



# The convergence of promotion and politics: how influencers curate their self-presentations through political talk<sup>☆</sup>

Hanna Reinikainen<sup>a,\*</sup>, Essi Pöyry<sup>a</sup>, Nuppu Pelevina<sup>b</sup>, Elisa Kannasto<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Helsinki, Finland

<sup>b</sup> University of Helsinki and University of Vaasa, Finland

<sup>c</sup> Seinäjoki University of Applied Sciences, Finland

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## ABSTRACT

Social media influencers are playing an increasingly important role in political discussions and debates. This development is not separate from the influencers' business models, thus warranting closer examination of influencer politics from a business perspective. This paper examines the convergence of promotion and politics in the influencer industry. Using netnography, this paper argues that political talk enables the creation of an informed influencer profile, generating business opportunities for the influencers that would not otherwise necessarily be available. At the same time, political ideas that are easily combined with the influencers' business models may become more visible and viable than those that are more difficult to combine with the impressions that the influencers wish to convey. As political discussions become intertwined with the logics of influencer marketing, it has significant implications for society and consumers as well as for marketers.

## 1. Introduction

Social media influencers (hereinafter simply 'influencers'), typically known for their engagement in lifestyle topics and ability to affect consumer behaviour, have increasingly started participating in political discussions and debates by addressing political issues, promoting social causes and even endorsing political candidates (e.g. Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2022; Goodwin et al., 2023; Kapoor et al., 2023). Suuronen et al. (2022) suggest that in doing so, influencers engage in 'political talk', which refers to content creation about experiences, interests or issues that have a connection to society (Graham, 2008, 2012). This development has recently been receiving more attention by researchers, who have largely approached the issue by examining the impacts of political influencer content on citizens' democratic participation and interest in politics (e.g. Cheng et al., 2023; Harff & Schmuck, 2023; Naderer, 2022). The political significance of influencers, however, is not limited to promoting political participation; they can also interlink politics with promotion and combine commercial and ideological messages (Arnesson, 2023; Leidig 2023). Thus, political talk by influencers is not separate from the business logic of the influencer industry. Understanding this connection is crucial from a business perspective, which

warrants further study on the convergence of political discourse and commercial promotion and the possible tensions that it raises.

Though many influencers are making the decision to wade into politics, the decision to do so is nonetheless often complicated. According to their own accounts, influencers post about politics because of their personal beliefs and values and the desire to make a positive difference (Goodwin et al., 2023). At the same time, research has suggested that more controversial topics, such as sustainability, may compromise influencers' regular business opportunities, which leads to a need to 'calibrate' their content (Jacobson & Harrison, 2022). Followers may also begin to hold influencers to higher standards when political themes appear in their content (Thomas & Fowler, 2023), resulting in a balancing act between the influencers' own aspirations and the expectations of their followers. Due to these complexities and the power that influencers can wield over people's attitudes and behaviours (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2023; Harff & Schmuck, 2023), there is a need to better understand the connection between the political engagement of influencers and their business logic. Such an understanding can help reveal how political narratives are constructed and how public opinion is swayed in the digital age, while also pinpointing possible implications for society and consumers, as well as for marketers, who wish to utilise

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\* Corresponding author at: University of Helsinki, PL 16, 00014 University of Helsinki, Finland.

E-mail address: [hanna.m.reinikainen@helsinki.fi](mailto:hanna.m.reinikainen@helsinki.fi) (H. Reinikainen).

influencers in their marketing campaigns.

This article explores the emergence of political talk in the influencer industry. We employ self-presentation and impression management as our theoretical lenses (Goffman, 1959; Leary & Kowalski, 1990), as we expect that the ways in which influencers choose to manage others' perceptions of them reveal both benefits and tensions in combining political and promotional influence. We focus on lifestyle influencers, who often skilfully combine promotional, personal and political topics in their content creation (Arnesson, 2023), and on Instagram, a platform where influencers commonly engage in political talk (Gonzalez et al., 2023; Lehto & Mannevu, 2023). We pose two research questions: 1) *How do influencers employ political talk in curating their self-presentations and impression management?* 2) *How is the relationship, and the possible tensions between political and promotional influence, manifested in the influencer industry?*

Since the study addresses the influencer industry and the culture, practices, interactions and networks typical of the industry, we employ netnography, a qualitative research method that sheds light on 'the cultural experiences that encompass and are reflected within the traces, practices, networks and systems of social media' (Kozinets, 2020, p. 14). Similar methods, such as digital ethnography, have likewise proven valuable when studying influencer cultures (Abidin, 2021; Lee & Abidin, 2021; Leidig, 2023). Netnography differs from quantitative methods and other more positivist approaches (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024), such as content analysis or experiments, which have previously been extensively used in studies about influencers and politics. Elements typical of netnography include gaining rich data through immersion and interaction and constant reflection during the research process (Kozinets, 2015, 2020), thus highlighting the context and enabling an examination of how influence manifests in social media. Our exploration deliberately coincided with the April 2023 Finnish parliamentary elections, as election periods are considered relevant for studying influencers and politics (Sehl & Schützeneder, 2023).

We suggest that political talk can help influencers create and nurture a more informed profile that they can further commodify, thus opening new and perhaps more meaningful business opportunities for them. At the same time, the kinds of political topics that are discussed (or not discussed) in the influencer sphere risk becoming subordinate to the logic of the influencer industry, which can have implications for the types of political discussions and debates that citizens are able to observe and in which they can participate. Hence, our results contribute to the literature on influencer cultures (Abidin, 2016, 2021; Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2018; Duffy and Hund, 2015), the business logic of the influencer industry (De Gregorio & Goanta, 2022; Hund, 2023; Jacobson & Harrison, 2022) and the convergence of personal, political and promotional influence on social media (Arnesson & Reinikainen, 2024; Leidig, 2023).

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Influencers and their business models

Social media influencers have established their position in today's digital culture, and research concerning them has significantly increased and refined over the past fifteen years. Freberg et al. (2011, p. 90) offered one of the earliest definitions of influencers: 'a new type of independent third-party endorsers who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media.' By third party, they are referring to the intermediary role that influencers often adopt between their followers and commercial actors, such as consumer brands. Dhaneš and Duthler (2019, p. 3) further define an influencer as a person who, 'through personal branding builds and maintains relationships with multiple followers on social media, and has the ability to inform, entertain, and potentially influence followers' thoughts, attitudes, and behaviours'.

The above two definitions highlight the key characteristics of

influencers: through content creation and regular interaction on social media, they are able to build appealing and relatable, yet distinct, representations of themselves and thus construct intimate relationships with their followers, thereby affecting those followers' attitudes and behaviours and even lending their influence to other actors, such as commercial brands. Influencers may use these capabilities for financial gain, and the most common way to profit is the third-party advertising model, in which influencers are rewarded for advertising and endorsing others' products or services (De Gregorio & Goanta, 2022; Hu et al., 2020). Another common way for influencers to profit is to launch their own product lines, such as clothing or cosmetics brands, a practice known as the self-branding model (Hu et al., 2020).

The success of such business models relies heavily on the perceived credibility, similarity and authenticity of the influencer (Munnukka et al., 2019; Pöyry et al., 2019; Reinikainen et al., 2020). Typically, influencers seek to nurture those characteristics carefully since they boost the influencers' popularity and the effectiveness of their endorsements (Arnesson, 2023). However, people's perceptions of them may also become jeopardised by the collaborations that influencers undertake; partnering with a brand in a way that followers do not accept may threaten the influencer's perceived authenticity (Audrezet et al., 2020). Thus, influencers may need to resort to content calibration (Jacobson & Harrison, 2022) as they seek to balance their own content-related ambitions, their relationships with promotional partners and their audiences' expectations.

Several recent studies have reviewed literature on influencers (Hudders et al., 2021; Tanwar et al., 2024; Vrontis et al., 2021; Ye et al., 2021). Based on these reviews, the majority of influencer studies conducted in the fields of marketing, advertising, communication and business can be roughly grouped into four major topics: (1) the effectiveness of influencer endorsements (e.g. Kapitan & Silvera, 2016; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Reinikainen et al., 2020); (2) the management of influencer marketing (e.g. Borchers & Enke, 2021; Borchers, 2023; Enke & Borchers, 2019; Navarro et al., 2020); (3) influencer marketing ethics (e.g. Boerman, 2020; Borchers and Enke, 2022; Evans et al., 2017); and (4) practices and features typical of influencer cultures (e.g. Abidin, 2016; Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2018; Duffy and Hund, 2015). The present study falls mostly into the fourth category, as we explore the intersection of political and promotional influence and thus probe the practices and interactions of influencers and the possible tensions created by such convergences.

### 2.2. Self-presentation, impression management and influencers

Social media offers new tools and venues for people to present themselves to others (Shulman, 2022), and influencers especially often resort to strategies of self-presentation and impression management (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2018; Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005; Whitmer, 2021). Self-presentation refers to the various ways of expressing and performing oneself to others, who are expected to then be impressed by that presentation (Goffman, 1959). Goffman further distinguishes between sincere and cynical self-presentations; while a sincere self-presentation is based on 'reality' and appears authentic, a cynical self-presentation is performed as a means to an end, such as the financial gain resulting from a calculated self-presentation. When influencers engage in self-presentation for specific purposes, it can possibly lead to contradictions and tensions between an authentic self and a more commercialised presentation of the self (Whitmer, 2021).

Impression management is commonly understood as the attempts of an individual to control the image that others have of them (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). It is often used interchangeably with self-presentation, although the former is generally understood as a broader, more strategic concept – people's self-presentations are guided by the impressions that they aim to convey (Goffman, 1959). Influencers, for example, typically seek to manage and shape impressions by curating their self-presentations across the different expectations and aesthetics of digital

platforms: they may want to convey professionalism to their business networks and dress in formal attire in their LinkedIn profile images, while showing a more playful and relaxed version of themselves on TikTok and Instagram.

Leary and Kowalski (1990) further conceptualise impression management as consisting of two processes: impression motivation and impression construction. An individual is typically motivated to manage the image that others have of them and then engages in acts to construct the desired image. Impression motivation typically includes a discrepancy between a person's current and desired self-image and ideas about the value of the desired image (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Impression construction, on the other hand, includes ideas about an individual's own self-concept and the desired or the potential image they want to convey; the value of that image for other people; and the possible constraints connected to their current role (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Impression management can, therefore, be understood as a balancing act between a person's own ideals, values and constraints and the perceived expectations of others.

Several previous studies have considered influencers' self-presentation and impression management strategies. Trammell and Keshelashvili (2005) point out how influencers regularly adopt various impression management strategies and strive to appear competent and likeable by, for example, aligning and associating themselves with other influencers. Djafarova and Trofimenko (2018) suggest that self-presentation through authentic, engaging and inspirational online behaviour contributes to the construction of influencer credibility. Atef et al. (2023) further suggest that the indicators of successful impression management include the engagement with and visibility of influencer content, along with the generation of lucrative partnerships. Bahar and Hasan (2024) have examined how influencers employ self-presentation to spread disinformation and argue that 'experimentation' and the testing of deceptive content appears critical to such image work. However, little research has combined the perspectives on influencers' self-presentation and impression management with their political and promotional influence.

### 2.3. Political talk by influencers

Influencers are typically associated with topics connected to lifestyle and consumer behaviour, such as fashion, beauty, games, fitness or home decor. In addition, many influencers raise and take stands on social and political issues and participate in political discussions (e.g. Riedl et al., 2021; Sehl & Schützeneder, 2023). The issues and debates may be related to democratic processes, current political events or political actors. However, influencers' posts about themes generally understood as lifestyle, such as fashion or cooking, often also have a political dimension when they are connected to broader societal issues, such as equality or sustainability, either by the influencer or, for example, by their audiences (Arnesson, 2023). Hence, the idea of lifestyle politics and 'political talk' by influencers (Suuronen et al., 2022), derived from the concept of political talk (Graham, 2008, 2012), which refers to influencers' interactions and the idea that their experiences and interests or issues have a connection to society in general.

The development has also led to a need to better understand influencers who engage in political talk. We approach the issue through the concept of 'influencer politics', which calls attention to the convergence of personal, political and promotional influence (Arnesson & Reinikainen, 2024). The concept explains how influencers combine their self-presentation and personal portrayal with monetisation efforts while raising political topics and participating in political debates. In this paper, we focus specifically on influencers who have monetised their following and online presence while also engaging in political talk. We suggest that being aware of these converging dynamics provides a way to better understand the significance of such influencers in society.

Arnesson (2023) suggests that the political and promotional have become increasingly intertwined, with many influencers promoting not

only products and services but also lifestyles that are ideological in nature. Sustainability influencers and 'greenfluencers' are examples of recent types of influencer profiles that promote ethical and sustainable consumption habits while aiming to create change in society (Kapoor et al., 2023). Efforts to engage in political talk also appear to benefit influencers: Thomas and Fowler (2023) suggest that influencers gain from raising political topics because of enhanced follower attitudes. Thus, in addition to the motivation to make a positive impact (Goodwin et al., 2023), influencers appear to have incentives to discuss political issues.

Previous research on influencers and politics has taken particular interest in the effects of political influencer content, such as examining the relationship between following political influencer content and political participation (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2022; Harff & Schmuck, 2023; Naderer, 2022), political interest (Schmuck et al., 2022) and intentions to share political content (Cheng et al., 2023). Previous studies have also examined the prevalence of political influencer content (Gonzalez et al., 2023; Harff & Schmuck, 2024a; Suuronen et al., 2022) and probed the possible motivations for influencers to discuss political topics (Goodwin et al., 2023). In general, influencers' participation in political discussions is met with both optimism and doubt. On the one hand, political influencer content arguably strengthens democracy and democratic processes (e.g., Harff & Schmuck, 2023; Naderer, 2022). On the other, the diffusion of conspiracy theories and radical political ideologies might accelerate if influencers are susceptible to malicious influences (e.g., Riedl et al., 2021), with young people particularly vulnerable to influencers' attempts at persuasion (Harff & Schmuck, 2024b).

Based on the previous literature, we suggest that a lack of research exists on how influencers curate their self-presentations and engage in strategies of impression management while combining political and promotional influence. Further, we suggest that scrutinising this relationship opens new perspectives regarding the construction of influencers' business models and the possible implications for society, consumers and marketers. Exploring the intersection of promotion and politics provides insights into the construction of political narratives, the formation of public opinion and the networks of influence typical of today's digital culture.

## 3. Data and method

This study employs netnography, which, as a 'tool for cultural understanding' (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024), allows us to focus on the culture, interactions, practices and networks of the Finnish influencer industry. We also address a methodological research gap, namely that previous research on influencers and politics has typically concentrated on impact and emphasized methods like surveys (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2023; Harff & Schmuck, 2023; Schmuck et al., 2022; Suuronen et al., 2022; Wasike, 2023), experiments (Cheng et al., 2023; Naderer, 2022) and content analysis (Gonzalez et al., 2023; Sehl & Schützeneder, 2023). In contrast, we echo the qualitative approaches of Leidig (2023) and Sykes and Hopner (2024), who have applied digital ethnography to examine how influencers combine political, commercial and lifestyle content.

### 3.1. Contextual background

The study focuses on the influencer industry in Finland, a Nordic democracy and welfare state with a high penetration of internet access (Statistics Finland, 2023), high literacy levels (OECD, n.d.) and substantial trust in public institutions and the mainstream media (Reunanen et al., 2023). The Finnish parliament represents a fragmented multi-party system, with its 200 members elected every four years. The multi-party system offers voters more variety than a two-party system, so party ties are relatively loose, and each party shares some views and values with other parties (Grönlund & Söderlund, 2024, pp. 116–17).

Our examination of the topic coincides with the April 2023 Finnish parliamentary elections. Elections comprise a relevant context for examining political influencer content, but research on the links between influencers and politics during election periods remains scant (Sehl & Schützeneder, 2023). Therefore, we believe that our approach provides new knowledge about influencer politics in a time when general interest in politics is high and political influencing is intense.

We focus our attention on Instagram, a platform rich in political influencer content (Gonzalez et al., 2023; Lehto & Mannevu, 2023). In addition to Instagram Feed posts, we focus on Stories, often defined as ephemeral content (Bainotti et al., 2021) because it disappears after a predefined period (24 h). Research suggests that Instagram Stories differ from non-ephemeral content; Stories are typically more spontaneous and less edited and seek to capture a feeling or share an experience (Villaespesa & Wowkowych, 2020), creating a greater perception of authenticity than Instagram Feed posts (Kreling et al., 2022). Gonzalez et al. (2023) have observed that influencers are more likely to share political content through Stories than through Feed-posts, assessing the former as a spontaneous and effortless way of posting, such as sharing third-party, ‘Instagram-ready’ activist content (Dumitrica and Hockin-Boyers, 2023). Thus, we consider Instagram useful for understanding how influencers employ political talk in their self-presentations and impression management and how the possible tensions between political and promotional influence become manifest.

### 3.2. Data collection and analysis

For data collection and its interpretive and analytic integration, we adopted the netnographic procedure developed by Kozinets (2015, 2020). We describe our approach through the six ‘procedural movements’ defined by Kozinets (2020): initiation, investigation, immersion, interaction, integration and incarnation. Table 1 presents how the research process proceeded.

#### 3.2.1. Initiation

The foundations of netnography are built during the initiation stage, which gives the research process an investigatory direction (Kozinets, 2020, p. 139). In August 2022, we created a private Slack channel to

**Table 1**  
The six procedural movements of netnography (Kozinets, 2020) and how they were followed during the research process.

Movement	Schedule	Actions
Initiation	August–	Laying the foundations:
	September 2022	Defining the context for the study, determining the research participants, considering research ethics
Investigation	September 2022–	Mapping the field:
Immersion	October 2023	Looking for traces of possible research participants and their interactions on social media
	September 2022–	Immersing in the field: Observing, journaling and reflecting
Interaction	April 2023	Interacting with research participants: Conducting interviews with influencers and influencer agency representatives
	September 2022–	
Integration	October 2023	Data analysis and interpretations: Analysing and interpreting data
	September 2022–	
Incarnation	February 2024	Reporting the results: Writing the paper
	January 2024–	
	February 2025	

discuss influencers and their practices, interactions, networks and political and promotional influence. During this stage, we defined the context of our research (the influencer industry and parliamentary elections), platform and content types of focus (Instagram Feed and Story posts), and the type of informants (influencers and influencer agencies).

The initiation stage also included the consideration of research ethics (Kozinets, 2020). Since the study involves personal data, the EU’s General Data Protection Regulation was followed; for example, privacy notices for both the interview data and social media data were crafted to specify the research subjects’ rights and outline the collection, use, storage and protection of personal data. The information was made available on the research project’s website. We adhered to the principle of not causing any harm to our research subjects (Favaretto et al., 2020), so their identities were not shared outside the research team. However, we consider the research participants to be influential people who wield a certain power in society, which warrants their study and invoking legitimate interest as the basis for processing their data. The ethical guidelines set by the Association of Internet Researchers (franzke et al., 2020) acknowledge that studying large amounts of social media data often makes acquiring informed consent impracticable. In trying to tackle this ethical dilemma, we followed those guidelines by pseudonymising our data, using passwords to protect the data and avoiding any quotes that would make it possible identify individual research subjects. Further, we want to emphasise that our study does not focus on documenting or analysing the political affiliations or opinions of individual influencers but instead focuses on the ways in which they build and use their influence online – a key question for the building and formation of public opinion.

#### 3.2.2. Investigation, immersion and interaction

Following Kozinets (2020, pp. 139–41), the next stage of the process included investigation (mapping out the investigative space of the project), immersion (inhabiting the investigative space through observation, journaling and reflection) and interaction (engaging with the research participants). After defining our field, we began to map our investigative space (Kozinets, 2020, p. 139) and search Instagram for Finnish influencers posting content that we wanted to study at an in-depth level. We started browsing their content based on our previous knowledge of the Finnish influencer industry while also searching for influencers who were being followed by political figures, parties or advocacy groups. We also studied several dozen stories published by the mainstream media around the issue of politics and influencers. Our final list of 19 influencers was compiled based on their activity and social media presence; they were individuals who had engaged in influencer marketing activities, raised political topics and had more than 10,000 followers on Instagram.

Some of the 19 influencers had previous experience in (paid or unpaid) collaborating with parties or political figures, and some had even been involved in politics (mostly at the municipal level). Most, however, discussed political topics, such as elections, parties or political figures and themes like the economy, human rights, consumption and climate, without any explicit party affiliations or apparent experience in politics. Three of the influencers were male, while the rest were female. Their ages ranged from mid-twenties to late forties, and their follower counts varied from a little more than 12,000 to more than 300,000. All 19 publish content, mainly in Finnish, that can be broadly described as lifestyle, consisting of everyday themes such as fashion, family, culture and wellness, while they also discuss politics and themes with a connection to society.

We aimed to cover various political ideologies and people with different backgrounds and styles, but we acknowledge that the dataset does not represent all political preferences in Finland. Most notably, influencers with openly national conservative ideologies appear to be largely absent in our data, as those influencers who would have met our selection criteria (engagement in influencer marketing activities and

more than 10,000 Instagram followers) are scarce in Finland. We acknowledge that this poses a limitation to our study while also providing a complementary approach to the studies done by [Leidig \(2023\)](#) and [Sykes and Hopner \(2024\)](#), which concentrate on far-right female influencers. Additionally, since Instagram and the influencer industry in general are biased towards female users and content creators ([Alhabash & Ma, 2017](#); [Hund, 2023](#)), a notable share of our data is from women in their thirties and forties.

While investigating, we also started to immerse ourselves in the field. We used our own Instagram accounts and a separate account created especially for the research project to collect data for later analysis. The account biography and the Instagram Feed posts of that account explained its use for research purposes and included a link to the research project website. We connected with the influencer posts by viewing them, but we did not comment on or react to them. Thus, our approach represents the typical user experience on Instagram (for more on 'lurking', see [Kozinets, 2002](#)) and is one possible analytical approach when it comes to less participatory social media platforms ([Kozinets, 2015, p. 98](#)). At the time of immersion, Instagram Stories displayed the content that a creator posted, with user comments visible only to the creator.

Our most intense immersion period took place one month before the 2 April 2023 parliamentary elections in Finland. This period included collecting daily Instagram Stories from the 19 influencers, with one researcher harvesting data every day at roughly the same time to ensure that any posts disappearing within 24 h would not be lost and could be studied later (Stories not relevant to the research questions were omitted). The Instagram Feed posts published during the time of immersion were also observed daily and later gathered using CrowdTangle. Recording online data through screenshots or automated methods is a common practice in netnographic data collection ([Kozinets et al., 2014](#)). In addition to collecting Instagram posts, the research team kept an immersion journal, a method that [Kozinets and Gretzel \(2024\)](#) describe as a good way to capture experiences and digital traces and make observations during the research process without actually uploading or saving everything. Following this approach, the immersion journal included notes, experiences and observations regarding the study topic, including material that extended beyond the 19 observed influencers.

Simultaneously with the stages of investigation and immersion, we began to conduct semi-structured interviews. They spanned the period from the beginning of the research process, in September 2022, to the months beyond the immersive stage and concluding at the end of October 2023. We began the interviews by contacting those influencers who we had identified during the investigative stage. To broaden our understanding of the influencer industry and its business logic, we also conducted interviews with representatives from marketing and communication agencies who regularly cooperate with influencers. To contact both influencers and agencies, we first used personal networks and contacts. Then, we used a snowballing technique by asking the interviewees for suggestions about further possible informants. We interviewed seven influencers and seven agency representatives. Six of the influencers were observed during the immersion phase. [Table 2](#) details the background information of our interviewees.

During the interviews, we discussed the interviewees' experiences with influencer political talk and their thoughts on the convergence of political and promotional influence to pinpoint key arguments. We also regularly discussed the observations and the research phenomenon on Slack, thus producing additional research material ranging from eight months prior to one month after the elections. Details about the full dataset are presented in [Table 3](#).

### 3.2.3. Integration and incarnation

The integration stage involves the analysis and interpretation of data ([Kozinets, 2020](#)). Here, it is crucial to highlight how netnography differs from, for example, content analysis, which is often used in studies that include social media data. Netnography has its origins in interpretivism

**Table 2**

Background information on interviewees (N = 14).

	Social media influencer	Agency representative
<b>Nr of interviewees</b>	7	7
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	5	3
Male	2	4
<b>Age</b>		
20–29		3
30–39	4	3
40–49	3	1
<b>Followers on Instagram</b>		
Fewer than 25,000	1	
25,000–50,000	2	
More than 50,000	4	
<b>Experience in marketing</b>		
<b>and communications</b>		
Less than 5 years		3
5–10 years		3
More than 10 years		1

**Table 3**

Dataset details.

Data source	Timeline	Quantity of saved data
Instagram Story posts*	03/2023	2,258 posts
Instagram Feed posts**	03/2023	195 posts
Immersion journal notes	02–04/2023	89 pages
Research team Slack discussions	08/2022–04/2023	305 pages
Interviews with influencers (n = 7) and agency representatives (n = 7)	09/2022–10/2023	268 pages

Notes: Pages are printed using double spacing and 12-point font.

\* One Story means one segment (ca. 15 s).

\*\* One Feed post can include several images or videos.

and thus emphasises a more holistic understanding of meanings, contexts and interactions instead of, for example, using predefined categories or numerical representations ([Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024](#)). Netnographic data is also typically interpreted and analysed during the initiative, investigative, immersive and interactive stages of the research ([Kozinets, 2020, p. 142](#)).

We used open coding with our data. Netnography makes it possible to organise many different types of data under the same codes ([Kozinets et al., 2014](#)). We started by creating a document where all authors brought together their observations regarding the way that influencers combine political, promotional and personal influence and the possible tensions that it creates from all our data sources: the interviews, social media data, the immersion journal and the research team's discussions. After the initial coding phase, we again immersed ourselves in the data and used a hermeneutic approach to identify greater patterns and overarching categories ([Kozinets et al., 2014](#); [Kozinets, 2020](#)). As [Kozinets et al. \(2021\)](#) suggest, we discussed and debated our findings in both face-to-face meetings and online discussions to build convincing relationships between our observations, to further develop our understandings and to test our interpretations against the data. Thus, our theorising approach can be described as emergent ([Kozinets et al., 2021](#)).

The final stage of the netnographic approach is incarnation ([Kozinets, 2020](#)), where the results are communicated. We report our findings in the following section. All data excerpts have been translated from Finnish into English.

## 4. Findings

We now present our key results regarding how self-presentation

through political talk can help influencers nurture a credible and informed influencer profile, how the urge to combine political talk with profitable business creates role constraints for the influencers and how the ephemeral sphere fosters influencers' self-presentation and impression management strategies.

#### 4.1. Curating an informed influencer profile through political talk

The influencers we observed introduced a wide variety of topics that can be considered political, such as the environment, the economy, education, human rights, equality, elections, political candidates and party ideologies. One influencer interviewee argued that the COVID-19 pandemic was the turning point for this development: 'I felt like my followers started to expect that there needs to be something other than me organising my closets.' Followers apparently began expressing a desire for influencers to show a more serious side of themselves and a desire for greater meaning among those in the industry as a whole, a development also recognised by Hund (2023). It seemingly led to influencers asking themselves how to make a societal difference while sustaining a steady business model. As a result, taking a stand and participating in political discussions became 'trendy' and even 'expected', as one of our influencer interviewees put it.

According to our informants, influencers who take a stand and participate in political discussions are perceived differently in the industry than those who do not, which suggests that there is value in this sort of impression management (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). The interviewees typically drew a contrast between influencers who are considered 'political' and those who are seemingly uninterested in taking part in political debates or who are motivated by effortless campaigns with brands that, according to one interviewee, are sold 'in volume'. One interviewed influencer described this sentiment as follows:

I feel like politics identifies you in such a way that 'this person is intelligent', that they are somehow aware of the society around them. [...] there are big, listed companies [seeking influencer marketing partners], and they want a person who is perceived as intelligent and not necessarily someone empty-headed

The above remark suggests that presenting oneself as an informed person who can talk about current issues and participate in political debates can help influencers become more credible and distance themselves from the typical, belittling image of influencers that has been recognised in previous research (Abidin, 2016; Hund, 2023). Thus, raising political and societal topics may offer a way for influencers to shift towards a more informed profile and present themselves as being aware of societal issues and the challenges facing society. One influencer agency interviewee highlighted that it is often a strategic decision made by an influencer: 'When the influencers shape their media product, they choose certain themes to talk about. And then some choose these societal topics and some not. Either way, it's a conscious decision.'

Relying on our interview data, we suggest that one reason that influencers choose to develop their profiles in this way is to attract new types of partnerships. One influencer who regularly talks about financial topics explained the kinds of collaborations that had become available by raising such issues:

For example, the green transition. I have done collaborations related to that [...] and I wouldn't have gotten those [without talking about the green transition]. Or I've done collaborations with electricity companies, and I wouldn't have gotten those had I not talked about electricity prices.

Thus, it appears that raising political issues and themes connected to society can lead to more complex and perhaps more meaningful partnerships than just endorsing run-of-the-mill consumer products. Indeed, one agency representative pointed out that influencers who talk about political and societal issues can garner collaborations that are more

distinct than just 'buy this, here's the product'. Similarly, one politically active influencer claimed that her clients want to collaborate with her because 'working with me serves as a sort of stamp of approval'. The idea of crafting a more informed and conscious image and its value appears to point towards impression motivation (see Leary & Kowalski, 1990) – providing a push to engage in impression management using political talk. Further, while influencers may have 'pure intentions' to do good and talk about meaningful issues (Goodwin et al., 2023), political talk also appears to function as a form of cynical self-presentation, something done for personal gain (Goffman, 1959; Whitmer, 2021).

In terms of constructing a more informed profile, we noted that influencers often reminded their followers about the upcoming elections and encouraged them to vote, sharing content by advocate organisations, highlighting societal inequalities like racism or ableism, talking about economic issues, such as the public debt, interest rates and tax avoidance, and introducing podcasts and literature about issues like biodiversity or violence against women. During the busiest election season, many influencers also published selfies with popular politicians and top candidates taken at rallies or other political events. The findings show how the practice of engaging in political talk and the efforts taken to manage impressions can manifest themselves in many forms, as influencers craft their profiles by becoming affiliated with desired topics, values and people.

In addition, we observed that the act of introducing political topics and expressing political opinions appeared to be generative in terms of (re)shaping the influencers' audiences, which also seems to have had a profound impact on their profiles. One of our influencer interviewees argued that political themes can be used to 'shape one's audience', as political talk can both alienate some current members of one's audience and attract new ones. While the term 'shaping' suggests that it is a strategic act, the transformation of an influencer's audience can also be regarded as an inevitable path of development caused by the occurrence of political talk. One of our influencer interviewees described the phenomenon of engaging with politics as follows: '[It] has probably been a natural evolution, but still, it hasn't been an easy change. I have faced a lot of resistance. And the more you discuss those societal topics, the more [...] it changes the follower profile and how people perceive my content.' Thus, losing followers who are not interested in political topics and gaining more politically oriented followers changes the audience and its expectations (see also Thomas & Fowler, 2023). In either case, as the audience profile is transformed, it has implications for influencer marketing and the 'product' that influencers offer to their business partners: 'Along with me come the super-critical followers', as one of our influencer interviewees put it. This observation leads us to infer that a politically oriented audience, such as those who consider themselves progressive, might be what a socially conscious brand is eager to reach, while, at the same time, constituting a cohort that a more conservative brand may want to avoid. This finding indicates that the efforts at impression construction (Leary & Kowalski, 1990) are not only critical in terms of an influencer's image but also in terms of audience composition, suggesting that a politically aware influencer image creates value for some but not all audiences.

#### 4.2. The constraints of integrating the personal, political and promotional

The influencers often curated their self-presentations by merging their personal lifestyles with politics and promotion in strikingly seamless ways. Notably, arguments related to middle-class feminism (Arnesson, 2023) were a common thread in many such posts. In one instance, an influencer who profiled herself as a feminist promoted semi-finished meals and argued that women have long fought to escape the kitchen, so the types of meals provided by the promoted brand allow women to use their energy for something other than cooking. In another instance, a female influencer promoted a home-cleaning service while also talking about a tax credit for household expenses, a topic of public discussion just before the parliamentary elections. A third female

influencer advertised a sustainability-labelled chocolate cake on International Women's Day while discussing women's rights and equality. The above examples show how feminism especially is easily commodified, which was also pointed out by an influencer interviewee: 'Equality is easy to sell. I mean, capitalism has eaten feminism; it is so easy.'

Another way that influencers engaged in self-presentation and impression management by integrating the personal, promotional, and political was self-promotion. We found many examples of Instagram posts in which the influencers promoted a book or a podcast episode that they had published and combined their self-promotion with a political message: 'Can women be believable as politicians? Click here for a free trial period of our podcast!'; 'After participating in that demonstration, I decided to write my book'; and 'There are alternatives to economic cuts! Read our blog post!' Thus, the convergence of the personal, political and promotional apparently applies to both third-party advertising models and the self-branding models of the influencer marketing.

In contrast to the otherwise seemingly effortless combination of the personal, political and promotional, influencers' role constraints (see [Leary & Kowalski, 1990](#)) became particularly obvious when scrutinising their paid collaborations with political parties. Indeed, even though an informed influencer profile can be used to earn money from political parties through advertisements ([Goodwin et al., 2023](#)), we observed no instances of paid partnerships between influencers and Finnish political parties during our immersion period. As the Finnish marketing sector has established guidelines about how to disclose sponsored influencer content ([Abidin et al., 2020](#)), we have no reason to believe that the influencers we observed participated in paid partnerships with political parties or candidates without disclosing it. However, we did witness influencers volunteering at campaign events, such as hosting panel discussions or handing out flyers, thus serving in facilitator roles (see, e. g. [Enke & Borchers, 2019](#)), and engaging in grassroots organising efforts ([Goodwin et al., 2023](#)).

Prior research suggests that European political communicators struggle to partner with influencers ([Borchers, 2025](#)), and our dataset reveals that members of the Finnish influencer industry have equally ambivalent attitudes regarding paid sponsorships with political parties. One influencer described her reluctance as follows: 'I wouldn't do a paid collaboration [with a party or candidate]. No, I think that would be somehow ... [a] direct influence on citizens. If I had to advertise a candidate, I wouldn't do it for money; it should be something that comes from the heart.' The influencers did admit, though, that they had talked about political parties and candidates that shared their values. However, one influencer interviewee suggested there is nothing to be gained by asking for money for political endorsements:

I don't bother doing it [paid collaborations with parties] because it wouldn't be financially viable, and I don't think it would bring me any credibility. I think I already have that [credibility], so I don't know why I would do it. It's just not worth it

Based on our observations and interviews, influencers at the time typically tried to incorporate a balanced amount of political talk into their content. Many influencers feared that becoming too vocal on political issues or showing overly close connections with political parties might scare off certain partnerships and negatively affect their revenues. However, this concern might not be a problem for all influencers; a powerful profile might compensate for strong opinions, as suggested by one agency representative: 'It's a big deal what the influencer is known for.' Furthermore, the influencers in our interviews reported avoiding certain topics that they felt uncomfortable with or incapable of discussing. The topics varied. For instance, while one influencer explained that female rights were an easy topic for her, another said that human rights were not suitable for her because her audience did not find that issue particularly engaging. Similarly, one influencer regularly posted about sustainability and environmental issues, while another perceived it as a difficult topic to combine with the logic of influencer marketing because 'capitalism is based on selling more things, so that does not go easily

together with the environment'.

The balancing act was also obvious in our social media data: while some influencers were heavily invested in political activism, including being quite open about their own political affiliations and beliefs and revealing the party and candidates they supported, others were significantly more subtle and either avoided taking a stand or endorsed candidates from several different parties, thus appearing more neutral. This latter strategy may have given the influencers more latitude to work with brands that prefer not to be associated with any specific political parties or ideologies. However, it may also have been based on a decision to simply keep voting decisions private.

We also noted a dividing line between being a professional influencer and becoming a political activist, let alone a politician. It seems that crossing too far into the political sphere can make influencer marketing activities difficult. Just before the busiest election period began, one influencer reported on Instagram that they had been in talks with one party about becoming a candidate in the upcoming elections. However, the party had insisted that the influencer would need to drop paid sponsorships while campaigning. In the end, the influencer opted not to become a political candidate. The incident led to a broader discussion in both the mainstream media and among influencers about whether paid sponsorships would make influencers biased as politicians and whether a political career is even possible for professional influencers. This example indicates that influencers do indeed often experience role constraints (see [Leary & Kowalski, 1990](#)) and tensions between their current and desired images, leading to a balancing act between their own ambitions, impression management strategies, business opportunities and audience expectations.

#### 4.3. Self-presentation and impression management through ephemeral content

Many of our interviewees emphasised that Instagram Stories are well suited to encouraging political discussion, as the ideas presented through ephemeral content do not need to be fully thought out or 'ready-made'. The immediacy of Stories also makes such posts appear more authentic, as noted by [Gonzalez et al. \(2023\)](#) and [Kreling et al. \(2022\)](#). Thus, ephemerality may offer influencers an attractive space for self-presentation and impression management as they aim to construct a more informed profile for themselves through political talk.

One of our influencer interviewees, who also works as a freelance journalist, considered Instagram Stories to be a more powerful medium for conveying political thoughts and arguments than, for example, a newspaper column. She explained that with Stories, 'you get so much closer; you can talk like a friend to a friend, it's like stream of consciousness'. This quote highlights one of the most powerful ways that influencers typically invite interaction with their content: by talking casually, like one friend to another. This strategy appears in our data as, for example, 'rants', where influencers open up at length about political or social issues. In Stories particularly, a common setup includes influencers holding the camera close to their face while appearing in an everyday situation, such as lounging on a sofa, sitting in a car or running errands. This type of interaction makes political talk appear casual and easily approachable because it blends naturally into the influencer's personal life.

Disappearing Stories may also work to the influencer's benefit in terms of testing new themes to include in their profiles and constructing their images – how does it feel to talk politics, and how does the audience react? One agency representative explained that many of the influencers they work with struggle with challenging audience comments, but that the threshold for discussing political topics through Stories is lower because it enables them to talk about ideas that are not yet thoroughly thought out: 'It can be a good thing that it [political content] is visible for only 24 h and that your thoughts about something are not set in stone.' This idea was also emphasised by the influencers that we interviewed, who noted that the general atmosphere on

Instagram is more positive and accepting than, for example, on TikTok. Another agency representative described how influencers use Stories to probe audiences prior to marketing campaigns, while another argued that ‘owning expertise’ on specific topics, such as politics, is key to formulating an influencer’s profile. The testing of such topics, then, is less risky when using an ephemeral content format like Stories, which resembles the experimentation with one’s self-presentation (Bahar & Hasan, 2024).

Regarding audience interaction in the ephemeral sphere, influencers typically act as gatekeepers and select which comments become public and which remain private. Such practices support the construction of their desired image (Leary & Kowalski, 1990) without the problem of unfitting or aggressive audience commentary. In our dataset, influencers typically did not share audience comments that strongly disagreed with their views; instead, a generally positive atmosphere was maintained. The desire to control the discussion was particularly visible in a case where an influencer criticised a political party’s early childhood education policies in a Feed post. After a public backlash, the influencer removed the ability to comment on her original Feed post and defended her position through Stories. This instance emphasises how ephemeral content can be used as a tool for impression management, as the audience members had no way to see how others had reacted to the incident, leaving the influencer in control of the discussion.

## 5. Discussion

This study has examined how influencers employ political talk in curating their self-presentations and impression management and how the relationship and the tensions between political and promotional influence manifest themselves in the influencer industry. We now present the theoretical implications of the study and discuss the implications for marketers and society at large.

### 5.1. Theoretical implications

This study fits into several research streams, namely by examining influencer cultures (Abidin, 2016, 2021; Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2018; Duffy and Hund, 2015) and the convergence of personal, political and promotional influence on social media (Arnesson & Reinikainen, 2024; Leidig, 2023). We believe that our most important theoretical implications align with the growing research focus on the politicisation of influencers. Previous studies on influencer politics mainly contribute to understandings of political communication and the impact of political influencer content on, for example, people’s political participation (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2022; Harff & Schmuck, 2023; Naderer, 2022). This study, however, also contributes to marketing research by showing how influencer political talk nurtures the shaping of an informed influencer profile, which can be used to create competitive influencer marketing offerings and thus support the influencers’ business models. The theories of self-presentation (Goffman, 1959) and impression management (Leary and Kowalski, 1990) offer useful lenses for examining this development.

Compared to previous research highlighting the key role of intrinsic, values-based motivation in prompting influencers to engage with political topics (Goodwin et al., 2023), we call attention to the fact that influencers may employ political talk as a form of self-presentation that offers financial benefits through the possibility of crafting informed, credible profiles for themselves. The socially conscious appearance crafted by influencers can be understood as a ‘desired image’ and interpreted using the idea of impression motivation, as defined by Leary and Kowalski (1990) – a catalyst for addressing political and societal topics. Thus, our findings complement those presented in previous research, which has focused on how combining the personal, political and promotional can open new possibilities for influencers to connect and interact with their audiences (Arnesson & Reinikainen, 2024) and how influencers may benefit from raising political topics because of

enhanced follower attitudes (Thomas & Fowler, 2023). We further argue that engaging in political talk can also enhance the attractiveness of influencers in the eyes of brands that are looking for informed and socially credible partners and foster new connections between influencers and those brands.

From this perspective, influencer political talk can function much in the same way as a job interview, where individuals strive to present themselves to prospective employers as good fits, as illustrated by Goffman (1959). Based on the logic of influencer marketing, influencers seek to present themselves as compelling and relevant to prospective commercial partners and brands, which provide the finances, and to their audiences, the source of their influence. This finding, in turn, suggests that political talk may have a functionalist role for influencers, meaning that political talk serves as an instrument for influencers to develop their profiles, audiences, interactions and, ultimately, influencer marketing partnerships. It points towards the idea of cynical self-presentations that are curated for personal gain (Whitmer, 2021).

We also highlight how the tension between the promotional and political is critical for influencers. Previous research has considered similar tensions but mainly in the context of commercial content and by discussing, for example, how certain partnerships may jeopardise influencer authenticity (Audrezet et al., 2020). We suggest that influencers face distinct role constraints (Leary & Kowalski, 1990) related to striking the right balance between the commercial and the political, as suggested by Jacobson and Harrison (2022) in the case of sustainability. We specifically found that paid partnerships between political parties and influencers are generally perceived as undesirable and that stepping too far into the political arena (e.g. becoming a candidate in an election) makes the influencer marketing business challenging if not impossible. Thus, while potentially profitable, the convergence of the personal, political and promotional is also somewhat confined for influencers. Therefore, following Leary and Kowalski (1990), we suggest that influencer image construction using political talk is bound by somewhat unresolved role constraints and requires balancing one’s desired self against the kinds of impressions desired by one’s audience and (potential) commercial partners. This finding also leads us to concur with Bahar and Hasan (2024), who argue that experimentation is critical to the self-presentation of influencers – and is most typically accomplished via ephemeral content – because it offers them the possibility to test how followers respond to the introduction of political topics and then adjust content as needed.

### 5.2. Practical implications

Our results also have implications for marketers, influencers and society. First, we suggest that informed influencers are likely better equipped to collaborate with certain advertisers. The informed profile that results from political talk may indeed be a viable partnership option, especially for socially conscious brands that already engage in corporate social advocacy or political activism and are interested in partnering with influencers who are able to discuss and debate complex issues. The fact that influencers can expand their profiles in this way can also prove essential for the growth of the influencer industry since the number and variety of brands that are looking for suitable partners keeps rising.

However, we also observed that political talk affects influencers differently. It is more suitable for some than for others, depending on how a given profile is perceived and interpreted, as noted by one of our agency interviewees. Goodwin et al. (2023) describe the case of one influencer, a person of colour, who expressed a reluctance to talk about issues such as racism out of fear of the consequences. This example suggests that the opportunity to successfully combine promotion and politics is not similarly available for all and is likely easier for white middle-class influencers (Arnesson, 2023), which was also the most common segment of influencers in our study. The findings therefore suggest that the boundaries of influencer political talk may have wider

societal impacts: those political ideas (such as feminism) that the influencers find easy to combine with their business models may become more visible and viable, leaving out other, perhaps more controversial topics that are trickier to combine with the profiles that the influencers wish to convey and offer to business partners. Such a reality may well mean that the kinds of political discussions and debates that audiences are able to observe and participate in become subordinate to the logics of influencer marketing. Furthermore, since influencers are able to garner support for the issues they want most to advocate among their followers, they can also attract the attention of policymakers, who are often eager to seize issues they deem popular. Consequently, even political decision-making and legislation may be tempted to follow market logic and the demands of the attention economy rather than genuine societal needs.

Finally, we have observed that influencer interaction with political issues through Instagram Stories is quite common, as suggested by Gonzalez et al. (2023). While Instagram Stories provide influencers with a fast, easy avenue for political talk, opportunities to quickly share and repost content by other influencers or activists, and thus, extensive possibilities for impression construction (Leary & Kowalski, 1990), such interactions are largely under the influencer's own control. The ephemeral nature of Stories makes interaction among audience members and public debates less straightforward than with many other content formats and platform types. When audience reactions to and comments posted on Stories are available only to the influencers themselves, then true interaction among audience members on the discussed topic is not supported. While Stories may inspire people to comment or react more than Instagram Feed posts, the idea of providing people with a place to engage in political debates is not exactly supported in the case of ephemeral political content. Thus, we suggest that influencer political talk is often controlled in the ephemeral sphere. We further suggest that this tactic creates challenges for citizens trying to follow political debates on social media, as discussions disappear quickly and interactions lack transparency because they are often only visible to the influencers themselves. In addition, the networked nature of social media demands an understanding of the relationships between influencers, a grasp of their positions in the networks and among their followers, and the ability to follow meandering discussions.

## 6. Limitations and future research

While this study has certain limitations, it also opens promising avenues for further research. First, the study was done in Finland, a small Nordic country where the influencer industry is rather strongly regulated (Abidin et al., 2020). Therefore, we expect that other country contexts could produce different kinds of results about the effects of combining political and promotional influence. Second, we concentrated on Instagram, which is typically used for visual self-expression and is more heavily used by women than men (Alhabash & Ma, 2017). Therefore, our dataset also skews toward female influencers and female audiences. Had we immersed ourselves in, say, TikTok or YouTube, we might have come to different conclusions: since the affordances of different platforms vary, practices and interactions might have appeared differently. Third, our netnographic approach is inherently interpretive. Quantitative research methods could, for example, be used to generate knowledge about the possible value of an informed influencer profile. Future research should continue to scrutinise how the inclusion of new topics and themes like politics may affect the value of an influencer profile and how the introduction of new themes affects the follower base.

Finally, we also acknowledge the role of algorithmic recommender systems in our sampling. We used both authors' own Instagram accounts and a separate Instagram account created for the research project to immerse ourselves in political influencer content. While social media feeds are personal and look different to all of us, it is possible that there may have been biases through algorithmic influence that led to

particular types of influencers being missing from the data. Future research should extend the inquiry to include larger countries and those with different kinds of political systems to investigate influencers with more diverse political preferences.

## 7. Conclusion

In this article, we have studied influencers and their practices and interactions during a specific period: the time around Finland's national elections. Elections appear to be a particularly ripe period for influencers to raise political topics and thus engage in self-presentation and impression management by developing their profiles and shaping their follower base. At election time, political parties and other political actors (e.g. lobbyists, trade unions and advocate groups) are active on social media and seek to engage with influencers to gain attention for their causes. Audiences are also receptive to political messages at such times, creating fertile soil for influencers' political talk.

We also point out how influencers intertwine political and promotional themes and messages. Considering commercial relevance alongside political influence might have important implications for what political issues are raised and how they are discussed. Further, the increasing popularity of short video formats (Zhang et al., 2023) that do not support mutual interaction among followers and the related role of influencers as gatekeepers of public conversations require more attention in both academia and in society at large.

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Hanna Reinikainen:** Writing – original draft, Validation, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Essi Pöyry:** Writing – original draft, Validation, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Nuppu Pelevina:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation. **Elisa Kannasto:** Writing – original draft, Investigation, Conceptualization.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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## Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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- Hanna Reinikainen**, PhD, Postdoctoral Researcher, Centre for Consumer Society Research, University of Helsinki. Her research interests include interaction and influence on digital platforms. She has studied, among other things, influencer marketing, consumer behavior, and the politicization of social media influencers.
- Essi Pöyry**, PhD, Senior Researcher, Centre for Consumer Society Research, University of Helsinki. She holds the Title of Docent in marketing. Her research concerns the role of social media and new technologies for consumers and marketers, and she has studied, among other things, influencer marketing and brand activism.
- Nuppu Pelevina**, M.Sc., Doctoral Researcher, University of Helsinki, the Faculty of Social Sciences, and Project Researcher, University of Vaasa, School of Marketing and Communication. Her research interests include the changing dynamics of global political communication, social media influencers' politicization and influencer propaganda. She has studied the roles of Brazilian, Russian, and Ukrainian social media influencers during the Russian war in Ukraine.
- Elisa Kannasto**, PhD, Head of Degree Programme, Master School, Seinäjoki University of Applied Sciences. Her research concerns political communication and interaction on digital platforms. She has studied, among other things, the formation of political personal brands in social media.