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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Hands labouring for safety: Mediated intimacy in influencer communities on Instagram

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Abstract

The article explores how digital images of hands are used as a symbolic representation of intimacy and intimate emotions in influencer communication on Instagram. Based on digital ethnography with female influencers in the Czech Republic, the analysis focuses on three categories of communicative practices, where hands function as a visual representation of intimacy—creating community, a sense of vulnerability, and the notion of rawness and openness. The analysis points to the gendered nature of influencer communication. It explores how intimacy is established specifically by women influencers who need to navigate vulnerability with the need to protect themselves against gender-based online violence in the form of hate comments and sexualized hate speech.

KEYWORDS

digital ethnography, digital intimacy, influencers, Instagram, social media

INTRODUCTION

Vivian is a lifestyle influencer from Prague, who shares her travels and fashion outfits on her Instagram profile. She has almost 50 000 followers, which enables her to regularly accept various collaborations with fashion brands. "I could probably make a living out of my Insta, if I wanted, but for me, it's mostly fun. I accept a colab, when it's something I think my followers would really like, though," she says while we talk on Zoom. Within the relatively small Czech influencer marketing scene, anyone with more than 20 000 followers can "monetize the content to the degree they can quit their job, if they have one," says Ian, co-founder of one of the biggest Czech influencer agencies. In this sense, Vivian is a very typical lifestyle influencer—her content is accessible enough that it appeals to broad audiences; she talks about everyday lifestyle choices, travel, outfits, what she cooks and eats, and home decor.

Her focus changed slightly after she had her first baby. She wrote about her pregnancy occasionally on her profile, but she also says that she “didn't want to make it a thing,” she didn't want to lose focus on her usual content and other things she's interested in. “It feels kinda private, you know?” she tells me. “I mean, I do share my life, but like, I never shared a pic of my husband even. I don't know how I feel about sharing my baby. That sounds weird when I say it like this,” she laughs.

The only pictures of Vivian's husband that she ever shared on her Instagram are pictures of his hands. This may sound strange, but anyone who has spent some time on Instagram following lifestyle influencers will probably be familiar with the aesthetics of Instagram hands. Influencers often share photos of hands to showcase products (such as jewelry or nail polish), but also as a symbol—hands holding a coffee cup refer to good times with friends, hands holding other hands symbolize relationship, and hands in front of a face represent a candid moment. Hands are photogenic and “instagrammable.”

When she first revealed to her followers that she's in a relationship, Vivian shared a picture of her then-boyfriend, now husband's hand on her hip. She also shared a picture of her hand in his with a ring visible when they got engaged. She shared pictures of his hand on the steering wheel of their car and a picture of his fingers curled around the stem of a wine glass when they went to a nice restaurant on holiday. “He's not even on Insta. He's a very private person, so I respect that,” she wrote in response to a comment from one of her followers, who asks why she never shows her husband's face. Yet, Paul, her husband, is such a big part of her life that she feels she cannot simply omit him from her Instagram presence. The first picture of her baby daughter she shares is also a picture of hands—cute little baby fingers curled around Vivian's owns index finger. Vivian eventually shares a picture of her daughter when she's about a month old, and when I ask her about it in chat, she replies: “I knoooooww, but she's just so cute, I couldn't resist!”

Vera, another lifestyle influencer also based in Prague, used a similar strategy when she announced to her followers that she's in a relationship with her current boyfriend. “I didn't want to just post a selfie with him. We weren't really at the stage where we would discuss it if he wants to be identified on my Insta like this. But I wanted my community to know, we went on holiday, and it was just the best thing in my life. I wanted to share that.” She posted a picture of his hand casually touching her thigh and put a heart emoji in the caption. We talked about that first picture almost 2 years after she posted it—Vera is still in a happy relationship, but her boyfriend's face has never appeared on her Instagram profile. She occasionally shares pictures of him from behind, but, “It's our mutual decision, that this is private, and we want to keep this to ourselves,” she tells me. She feels that the picture of her boyfriend's hand can express the intimacy and happiness of her relationship, but also protect his anonymity.

There are plenty of very public couples on Instagram and not all influencers share Vera's and Vivian's approach to protecting the privacy of their life partners (and the discussion about the ethics of sharing pictures of babies on social media is ongoing both in the media as well as in the academic community—see, for example, Archer, 2019; Autenrieth, 2018). Yet the decisions around what, when, and how to share, balancing privacy on the one hand and intimacy with a virtual public on the other, constitute important aspects of everyday influencer practices. This article analyzes the symbolism of hands as used by Czech female Instagram influencers and explores how they perceive and strategically perform both privacy and public intimacy on their Instagram profiles.

The analysis is based on long-term participant observation among Czech female lifestyle influencers on Instagram that was conducted between January 2020 and June 2023. It builds on the existing literature on digital intimacy and gendered performances of authenticity on social media (Arriagada & Bishop, 2021; Duffy & Hund, 2019; Glatt, 2023; Reade, 2020). My analysis uncovers three main categories where digital intimacy and privacy overlap and

are sometimes in conflict: (1) *communality*, which enables influencers to build meaningful relationships with their followers via sharing intimate parts of their lives. While relationships within the community feel intimate, they are also economically productive, because the number of followers and stable relationships with them enables influencers to build their brands and monetize their presence on the platform. In this way, digitally mediated intimacy is an important part of the political economy of influencer culture, and both produces and requires emotional and aspirational labor (Duffy, 2016). In this context, visuals of hands serve as symbols of connection and intimate contact mediated via digital screens. (2) Performing r*awness*, conceptualized here as the need to be authentic and show less-than-perfect, esthetically displeasing images and bodies on Instagram, enables influencers to digitally mediate their embodied emotions such as not feeling good enough but also feeling strong. Hands as visual symbols enable them to showcase their raw negative emotions and help them protect their privacy in vulnerable moments. (3) *Vulnerability* is maintained, produced, and performed via the notion of a safe space, that enables the influencers as well as their followers to be themselves and present their bodies publicly but, at the same, in a protected environment. Vulnerability is also important in the framework of authenticity that is constructed in influencer communication as the desirable ideal (Arriagada & Bishop, 2021; Cunningham & Craig, 2017; Heřmanová, 2022a). Through hands, influencers can represent a body part that is engaged in private acts (holding hands, touching other bodies, etc.) and therefore can point to vulnerability within the safe space of the community.

The way my research participants construct what it means to be private or intimate on Instagram is partly also a result of gendered inequalities in digital spaces. Hands, as body parts can hint at intimacy but also protect the anonymity of the rest of the body, most notably the face, which would make a person instantly recognizable. Instead of faces, hands become material extensions of the body and symbols that enable influencers to overcome the productive tension between sharing their everyday lives as a way of performing vulnerability and authenticity and the articulated need to protect their privacy and the privacy of their families, partners, and close friends.

THEORETICAL FRAMING: NETWORKED INTIMACY ON SOCIAL MEDIA

We are undeniably living in an era of social media (Suton, 2020). Interactions mediated through social media are changing the way we perceive our interactions offline, thus troubling the categories of “offline” and “online.” In this article, I follow Horst and Miller's (2012) conceptualization of digital anthropology as rooted in the holistic principles of anthropology as a discipline. They observe “…that no one lives an entirely digital life, and that no digital media or technology exists outside of networks that include analogue and other media technologies” (Horst & Miller, 2012, 16). Consequently, it makes little sense to see a person's online and offline life as separated. Nor should we perceive interactions in the offline sphere as somehow less mediated than the online ones—because all human interactions are always mediated to a certain extent. For example, researchers have examined how various digital technologies and artifacts such as mobile phones mediate emotions and bridge the online and offline experiences in everyday practices of the users of these technologies (Bublatzky, 2022; Pink et al., 2016).

Research on digital intimacies has emerged both within anthropology and in media and communication studies. Dobson et al. (2018) define digital intimacies, in the broadest sense, as connections mediated through digital technology. Anthropologists have explored how technologies mediate intimacy in various settings—for example, how mobile phones enable building of intimacy in arranged marriages (Walter, 2021), and how specific affordances

of mobile phones (such as the possibility of taking a selfie) are shaped by different social norms in different settings, enabling users to either construct or deconstruct their performance on social media (Abidin, 2016b; Haynes, 2016).

Processes of constructing digital intimacies have been explored in vlogging on YouTube (Berryman & Kavka, 2018), in digitally mediated family relationships (Leaver, 2017), and extensively also in influencer communication (Arriagada & Ibáñez, 2020; Duffy et al., 2022; Duffy & Hund, 2019; Reade, 2020). Lambert (2016) focuses on how intimacy on social media (Facebook, in his case), is practiced publicly, because the public performance is normatively enforced by the affordances of Facebook and its infrastructure. Autenrieth (2018) explored, against the background of publicly performed intimacy, the practices of what she calls "anti-sharenting," where parents carefully choose how to picture their children on social media while protecting their privacy, similar to other documented practices of "un-showing" intimate details on various platforms such as the "un-selfie" (Autenrieth, 2018). Drawing from these concepts, the use of hands could also be seen as a practice of un-showing—a practice of being intimate without necessarily being private.

Social media platforms have been ethnographically studied as sites of negotiating and performing emotions (Costa, 2021; Miller et al., 2016). Within studies of influencer cultures, the notion of digital intimacy is often explored in the framework of "parasocial relationships" (Horton & Wohl, 1956) which describes how people form connections with media personalities who are (physically) distant and unreachable, yet whose audiences feel closely connected to them. On Instagram, the focus on public performance of bodies and bodily intimacy is enhanced by the focus on visuality (Locatelli, 2017). The mutual interplay between technological affordances of the platforms on the one hand and the practices of users on the other is also highlighted by recent research on how notions of intimacy and privacy have changed with the emergence of newer platforms such as TikTok (Kaye et al., 2022). On TikTok specifically, researchers have also recently paid attention to the ways in which users create intimate relationships not just with other users but also with the platform itself via its algorithm (Alper et al., 2023; Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Siles et al., 2022). The formation of intimate relationships was previously also analyzed by Miller (2011) in his exploration of how Trinidadian users relate to Facebook—he suggests the notion of Facebook as a "meta-friend" that we turn to when we are sad, bored, or lonely. Importantly, he notes that "a relationship to Facebook as a thing is not axiomatically inferior to a relationship with a person" (Miller, 2011, 170).

Within research on influencer cultures, the work of Crystal Abidin sets the conceptual framework for the study of authenticity and intimacy as key aspects of influencer communication and performance of identities on social media. Abidin explores authenticity as part of the 'performative ecology' of social media, where content designed to showcase authenticity as everyday ordinariness needs to be balanced with professional content designed to perform aspirational luxury or talent (Abidin, 2017). Following up on the notion of authenticity as a "communicative process" (Enli, 2015), I argue that authenticity on social media cannot be seen as an inherent, static aspect of a person or product, but it is rather a dynamic process that is constantly negotiated between influencers and their followers (Heřmanová, 2022a) and it is also significantly gendered (ibid, Duffy & Hund, 2019).

Establishing intimacy and shared trust is crucial for maintaining authenticity and for turning their social capital into economic capital. Abidin (2016a, 11) points out that the "communicative intimacies" playing out between influencers and their followers are not in contradiction with the often-commercial nature of the relationship. Even though the relationship is based on influencing followers' consumption patterns and decisions, intimate and emotional connections are formed and felt on both sides. This mutual interplay between authenticity and intimacy on the one hand and professionalization and commercialization on the other underpins much of current research on influencers and is interwoven through all the three

analyzed categories presented in this article as well. Performed authenticity and digitally mediated intimacy are thus important parts of the political economy of influencer cultures on social media. Successful performances of authenticity and building meaningful intimate connections with followers enable influencers to accumulate social capital that can be turned into economic capital in the form of brand collaborations, sponsored posts, etc. The performance of intimacy, in which hands are used as an embodied symbol of private, intimate, bodily experiences and used to create safe space where this intimacy can be performed publicly (Lambert, 2016), occurs against the backdrop of affective connections interwoven in these hierarchical economic structures.

While Instagram, which this study focuses on, is a global platform, anthropologists have previously explored how the notions of authenticity, privacy, and intimacy are shaped by local cultural and social norms (Miller et al., 2016) with important work emerging out of the Asia-Pacific region (Abidin & Lee, 2023; Zhao & Abidin, 2023). For example, Walter (2021) focuses on how young women in northern Pakistan struggle with constant scrutiny of their mobile phones use and the practices they develop to protect their privacy and prospects on the marriage market. Beta (2019) focuses on how social media influencers in Indonesia work with religious norms in their commercial and social activities on various platforms. Influencers in the Czech Republic mostly follow global trends. While studies on the Czech influencer industry are so far scarce (Heřmanová, 2022a, 2022c; Slavík & Pospěch, 2019), my research indicates that the Czech-speaking spaces on Instagram are part of the global scene and my research informants themselves are often in touch (and inspired by) English-speaking influencers from different parts of the world.

METHODOLOGY AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

There is an ongoing and dynamic discussion about the shifting dynamics from influencers becoming "content creators" and their role outside of lifestyle and commercial domains (Abidin, 2021; Riedl et al., 2021), but for the purpose of my research and this article, I used the broad definition of an "influencer" as a person who can monetize their content on one or more social media platform.

Between January 2020 and June 2022, I conducted both online and offline participant observation among Czech female Instagram influencers, recorded semi-structured (one-off or repeated) interviews with 16 influencers, and spent countless hours chatting via Instagram direct message and WhatsApp. The planned design of the fieldwork also included participant observation at events organized by influencer agencies and at influencer meet-ups with their followers. However, 3 months into the research project, the COVID-19 pandemic made offline contacts impossible for many months. The pandemic also significantly impacted my research questions and the whole set-up of my research project. The primary research questions I wanted to explore were, RQ1: How is femininity performed on Instagram in influencer communication? RQ2: How are gender stereotypes and beauty standards experienced, lived and (re)produced by women for whom their online presence also means their main income? RQ3: Connected to that, how is the performance of femininity tied to the economic capital of influencers?

However, the pandemic shifted the focus of what many of my research participants were posting about and thus also what my research, in the end, was about. For influencers whose content normally focuses on travels, coffee dates, playdates with children, or shopping, the "lifestyles" they posted about disappeared overnight (as it did for most of the world's population). During my fieldwork, I observed two distinct changes in content online—the first was a shift towards more political content, including open discussions about the pandemic and anti-pandemic restrictions, sometimes overlapping with misinformation and conspiracy

milieu on Instagram (Heřmanová, 2022b, 2022c). The second reaction consisted of a shift towards domesticity, intimacy of everyday chores, family life, the importance of friendships, self-reflection, and focus on community. In this shift towards domesticity, the gendered aspect of what it means to be either private or intimate on Instagram became ever more pressing. At the same time, the communicative aspects of Instagram as a visual platform became more important to my research participants (and to their followers as well), as they became the only means of communication available. Fostering digital intimacy via embodied visual communication was always a crucial part of their everyday practices of creating content, but for a time during the pandemic, it became the only, seemingly universal, way to construct intimacy.

My final dataset consisted of 12 months of fieldnotes from online participant observation, 8 months in 2020, and 4 months in 2022 (to capture how the online content and interaction changed as the anti-pandemic restrictions were loosened in the Czech Republic). During the participant observation, I made field notes and screenshotted Instagram content posted by my research participants. I recorded eight interviews via the online platform Zoom in 2020, another two via Zoom in 2021 and then six interviews face to face during the second half of 2022. Throughout the fieldwork, I was in touch with my research participants via chat, mainly Instagram direct messaging app or via WhatsApp. I did not plan to record or download the chats as a default. My research participants treated me in a friendly and informal manner, sometimes also sending me screenshots of other content, asking me about how my research is going, etc. However, sometimes we ended up discussing issues via chat that I felt might add an important aspect to the research—in that case, I sought permission from my research participants to use the quotes from the chat in the analysis.

The transcripts of recorded interviews were coded using the Atlas.ti software and my fieldnotes, including screenshots from Instagram and quotes from the online chats, were coded manually. All quotes used in this article (from interviews as well as from Instagram captions) were translated from Czech to English by me.

During the online fieldwork, I relied on Kozinets' (2019) guidelines for conducting netnography as well as on Pink et al. (2016) fieldwork guidelines for digital ethnography. Kozinet (ibid) observes the ethical challenges of doing online ethnography, particularly when it comes to using publicly available data without the consent of the people who posted them. Even though I obtained informed consent from all my research participants, to protect their privacy, all names used in this article are pseudonyms and I don't link to their Instagram profiles anywhere in the text.

The following section will explore the three categories that emerged during the analysis—communality, rawness, and vulnerability—in detail.

"You are what keeps me going and I am here for you, through it all": building a community

Tessa had her second baby in January 2021. She started posting to her Instagram stories almost immediately after her son was born—and the first picture that she shared was a selfie of her and her baby lying on her chest and holding her finger in his little fist. She captioned the story "Hand in hand, there's nothing better than this". She was released from the maternity ward after a few days and went home to her husband and firstborn son, who was then 3 years old. She posted another picture of hands—this time, of her older son's hand, tentatively touching his baby brother's head. Tessa has almost 100 000 followers, which makes her quite a big name in the Czech influencer scene. Unlike Vivi and Vera, she was also very open from the beginning about her relationship with her boyfriend and then husband and about her family life. When I asked her about how she presents her family members on Instagram, she explained:

> "I didn't really think about that, to be honest. What I wanted, why I even started posting, was to share my own story. The things I went through, the bad ones and the good ones as well. I wanted to say, look, if I did this, you can too." … "Now that you ask, I think it was always about the other people. The women who write me messages and it doesn't matter if they ask how to overcome loneliness or where did I buy that kitchen door handle" … "this is what I am here for."

In a caption under a picture of her reading a book, the baby sleeping peacefully next to her, which she posted about 3 months later, she writes:

> This is not what it normally looks like here. I don't have much time to read, or sleep for that matter, my fellow mamas out there, you know what I'm talking about! And it also means I don't always have time to reply to your messages. I try to answer as much as I can and if I could, I would write to each and every one of you. Please be patient with me now, I will be fully back and here for you as soon as I can. Reading your messages always makes my day, It feels like I know you all personally. I am forever grateful for this community. Love you all.

For Tessa, the community of her (mostly female) followers on her Instagram profile means having a safe space where she is not afraid to share intimate moments without, as she acknowledges above, feeling the need to really think about it. Her followers, even though she has never met most of them face to face, seem like friends to her. Sharing the intimate moment of holding her newborn son's hand for the first time felt natural to her—an organic part of the story she wants to tell.

Nicol, a 23-year-old Prague-based influencer and social media marketing specialist, also talked to me about the importance of community that she feels she's managed to build for herself and her followers:

> My followers are mostly women and what is quite surprising for me, lot of them are older than me. But they would comment or message me and they will be like, I like how you talk about things. And that is why I keep doing this, you know? I do struggle a lot, timewise, I have a job on the side and then to make this into like a full-time thing, I would need to spend much more time posting. I am not sure I want to go that way, but when I'm overwhelmed, I think about the community I have and I'm like, I don't wanna leave them, they're friends.

The notion of community and the feeling of communality with their followers is the answer I almost always get when I ask my research participants what their motivation is for posting on Instagram. Some of them are open about the fact that it is also an economic necessity for them, as Instagram is their main source of income, like for example Evie, a mother of two who lives in a small town in Central Bohemia:

> "Of course, this my job, this is what I do. I am in this situation now, where with my kids, I really wouldn't be able to get another job that would be this flexible. So that is an aspect of it. I'm open about that. And I talk about that too, I think it's important to be open about that and be transparent about the fact that you are paid, these are professional standards, I think that's not talked about enough" …"But I don't think it's possible to do this just for the money. You need your community to trust you. If you don't care about them, if you don't show them that you care, then how can they trust you? It's like, you are in a sort of relationship with these people, they know a lot of things about you. The community is also a responsibility."

Evie, Tessa and Nicol all accentuate the feeling of responsibility that is based on care—they care about the people in their community, and even though they have never met them face to face, they feel like they are part of each other's lives. Hands here symbolize the community and care that goes into maintaining a community—the “hand in hand” feeling that Tessa talks about: I'll hold your hand and I'll be here for you. This also partly corresponds with Miller's (2011) notion of a platform as a meta-friend that is always there for you—Tessa perceives her Instagram community as a community of friends, who are however only ever present via the platform. The community and the platform thus, in a way, blur together.

The community is also what enables the influencers to be paid for their online presence. Evie is paid for promoting products to her followers, but this doesn't exclude her followers from feeling like they are her friends; this is an example of what Abidin (2016a) calls “communicative intimacies” (see above). It also doesn't prevent Evie or Tessa or Nicol from feeling that they are part of a community and feeling responsible or grateful or sometimes overwhelmed by it. In a similar vein, Duffy (2016) observes that “building affective relationships with members of one community” is a significant part of influencers' labor (2016, 449).

Similar to Abidin, Duffy points out that the relationship the influencer maintains with her community is at the same time felt and presented as genuine, in most cases on both sides, but is on the other hand instrumental. Duffy coins the term “aspirational labor” as forward-facing labor that is often unpaid but is done with the promise, or aspiration, that it will pay off in the future—when the community is big and robust enough to be commercially viable. Aspirational labor includes many productive activities routinely employed by influencers—including messaging and communicating with their followers and everyday deliberations about which content to post and how, in order to stay safe yet share enough of themselves with their community. The tension between being intimate but also being aspirational is economically productive for the influencers, because it enables them to communicate with their followers in a meaningful way while maintaining the professionalism needed for commercial collaborations. Influencers' bodies are the tools for aspiration labor as showing one's own body in a certain way communicates intimacy and emotional connection in some cases or professionalism and authority in other cases. Hands are often used as the symbol of the former—showing hands means caring (for people whose hands the influencers are holding, such as babies) or for the community in general.

As Duffy points out, this type of labor is often not seen as work at all (and even the influencers themselves rarely characterize it as such), yet it is crucial for maintaining influencers' own economic viability. She draws on Hochshild's concepts of emotional labor (Hochshild, 1983) to point out that the work that goes into building a community, or “being here for them,” in Tessa's words, is also highly feminized and done voluntarily by women. For Tessa, Vivi, Nicol, Evie, and others, showing up for their community means simultaneously experiencing joy, motivation, obligation, responsibility, and financial necessity, without one excluding the other.

The aspirational labor of building a community on Instagram is a form of embodied labor in that it requires influencers to showcase their bodies and construct and deconstruct their relationships with them, as analyzed in the following section. Intimacy is built via sharing pictures of bodies—not only of the influencers themselves but also of their children, friends, and partners.

“It feels like stripping down naked in front of strangers, but how can you not?”: staying raw and true

Building and maintaining a community on Instagram requires a significant amount of labor, as explained above. In this context, bodies and hands specifically are working tools. My

research participants reflected on how their own relationship to their body is also a site of intense vulnerability during their everyday online presentations. Alex has a complicated relationship with her body. As an influencer, she shows a lot of her body on her Instagram, especially in the summer, when her figure is visible in swimming suits and summer dresses. She receives many comments on those images:

> I posted this picture where my hands, like, my arms, looked really thin. I have thin arms, I know, I know it doesn't look good. But what am I supposed to do, photoshop them? This is how I look. People accused me immediately of having an eating disorder, but I am healthy. I remember these comments, like why do your arms look like this, that one picture, it was a low point for me. But then, I think, there are so many girls going through this. I used to be quite fat as a child and I was bullied for that and now I am thin, and I am bullied for that too and that's the reality. So let's talk about it.

Later that same week, Alex posted a longer post on her blog where she talked about her childhood and how she struggles with accepting her body now. She emphasized the need to be open about why women and girls often feel uncomfortable in their bodies and asked her followers to think twice before they comment on someone's looks. She posted the link to the blog article to her Instagram stories as well, accompanied by a picture of herself in a bikini: "This is not my best angle, this is not polished for Instagram. But this is how I look. Showing you feels like stripping naked in front of strangers, but I think it's important." We chatted later that day and I asked her how she feels: "Like I said, I feel like I stripped naked. But, I mean, how can you not? How can you ignore this? If this helps even one person to feel better about themselves, it was worth it."

For Alex, the picture of her thin arms shifted how she thinks about what she posts. She started to post more about her other mental health issues, her complicated relationship with her father, and other issues she previously considered private. The criticism she received made her aware of her vulnerability, but at the same time, she says, she realized that the vulnerability might be what she wants to achieve in her influencer work. In an interview recorded almost a year later after that first picture, I asked her to reflect further on this experience:

> I think my content shifted towards something that feels more raw. More authentic. I struggle with it sometimes. For example, when I talked about my dad, the person who was most impacted by it was my mum. She was upset, she felt like it's her fault. But I don't think I could go back now, you know what I mean? This is part of what I do, for one thing. And I do get positive feedback. People are looking for this kind of authenticity online.

Similar reflections were made by Ian, the owner of the influencer marketing agency (he has previously cooperated with Alex). "I would tell her, hey, like, you do you. Keep it raw. If you can deal with the mean comments, then by all means, do it, because it will only get your numbers higher." In our interview, Ian repeatedly emphasized authenticity as the main criteria for a successfull influencer campaign. He made a direct connection between the rawness of Alex's posts and how authentic she will be perceived by her audience.

The Czech term for "raw" is "syrový" and similarly to English, it can be used to describe material objects (such as raw wood) or food (raw meat) but also to describe emotions and state of mind. When Alex used the term in our conversation, she later elaborated on the term "raw" referring to content that can be posted directly, without any edits, tweaks, or qualifications. Rawness is thus interpreted here both as a socio-material quality of something (an

unedited picture of a very skinny hand is raw in this sense) that at the same time conveys an emotional message as something authentic, perhaps uncomfortable, but truthful.

Using feminist new materialist approaches, Josie Reade (2020) has analyzed how Australian fitness influencers enact elements of "raw" to establish and maintain digital intimacies between themselves and Instagram users. She focuses on female body parts, and how they establish intimacy. She defines "raw" as an "assemblage" held together by affects, which move between women's bodies, social media influencers, feelings of relatability, and platform functionalities (Reade, 2020, 5). She identifies several practices used by influencers to enact the raw, including posting unedited pictures of bodies and initiating "real talk" with followers. As in Alex's case, the fitness influencers are using their bodies (in Alex's case, her arms) to "keep it raw"—to perform reality in a way that feels the closest to raw truth both to them and their followers. The mediated intimacy of seeing someone's raw and unedited pictures is socially constitutive because it establishes a new level of connection and trust in the community, but it is also economically productive because it enables the influencer to be perceived as authentic and trustworthy for brand partnerships.

Alex was motivated to post more raw content by the reaction of her audiences and she describes the development as being a series of discussions, reflections, and consequently, decisions that she always feels the need to explain. Rawness (and the role it plays in establishing communality, see above) thus also points to how influencer work is not an individualistic endeavor—while there is a strong accent on the 'self-made woman' trope in the influencer community, all my informants constantly referred to their followers as the main guideline they have in their work. Even though the physical acts of influencers' labor are often done alone and in private spaces, it is also deeply intersubjective. Hands, on both sides of the screens, engage in emotional and aspirational labor of building a community and consequently, a safe space, as will be analyzed below.

"In my darkest moments, this is what I look like": creating a safe space by being vulnerable

As Alex's story shows, being raw also requires being uncomfortable, both on a bodily as well as on emotional level (as Alex points out when she references feeling naked). This is echoed by Vera. When we discuss vulnerability, she mentions that she posted a picture of herself crying a few times in her Instagram Stories: "I thought, I really don't want these people to think that my life is just outfits, you know? It's not a rose garden, all the time. I feel like shit sometimes. So I posted that. It's part of it." Embodied affects such as crying and showing tears have been adapted in influencer communication as another communicative strategy of performing authenticity. Abidin (2022) has analyzed how grief can also be commodified in influencer communication.

For my research participants, performing grief, unhappiness and other negative emotions feels necessary in order to maintain an intimate relationship with their followers. Vivian notes:

> I consider myself an optimist. I try to be for other people. But also, since I had Mia {her daughter}, I feel a lot more vulnerable. The other day, I sat there and our living room was such a mess. And I thought, isn't this part of it though? I posted about the brand of the sofa we have, but now that sofa is covered in baby mess. So people should know that too, that's…that's life, I guess.

Vivian reflects on how showing the less than glamorous and maybe chaotic and uneasy parts of her life feels "true." Nicol has a similar experience. One of the things she posted

about on her Instagram in 2021 was hair loss. She lost a significant amount of hair due to badly done bleaching. She reflects on it:

> "This was one of the hardest things for me! It sounds like it's not that hard. I mean, it's just hair. But I was destroyed, I felt so bad. I felt so ugly. And I didn't even want to post pictures of myself, but that's my job, so I couldn't stop and then I thought, but hey, I might not be alone in this. What if I just tell the truth? This is safe space. I know my followers are good people"… "what if someone has the same issue? We can talk about it, girls."

The notion of "safe space" was repeatedly mentioned by many of my research participants. And many of them directly connected it to their willingness to be vulnerable, just as Nicol did. Vera told me that she felt her crying pictures received a lot of positive responses from her followers and they were very supportive. She then mentions "safe space" as a place where she can go and cry and vice versa—all her followers can be vulnerable too. In this sense, the notion of safe space is directly connected to the sense of community. Hands often materialize this vulnerability. Vera, for example, mentions that she has the tendency to cover her face with her hands whenever she feels vulnerable: "I was doing a Reel one time about skincare and one follower commented on it, she was like, hey, don't cover your face before you put the mask on, we need to see the before and after," she laughs. Hands can help the influencer to feel less vulnerable, but showing hands still feels intimate enough to convey the vulnerability of various moments of everyday life.

Vulnerability thus presents an interesting conundrum for my research participants. On the one hand, they strongly feel that showing their own vulnerability helps create a safe space for their followers. At the same time, communicating their own vulnerability to their followers, for most of them, was also the moment when they felt the most unsafe themselves. "It kinda goes both sides," Vera shrugs when we are finally able to meet in person, during the summer of 2021. She tells me that every time she posts a picture showing her vulnerability, such as herself crying, she receives many supportive comments but inevitably, also a few hateful and threatening ones. "They are almost always from men. Not all of them, but the majority," she points out. Being vulnerable means being exposed to hate speech and backlash while at the same time, it is a prerequisite for feeling safe. In this sense, as the example of Alex shows, the inevitable negative feedback is interpreted by the influencers as an impetus to focus even more on their community as a place where they can not only create a safe space for themselves but also provide it to their followers.

Sonya, a travel influencer who is now based outside of the Czech Republic, mentions a similar experience. One of the long-term collaborations that she has (and that supported her also through the pandemic, when she couldn't travel) is with a producer of skincare products that help her with her dermatitis. The collaboration included a post showing before and after pictures, which means she had to show what she looks like during a bad bout of the disease. "I mean, they didn't force me to do that, but the products actually truly helped me and I wanted to share that," she told me:

> I posted a picture of my hand, at first. My hands, especially my knuckles, can get really bad, people with dermatitis will know what I am talking about. But then some girl would message, and she would be like, did it help for your face as well. Cause that's the worst for me, it's so visible. So, I was like, to hell with it, it's my skin, it's my body, we all have bodies and we all have problems, don't we? But there will always, inevitably, be some random guy who's just hateful or a troll and he would comment like, go kill yourself if you look like this.

Sonya then decided to post her face without make-up, during a bad bout of dermatitis. She moved from her hands that enabled her to show the intimate details of her condition, but protect the rest of her body, to showing her face, which felt, in her own words, like a "full disclosure."

Being vulnerable and being a woman online thus means feeling safe and unsafe at the same time. Vulnerability is important in establishing digital intimacy between influencers and their followers because it helps them connect over shared insecurities and facilitates the sense of "raw" authenticity. But it also, inevitably, exposes them to things that might make them even more vulnerable when they don't want to be. As other researchers have noted (Duffy et al., 2022; Duffy & Hund, 2019; Reade, 2020; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2020) vulnerability is experienced differently by men and women both on a symbolic level, where women are expected to be vulnerable and fragile as part of stereotypized notion of femininity, as well as on a practical level, where women are more often than men exposed to hate speech and other forms of gender-based online violence (Gelber & McNamara, 2016; Vochocová et al., 2016). Showing just your hand might feel like a safe choice, because it leaves the rest of the body protected. However, hands are not always enough, and showing your face in a full disclosure requires a level of vulnerability that can cause discomfort. But it also feels necessary—because without vulnerability, there's no safe space for others.

In this context, hands act as a bridge between what can (and has to) be shown in order to be able to create and function in a safe space and what could, on the other hand, be too intimate and thus, consequently, dangerous.

CONCLUSION

Shortly after I started to write this article, I met for coffee with Christian, a young queer influencer who uses his social media presence and thousands of followers to communicate about LGBTQ+ rights and who participates in my current research project on political influencers. Christian posts almost constantly on Instagram, his Stories are an endless feed of gym selfies, coffee dates with friends, work meetings, and parties. When we meet, he jokes that I will be in his stories too. I express some ambivalence about that—unlike him, I almost never post pictures of myself, even though I use Instagram actively. During our talk, he snaps a quick picture of my hand as I'm holding a coffee cup and says: "This is good! Your hand as a proof that I was here with you. And cool jewelry!" I wouldn't probably remember this episode and maybe wouldn't even consider noting it in my field notes if it weren't for the fact that I was in the middle of drafting a whole article about hands. I laughed at Christian's joke and felt placated in my previous uneasiness—a hand felt safe where a whole figure, or a face, wouldn't.

Creating safe space and safe distance—processes that were negotiated through careful, selective revelations of the body—is especially important for my research participants because all of them have experienced negative, hateful comments and sometimes open threats. Women's experiences in online spaces are determined by the constant push and pull of being open enough and being safe enough. Duffy and Hund (2019) coin the term "gendered authenticity bind" and describe how female influencers not only on Instagram, but across platforms, are forced to constantly balance the need to be visible to stay relevant, keep their position, keep their job within the influencer industry and sometimes keep their family budget afloat with the need to stay safe. Authenticity—performed as rawness, vulnerability, and reflected in a sense of communality—thus becomes a crucial aspect of the economic success of influencers.

Among my research respondents, almost all of them relied on Instagram as an important source of finances (except for Vivian, whose husband was able to provide for the family, and thus, for her, Instagram was less economically important than for the others). As Sonya

noted in one of our chats, authenticity became somewhat of a chimera for her, because it sometimes felt impossible to do what she wanted to do (be authentic to herself) and keep up with the expectations of her audience (be authentic to her community). As Duffy and Hund note, and as I have also explored in my previous research (Heřmanová, 2022a), the expectations about authentic femininity and authentic masculinity differ significantly and where vulnerability is expected from women, men are on the other hand expected to perform their authenticity via being authoritative and consistent, rather than emotional and open to their communities. For example, in contrast with the expectations that women will display their bodies and faces on Instagram, Bluteau (2022) notes that within the menswear community on Instagram, headless images where the face is not shown at all are the most preferred and appreciated by the audience.

For women influencers who post hands—boyfriends' hands, cute, little baby hands, their own hands—posting a body part means communicating the intimacy they want to establish and maintain with their followers at the same time as creating a safe space and safe distance for themselves. Hands indicate the presence of another person, who's cropped out of the picture, yet they are there, imagined by the audience, unseen yet present, intimate but private and safe.

The symbolism of posting pictures of hands to mediate intimacy, sharing a private moment while also hinting at another part of the story that is happening outside of the frame, seems to work regardless of local cultural context—this can also be ilustrated by a once viral Instagram hashtag #followmeto, that was used to accompany pictures of (mostly male) hands holding a (mostly female) hand, where the man is outside of the frame (presumably taking the picture) and the silhouette of the woman is placed next to a famous landmark (for example, #followmeto the Eiffel tower). The trend was started by travel influencer Murad Osman in 2013, when he posted a picture of him holding his then-girlfriend Natalia, who leads him down a narrow street in Barcelona. The hashtag quickly became globally viral, with many people posting their own iterations of handholding pictures from various destinations. Osman now has his own travel agency named after the hashtag.

Digital hands represent several levels of connection. The human-to-human connection (a woman holding her boyfriend's hand) mirrors the practice of employing hands and movement of hands in face-to-face communication—holding someone's hand is a performance of intimacy both in offline contexts as well (if someone holds your hand in public, they are also publicly acknowledging their intimate relationship to you). Hands are also employed in human-to-machine connections—we swipe with our fingers, we touch the screens to like someone's picture, etc. Hands can thus be interpreted both on a purely symbolic level, if a picture of hands is used to represent an emotion, as well as on socio-material level, when hands are used as tools to create, construct, and deconstruct relationships and intimacy both online and offline.

Women influencers thus rely on hands as both practical tools for their emotional and aspirational labor in performing authenticity as well as symbols for the authenticity binds in which they find themselves—and they also use hands to get out these binds. A hand, an arm, or a tiny finger of a newborn baby can help them navigate the slippery terrain of being a woman and being visible online.

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