of life and world views are easily available, while explanation is scarce (Keane 1999). The non-profit influencer may echo a need for and facilitation of tangible individuals whose performance can safely, at a distance, grapple with issues of the self, morality and the extent of personal matters, in enduring individualisation and information abundance (see Bauman 2001, xviii; Thompson 1995).

While the public sphere functions of their Instagram activities are beyond the scope of this study (see, e.g. Dahl [2019] on how comedy is not necessarily subversive), the posts analysed demonstrate that the non-profit influencers' rhetoric is typical for expressions stemming from the cultural public sphere (Gripsrud 2017). Their communication is highly aesthetic, emotional and situated, facilitated by Instagram. The non-profit influencers elicit engagement by employing storytelling, humour, and representation. While both actors employ humour in ways typical in attempts aiming to criticise power positions or hegemonic views and acquiring a public's engagement (Meyer 2000; Klugeff 2012; Sundèn and Paasonen 2020), Hansen's posts especially work as empirical representations of how humour plays a role in societies' “working

through” of norms and values (Kjeldsen 2016). His Instagram posts have spurred debate in Norwegian newspapers and talk shows (e.g. Harm and Hegseth 2020; Hansen 2018). Some of the criticism directed towards Hansen has been his own “immoral” and “rude” behaviour. Pointing out specific public figures as “treacherous” and “bad”, his rhetoric has been deemed a form of bullying. Others have defended Hansen, emphasising the broader public issues he aims to address, and the social and financial responsibilities of the celebrities he employs as cases. Hansen hence provides cases of how arguments deploying a “provocative style” can create a presence of issues and serve as catalysts to public engagement and deliberation (Klujeff 2012). Provocative argumentation often prompts debate as it oversteps the “norms of public communication” (Klujeff 2012, 109).

The modes and sub-modes reflect the posts’ context, specifically the issues’ nature and the social media environment. While there are numerous utterances and expressions in digital societies, only a small amount of the overall content acquires attention (Klinger and Svensson 2014). The tailoring of enthymematic reasoning to visual sub-modes and narratives suits the issues they address, in the information-dense circumstance of social media, demanding brief and intriguing communication. While they must play by the rules of social media’s attention economy, the non-profit influencers also *utilise* Instagram’s distributive logic, aiding a form of transient broadcasting. As they have transgressed the borders of Instagram into the edited public sphere (see, e.g. Ytre-Arne 2016) often as a result of their Instagram activities (e.g. Solheim and Ertesvåg 2018; Hansen 2018), they shed light on the intertwined relationship between social media and traditional mass media (van Dijck and Poell 2013; Parmelee 2013). Given their rhetoric, the non-profit influencers of this study may exemplify transient guiding functions (e.g. Stevenson 2009) in the Norwegian public’s “working through” of issues (Kjeldsen 2016), prompted by individualisation. Furthermore, criticising and highlighting social and hegemonic power and views, they may also illustrate a culture trait of modern democratic societies. That is, a focus to the individual and its liberation from unjust structures and authorities (Welzel and Inglehart 2014, 291–292).¹⁰

This is not to say that the prominence of non-profit influencers is necessarily or entirely valuable to a public’s democratic conversation. An increased attention to “the individual” in public life has, for instance, been said to rather counter citizenship ideals (see Bauman 2001, xviii). Social media has furthermore been considered a challenge to the formation and necessary community (re)building of publics (Habermas 2006, 423; Gripsrud 2017, 190). This study rather demonstrates one way multimodal social media work as relevant arenas in deliberative democratic perspectives (Habermas 1992; Hauser 1999). The non-profit influencers’ rhetoric and popularity represent functions of (popular) culture in stirring debate, identifying and shedding light on public matters.

Conclusion

The non-profit influencer acquires attention and creates engagement, problematising issues of unfairness or inequality located in taken for granted views or norms, framing them as eligible public matters. They employ the rhetorical building blocks of humour and the self, moulded by the verbal sub-mode narrative, visual sub-modes and enthymematic reasoning specifically. Their rhetoric is typical to utterances playing into the ground level of political communication, where norms and values are continuously (re)shaped. While the more commonly researched for-profit influencer (known as *the influencer*) is known to follow a

commercial logic, the non-profit influencer is guided rather by a normative logic. They can be located in the popular cultural public sphere, beyond economics, fandom and traditional politics. Being popular, informal and employing aesthetic and emotional means, the non-profit influencers perform momentary production and broadcasting functions — utilising Instagram’s logic of virality — of cultural expressions in the public sphere. They display enduring classic functions of the cultural public sphere to democratic societies.

Adopting Groarke’s “Key Component”-table proved useful to identify modes and sub-modes as answers to communicative demands. That is, communicative demands prompted by the issues addressed by the non-profit influencers, but also by the attention-competitive and visually oriented environment of Instagram. Enthymematic reasoning may for example be particularly required and invited on visually oriented social media when aiming for a large audience. As social media like Instagram become places for politicians’ personal branding and conveying of political messages (Ekman and Widholm 2017), this method should also prove useful to scholars studying political communication in multi-modal environments where acquiring attention is imperative.

While this study is limited in time and scope, it demonstrates one way multimodal social media can be seen to work as relevant arenas in deliberative democratic perspectives. To substantiate these findings, research should explore the connections between the edited public sphere and self-reliant producers and broadcasters on social media. Furthermore, research should look further into the ways popular individuals engage people through their social media performances. People’s interactions with, and perceptions of, the non-profit influencer and its counterparts should in particular be investigated. As suggested in this paper, non-profit influencers may provide tangible performances to pertinent questions in digital democratic publics. These questions pertain to the self and its liberation from unjust structures, and what is good and bad, right and wrong. The non-profit influencers do not just provide crystallisations of technological emphases on the individual (as seen prompted by social media and communicative abundance). They also reflect the social emphases on the individual in modern society.

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NOTES

1. These are both “followers” and people stumbling upon their posts, resulting from Instagram’s augmenting distribution of already popular content (Klinger and Svensson 2014).
2. Increasingly explicit as laws demanding that posts including advertisement are easily recognisable as marketing are put in place across Europe (Ekşioğlu 2021; Forbrukertilsynet 2022).

3. The “identification” and “clarification” types both typically reduce tension and uncertainty, seeking to unify, while the “enforcement” and “differentiation” humour emphasise violations and correction (Meyer 2000).
4. Sexual harassment became a named concept in the 1970s–1980s. Women telling stories led to the development of “a social, moral and legal theory about the problem” (Young 2002, 73).
5. Ellis (1999, 55) used the same term to describe television’s role in information abundant and explanation scarce times, drawing on the process of “working through” from psychoanalysis: “a process whereby material is [...] continually worried over until it is exhausted”.
6. Institutions directed towards individuals rather than groups, such as civil, political and social rights, are hence also explanatory factors in this context (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001).
7. This does not, however, automatically equate to a loss of any social control and complete individual autonomy. Rather, it may be “a new form of social control, centered around the self” (Elchardus 2009, 146).
8. Also known for creating a wave of feminism called “Beyoncé-feminism”.
9. Emphasising emancipation and equality does not mean that one is necessarily *progressive*, however. See, for example, Wessler (2018, 150–151) on right-wing counterpublics versus subaltern counterpublics.
10. Both emerge and thrive in a market logic, however, as social media platforms are commercial corporations that further influence social media logics (van Dijck and Poell 2013).

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