

Platform Spiritualities: Entrepreneurial Selves and Post-Feminist Sensibilities of Russian Influencers

Espiritualidades em Plataforma: Empreendedorismo Pessoal e Sensibilidades Pós-Feministas de Influenciadoras Russas

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Abstract

In this article, we look at how preeminent Russian-speaking influencers spread sensibilities of entrepreneurialism and post-feminism on social media platforms, and specifically Instagram. Drawing on platform studies, critical theory and material from influencer accounts, we explore the ways that platform-based spiritualities are embedded in the neoliberal economies of self-presentation, micro-celebrity and branding in Russia and beyond. We understand spirituality as a broader figure encompassing both external beliefs in the divine, such as in magic, spirits and forces that lie beyond human understanding, as well as internal beliefs in spiritual tropes for reaching self-development, including exercise, mindfulness and life coaching, among others. By amplifying presentations of the self around regimes of happiness, positivity, self-growth and unfettered joy, platform spiritualities nullify critical thought and normalize a depoliticized conception of selfhood in the Russian public space. Influencers encourage women to focus on themselves, travel, dress up, dream about wealthy husbands and exotic sensations, and prioritize their own well-being and empowerment over social or collective concerns. The depoliticized discourse of these influencers is largely an outcome of the social media imperative to produce safe and riskless content under the fear of cancellation, which can lead to a loss of advertising and other forms of revenue. We argue that, rather than being simply progressive vehicles for democratic publics and participatory cultures, social media platforms, and Instagram in particular, are key to intensifying an entrepreneurial selfhood that relies on magical thinking and spiritual guidance from abstract authorities in repressive political contexts.

Keywords: Platforms, Spirituality, Influencers, Post-feminism, Russia, Empowerment

Resumo

Neste artigo, examinamos como influenciadores de destaque de língua russa disseminam ideário empreendedor e pós-feminista nas redes sociais online, especificamente no Instagram. Com base em estudos de plataforma, teoria crítica e material proveniente das contas online de influenciadoras, exploramos como as espiritualidades manifestadas em plataforma estão incorporadas nas economias neoliberais de autopromoção, microcelebridade e 'branding' na Rússia e para além das suas fronteiras. Entendemos a espiritualidade como figura mais ampla que abrange tanto crenças externas, centradas no divino, como magia, espíritos e forças situadas além da compreensão humana, quanto crenças interiorizadas ancoradas em tropos espirituais para alcançar o autodesenvolvimento, incluindo exercícios, 'mindfulness' e 'life coaching' (treino mental), entre outros. Ao amplificar apresentações do eu em torno de regimes de felicidade, otimismo, crescimento pessoal e alegria sem limites, as espiritualidades de plataforma anulam o pensamento crítico e normalizam uma concepção despolitizada do eu no espaço público russo. Os influenciadores incentivam as mulheres a focarem-se em si mesmas, viajar, vestir-se bem, sonhar com maridos ricos e sensações exóticas, priorizando o seu próprio bem-estar e empoderamento individual em detrimento de preocupações sociais ou coletivas. O discurso despolitizado dessas influenciadoras resulta em grande parte do imperativo das redes sociais online produzirem conteúdo seguro e sem riscos sob o medo do cancelamento, que pode levar à perda de publicidade e outras formas de receita. Defendemos que, em vez de simples veículos progressistas de públicos democráticos e culturas participativas, as plataformas online, e o Instagram em particular, desempenham um papel fundamental na intensificação de uma autoimagem empreendedora que depende do pensamento mágico e orientação espiritual de autoridades abstratas em contextos políticos repressivos.

Palavras-chave: Plataformas, Espiritualidade, Influenciadores, Pós-feminismo, Rússia, Empoderamento

Introduction

"Love is looking at a woman who is genuinely passionate about her work", says Alina Levda, an Instagram fitness superstar with 7.6 million followers in Russia. "[Love is] not looking into the eyes of a man in order to find in them something that will praise you! Instead, [love is] looking into your own eyes in the mirror, seeing there your amazing inner world and smile, realizing that you are living your best and unique life!"¹ Levda continues. She is one of the countless influencers and micro-celebrities who advise their followers to reach avenues of empowerment and accomplishment, a sensibility that enjoys remarkable popularity with the proliferation of digital platforms in which finding your "amazing inner world" requires spiritual guidance and training. In this article, we look at Levda and other top Russian influencers that promote emotional tonalities of inspiration, self-help and individual achievement on Instagram, namely Elena Blinovskaya with 5.1 million subscribers, Yana Leventseva with 1.3 million subscribers and Oxana Samoylova with 15.5 million subscribers. Drawing on material from the accounts of these influencers, which we regard as a local manifestation of a global influencer discourse, we explore the ways that platform-based spiritualities are embedded in the neoliberal and depoliticized economies of self-presentation, micro-celebrity and branding in Russia and beyond. -

In the essay *The Stars Came Down to Earth* (1974), Theodor Adorno looked at a weekly astrology column published in the Los Angeles Times as an example of what he thought was a worrying tendency in modern mass societies: a tendency towards irrationality, such as the belief that one's life can be read in the stars, and abstract authorities, such as the astrology expert who is legitimized through the column to publicize unverified advice. For Adorno, superstition, occultism and self-help, which are part of this tendency, existed before the formation of mass societies in varying geographies and degrees, yet it is in mass societies that their "institutionalization has reached, by means of mass production, a quantity which is likely to result in a new quality of attitudes and behavior" (1974: 15).

For Adorno, the institutionalization of spirituality, happening not only against but also from within modern reason via mass means of communication, like newspapers, radio and TV, was indicative of the cultures of capitalist societies; in other words, the model of market-based media production allowed these abstract authorities to shape irrational attitudes and behaviours accordingly.

With the term "platform spiritualities", we want to highlight a likewise expansive and multidirectional logic addressing matters around the "spirit" in the age of social media platforms. By means of the affordances of the latter, there is a dazzling worldwide proliferation of industries, subcultures, discourses, practices, communities and abstract authorities around "spirituality" that mediates public discourse. We understand spirituality as a broader figure encompassing both external beliefs in the divine, such as in magic, spirits and forces that lie beyond human understanding, as well as internal beliefs in spiritual tropes for reaching self-development, including exercise, mindfulness and life coaching, among others. Both external and internal spiritualities suggest ways of escaping the complexity of the social world by postulating abstract authorities, e.g., the coach, the guru, the shaman, or the self, who possess a certain wiser, higher truth. In the age of social media platforms and the shift from "representational to presentational media" that assembles a "widening dimension of the public self" (Marshall, 2010: 40), these abstract authorities multiply and have the ability to control their own profiles independently of the authority of the editor (while, for instance, Adorno's astrologist was to a significant extent reliant on the editor).

¹ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CuRdhcUyufi/>

We start this paper by looking at the dependencies between content creators and platform infrastructures and move on to explore the entrepreneurial spiritualities that influencer discourses endorse. After presenting the method and material, we explore the particularities of the Russian context and discuss some of the most prevalent themes appearing across the platform interactions of these influencers, namely the trope of the “perfect dream”, the injunction to develop a certain mindset to achieve this dream and the constant circulation of upbeat content. We conclude by arguing that, rather than simply being progressive vehicles for democratic publics and participatory cultures, social media platforms, and Instagram in particular, are key to intensifying an entrepreneurial selfhood that relies on magical thinking and spiritual guidance from abstract authorities in repressive political contexts.

Platforms, Cultures and Authorities

The concept of “platform” is an umbrella term that refers to digital infrastructures, mainly privately owned and profit-oriented, that facilitate connectivities, authorize and curate content and invite users to varying degrees of interaction on their space (Van Dijck, 2013; Poell, Nieborg & Duffy, 2021). While the main global platforms, typically referred to as the so-called GAFAM, initials that correspond to the corporations Google (Alphabet), Amazon, Facebook (Meta), Apple and Microsoft, control the lion’s share of the global internet, the platform ecosystem is fragmented into countless overlapping platform segments ranging from search engines to dating apps performing diverse functions (van Dijck, Poell and de Waal, 2018). Indicatively, the concept has been varyingly used to describe audiovisual streaming platforms, such as Netflix and Amazon Prime; music streaming platforms, such as Spotify and Apple Music; search engines, like Google; app stores, like Google Play and Apple’s App Store; and social media platforms, such as Facebook, YouTube, TikTok and Instagram, among others. To a large extent, the business model of the platform relies on extracting rent or subscription revenues from the creation of multi-sited markets that connect producers, consumers, advertisers and end-users into a single space of interaction (Sadowski, 2020), as well as from the extraction and processing of user data, which can then be sold to advertisers, used to train algorithms, build recommendation systems, improve platform services, and generally help the platform grow economically (Srnicsek, 2017).

Platforms are generally dependent on user participation, that is, on users voluntarily spending time, resources and attention in their space, either as creators or as audiences, so that the value of the platform increases. In the less commercialized days of the Internet of the 2000s, user participation was seen as a potentially positive step for the creation of more democratic, self-reflexive and participatory societies (e.g., Thornton, 2001; Chau, 2009). The post-2010 dominance of the digital platform, however, entails a commercialization of the online space that encourages the generation of narcissistic and self-absorbed cultures rather than participatory in the civic sense of the term (Khamis, Ang and Welling, 2017). The figure of the Internet celebrity or influencer is paradigmatic in this regard (Abidin, 2018; Marwick, 2015), as what Sophie Bishop calls the “Influencer creep”, whose key tenets include “self-branding, optimisation and a performance of authenticity”, permeates various online industries and cultures, such as the artworld (2023: 2). While influencers, similar to traditional celebrities, can advocate for social issues that contribute to progressive change, their activity is calculated to be as safe and risk-free as possible; becoming controversial can lead to public image ruination and therefore loss of income. Internet celebrities therefore tend to self-brand via safer narratives that primarily revolve around the self and its feats (Khamis, Ang and Welling, 2017), that is to say, the core narratives of a global neoliberal ideology (Wilson, 2017). As a case in point, Bishop (2021) notes how the Influencer

Management Tools, that is, algorithmic tools helping advertisers understand the appropriate influencers to promote their products, tend to privilege the creation of safe, frictionless content. Therefore, advertisers generally “desire to influence content and reward production that is ‘noncontroversial, light and non-political’ as this sustains a ‘buying mood’”, that is, a smooth flow of content that sustains a positive brand ambience (Bishop, 2021: 5; Bagdikian, 1997: 113). With the threat of cancelling looming over content producers (Ng, 2023), influencers are forced to curate their profiles so as to appeal to audience desires. The preoccupation with spiritual tropes, including well-being, success, empowerment and the therapeutic is indeed one of the safest choices for influencer content since, in principle, it boosts the influencer image of a trained “spiritual accomplice” without in any way threatening their publicity

Spirituality and Entrepreneurialism

The umbrella term “spirituality” is useful for thinking through a distributed sensibility among social media usage that is manifested in the public performances of influencers, micro-celebrities and everyday users alike. Spirituality pertains to matters of the “spirit”, a term that engulfs transcendental values and worldviews, including the idea that there are impenetrable essences above, beyond and around the interactions of physical matter. Rather than via strict logic and reason, these essences can be accessed through intuitive understanding, belief in the self or external entities, and training of the soul. Spirituality makes an appeal to the transcendental and the metaphysical as forces that can regulate not only the natural world, expressed, for instance, in common injunctions like “nature has its own secrets” and “nature is magical”, but often the social world (e.g., “if you believe hard in your dreams, they will become true”). Spirituality then refers to a system of thought that poses the transcendental and the metaphysical as foundational modalities of reasoning and understanding the world and its phenomena.

Furthermore, the word refers to the values and meanings of a person, as well as to the ideal of the “human spirit” and its attempts to reach “full potential” (Sheldrake, 2007: 2). Today’s understanding of spirituality is closely linked to the idea of the ‘inner self’, which is exemplary of “the massive subjective turn of modern culture”, as Charles Taylor puts it, resulting in “a new form of inwardness, in which we come to think of ourselves as beings with inner depth” (Taylor, 1991: 26). Building upon this idea, Heelas and Woodhead (2005: 6) suggest that the sacred domain of the Western world undergoes a “spiritual revolution” (1). According to Heelas and Woodhead, this spiritual revolution entails, on the one hand, the decline of religion, which relates to “life-as forms of the sacred”, that is, a “life lived in terms of external or ‘objective’ roles, duties and obligations”, (2) and, on the other hand, the rise of spirituality, relating to “subjective-life forms of the sacred” (6) and referring to a “life lived by reference to one’s own subjective experiences” (2005: 2). Dominika Motak develops the idea of the subjective turn in contemporary religiosity by offering the notion of “postmodern spirituality” and its links to the culture of individualism (Motak, 2009). Motak highlights the tight bond between the modern individualistic account of spirituality and the consumer society: “the spirituality of an individual develops in the one-size-fits-all consumerist culture” (2009: 139). In turn, Jeremy Carrette and Richard King provide a comprehensive analysis of how this focus on self-realization in today’s spirituality fits in with neoliberal capitalism, and the idea of what they call “Capitalist Spiritualities”, which go beyond the embracement of an individual self and towards “a concern with making the individual employee/consumer function as effectively as possible for the benefit of corporate organisations and the ‘global economy’” (2004: 20). According to Carrette and King, in the age of global finance

capitalism “spirituality becomes a way of developing incentives that are conducive to the corporate objectives of the employer” (2004: 23).

The tendencies that Carrette and King observed in 2004 bourgeoned as platforms became a significant part of today’s global culture. Recent studies show that posts covering the topics of witchcraft and Wicca religion reach millions of followers globally (Jabłońska, 2022; Miller, 2022). Lionel Obadia points out that the Internet has become a “fertile ground for a redeployment of magic in culture and society” (2020: 537). In his recent work, Chris Miller (2022) proposes a complex review of the #WitchTok sub-section on TikTok with a specific focus on how materiality and magic are conceptualized and how modern social media Witchcraft intersects with consumer capitalism. Moreover, these spiritually related topics are exploited not only by practitioners but also by companies with no relation to religion like Sephora, Cosmopolitan, or Walt Disney (Jabłońska, 2022: 274).

However, it would be a mistake to limit today’s spirituality on social media to a direct citation of Wiccan traditions or the performance of “witchy” aesthetics. The key element of spirituality today is the focus on the individual self, and the idea that its potential can be reached to its fullest, which connects it to the popular practices of well-being, mindfulness and self-development. These practices, being an intrinsic part of a neoliberal culture, can harbour manifestations of socio-political discourses. For example, Charlotte Ward and David Voas highlight how New Age beliefs in a supposed “paradigm shift” in consciousness and the spiritual awakening of humanity at the dawn of the 21st century merge with conspiracy theories, thus forming a unique hybrid that they call “conspirituality” (Ward & Voas, 2011). Stemming from the web cultures of the mid-1990s, conspirituality was formed as a seemingly contradictory synthesis of male-driven, politically charged, conservative, and pessimistic conspiratorial thinking with female-driven, self-oriented, optimistic New Age spirituality; in this union, “political cynicism is tempered with spiritual optimism” (Ward & Voas, 2011: 108). Ward and Voas emphasize that the ideas of conspirituality penetrate the mainstream through the web and that conspirituality in general is an online movement (Ward & Voas, 2011: 116). Developing the notion, Stephanie Alice Baker argues that conspiracy thinking interweaves with current lifestyle, self-care and wellness cultures in denial of COVID-19 and circulating misleading medical advice (Baker, 2022). According to Baker, wellness influencers were spreading misinformation and conspiracy theories during the COVID-19 pandemic using the same techniques they employed to achieve their microcelebrity status (Baker, 2022).

The platform-based spirituality that we discuss here can be seen along the lines of capitalist spirituality, which is based on the culture of individualism and the mobilization of transcendental and metaphysical reasoning for commercial purposes with influencers becoming new-age gurus possessing a “deeper knowledge”. This involves the spiritual framing and interpreting of exceptional moments that refer to instances of self-making, success and status and emphasizes the power of individual will and determination, rather than, say, luck or circumstances, in interpreting various events. Take, for instance, the following example:

“Today (this month) in honor of the holiday...in our wishes, we will make a wish for an apartment”, says Elena Blinovskaya, a life coaching superstar in Russia who runs a series of marathons assisting people to make their dreams true. “This most powerful egregore² of your desires ... Think about it for now ... what kind of apartment

² Egregore is a concept in esotericism that refers to a spiritual entity arising from collective thoughts.

do you need and, most importantly, how much does it cost. Perhaps you need the apartment as an investment ... or an inheritance for a child. Everyone may have a different need ... today we will twist this reality.”³

Blinovskaya mobilizes this unaccountable spirit, will and intuition not only as a framing device to speak about her own self-making and success, but as a means of convincing her audiences that the power of thought can be used to acquire material possessions, such as an apartment.

Platform spirituality harbors an entrepreneurial sensibility, which is in turn evocative of the digital expansion of what Nikolas Rose has previously called the “psy-disciplines” (1999), including psychology, psychoanalysis, self-help, life coaching and advice literature. Eva Illouz uses the broader concept of the “therapeutic” to likewise refer to neoliberal cultures (2008; 2020), encouraging self-entrepreneurialism and a focus on individual responsibility (see also Rimke, 2020; Fabián and Sepúlveda, 2020; Sugarman, 2015). For instance, Rimke argues that “[n]eoliberal subjects are encouraged to almost exclusively view and understand themselves according to the truths, practices, and techniques promoted by therapeutic industries” (38), as “[m]odern life is colonised by therapeutic cultures of the global medical industrial complex [...] that mask and distort the inherent problems of neoliberal societies” (37). The entrepreneurial aspect of platform spiritualities, as we shall see below, promotes particular conceptions of gender, including, in our case, the idea that femininity is a project that needs to be managed through emotional self-labor for reaching middle class aspirations in love, career and personal life.

Post-feminist sensibilities and platforms in Russia

As noted above, there is a constitutive relationship between platforms and influencer content, with Instagram being one of the central online spaces where careers and reputations are built in Russia and beyond (Van Driel and Dutrimica, 2021). This relationship, which is essentially a relationship that can guarantee symbolic and economic value, was not broken in Russia even after the government prohibited access to Instagram at the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Meta Platforms was recognized as extremist by the Tverskoy Court of Moscow, and some of its products — Facebook and Instagram — became accessible on the territory of Russia only through VPN. In the fog of uncertainty following the court’s decision, bloggers who built their media persona and business on Instagram started to bid farewell to their audience: “It’s hard to believe)) but it’s the same with the events of each day... at first... can't believe it ... I support, I find words in Telegram”, Elena Blinovskaya writes on March 11th, promising to switch to Telegram and VKontakte, social media platforms that became an alternative for Russian bloggers who lost their audience due to the ban. “This era!! Which made me who I am ... Me and the desert ... Symbolic, however ... What will I build here? Which values will I take with me? Which ones will I create?,”⁴ she writes in her reflection on the possibility of leaving the platform that created her brand and persona. Yet more than a year after the Russian invasion and Meta’s ban from Russia, Instagram continues to be a significant social media platform for the Russian audience,

³ https://www.instagram.com/p/Cq2JrsON_h9/

⁴ <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ca9sXQyNP5i/>

and Blinovskaya continued to regularly post and launch her “Dreams Marathons” until the end of April 2023, when she was arrested for tax evasion and banned from using the Internet (Kommersant, 2023).⁵

Apart from banning Meta products that were widely used in Russia, Russian influencers and online content producers faced more challenges as the government became openly authoritarian after 2022, which greatly increased censorship at several levels of society. This involved an effort to conceive Russia as a geopolitical brand, that is, to symbolically differentiate and conceptualize Russia as a distinct civilization: a presumed Russian World with its own history, rituals and norms that defends traditional and family values—what critical theorist Ilya Budraitskis critically refers to as Russia’s “special path” (2017). This geopolitical branding conceptualized Russia and its “spirit” as different from “Western liberalism”, which in governmental discourse is related to a negatively-perceived unfettered freedom, moral decadence, and a focus on the individual rather than the communal. The acceleration of this “hegemonic conservative agenda” (Romashko, 2020: 115) after 2022 posed increased difficulties for content producers, especially the more politically-oriented ones; for instance, the passing of a law against propaganda of “non-traditional values” (to minors in 2013 and to anyone, according to the update of this law in 2022) led to a general climate of self-censorship towards LGBT topics in platform cultures and beyond. In this sense, the influencers we present here adhere to typical neoliberal and post-feminist cultures of success, accomplishment, narcissism, individualism and personal fun, which are, however, enabled within an increasingly conservative political and social context.

The Russian influencers we explore express a “post-feminist sensibility”, a term coined by the feminist scholar Rosalind Gill to account for the mainstreaming of feminism in Western societies that replaces traditional feminist demands for radical social change (2007). According to Gill, post-feminism should not be seen periodically, that is, as a chronological era where feminism is substituted by something else, but as a “sensibility”, or diffusing constellation of affects and discourses permeating popular culture, characterized by and expressing a set of characteristics and beliefs:

“femininity is a bodily property; a shift from objectification to subjectification; the emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference; a marked sexualization of culture; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference” (2007: 149).

In the age of platforms, this post-feminist sensibility is a globalized “digital feeling”, as Adrienne Evans puts it (2023), found in an array of settings, such as Russia, that we here discuss.

Post-feminist platform cultures further promote self-labour as a means to perform a successful womanhood, turning the mandate of “working with yourself” into a socially diffused injunction (Sweeney-Romero, 2022). Looking at self-help literature in Russia, Suvi Salmenniemi and Maria Adamson likewise argue that one of the main modalities through which post-feminist sensibility is domesticated is labor, that is “the labour of personality, the labour of femininity and the labour of sexuality” (2015: 89). This “aesthetic labour”, which has to be constant and continuous rather than one-off, promises to turn women into desirable and valuable subjects (Adamson & Salmenniemi, 2017; Gill, 2017). Ekaterina Kolpinets explores how internet celebrities employ affective and emotional labor and construct “affective labor strategies” in creating bonds with the audience (Kolpinets, 2021). One of the recent studies on the Russian speaking

⁵ The case of Blinovskaya demonstrates that influencer discourse, as we shall also see later, relies upon the material affordances of the platform. The perspective of what Nico Carpentier calls “discursive- material knot” (2017) can be useful here.

Instagram influencers identified four leading role models for women: "ideal mother", "successful businesswoman", "standard of woman", and "daring woman" (Kolpinets & Kozharinova, 2022: 270). The unifying features of these models are "the unspoken need to conform to traditional standards of female behavior, which are based in one way or another on the demonstration of marital and maternal relationships in the blog" and exploitation of the "self-love" theme interpreted as "taking care of external attractiveness" (Kolpinets & Kozharinova, 2022: 282). Kolpinets and Kozharinova then argue that "Russian Instagram culture is extremely patriarchal and demanding of women", and female bloggers represent themselves not as subjects, but as objects, and especially as objects of male attention (2022: 283).

In what follows, we look at the content produced by top Russian influencers so as to get a glimpse into their worldview and values from within their discourse. We understand the discourse of "Russian influencers" as a localized manifestation of a global phenomenon; if we think of the figure of the influencer as a transnational or "global form" (Ong and Collier, 2008) then the figure of the Russian influencer is a localized adaptation of this form that is specific (without being reduced) to some of the dominant values pertaining to the Russian internet space and its publics, including increased constraints in celebrating alternative sexualities and alternative gender roles, avoiding touching upon risky geopolitical themes and conforming to heterosexual family norms (the ideal of the normative family in all influencers we looked at was promoted consistently). This is so because, as mentioned above, the influencer economy nurtures riskless cultural forms so as to avoid friction and potential cancellation by both the government and the public. Also, while all the blogs that we examine in the article are owned by women, some of the tendencies that we observe can be witnessed in male blogs. However, we limit the scope to female bloggers due to our understanding of blogging as affective labor (Duffy, 2017), which, as Ekaterina Kolpinets discusses in her work, has been theorized in feminist critique as gendered, specifically female labor (Kolpinets 2021: 108-109). While platform spiritualities constitute a distributed sensibility across social media cultures rather than being confined to the self-presentation strategies of influencers, we examine influencers since their public performances not only get widely diffused but are more meticulously curated, and thus these sensibilities become more legible and apparent.

We identify the spiritual tropes employed by Russian influencers on Instagram in their struggle for the audience's attention, focusing on the themes that they regularly discuss in developing a model of individualistic spirituality in the context of platform capitalism and post-feminist sensibility. Our goal is to show how capitalist spirituality, which treats the individual as a means to achieving financial growth, manifests itself in the lifestyle content of tremendously popular personas who became role models for millions of women seeking happiness.

Methods and material

We thus explore the content that is produced by popular Russian-speaking bloggers that aim at a Russian audience: Elena Blinovskaya (@elena_blinovskaya, 5.1 mln subscribers), Alina Levda (@botanovna_, 7.6 mln subscribers), Yana Leventseva (@yana_leventseva, 1.3 mln subscribers), and Oxana Samoylova (@samoylovaoxana, 15.5 mln subscribers). Our choice of these four bloggers was based on a combination of popularity (all of them had built an audience of more than one million subscribers) and the common themes they post: each blogger in one way or another frames topics, such as family, self-development, wealth and luxury travel, through spiritual tropes, as understood above.

Despite often engaging with the same topics, each blogger has quite diverse content strategies and personal backgrounds. However, all of them are united in the presentation of a specific project of spirituality that constructs a system of what we can call “Instagram ideology”, which, at least in Russia, assembles itself on the foundations of individualism, luxury aesthetics, and conservative family values. Most of the bloggers rely on the more general discourse of capitalist spirituality, developed within platform economies and cultures.

The initial corpus of texts consisted of posts published between January 1, 2021 and July 13, 2023, amounting to a total of 1702 posts (including the latest posts available for the data collection). To ensure the broadness of the topics included in the analysis, we have not selected the posts based on metrics and, as a first step, we used open coding to analyze the sample. During the first cycle of coding, we identified several recurring topics in the content under analysis and assigned labels: “Infoproduct & business advertisement”; “Body”; “Travel”; “Romantic relationship”; “Wealth, money, items of luxury”; “Family, children, marriage”. During the second cycle of coding, we also identified instances of esoteric language as well as conservative and “patriotic” ideas.

Table 1. Influencers, followers and examined post

Influencer	Followers	Posts analysed
Oxana Samoylova	15.5 mln	162
Alina Levda	7.6 mln	385
Elena Blinovskaya	5.2 mln	704
Yana Leventseva	1.3 mln	448

Additionally, we have also looked at the information products that these bloggers offer to their audiences, which mostly consist of online courses and webinars. This allowed us to examine both the goods and services they sell and the narrative that supports these business enterprises in personal and spiritual development. We are focusing on bloggers with different specializations and varying accents on spirituality. For example, Elena Blinovskaya is probably the most “spiritual” of all and explicit in her transcendental leanings, focusing on “wish fulfillment” and “producing reality”, framing her spiritual approach as psychological work. Alina Levda shows her subscribers the way to the “dream body” and sells weight loss courses, training programs, and a menu with the straightforward name “Eat and Lose Weight”. Yana Leventseva presents herself as a “top travel blogger of Russia” and an “Instagram expert”: she teaches how to shoot Instagram stories, how to pose, and how to edit photos in Lightroom. Finally, Oxana Samoylova in her Instagram activity primarily focuses on her children and family visuals, and her account description features a link to the website of Samoylova’s cosmetics brand.

After the stage of coding, we proceeded to thematically analyze both social media posts and the information products offered by influencers (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Building upon the set of initially generated codes, we have identified the themes that are recurrent in the materials to establish the core values of the platform-based spirituality that the influencers endorse with their content. We have identified three themes that contribute to the construction of influencer spiritualities: “perfection” as the ultimate goal; a certain “mindset” as the path to perfection; and “positivity” as a way of obscuring disturbing political events and adhering to a “depoliticized” self, even when living in times of a major crisis, such as the war in Ukraine.

Findings

Dreams of Perfection

In all the influencers we looked at, the question of how to reach personal improvement as well as accomplish one's dreams is constant. The image-based nature of the medium is key, as visuals create more direct representations than the written text, providing pictorial evidence of how these dreams and perfect lives look like. Ekaterina Kolpinets in her book, "The Formula of Dreams" (2022), writes about "a set of visual clichés" (15) that dominate the platform: "dream body and face", "dream home", "dream trip", "dream relationship", and "dream job" (16). According to Kolpinets, the clichés that define the visuals and fashion of Instagram are "a way to embody the life that no one really lives, but that everyone dreams of" (16), and "a life worth dreaming about" (16). This is apparent in the case of Blinovskaya, who is best known as a creator of the so-called "Marathon of Dreams" – an online course that promises to help to "learn to dream", "realize everything that really matters to you", "discard all unnecessary things — fears, doubts, expectations of others" and "start the path to the life of your dreams"⁶. Blinovskaya's personal website features several other online info products: for example, the financial marathon "New Dimension" promises to open a "personal portal to abundance and opportunities"; the marathon "Relationship" is presented as "a chance to find yourself in your most harmonious relationship with everyone around you — with a partner, children, parents, friends, and any other people"; and "a date with the body" promises that participants will "say goodbye to all complexes" and "solve health problems".

In the description of the semi-marathon "Husband on couch" [Muzh na divane], Blinovskaya laments that "women in the 21st century have received so many rights and freedoms that they do not know how to dispose of them" and promises that thanks to her webinar they will "remember THE MAIN THING" and will be able to "make your king carry you in his arms". Other courses and webinars are dedicated to such topics as "Pride", "Envy and Jealousy", "Friendship", "Purpose", "Astrology", "Sex" and "Motherhood", while the concept of "dreams" is a foundation for her business and content. "Dreams" are featured regularly in her posts, and in her account's description Blinovskaya describes herself as a "fairy" (that supposedly fulfills the dreams) and assures that "dreams have brought you here". Blinovskaya's persona is based on two things: on the one hand, she performs the "dream life" based on dominant ideas of how "success" looks like (a big house, several kids, a loving husband with a thriving business, luxury brands, etc.). On the other hand, she reaches out to her audience: the dream life that you see in my account is accessible to you, too. You just need to want it (and to buy the Marathon). Blinovskaya's conservatism and metaphysical thinking mirrors and exacerbates the mainstream-dominant attitudes in the Russian social and political environment, as discussed above, presented here under the aura of empowerment, confidence, and self-assertion.

If Instagram, as Kolpinets writes, is a wish-making machine, then Blinovskaya with her "performer of desires" brand is an ideal Instagram entrepreneur. Her courses promise to give audiences the life of their dream: perfect relationship, perfect body, perfect trip, and perfect job. As popular Instagram Reels courses promise to teach subscribers how to imitate the Instagram "perfect life" and reproduce the visual clichés that signify it, Blinovskaya's courses promise to make the Instagram "perfect life" a reality. Yet, to be a perfect woman realizing her dreams demands intense laboring, a performance characterized by "relentless individualism, that calls forth endless work on the self, and which centres notions of agency, empowerment and choice while enrolling women in ever more intense regimes of 'the perfect'"

⁶ We took this and the following quotes from the personal website of Blinovskaya, which some time after her arrest had stopped working (previously here: <https://blinovskaya.com/#main/dream>).

(Favaro and Gill, 2020: 154). What is needed for these perfect dreams to be able to come true is the cultivation of a right way of thinking, the right mindset that, once acquired, can automatically lead to riches and abundance.

Mindsets of Empowerment, Happiness and Family

The concept of mindset denotes the attitudes, beliefs and values a person holds about the world and the phenomena around it. The influencers we examined, either explicitly or implicitly, emphasize to their followers the need to develop a particular mindset, a “winner mindset”, which can raise their social position and bring happiness. The idea that certain mindsets are problematic while others are desirable is extremely widespread in life coaching cultures, with the former being characterized by victimization and fixedness and the latter by empowerment, adaptability and resilience (Kompatsiaris, 2023). The Russian influencers follow these global trends and offer normative advice and instructions to reach the desirable mindsets and avoid the problematic ones. This advice, addressed here primarily to women, is usually awash with the self-objectifying clichés that recollect Gill’s idea of post-feminist sensibility. For instance, Alina Levda explains what is the right mindset for a woman who wants to be attractive to men:

...But a man does not need a mysterious quiet girl or an arrogant “Iron Lady”. Something completely different attracts as a magnet. A man falls for special features <...> When he sees the real manifestation, without fear of seeming too light or somewhat infantile. What attracts is the essence, which is in harmony with the external [appearance]!... So for me it is enough just to be myself. And to come into this world without limiting judgments that the depth of dignity is an imposed framework of social behavior. Not at all! To be yourself, to love yourself and not to be afraid to shine into this world, illuminating it with warmth, creating energy inside, taking care of yourself and, as a result, taking care of others - YES!”⁷

Figure 1. Levda and her husband celebrating life



Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/CtuMRM5IQJw/?img_index=2

Reaching the right mindset then requires cultivating a particular way of thinking and behaving, such as that women have to “be themselves” and “love themselves”. Yet the idea that a woman has to be herself in order to reach happiness

⁷ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CtuMRM5IQJw/>

operates as a regulating device, a means of discipline that requires present-time sacrifices, including monetary ones (such as subscribing to influencer courses), for reaching a future promise. To illustrate her own reward from possessing this elevated mindset, the influencer shares an idyllic series of pictures in which she enjoys time with her husband who cheers for her success (figure 1). Throughout the feed the husband serves as a prop, which, along with the prop-children, perform the idea of the perfect family, as the influencer maintains a delicate balance between personal development, fun and commitment to something bigger than the self (e.g., the family). The family is another accomplishment in a series of accomplishments, a pay-off coming from Levda's tireless labor with herself. A similar regulatory role has the mindset of compulsory self-love that should happen anywhere and anytime (more on this in the next section). Indicatively, Oxana Samoylova tags herself for her birthday in Dubai, a place where many richer Russians moved after February 2022, and confesses:

....I become more and more confident every year, more whole and stronger ❤️ and this is an absolutely amazing feeling 😊 I live my life to the fullest, I live every day in happiness and gratitude, I use every opportunity given to me by God, I fulfill all my dreams, I gave life to 4 beautiful children, I evolve and never stop 🙏there is so much more interesting and inspiring ahead 😊 I LOVE YOU LIFE ❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️ P.S: And today, tomorrow and the day after tomorrow, in honor of my holiday, I will delight you too, moreover, like never before))) to the fullest 🌊🌊🌊 just go to my Stories)))⁸

Here, the right mindset entails embracing an attitude in which the regulatory (yet vague) ideas of loving life and living it to the fullest are a precondition for happiness. In this never-ending journey towards self-fulfillment, God is the provider of opportunities and Samoylova's children are the fruits of her long personal quest to reach joy. Similar to Levda, the husband (who has a tattoo "Family First" on his chest) and the four children are employed in Samoylova's feed as theatrical props performing a script of a perfect life. Besides, as Gernot Böhme notes, the employment of theatricality in the contemporary creative industries aims to create particular, potentially monetizable, atmospheres by curating the "moods which are 'in the air'" and the "emotional tinge of a space" (2013: 1). These influencers curate atmospheres of "right mindset" aiming to inspire followers with recycled stereotypes that not only confirm the dominant values of Russian political identities, but re-model these values under an atmosphere of desirable luxury and individual empowerment that can reach wider parts of the population.

In turn, Yana Leventseva, a self-described opinion leader who claims to have changed the "mindset of 60.000 people" and equally uses her family to evoke the responsible and committed side of her identity, suggests that the right mindset requires proactive individuals not only regarding career but also as concerns more social institutions like friendship:

Think about it, when was the last time you took the initiative? When did you call your friends to go out somewhere? Have we forgotten how to be friends? Why does our brain have so many excuses not to call someone out for coffee right now instead of scrolling through the feed and stories. Start thinking in this direction and the world will unfold for you and your request.⁹

Here the "right mindset" for Leventseva consists of rebelling against the platform's *raison d'être*, as she encourages followers to go out and meet people instead of "scrolling through the feed and stories". This symbolic revolt against

⁸ <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ccz018FBmzz/>

⁹ <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cr1CagIMnal/>

the infrastructure that contains her influencer persona registers a rebellious spirit that goes against the mainstream, e.g. incessant scrolling, that is, a spirit that operates outside of the box. The brain should change and break with social media addiction, Leventseva suggests, otherwise friendships will end, and people will forget what real relations mean.¹⁰ In another celebration of the magical powers of the brain, Leventseva writes:

Our brain always confirms what we believe in and finds what we are looking for.
For many years now, all the pictures from my head have become reality. I'm going to buy a gray gelik¹¹ - I see them everywhere. Want to go to the Maldives? Immediately there is a partner in crime who agrees to your adventure.

I'll tell you a cool exercise that I give when training, called 100 pleasures.

Try to write out 100 desires, not material, but sensations, for example, I do it before each trip:

- to wake up with the rays of dawn in the Maldives that fall on the bed and to feel their warmth
- to take a slow hot shower with aroma gel and to feel the hot drops flowing down your body
- to get under the cool rain that will wet me through and feel the contrast of warm air and cold drops
- to inhale the aroma of coffee and look at the azure water
- to walk along the pier in a silk dress and to feel how silk caresses smooth skin
- to bury your feet in the sand and feel the coolness layer by layer

And so on, and you will notice how your life will begin to change right from following this list. And then you can go into the material 😊

What would you like to feel right now?¹²

This typical metaphysical thinking presents the brain as having the capacity to actualize desires only by thinking about them. The desires that are given as examples are fixes to instant gratification operating in the overall context of experience economy, where the experience of as many and as diverse sensations and feelings as possible become part of one's identity and vision. The audience is here prompted to escape social complexity by means of inspirational, magical thinking.

Figure 2. Leventseva using her son as a (seemingly reluctant) prop



Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/CvrMabzIQMx/?img_index=1

¹⁰ Yet addiction is not exactly an individual anomaly in social media usage; platforms (and Leventseva's persona itself) are actively creating the conditions for addictive usage so as to exploit attention, data, visibility and so on.

¹¹ "Gelik" is a Russian jargon word for Gelendvagen, a symbol of success and prosperity.

¹² <https://www.instagram.com/p/CqnpqZs1u1H/>

Positivity and depoliticized selfhood

Similar to the dominant platform cultures around the world (Sweeney-Romero, 2022), the Russian influencer scene promotes positivity as a key attitude to overcome obstacles and be happy. Drawing on the spread of popular psychology, positivity is a “compulsory” injunction, an imperative of neoliberal cultures (Favaro and Gill, 2020: 156). In influencer content, positivity translates into “inspirational and aspirational injunctions, affirmations and gratitude mantras” (Favaro and Gill, 2020: 156) that oversimplify phenomena and cultivate a self-absorbed and even infantilizing outlook among their publics. For instance, after a trip in “Africa”, Samoylova writes:

The simplest iPhone photos, just like before, and Our Africa 🌍🌍🌍 We want to come back here again and again 🌍🌍 Every time is like the first time, every safari is like a Kinder Surprise with emotions and impressions)) you know those trips that you remember all your life and carefully keep in your heart ❤️ Africa cannot be described or conveyed with photos and videos, the only option is to feel it ❤️ so I just wish each of you to see this untouched wild world with your own eyes 🌍¹³

Here, “Africa” is a place that can only “be felt”, it possesses a spirit that eludes rational capture (despite the fact that it is photographically captured and posted by the influencer for creating content). The name of the African country where the influencer was on holiday seems irrelevant, as the enigmatic signifier “Africa” is caught in an unproblematic vortex of positivity marked by touristic stereotypes, such as safaris and untouched wilderness. In this mystification of Africa as a raw site of eternal and organic spirituality, there is no room for thinking through negativity, such as poverty, colonialism and structural injustice, while the “Africans” themselves are absent from the picture.

The generation of upbeat content is not accidental to these Russian influencer cultures but derives from Instagram audiencing itself, as scrolling audiences tend to turn their attention to digestible and uncritical messages that are funny, creative and inspirational¹⁴. For instance, it is indicative that none of these Russian influencers has posted a “negative” post to refer to the war in Ukraine, a devastating event that dominated local and international discussions. This absence is as telling as it is expected. The influencers not only know that they may be cancelled or attract unwanted publicity if they touch upon sensitive issues, which can lead to them being tagged as a “risky investment” from the advertisers, but also that negative content can alienate their audiences. Instead, the surrounding negativity becomes the ambience against which individual pleasure fixes or longer strategies of the self can evolve. As the first months of the war were a period of intense uncertainty for Russian audiences, the influencers often treated this uncertainty as a raw material, a background for further spreading positive messages. For instance, Levda, in April 2022, starts a post by saying, “If there is no point in planning your life much ahead yet, maybe allow yourself to live the way you WANT NOW?”¹⁵ and goes on to explain how we should do whatever we want and feel without depending on the circumstances that always change. In early March 2022, Blinovskaya writes, “The world is changing and so am I 😊😊 But everything is for the better, no matter how difficult it may be to believe now. The best investments (as life has shown) are investments in yourself. The best thing we can do is get to know and improve ourselves and our skills. It will definitely pay off!”¹⁶. Here, the surrounding negative context is repurposed for engaging with an even more intense preoccupation with the

¹³ https://www.instagram.com/p/Cr-c5aNoqHV/?img_index=1

¹⁴ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1310997/instagram-most-liked-type-of-content-worldwide/>

¹⁵ https://www.instagram.com/p/CcAPndFL3Ee/?img_index=1

¹⁶ <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ca6HWLjq6k4/>

self, turning a disturbing political situation into a backdrop where self-development should occur no matter what. This is a structural effect of influencer economies, in which, as we discussed above, the less confrontational an influencer appears to the beliefs of their audiences and stakeholders, the more potential they have for maintaining and expanding their clout. The presentations of the self around regimes of happiness, positivity, self-growth and unfettered joy amidst surrounding negativity curate a depoliticized selfhood, that is, one that is constantly mobilized into looking at personal solutions instead of collective ones. This depoliticization infantilizes audiences as "Africa" turns into a mystical escape route for middle-class fun and adventures, and the war becomes an opportunity for opening new personal avenues.

Conclusion

To recap, platform spirituality inhabits the combination of metaphysical and entrepreneurial sensibilities and spreads them through the use of social media, including Instagram and also other popular platforms like YouTube and TikTok. While religious spirituality inhabits more collective and self-negating modalities, the design architecture of platforms encourages modalities of individuation, e.g., profiles, payment systems, algorithmic recommendations and modes of socialization that correspond to named individuals. Following, platforms encourage a self-absorbed understanding of the "right spirit", or often the "right mindset", as a resource whose possession can lead to success, happiness and abundance. They espouse the metaphysical tradition but also rely on the authority of popular science, for instance, in the form of short quotations by popular psychologists that are authoritatively used to prove one's claim.

Platform spirituality is based on the wider "subjective turn" of contemporary religiosity that gives path to capitalist spirituality in the context of a global neoliberal market system. At the level of the individual, this shift manifests in a desire to connect with an "inner self" through practices of well-being and mindfulness that, according to this worldview, lead to prosperity — the ultimate goal. In parallel with platforms that seek to capture audience attention, platform spiritualities connect the language of mindfulness with profit-oriented content creation. In the case of Russian female bloggers, this profit-oriented spirituality is accompanied with the post-feminist injunction for women "to construct and self-regulate their own human capital in all spheres of life" (Fenwick, 2001:127), that is, focus on their selves, travel, dress-up, dream about wealthy husbands and exotic sensations, and prioritize their own well-being and empowerment over anything else in an increasingly conservative political and social context.

Through the thematic analysis of the Instagram posts that were created by four top Russian Instagram influencers, we have encountered three key elements that contribute to the construction of the individualistic spiritual narrative: "perfection" as the goal, "mindset" as the way to achieve it, and "positivity" as a tool to avoid obstacles such as political and social crises. The spirituality that we are looking at is an evasive concept: sometimes it can be more pronounced, such as with Elena Blinovskaya, who openly employs esoteric language such as "egregore"; in other cases, it can manifest itself in general injunctions to reach your "inner self" or, simply, "think positively" as a path to happiness and success.

Ethics

This research was conducted in line with the AoIR guidelines 2019 (Internet Research Ethics 3.0). This study has not intervened with any personal/sensitive information of the subjects. The research was conducted on the basis of open social media accounts that are accessible to the general public, and content cited according to the needs of transparent analysis with reference to the content producers.

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