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## Examining the Multimodal and Multilingual Practices of Finnish Social Media Influencers

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# Examining the multimodal and multilingual practices of Finnish social media influencers

## Introduction

In recent years, *influencer culture* has become a prominent part of social media (Abidin 2016, 2018; Torres, Augusto and Matos 2019). Being a social media influencer typically involves activities such as blogging and vlogging (i.e. video-blogging), as well as creating content for one's followers on a plethora of social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram, TikTok and Snapchat. Influencer culture is also strongly connected to processes of self-branding (van Nuenen and Varis 2017, 129) and the commercialization of user-generated content.

This chapter presents an exploratory, qualitative study on the roles of multimodality (e.g. Kress 2010; Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996/2006) and multilingualism (e.g. Auer and Wei 2007; Pahta, Skaffari and Wright 2017; Sebba 2012) in the online activities of Finnish social media influencers. I analyze the ways in which influencers utilize a combination of visual and linguistic representations – specifically, *discursive*, *aesthetic*, and *social* resources (Jäntti et al. 2018) – on their social media platforms, as well as the ways in which they combine the use of Finnish with English in the content they create. The study focuses on influencers who specialize in the fields of fashion and beauty, creating content including Instagram posts, blog posts, and YouTube videos, some of which contain monetized promotion of fashion and beauty brands.

The data for the chapter consists of social media material collected from six Finnish beauty- and/or fashion-focused influencers over a period of six months. All influencers chosen for the study post content regularly on social media and use both Finnish and English in the communication that takes place on their platform(s). The majority of the participants are Instagram-based influencers – two of them, however, also post YouTube videos, and one authors a blog. The analytical approach to the data is built on multimodal discourse analysis (Cameron and Panović 2014; Huang, Blommaert, and Van Praet 2020; Jäntti et al. 2018). I examine the meanings produced by the influencers through their verbal and visual choices, as well as the relationships between verbal and visual elements (Cameron and Panović 2014).

Multimodal and multilingual practices have many purposes for influencers – for example, the commercial aspects of influencer culture may encourage influencers to use English in specific contexts, as it enables them to establish connections with international brands, as well as reaching a wider audience (Blackwood 2019). Similarly, emphasizing certain aesthetic features, from layouts to color schemes, can attract specific audiences.

The analysis focuses on the following questions:

1. How do Finnish online influencers utilize multimodal practices on their social media platforms?
2. In what contexts do these influencers use English?

3. How does the choice of the social media platform affect the influencers' multimodal and multilingual practices?

The chapter begins with an overview of previous research on social media, multimodality, and multilingualism, after which I discuss the concepts of influencer culture, microcelebrity and branding. Following these theoretical sections, I will introduce the influencers who took part in the present study, as well as describing the methods of data collection and analysis. I will then move on to the qualitative analysis of the discursive, aesthetic, and social features (Jäntti et al. 2018) of the content created by the influencers. The chapter ends with concluding remarks and suggestions for future research.

### **Multimodality and multilingualism on social media**

Multimodal discourse analysis addresses the ways in which linguistic representations intersect with, for example, image and sound, and digital technologies have increased the presence of such intersections in everyday communication (Huang, Blommaert and Van Praet 2020). Previous research on the use of multimodal practices on digital media has explored several social networking sites, including Facebook (Georgalou 2017; Konrad, Herring and Choi 2020), Instagram (Blackwood 2019), and YouTube (Adami 2014; Zappavigna 2019). Phenomena related to multilingualism, such as attitudes towards the use of different languages on social media (Ivković 2013), and code-switching practices in the interactions between users (Sophocleous and Themistocleous 2014) as well as in self-presentation (Blackwood 2019), have been observed on the same platforms.

Even though various scholars have discussed multimodality and multilingualism on social media, there is little research that focuses specifically on the multimodal practices of social media influencers. In a recent study, Huang, Blommaert, and Van Praet (2020) examined the discursive strategies used by a Chinese live-streamer, Austin Li, using multimodal discourse analysis. However, apart from this case study focusing on one individual influencer, there appears to be a gap in research on multimodality in the context of influencer culture. Moreover, the combined potential of multimodality and multilingualism for online influencers has not, to my knowledge, been considered in previous research. Indeed, as Torres, Augusto and Matos (2019) note, influencer communication in general has not yet been studied extensively.<sup>1</sup> One goal of the present chapter, despite its focus on a small group of influencers, is thus opening a new discussion concerning the benefits that both multimodal and multilingual practices have for influencers.

Georgalou (2017) found that multimodality had several functions for Facebook users. For example, self-taken photographs were used to construct identities, to demonstrate accomplishments and skills, and to convey statements without “spelling them out in words”, whereas ready-made images such as memes were used to show alignment with certain messages, to complement verbal messages, and to display humor or (self)irony, among other functions (258-9). Blackwood (2019) also addressed practices of identity construction in his study on the multimodal and multilingual aspects of Instagram posts geo-tagged at the Paris-Orly airport – for example, a French identity was constructed both through the use of linguistic

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<sup>1</sup> One could, however, argue that contemporary influencer communication contains features comparable to the communication of bloggers (Limatius, 2016).

resources (i.e. the use of French in Instagram captions) and visual elements that highlighted the national identity. The significance of language choice for identity construction was also present in Sophocleous' and Themistocleous' (2014) work on the code-switching practices of Greek Cypriot Facebook users.

In a study on YouTube's "decluttering" videos, Zappavigna (2019) noted the importance of the visual framing of objects presented by YouTubers, as well as the use of gestures. Through "point of view" framing, the vloggers in Zappavigna's (2019) study emphasized the deictic meanings produced in their speech, as well as creating a sense of intimacy to their viewers. Huang, Blommaert, and Van Praet (2020) also discussed meanings achieved through body language, highlighting the role of gestures such as rolling one's eyes or shaking one's head to emphasize verbal criticism and, by extension, one's credibility in the eyes of the audience.

Finally, previous research has also addressed the social and interactional functions of digital media platforms, which are often realized through multimodal resources. When posting content on social media, creators tend to think about the audience reception of this content (Zappavigna 2019, 7). Audience reactions are facilitated by the creators through, for example, the use of comment boxes (Jäntti et al. 2018) and links (Myers 2010), as well as directly addressing the audience (Huang, Blommaert and Van Praet 2020).

To sum up, earlier research on multimodality in the context of social media has addressed various ways in which multimodal resources can be used in everyday communication to construct identity, as well as to supplement interaction with others using cues that are typically missing from text-based online communication. Multilingualism has also been established as an important tool for identification and self-expression on social media. In the present chapter, these two perspectives are combined to explore the dynamics of influencer communication.

### **Influencer culture, microcelebrity and branding**

In the context of the present chapter, I define a *social media influencer* as a person who creates content regularly and publicly on social media, with the intention of growing an audience and securing collaborations with brands and businesses. Influencers can create content for a living, but not all of them do – however, most active and successful influencers engage in some forms of commercial collaboration. They may, for example, post product reviews in exchange for free products, or produce sponsored content.

Abidin (2016) refers to influencers as *microcelebrities* – a term introduced and popularized by Senft (2008). According to Abidin (2016), microcelebrities can be contrasted with "mainstream" celebrities who have wide audiences across different social groups. Influencers are more likely to garner popularity within a "niche" audience – in the case of the present study, that niche consists of young, predominantly Finnish women who are interested in makeup, beauty products, and fashion. According to Abidin (2016), most "lifestyle" influencers are women, which is in line with the fact that social-media-based work, in general, is a feminine field (Duffy and Schwartz 2018). To Abidin (2016, 3), influencers are "everyday, ordinary Internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on [...] social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles, engage with their following [...] and monetize their following by integrating "advertorials" into their blogs or social media". By "advertorials", Abidin (p. 3) refers to "highly personalized, opinion-laden

promotions of products and services”. The concept highlights the blurred boundary between advertisement and original content on social media – paid promotion or not, influencers appeal to their audience through presenting their personal experience with the products they feature. Such public sharing of experiences creates feelings of intimacy and relatability for the audience (Balleys et al. 2020). Influencers can thus be viewed to reject the binary of “play/work”, as they are using their bodies and personal lives as tools for branding (Thurlow 2019, 101).

My definition of “influencer” differs slightly from Abidin’s (2016) in two respects. First, in the Finnish context, a large audience is not necessarily the most relevant measure of influence, especially in niche categories of content creation. Finland is a small country in terms of population, and the number of people who speak Finnish (and consume social media content produced in Finnish) is thus also relatively small on a global scale. Indeed, it could be stated that the majority of Finnish influencers are *microinfluencers* (Evans et al. 2017, 146) as opposed to *celebrity influencers* (e.g. Jerslev 2016). Therefore, I prioritize features such as brand collaborations and the individual’s own perception of having a voice and a platform (cf. Stavrositu and Sundar 2012) over the number of followers an influencer has. For example, by adding contact details for “PR and collaborations” in their social media profiles, influencers establish their identities as (semi)professional reviewers interested in creating commercial content.

Second, I do not consider a monetized audience as a prerequisite for being an influencer. Smaller influencers may not make a living from their social media following; however, many of them are in the process of *gathering* a monetized audience. YouTube, for example, only enables monetization of videos for channels that have over 1,000 subscribers, while Instagram unlocks certain features for “professional” content creation after one has reached the limit of 10,000 followers, which is, again, a relatively large number in the Finnish context. Without gaining sudden popularity – “going viral” on the internet – it may take years for influencers to establish a large enough audience to be able to focus on content creation full-time. Additionally, not all interactions between brands and influencers result in actual money changing hands. Sometimes influencers post reviews in exchange for receiving PR samples of products. Influencers may also “tag” brands in their social media content without any obligation or sponsorship, in the hopes of networking with the brand in the future, or as a way of establishing social status or symbolic capital (Fiers 2020).

However, I agree with Abidin’s (2016, 3) statement that influencer work “involves the curation of a persona that feels authentic to readers.” Creating this type of persona can be accomplished through various practices, such as building a sense of community with the audience (e.g., Limatius 2016), disclosing sponsorships and collaborations, as well as offering “perks” such as giveaway prizes and discount codes to loyal followers. Through presentation of authenticity (Maly and Varis 2015), influencers are able to create their own brand – as Ezzat (2020, 120) puts it, they can “craft a certain image for themselves and cultivate their audiences”. The identity of the influencer appears to be, as such, strongly connected to both their personal sense of being authentic, and their audience’s perception of this authenticity (Ezzat 2020, 124). To achieve and maintain such a position, influencers utilize various multimodal and multilingual resources on their social media platforms.

## **The influencers**

In this section, I will briefly introduce the six Finnish influencers who took part in the study. The size of each influencer's following on each platform is presented in parentheses after their name.<sup>2</sup> All research material was collected with the influencers' permission, and they chose to appear under the names they use on their social media platforms instead of using pseudonyms. All participants are over the age of 18 and therefore legally adults in Finland.

*Enni (Instagram: 1,536 followers; TikTok: 8,243 followers<sup>3</sup>)*

Enni is an Instagram-based influencer who started creating content in 2019. In her Instagram profile, she further specifies that she is a makeup artist and a mother, and her account focuses especially on “colorful, everyday makeup looks”, as well as “plus-size style” and “body positivity”. She also mentions her location (country and city) and links her TikTok account. Her profile text used to be in English, but she recently changed it to Finnish.

*Annie (Instagram: 2,955 followers; YouTube: 6,580 subscribers)*

Annie is a makeup artist and beauty vlogger who posts content on YouTube and Instagram. She previously authored a blog, but as the blog has not been updated since 2018, and Annie does not mention it on her other platforms, I consider it abandoned. The first post on Annie's Instagram page is from 2012, and her earliest YouTube-video was published in 2010. In her YouTube profile she states, in Finnish, that she does makeup tutorials, product reviews, and “all things related to beauty and cosmetics”. Her Instagram profile text also mentions tutorials and product recommendations. She provides her email address and a Linktree link. Her Instagram profile is written in Finnish.

*Maria Glow (Instagram: 2,104 followers; YouTube: 772 subscribers; number of blog followers not publicly available)*

Maria Glow is a beauty and lifestyle vlogger/blogger who also posts actively on Instagram. Her earliest blog posts are from 2010, and she published her first YouTube video in 2014. Her first Instagram post is also from 2014. Maria's social media channels are centered around makeup and beauty, but she also posts “lifestyle” content. On her blog, there are categories the reader can choose from depending on their interests, e.g., “makeup”, “travel”, “wellness” and “home”. Similar themes are present on her Instagram. Maria's blog posts are written in Finnish. Her Instagram profile, which specifies her interests as “beauty, wellness and home”, and provides contact details, is also in Finnish.

*Elliroosa (Instagram: 2,765 followers)*

Elliroosa is an Instagram-based influencer who focuses on makeup tutorials. She has been posting since 2012. In addition to photos of the makeup looks she has created, Elliroosa's Instagram features tutorial videos of her creating these looks. In addition to beauty content, she posts more general lifestyle content (food, travel, etc.) While most of Elliroosa's content is in Finnish, her Instagram profile text is written in English.

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<sup>2</sup> The number of followers on 11 June 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Studying TikTok was beyond the scope of this chapter. However, the number of TikTok followers is mentioned here, as Enni's content on the two platforms overlaps often (e.g. re-purposing popular TikTok content on Instagram), and she herself mentions the number of TikTok followers in her Instagram bio. As the popularity of TikTok as a platform continues to increase, it is relevant to study its effects on influencers in the future.

*Cece Bombshell (Instagram: 3,503 followers)*

Cece Bombshell is an Instagram-influencer who posts mostly fashion- and beauty-focused content. Compared to the other influencers in the study, her page has a more notable emphasis on fashion. In her Instagram profile, she describes herself as “your friendly neighborhood Geeky Pin-Up girl.” Many of her posts have fantasy or cosplay elements – for example, she posts outfits and makeup looks inspired by J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series. Cece’s Instagram profile also mentions her age, her ethnicity, her pets, and her profession. Like the other influencers, she provides a contact email address. Her profile is written in English.

*Hanna (Instagram: 2,164 followers)*

Hanna is an Instagram-based influencer focusing on beauty and makeup. In her profile, she mentions being particularly interested in “beauty and perfumes”, and “wellness”. She also states her interest in plus-size fashion and mentions being on a gluten-free, low-carb diet in her profile. Her profile includes a Linktree link and a link to her podcast. Hanna’s Instagram profile is written in Finnish.<sup>4</sup>

## Data and method

The starting point for the data collection were Finnish creators I had personally observed using both Finnish and English on Instagram. Following the identification of the first influencers, a snowball sampling method was used to find others – I examined the following lists of the first participants to find similar accounts. I also asked some of the influencers to help me identify people who would suit the criteria of a) creating beauty or fashion content in the Finnish context, and b) using both Finnish and English in their communication. I reached out to the influencers via email, or the direct messaging function on Instagram. Data from influencers who did not respond was not included.

I observed the six influencers’ social media channels for a period of six months: from May 1st, 2020 until October 31st, 2020. The data from YouTube includes 23 videos and the data from Instagram includes 428 posts. Instagram stories and story highlight -videos were not included in the analysis, but I did analyze the elements featured on the Instagram profile pages of the influencers. In addition to Instagram and YouTube data, I analyzed the 38 blog posts that were published in Maria’s blog during the observation period. The data is presented in more detail in Table 1 below.

<b>Influencer</b>	<b>Number of IG posts</b>	<b>Number of YouTube videos</b>	<b>Number of blog posts</b>
Enni	126	-	-
Annie	22	8	-
Maria Glow	42	15	38

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<sup>4</sup> Hanna also has a blog, but I was not aware of this at the time of data collection, and thus did not request her permission to study it.

Elliroosa	38	-	-
Cece Bombshell	85	-	-
Hanna	120	-	-
All	433	23	38

Table 1: The data.

I conducted a close reading of each blog post, documenting all instances of multilingual practices. Out of 38 blog posts, 35 contained multilingualism. In addition to linguistic/discursive features, I analyzed the *aesthetic* and *social* aspects of the blog (Jäntti et al. 2018, 2). Thus, I examined the relationship between visual and verbal content, as well as any interactive features of the blog, such as commenting, sharing, and embedding (e.g. of YouTube videos).

When it comes to the two YouTube channels in the data, I watched each video and transcribed all instances of multilingualism. 21 out of 23 videos contained multilingualism. I also considered multimodality in the context of the video, including the influencers' speech and gestures, the use of written language (e.g. text added to the video as an overlay in the editing process, text used in the video descriptions), as well as occurrences of intertextuality, such as mentions of blogs and/or Instagram accounts, and the presence of links in the description boxes of the videos. Different ways of combining images and text in the thumbnail photos of the videos were also examined.

Finally, as for the Instagram posts, which formed the majority of the data, I systematically analyzed each post in the data by conducting close readings of the post captions, hashtags and comments, as well as analyzing the aesthetic and social features used in the photographs and video clips that were posted. Again, I documented all instances of multilingualism, as well as observing patterns in stylistic phenomena such as emoji use. As I will demonstrate in the analysis, there was considerable variation in the use of multilingual practices in the Instagram data – some influencers posted consistently in two languages, while others predominantly used either Finnish or English. As a result of natural variety in the participants posting practices, some of the themes in the analysis connect more to certain participants than others, and there is an uneven amount of data available from the participants (cf. Georgalou 2017, 36). The videos that were posted on the influencers' Instagram accounts were transcribed in the same manner as the YouTube videos.

As mentioned above, all influencers were contacted prior to the data collection, and I requested their informed consent for using the data. They were also informed they had the right to withdraw their participation at any point during the study. All influencers chose to appear in the study under the names they use on their social media accounts. Some of them asked me to exclude material where other people, such as family members, appeared. They were also offered the chance to see screenshots taken from their platforms and included in the study before its publication.

In my analysis, I contrast and compare the multimodal and multilingual practices found in the data to examples provided in previous literature on multimodality and multilingualism on



social media. I use Jäntti et al.’s (2018) division into discursive, aesthetic and social features to categorize these practices in Table 2 below.

Discursive features	Aesthetic features	Social features
<p>Constructing credibility and authenticity (Huang, Blommaert and Van Praet 2020).</p> <p>Constructing identities, aligning oneself with specific messages and communities (Blackwood 2019; Georgalou 2017; Sophocleous and Themistocleous 2014).</p> <p>Constructing the social media platform as a space (Jäntti et al. 2018) for agency and community-building.</p>	<p>Demonstrating artistic skill in e.g. photography (Georgalou 2017).</p> <p>Gestures and body language (Huang, Blommaert and Van Praet 2020; Zappavigna 2019).</p> <p>Use of props (Blackwood 2019), e.g. the placement of specific items in photographs and on video; the visual framing of objects (Zappavigna 2019).</p> <p>Visual proof of accomplishment and professionalism (Georgalou 2017).</p>	<p>Addressing the audience and reacting to audience requests (Huang, Blommaert and Van Praet 2020; Jäntti et al. 2018).</p> <p>Amusing the audience (Georgalou 2017).</p> <p>Interaction in the comment sections (Jäntti et al. 2018).</p> <p>Linking and intertextuality (Myers 2010), e.g. cross-promoting different social media platforms.</p> <p>Tagging practices (Fiers 2020), e.g. the tagging of brands and other influencers.</p>

Table 2: Multilingual and multimodal features of social media communication in previous literature.

For the sake of ethical transparency, it should be mentioned that I am personally acquainted with two of the participants, Annie and Enni. Annie and I have mutual friends and have met a handful of times, whereas Enni and I have followed each other on social media for several years, and communicate occasionally via private messages, although we have never met in person. However, considering the focus of the study, my acquaintance with these two participants should not create any sort of bias. The Finnish fashion and beauty influencer community is relatively small, and since I myself am active within that community, it would be challenging to find a group of participants completely unfamiliar to me.

### Multimodality and multilingualism in blog data

In this section, I present my observations on the one blog that was included in the data: Maria Glow’s blog – also titled *Maria Glow*. Between May 1st and October 31st, 2020, Maria posted on her blog 38 times. During the observation period, she was most active in September (nine posts) and least active in August (four posts).

Aesthetically, *Maria Glow* is a very typical beauty- or lifestyle-focused blog. It features a simple yet elegant layout, with the blog name in the upper-middle part of the page, and categories that specify the blog’s content below the blog name. In this case, the categories are

(in Finnish): “beauty”, “home”, “wellness” and “travel”. Below the header, the blog posts are presented in reverse-chronological order (e.g. Blood 2002) (see Figure 1).

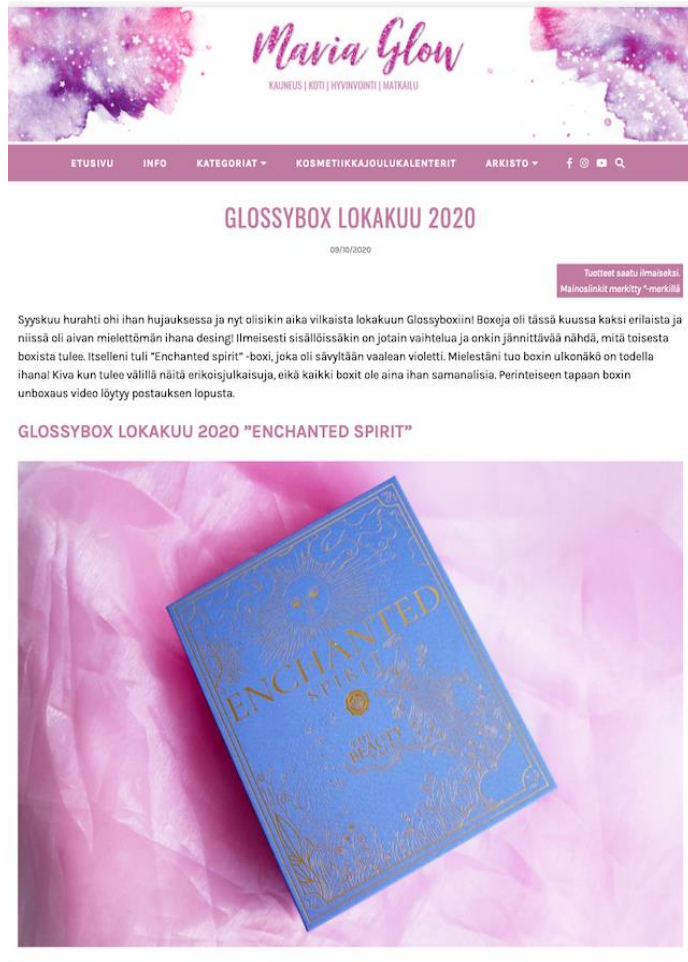


Figure 1: Screenshot from the Maria Glow Blog.

The layout of the blog is dominated by what can be described as a “traditionally feminine” aesthetic – pink and purple are used heavily, and the header features small star shapes, as well as a glittering effect on the blog name. Color, as Thurlow (2015, 622) points out, can communicate a variety of meanings, ranging from the representation of values and worldviews to structural meanings like putting emphasis on specific features. Matching the colors to the “mood” of the blog was also common among the homing bloggers studied by Jäntti et al. (2018). In Maria’s blog, the feminine color scheme is also present in the photographs featured in the blog posts. As seen in Figure 1, Maria tends to use pink fabric or tissue paper as a backdrop for the beauty products she writes about. The use of such props that highlight a “girly” aesthetic can be interpreted as identity-constructing in a way that is similar to Instagram users’ self-presentation through the portrayal of luxury items (Blackwood 2019, 22). Such visual choices also “speak to” audiences that are drawn to a similar aesthetic, which is reflected in the commenting sections of the blog posts. Descriptors such as “lovely”, “heavenly”, “gorgeous”, and “pretty” were common in the readers’ responses, alongside the use of a red heart emoji.

In addition to carefully-constructed product images, Maria includes close-ups of the makeup on her face; she is often portrayed holding a beauty product next to her face, thus simultaneously displaying the product packaging and the “final result” of the product. Photos

that featured other subjects than the blogger herself or the products she discussed were relatively rare during the observation period, but there were, for example, photos of Finnish nature in the summer. For the most part, the blog appears to invite its audience to direct their gaze *at* the blogger and the products she presents, instead of looking at the world *with* the blogger (Zappavigna 2019, 7).

The blog also features interactive, intertextual elements that connect it to Maria's other social media platforms, thus strengthening her brand as an influencer. There is a link to her Instagram accompanied by a mention of her arranging a raffle for her followers on that platform, thus encouraging her blog followers to also visit her Instagram account. More prominent, however, is the cross-promotion between Maria's blog and her YouTube channel – several of her posts featured an embedded YouTube video, enabling the readers of the blog to also watch her demonstrate the products she discussed via video. The reader is thus presented with several options for consuming content and interacting with it – the same product review can be either read as a text and observed through photographs, or it can be watched and listened to in audio-visual format.

Although Maria blogs in Finnish, there were several multilingual practices that could be observed in the data. English was present in almost all blog posts, partly due to the numerous references to English product names. Product names are rarely translated – they are, in Sebba's (2012, 108) terms, *language-neutral units*. However, there were instances of Maria explaining the meanings of specific product-related English words or phrases:

**Example 1 (15 June 2020):** “SPF on lyhenne **Sun Protection Factorista**, joka kertoo sen kuinka paljon pidempään voide suojaa ihoa UVB-säteiltä.”

(Author's translation (henceforth “AT”): “SPF is short for **Sun Protection Factor**, **which** tells us how much longer the lotion protects the skin from UVB-radiation.”)  
(emphasis added)

This type of multilingualism is not “conversational code-switching” (Sebba 2012) – rather, it has an informative function that is dictated by the presumed audience of the blog. The fact that the acronym is explained in Finnish suggests that Maria does not assume everyone in her audience to be familiar with the English term. The ways in which a blogger communicates thus also add to the construction of the author-reader relationship, and the community that these actors form.

In addition to informative uses of English, Maria used some beauty-related terms like “liner” or “highlighter” in English. Words like these are quite established in the Finnish beauty community – there is no ambiguity about them, nor is there a need to specify their meaning to community insiders (cf. Limatius 2016). Typically, Maria appeared to use an English alternative when the terms would have been longer and more awkward when translated into Finnish. “Liner”, for example, can refer to any type of liner in English – liquid, pencil, etc. – but in Finnish, it would need to be translated, for example, as “pencil liner” (*rajauskynä*) or “liquid color liner” (*nestemäinen rajausväri*). Using the English word thus allows for more flexibility and is likely to feel less cumbersome.

Other examples of terms that retained English were “unboxing” and “swatch”. “Unboxing” refers to a practice where a blogger “unwraps newly purchased items from their original packaging and gives their ‘first impressions’” (Zappavigna 2019, 3). The term does not appear

to have an established Finnish alternative, and it is also widely used among the international influencer community – thus, it is a part of the community’s in-group language (Limatius 2016, 2020). As for “swatch”, in the context of beauty blogging/vlogging, the verb “to swatch” means “to take some product on a fingertip or brush and to paint a stripe on one’s skin to illustrate the pigmentation and formula of the product”. The term is also used as a noun “swatch(es)”.

Example 2 is from a blog post that demonstrates both the multimodal and multilingual practices used by Maria. The post in question, a review of an eyeshadow palette, contained an embedded YouTube-video in addition to the combination of several photos and written text.

**Example 2 (3 May 2020):** “Kuvasin paletista **swatchit** videolle ja lisään videon postauksen loppuun. Nyt **voidaankin katsoa** palettia ja **swatcheja** vähän tarkemmin.”

(AT: “I filmed **swatches** from this palette on video, and I will add that to the end of this post. Now, **we can take a closer look** at the palette and the **swatches**.”)

In contrast to the images that framed Maria and her beauty products as something the audience is looking *at*, the text in Example 2 explicitly invites the audience to look at the swatches *with* Maria. Example 2 also emphasizes the relationship between the YouTube video that is embedded into the post and the post text itself. In addition to being two alternative means of review the reader can choose from, the video and the blog post also complement each other (cf. Georgalou 2017), providing a “closer look” to the palette under review. Here, the audience is simultaneously constructed as a familiar group – they are able to understand in-group language use, such as “swatching” – and as a group that the blogger is providing a “service” for, since they are presented with detailed, multifaceted information about a product.

To summarize, the multilingual and multimodal practices used by the blogger contribute to both the conceptualization of the blog as brand or product, and the portrayal of the blog as a space for interaction and community-building. The use of visual resources such as props (Blackwood 2019), colors (Thurlow 2015), and framing (Zappavigna 2019), together with the linguistic choices made by the author, help create an image of what the blog represents and to whom it is aimed at.

### **Multimodality and multilingualism in YouTube data**

Two of the participants of the present study, Maria and Annie, also posted videos on their YouTube channels during the observation period. Both channels are focused on beauty and makeup related content, including makeup tutorials with a focus on “teaching”, product reviews, and videos where the influencers simply discuss their love for makeup and beauty products. Both influencers utilized multimodal and multilingual practices in their YouTube content. However, there were some interesting similarities and differences between the two.

Annie’s YouTube content is consistent with the description in her profile: she posts tutorials, product reviews, and other videos on cosmetics, including videos where she talks about her favorite products. She also does “haul” videos, meaning videos where she introduces “the product of a shopping expedition” (Zappavigna 2019, 3) to her audience. Such videos are an example of a broader consumer culture on social media, which is focused around practices of presenting “recently acquired objects” (Zappavigna 2019, 1). However, in accordance with the language use on her YouTube profile page, Annie uses the Finnish term “*haalinta*” for these

types of videos. Again, the term is clearly established within the genre, and thus requires no explanation.

On Maria's YouTube channel, many of the videos are "unboxing" videos – as we saw in the previous section, this theme carries over to her blog, and she embeds such videos in her blog posts to give her audience the option to both read the textual description and to watch a video on the topic. In the unboxing videos, Maria literally opens a box full of beauty products (usually received from monthly subscription services, or as PR samples from makeup brands) in front of the camera, shows her viewers the products and talks about them. Thus, the audience is, on the one hand, looking at Maria, and on the other hand, sorting through the products together with her (Zappavigna 2019, 7). Maria also posted product reviews on her channel, as well as tutorials. Her channel thus has both informational and educational functions.

Both YouTube channels were dominated by content where the influencer sat directly in front of the camera, talking to their audience and thus creating a "personal" feeling to the video (Zappavigna 2019, 3). One notable exception was a long video on Annie's channel, where she introduced her makeup collection to the audience, holding the camera and taking it with her around her room. However, it can be argued that this way of filming also creates a sense of intimacy with the viewer – the influencer is sharing her own space, something that is important to her, with the audience (cf. Jäntti et al. 2018).

The most common multimodal practices on both channels were additions of text on the video (meaning that in the process of video editing, the influencer has added text that "floats" on the screen in front of the video clip) as well as in the description box below the video, and the linking (both through verbal recommendation and through actual hyperlinks) of the content to other channels. Myers (2010, 31) describes linking as "currency" in the context of blogs, and it has similar functions in YouTube descriptions. By linking another channel or blog in the description, the influencers are giving it their seal of approval, and aligning themselves with it. Additionally, both Annie and Maria linked their own social media channels in their YouTube descriptions, thus inviting their viewers to seek out more of their content. In this way, linking in the description boxes has both a communal function (Georgalou 2017; Limatius 2016), and a self-promoting function.

As for the text added "on top of" the video in the editing process, it could function as a clarification (adding information that the influencer forgot to mention on the video or correcting something in the video content), or it could inform the audience that the products in the video were PR-samples, or that the video was sponsored. Disclosing sponsorships and collaborations is important for influencers, as it increases their authenticity (e.g. Maly and Varis 2015; Ezzat 2020) in the eyes of their viewers. This is sometimes complemented by verbal statements – "some of these products I have received as a PR sample" – that further enforce the sense of credibility. Criticizing gifted or sponsored products also increases the trustworthiness of influencers, as noted by Huang, Blommaert and Van Praet (2020).

Another type of multimodality could be observed in the thumbnail photos of the YouTube videos. The thumbnail has an important function, as it can determine whether a viewer clicks on the video or not. In Figure 2, we see three thumbnails from Annie's channel. In all three, she has combined a photo of herself with some of the products she uses on the video. They thus highlight her personal brand, but also give the viewer a glimpse into the makeup products they may be interested in. The way Annie places the items next to her face is similar to what Maria

did in her blog photographs. In addition to these features, two out of three thumbnails include a linguistic clue (in Finnish) that tells the viewer what the video is about (“*obsessiot*” = obsessions, and “*haalinta*” = haul). It is clear that the interplay of different aesthetic features—colors, fonts and visual effects – in the thumbnails is carefully planned and demonstrates artistic ability in addition to giving the audience a sneak peek into the content of the video (cf. Geogalou 2017).

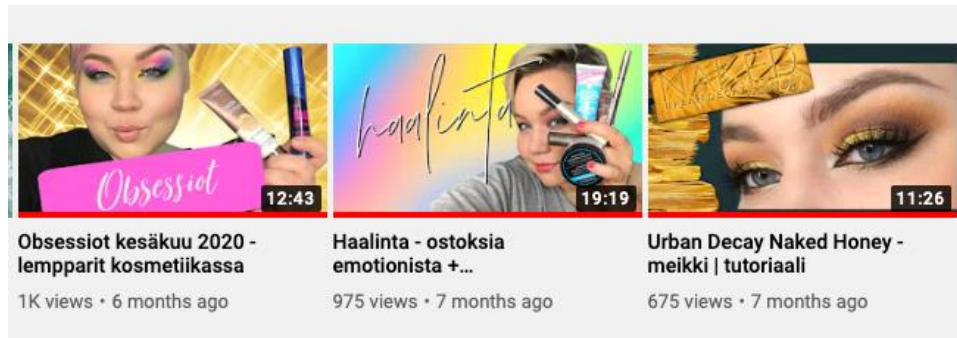


Figure 2: Thumbnail images from Annie's YouTube channel.

While the practices of, for example, linking and disclosing collaborations were similar on both channels, there was more variety in terms of multilingualism. Annie does her YouTube videos in Finnish but uses English rather frequently. In fact, all her videos that were posted during the observation period contained some English interjections. Maria also speaks Finnish on her channel, but many of her videos have English text in the description box, and in her video titles, she uses English terminology adapted from the language of international influencers, such as the aforementioned “unboxing”. Moreover, Maria also used some English expressions in her actual speech. Sometimes, English was used when she talked about a product with an originally English name, and she then translated that into Finnish for clarification (similar to what she did in her blog, see Example 1).

Interestingly, as well as using English terms in her videos, Maria also talked about the fact that some terms did not have a Finnish alternative, or were difficult for her to translate into Finnish, despite Finnish being her mother tongue.

**Example 3 (19 August 2020):** “Sitten saadaan tänne **tämmöstä definition... mikä siihen olis hyvä suomalainen sana, en kyllä nyt keksi semmosta vastaavaa suomalaista sanaa**”

(AT: “Then we get this kind of **definition...what would be a good Finnish word, I just can’t think of any Finnish word for that**”)

In Example 3, Maria is talking about the makeup giving “definition” to her face and uses the English word, as she cannot think of a suitable Finnish equivalent. On her video, she even goes on to invite the viewers to leave a comment if they can think of a translation (no-one comments on the topic, so presumably others could not come up with one, either).

While Maria’s English use on her YouTube channel was mostly descriptive or clarifying, or the result of a lack of a suitable Finnish word, Annie’s English use had more variety. As mentioned, she used English in all the videos she posted during the observation period. The English interjections and phrases used were usually not something that was “required” – rather, they seemed to be a part of her style of speech:

**Example 4 (14 June 2020):** “Ensi ajatukseni oli silleen, että **I’m not vibing with these colors**”

(AT: “My first thought was, like, **I’m not vibing with these colors**”)

Example 4 is very typical of Annie’s English use on YouTube. She often started a sentence in Finnish and switched to English halfway through. Sometimes, Annie even used complete English sentences without translating them into Finnish in any way. Compared to Maria, Annie’s multilingual practices appear more spontaneous and “conversational” (cf. Sebba 2012), even though she is the only person talking in the situation. Interestingly, there was an instance in one of Annie’s videos where she acknowledged her habit of switching between languages:

**Example 5 (29 May 2020):** “We’re tight, we’re still tight, me and my neutral MAC palette... **sori et mä vaihdan koko ajan englantiin, se on joku, se vaan tulee sieltä.**”

(AT: “We’re tight, we’re still tight, me and my neutral MAC palette...**sorry I keep switching to English all the time, it’s something, it just happens.**”)

Example 5 suggests that the multilingual practices of Finnish influencers are not always calculated for the purpose of reaching an international audience (cf. Blackwood 2019). Indeed, the fact that Annie apologizes for her bilingual speech seems to indicate that the target audience would prefer her sticking to Finnish. However, as the switching between two languages was extremely common in her videos, it might have also become a part of her “brand” in the eyes of the audience. Nevertheless, acknowledging the peculiarity of her bilingual content and portraying it as something that “just happens” also creates a sense of authenticity, similar to influencers not editing out their mistakes from videos (Jerslev 2016, 5243).

Indeed, the role of the audience was notable in the ways in which both YouTubers utilized multimodal and multilingual practices. While multimodal features such as adding text on screen and links in the description box were used to give followers more information, the audience was also acknowledged in the context of multilingualism, as illustrated by Maria asking the viewers’ help in translation and Annie’s apologetic comment.

### **Multimodality and multilingualism in Instagram data**

The Instagram data investigated in the present study was rich in terms of multilingualism and multimodality. The participants utilized a variety of multimodal practices, including intertextual features (linking to other platforms, cross-promotion), visual cues other than the photos themselves (emoji, collages), and community-building/social networking practices (tagging brands and other influencers).

The majority of the photos the influencers posted on Instagram were “selfies” (Abidin 2016) that displayed the makeup looks they had created, or other types of self-portraits, like “outfit of the day” photos (Limatius 2020). However, the influencers were not always the object of their photography – they also posted images of scenery, food, home décor, and pets. Such images can be grouped under the heading of “lifestyle content”. Some photos featured other people, like other influencers and family members, but photos with many people in them were relatively rare. This may have been affected by the observation period (May 2020 to October

2020), since the content was posted during the COVID-19 pandemic, and social distancing was encouraged in Finland at the time. There were also more text-based posts, often featuring inspirational or motivational quotes, and sometimes containing an element of activism. The influencers reacted to societal topics such as the Black Lives Matter movement, and World Heart Day.

In addition to feed posts (photographs and short video clips posted on their followers' timelines), Elliroosa, Maria and Enni shared IGTV videos (ca. 5 to 15 minutes in length). These videos were similar to Maria and Annie's YouTube videos; their focus was on a "tutorial" where a makeup look was created and presented. Some of the videos were instructional and narrated, while others featured music in the background. Enni also shared her TikTok videos, and her makeup selfie posts typically featured several photos and a short video clip where she displayed her makeup look from multiple angles. In this way, she used Instagram to fulfil the purposes for which Maria used a combination of a blog post and an embedded YouTube video. The audience was presented with multiple resources that complemented each other: image, video, and written text (cf. Georgalou 2017).

The communality and interactivity among influencers were also apparent on Instagram. Hanna posted a "pass the brush" challenge video, where a group of influencers do their makeup one by one and then "pass" a makeup brush to the next person "outside the frame", who proceeds to continue the challenge by doing their makeup with their own brush. The "passing" of the brush in these videos is often done in a humorous manner, such as by dropping it, hiding it in one's sleeve, etc., and the person next in the challenge video naturally "finds" the brush in a corresponding place, as if it is the same brush that is actually being passed along. The idea behind such challenges is that everyone who participates also posts the collaborative video and tags the other participants. Through this cross-promotion, each influencer's audience is encouraged to visit the other participants' channels. While the multimodal execution of "pass the brush" challenges is new and facilitated by Instagram as a platform, the process and benefits of the challenge itself are comparable to earlier blogging challenges (Limatius 2016).

Collaborative challenges in general appeared to be popular in the Instagram beauty space. During the observation period, one of the participants, Enni, even created a challenge and a corresponding hashtag herself (see Figure 3).





Figure 3: Enni's Instagram challenge.

The example in Figure 3 is an *ensemble* (Thurlow 2015, 620) of written material and visual elements. Instead of just posting a photo with the information of the challenge in a caption, Enni has displayed her creative competence (Georgalou 2017) by producing a collage of a “then and now” positioning of two images of herself, with the implication that the “now” photo showcases her development as a makeup artist. The post has communal elements as well, since participants are invited to interact with Enni and share their expertise and collective knowledge through “tips” and “do’s and don’ts”.

Overall, the influencers who participated in the study posted carefully planned and executed content on their Instagram accounts. Like the homing bloggers in Jäntti et al.’s (2018) study, they displayed an interest in and a love for photography. Most photos appeared professional, usually taken outdoors or in studio lighting. Sometimes a photographer was credited, which can be seen as visual proof of professionalism (Georgalou 2017). Crediting appeared important also when it came to brands. Brands were tagged in photos where their products appeared and, much like in the case of YouTube videos, gifted items and collaborations were marked as such. Tagging practices serve multiple goals for influencers. On the one hand, tagging lets brands know that the influencers are fans of their products – on the other hand, it increases the sense of authenticity and transparency in the eyes of the audience.

All influencers used both English and Finnish on their Instagram accounts. As Blackwood (2019, 13-14) points out, because they are widely used, English hashtags function as “currency” for non-English-speakers – thus, they have similar benefits as links (Myers 2010). In the data, it was common for the influencers to include both English and Finnish hashtags, such as #pinupgirl vs. #pinuptyttösuomi (AT: #pinupgirlsfinland). Here, the first hashtag connects the influencer to a specific group of people and a related social identity of a “pinup girl”. The second variation of the hashtag is more specifying – it ties the “pinup girl” identity to a particular regional (Finland) and linguistic (Finnish) context (cf. Sophocleous and Themistocleous 2014). By using both hashtags, the influencer can appeal to a global audience and a more specific group at the same time.

While the use of English hashtags in the data was common, only three out of six influencers posted their actual caption texts predominantly in English: Annie, Cece, and Enni. However, Enni added a Finnish translation to some of her captions, and Annie also used both Finnish and English in some captions. It is interesting that while Annie’s “official” YouTube language was Finnish – although she spoke English often, as demonstrated in Examples 4 and 5 – her Instagram content appeared *purposefully* bilingual. This implies the existence of different audiences on the two platforms. Influencers are typically able to view statistical information about their following, including their location, which might affect their language choice on different platforms.

Cece used exclusively English in her Instagram caption texts, but responded to Finnish comments in Finnish, as well as using some Finnish hashtags. Generally, the creators seemed to follow the language choice of the commenters when interacting with them – in fact, there were also instances where a Finnish commenter posted in English, and the influencer also responded in English, like the exchange between Annie and Maria in Figure 4. This illustrates the influencers’ desire to cater to their audience, as well as keeping up community ties with other creators.



Figure 4: Maria Glow's comment and Annie's response.

Hanna’s multilingual practices were perhaps the most interesting in the Instagram data. In the beginning of the observation period, she mostly posted in English. However, she later started posting a Finnish translation below the English text – this was marked by a Finnish flag emoji and the word “below” in the upper part of the post. However, Hanna changed this practice again in mid-July 2020, and towards the end of the observation period, she wrote captions in Finnish first, followed by English. Thus, during the observation period, Hanna’s captions went

from being almost exclusively in English, to English with a Finnish translation, and then to Finnish with an English translation. Like using different languages on different platforms, this might be a reaction to audience preferences. However, further research including influencer interviews is required to discover the reasons behind such changes in language choice. Overall, the Instagram data illustrates both the richness of different multimodal and multilingual practices in influencer communication, and the fact that these practices constantly change and evolve.

## **Conclusion**

The Finnish social media influencers observed in the present study recognize the importance of an engaged audience, and curate their content accordingly. They produce expertly shot photographs and videos while highlighting their credibility and authenticity through linguistic and discursive means. In their language choices, the influencers also keep their audience in mind, providing translations and clarifications, and engaging in interactions in both Finnish and English, depending on their followers' preferred language.

The empirical analysis illustrates that English is not always used for self-branding and marketing purposes and that there is variation in the multilingual practices the influencers utilize on different platforms. In some cases, even different postings on the same platform feature different language choices, and these choices appear to change through time. Thus, the influencers' language choice seems to be affected by a multitude of factors, including the ways in which others interact with the content, and personal stylistic preferences.

When it comes to difference between platforms, Instagram data was richest in terms of multilingualism, while all platforms utilized a variety of multimodal practices. However, it should be noted that this exploratory study had more participants who posted Instagram content than those who posted YouTube or blog content. Indeed, one central limitation of the present study is the fact that the data only contained one blog. Thus, further studies on larger datasets are needed. Another aspect that can be considered a limitation is the influencers' status as microinfluencers as opposed to celebrity influencers. In the future, a comparative study between microinfluencers and those with larger followings and celebrity status may be relevant. Despite its limitations, however, my research illustrates that all three social media channels contain some forms of both multilingualism and multimodality. This is an interesting starting point for future research.

As Abidin (2018, 98) puts it, influencers demonstrate the “enduring power of internet celebrities to occupy space on the highly saturated internet, establish meaningful relationships with followers, and demonstrate the impact of young people’s creativity and innovation in digital spaces.” Although they may not be “celebrities”, the influencers investigated in this chapter displayed a range of creative practices that were realized through multimodal and multilingual resources. For example, Maria Glow, who was active on all three platforms investigated, cross-promoted her content effectively so that her channels made up a coherent brand. Future studies should explore the effects of such cross-promotion in more detail, and through larger datasets, as this type of multi-channel presence is at the heart of influencer culture.

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