The Enchanted North
Nature, Place and Gender in ‘Off the Grid’ Social Media Representations

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Abstract
The article explores ‘off the grid’ representations in social media, with a focus on how these representations reproduce imaginaries of nature, place and gender. The analysis material consists of content produced by three influencers who left urban life for a simpler lifestyle in northern Sweden. We find that the social media content draws on numerous ideals: neoliberal ideals on digital entrepreneurship, anti-capitalist ideals on ‘escaping’ modern consumerist society and romantic (sometimes colonial) envisioning of northern Sweden as wild and empty land. We conclude that the ‘off grid’ social media representations and the various ideals they incorporate should be understood as expressions of a contemporary era of neoliberal romanticism: a trend that exists both online and offline.

Keywords
enchantment, influencers, gender, rurality, social media, voluntary simplicity, wilderness

In 2012, Jonna Jinton – a young Swedish student – decided to leave her apartment in Gothenburg, a city in southwest Sweden. She dreamt of ‘living closer to nature’. In her blog she describes the decision:

I was 21 years old when I decided to leave the city life in Gothenburg, Sweden. I felt trapped in the apartment and my soul was longing for something else. Something that no city in the whole world could give me. Nature, silence, fresh air. I wanted to feel connected to the earth and to the changing seasons. To come back to my roots and to where I belong. So off I went. (Jinton 2023a)

Jinton settled in the northern part of Sweden where her family had a cottage, lived through a harsh first winter in a house without most modern facilities and started to document her new life on social media. Over the years, her Instagram and YouTube accounts have been filled with scenic nature images, and her artistic photography has attracted an ever-increasing number of followers. More than a decade later, Jinton is now an award-winning influencer with more
than 1.5 million followers, a photographer and an artist. She runs her own company with several employees.

In this article, we explore virtual representations of choosing a rural lifestyle of voluntary simplicity in the social media content of three influencers based in the Swedish rural north. These influencers have all, like Jinton, chosen to leave an urban life. In recent decades, this form of voluntary simplicity has increased and is commonly described as ‘downshifting’, ‘simple living’ or ‘going off the grid’ (Drake 2009; Vannini and Taggart 2015). We will be using the term ‘off the grid’ to target this phenomenon and representations of it online. The way we use it is thus inclusive in the sense that we focus on covering representations and expressions rather than trying to find out how the content creators actually live their lives. Our overall aim is to explore these representations of life off the grid, with a focus on how they produce ideas of nature and ‘the north’, and how colonial histories and gender are at work in this production of nature and place.

**Social Media, Voluntary Simplicity and Off the Grid**

Social media influencers commonly use platforms such as Instagram, YouTube and TikTok to marketise products and a certain, often close to perfect, mainstream and consumerist lifestyle (Duffy and Hund 2015). However, in today’s myriad of accounts and channels, there are also subgenres of influencers who instead promote alternative lifestyles. In recent years, lifestyles that focus on simple living have been increasingly visible in Western social media. Examples include #vanlife (where people who have chosen to live in vans document their mobile lifestyle), tiny housing (where people create content about a comprised living in small houses on wheels) and #offgrid, where people document a rural lifestyle without most modern facilities (electricity, sewerage and so on). Partly, the longing for a lifestyle outside of urbanity can be seen as a response to climate disasters, financial crises and insecurity; in this context, going ‘back to the land’ can be a way to initiate a slower lifestyle and to tackle economic hardships (Benessaiah 2018), for example by increasing the level of self-sufficiency (Houtbeckers 2018).

Traditionally, going off the grid means settling outside the public infrastructure, such as the electricity and networks of heating (Vannini and Taggart 2015). People can also be driven off the grid by economic reasons, often caused by societal inequalities (Nearing et
al. 2021). For many people in the world, living off the grid is the only alternative. More privileged groups, however, may choose to go off the grid for a variety of reasons, including prepping for a societal collapse (Mellander 2021), striving for more sustainable living (Hesselberth 2019) or seeking to reduce costs (Sporer 2018; Vannini and Taggart 2015).

In contrast to the heterogenous reasons for why people choose to go off the grid, people who make a living from creating social media content about a downscaled lifestyle appears to be a more homogenous group with a generally larger cultural and economic capital. In some important regards, social media content about downscaling and leaving the city differs from actual off-the-grid living since influencer careers require technological equipment, electricity and internet connection. The social media versions of these lifestyles can therefore not be described as fully anti-materialist. However, in the social media sphere, rejecting certain materialities has become a class signifier, and the environments that are featured on social media are often highly stylised and commodified (Trdina and Jontes 2022). Rather than highlighting economic or political reasons for downscaling, social media influencers tend to emphasise personal growth, life balance and mental health. These components have long been associated with self-development and spiritual reasons for downscaling and voluntary simplicity (Devenin and Bianchi 2022; Elgin 1981), and in the current neoliberal lifestyle economy, these values can be commodified when transformed into social media content.

In Sweden, many of those who make content about off the grid as a lifestyle do so in northern Sweden, because the territory is sparsely populated and there is an idea about this area as remote, rural and wild (Eriksson 2010). Independent of whether people who move to northern Sweden live outside the societal infrastructure, the new lifestyle is commonly referred to as #offgrid in social media, something that may be influenced by an increasing flow of global social media representations of this lifestyle. The cultural phenomenon implicating urban to rural mobility and imaginaries about living #offgrid appears to attract increasing numbers of young adults interested in a ‘simpler’ rural lifestyle closer to nature (Trdina and Jontes 2022).

The focus of this article is on a privileged group who have chosen to live in voluntary simplicity. They had all settled in cabins in rural northern Sweden where they initially lacked certain modern facilities, yet – as was noted in the introduction – our focus is on representations of a lifestyle rather than on actual life circumstances. After all,
creating content is about selling a narrative that will inspire people. Thus, although the accounts we have studied ‘could’ be understood as part of a countercultural movement, they were not political per se; rather, they mirrored a contemporary dream of a lifestyle on the opposite end of urban dwelling.

The region where the influencers resided matters for our analysis. Northern Sweden has a long history of colonialism, including exploitation of lands and extractive violence against the indigenous Sami population (e.g., Sehlin MacNeil 2017). The region includes lands where the influencers of this study lived include lands that Sami communities use for herding reindeer, in which it is common for reindeer herders to live off the grid during parts of the year. Still, their livelihood is rarely represented in social media content about life off the grid. Since #offgrid started to appear as a hashtag on social media, the reference to a life outside public infrastructure has been weakened as the concept has come to be used much more broadly. Rather than describing an actual distance to infrastructure, it seems, #offgrid has become a symbolic term for places that are perceived as peripheral (Vannini and Taggart 2015).

In Swedish media and popular culture, the northern part of the country, Norrland (North land), has often been associated with depopulation, wilderness and traditional lifestyles (Eriksson 2010). Parallel peripheralisation and exotification of the north has facilitated both an exploitation of the indigenous Sami people’s land and tourist businesses centred around outdoor activities and aurora watching. In the context of the new trend of #offgrid social media accounts, the northern territory works as a perfect scenario, independent of regional industries and urban hubs, and of how remote the people behind the accounts actually live. This illustrates how both place and ideas about rural life can partly be abstracted from actual conditions and get a different meaning on social media.

Of course, this discrepancy between ‘real life’ and content is not unique for #offgrid influencers, as boundaries between actual lifestyle and a more fictional lifestyle is often blurred in the digital world (Moustakas et al. 2020). Influencers show one side of their lives while other sides remain hidden, and there are cultural expressions that exist exclusively in the digital world. Thus, while some influencers document their lifestyle, others produce an obvious fiction. The influencers selected for this study all combined a documenting and fictional approach in their content, where fictional could be anything from staging a perfect dinner to dressing up and posing as a fairy-tale creature in the woods.
The digital representations of voluntary simplicity and off the grid are relatively unexplored in the Swedish context. This article therefore contributes to an understanding of the motives and ideals of this subgroup, as well as an understanding of how their social media content reproduced ideas on ‘the north’ as a place.

**Methods**

The study was carried out in the spring of 2022. Given our interest in representations of off-the-grid living and its popularity, we decided to target the relatively new phenomenon of ‘off the grid’ influencers. Following digital anthropologist Crystal Abidin’s (2017: 1) definition of an influencer as ‘a contemporary incarnation of Internet celebrity for whom microcelebrity is not merely a hobby or a supplementary income but an established career with its own ecology and economy’, we found the combination of off the grid and influencer lifestyle fascinating.

The material was gathered through digital ethnography on social media platforms (Miller 2016). We searched for accounts and content primarily on Instagram, yet recognising the polymediactic characters of the social media platforms, we also followed the influencers we selected to other sites (Madianou and Miller 2012). We started by following specific hashtags on Instagram. Following hashtags is a field method that offers entry points into highly complex worlds linked to different physical and social spaces in filtered and partial ways (Bonilla and Rosa 2015). We began by using the hashtags #offgrid and #norrland and then continued through the myriad of accounts and hashtags that appeared. Our observations of these hashtags and accounts can be described as ‘lurking’, a method where the researcher participates for observations to gain an overview of the social norms of a particular platform or hashtag without being intrusive or interacting (Ferguson 2017; Leander and McKim 2003). After familiarising with the social landscape of these particular hashtags, we narrowed our search to only include influencers with at least ten thousand followers on Instagram, which is the level you need to reach to be able to use functions that enable marketising. To further limit the selection, we set the criteria that the accounts were to be run by individuals who had moved to the countryside in northern Sweden and who – at least initially – lacked electricity/heating systems or running water. The accounts we came across were run by people who had moved to an off-the-grid property by accident or due to circumstances, as well as people who had purposefully targeted this lifestyle.
We selected three larger accounts, currently ranging from 10,800 to 1,500,000 followers. These are run by Jonna Jinton, Kalle Flodin and Christine Kjaer who mainly posted images and videos from their everyday life. When analysing their accounts, we have focused on the cultural phenomenon of off-grid imaginaries and not on the particular influencers as individuals. We have no intention to discuss their social media personas in detail, as our focus is on the content that they posted. The material analysed for this article thus consists of Instagram and blog posts, videos from YouTube channels and podcast episodes that the selected influencers produced or participated in. The material we analysed was produced from 2010 to 2022. All the selected influencers are white, in their thirties and in heterosexual relationships. They are residents of the region Västernorrland, to where they moved from larger Nordic cities in the past decade.

Like in all research, there are important ethical concerns related to using social media in ethnographic fieldwork. However, there is no clear-cut ethical framework, and suggestions on how to ensure that the study is ethical varies between contexts (franzke et al. 2020; Wallace and Townsend 2016). With the speed of changing technology, no set of ethical guidelines could be static. Rather, each research process needs to find its model for how to approach ethical issues, and the conversation about it needs to be dynamic within research communities; like others have noted before us, it is primarily a dynamic question of method (franzke et al. 2020). Therefore, we will thoroughly discuss the methodological decisions we have made in relation to ethics.

To begin with, we were concerned about how to approach the data posted by influencers. In order to not be intrusive, we decided to focus on influencers who have a larger number of followers and whose posts could be considered public data. The material we have used is thus data that was posted on social media platforms where the default setting is public, meaning anyone could access their posts without having to become a follower or entering a more secluded private room. All the selected influencers have open profiles, and their postings were undoubtedly intended for a large audience. This is clearly illustrated by the use of hashtags, which are strategic means to reach larger audiences. Thus, none of the influencers we studied posted private statements about their lives intended for a small or private audience – rather, they acted as their influencer persona, making public posts intended for an expectedly global audience. Given this, we considered their posts on social media as public data, and we have accessed them accordingly (Markham and Buchanan 2012; Wallace and Townsend 2016).
Even if the data could be considered public information, we still felt unsure whether to make pseudonyms for the chosen influencers. Given the public nature of social media microcelebrities, however, we found pseudonymisation would pose challenges. First, through posts and public accounts, the figures are already publicly known, and it would be easy to identify them. Instead, we chose to collect our material and write the result in such a way that it ensures that our work, with the data included, would not in any way harm them. The data we have collected does not touch upon topics such as ethnicity, sexuality or religion, and is thus not to be considered sensitive. Therefore, we find it unlikely that it could cause harm to the influencers if their names and posts are exposed to new audiences through our analysis and re-publishing of quotes (Wallace and Townsend 2016: 11).

Related to this, and important to mention, is how we have worked with followers and their interactions on the accounts. Unlike books, films, TV series and other traditional sources that previously accounted for the production of popular cultural narratives, social media is largely about interaction, as one follows, likes and comments (Page 2012). One can thus think of influencers as actors who own a channel, which is built up by the response from followers. In our observations, our focus has been on the influencers. We have not collected any kind of data from followers.

**Theory**

When analysing the influencers’ social media content, we relied on theories on enchantment, place and gender. In social theory, the modern capitalist society has often been pictured as alienating, and deprived of magic and a deeper meaning (e.g., Marx [1844] 2019; Weber 2001). While these theories have mainly focused on the stratification of labour and technologisation of society, our focus in this article is on how nature and rurality can be perceived as enchanted, in contrast to urbanity that instead tend to be seen as a source of alienation and disenchantment. Inspired by Jane Bennett’s (2001) theorisation of modern life and enchantment, we turn away from traditional theorisations of ‘the disenchanted modern life’ and suggest that technology and digital connectedness can be a source of enchantment. In this context we are particularly interested in how technology and social media enables enchantment of rural spaces.
To examine this digital enactment of place, we used Keith Halfacree’s (2007) theorisation of ‘representations of rurality’ to reflect on how representations of ‘off the grid’ appear in the influencers’ social media content. In a next step, we were interested in how these representations reproduced gendered imaginaries about northern Sweden as a place. In this context, the Swedish north is an example of a space characterised by particular historical and contemporary power relations. Madeleine Eriksson (2010) has noted that northern Sweden is often positioned as an ‘internal other’ – an area that is constructed as different from the rest of the country and therefore can be subjected to exploitation. The idea that northern Sweden and Sápmi, the indigenous Sami people’s traditional land, consist of empty spaces and lacks a local population is a persisting colonial idea, which has been picked up by businesses, such as mining companies, with an interest in natural resources in the territory (Sjöstedt and Fotaki 2018). Sami reindeer herding on traditional lands, already under pressures from centuries of settler colonial policies (Össbo 2020), is increasingly threatened by the climate crisis and the ‘greening’ of extractive industries (Kuokkanen 2023; Österlin and Raitio 2020). Finally, we employ a feminist understanding of how places become gendered through the relationships and practices associated with them (Little 2002; Massey 1994). We thus pay specific attention to how off-grid representations link to colonial history and to expressions of femininity.

Nature, Place and Gender in ‘Off the Grid’ Social Media Representations

The influencers in focus did all produce representations of rurality, similar to what Halfacree (2007) found when studying how rurality is portrayed. However, the rural lifestyle that the influencers produced was of a specific and alternative kind, and centred on a life with fewer facilities, which we here refer to as ‘off the grid’. Below, we will highlight three imaginaries that stood out in these representations, which all related to an idea of northern Sweden as place.

Searching for (Dis)connection

In the influencers’ narratives on choosing a life with less facilities, (dis)connection played an important role. To disconnect from the urban
life and culture and move to the rural north was described as a way to be true to oneself and follow one’s heart. While others have described off-the-grid mobility as a calling to a place (Vannini 2011), the influencers whose accounts we analysed did most commonly describe the decision as a necessity, something that they needed to do in order to feel good and connected – with nature and with themselves. Kalle Flodin, who lived in a log cabin in the woods outside a small village in the Västernorrland region, wrote in the biography section on his blog:

> At the age of 29 I felt stuck. I was living in an apartment in Stockholm and was doing 9–5, so I had everything that I was ‘supposed’ to have. But still something was missing: a sense of purpose and meaning. (Flodin 2023b)

Just like Flodin, the other influencers described how the urban life had left them unfulfilled. Christine Kjaer, who had moved from Copenhagen to live with Kalle Flodin, wrote on her Instagram that she was ‘longing for the wild nature’. Likewise, Jinton said she had ‘an inexplicable strong longing for something totally different. The nature, stillness, fresh air, meadows, lakes, sunsets’ (Jinton 2023b). In this way, the influencers described an inexplicable but strong feeling of wanting to leave the city, a feeling that was connected to an existential search for meaning. Studies on voluntary simplicity show that individuals who found mainstream lifestyles not feasible and therefore chose to live in voluntary simplicity reacted towards factors such as alienation. However, their decision enabled them to feel capable to affect and be affected by the world (Devenin and Bianchi 2022). Similarly, most voluntary simple lifestyles are described as a rejection of neoliberal values in favour of self-development and connection to nature (Kennedy et al. 2013). The new rural lifestyle in the nature of northern Sweden appears as soulful and even a bit magical, while nine-to-five workdays in the city are described as the opposite. The influencers in our study express this dichotomy when motivating their choice. Jinton addresses the link between leaving the city and feeling well in nature in the following post: ‘I feel so grateful for living in a place like this. Every day it fills me with peace and inspiration. If I feel stressed, I can just go outside and the nature will quiet my mind.’ (Jinton 2015a). Being true to oneself was something that the influencers strived for in all aspects of life, and it was thus not something they completed when transitioning to a rural lifestyle. As becomes apparent in their social media content, achieving connection and fulfilment was an ongoing theme in their lives. In a marketised YouTube video, Flodin shares with viewers:
Recently I have been thinking and I guess even struggling with feeling enough – I guess I mean good enough. And I don’t know if it’s good enough for me, myself, or good enough for people around me. Because when I’ve been talking to my friends and family about this subject, a lot of people can recognise themselves in the feeling of feeling behind in life and not feeling good enough. And the same comes for me too. When you look on my videos on YouTube or on Instagram, you might look at it like I live a very peaceful and fulfilled life and that I completed the goals I put up for myself. I guess I have. I’m living the life I want to, but I’m still struggling so much with stress, I’m struggling so much with this feeling of catching up with myself, catching up with the expectations of what I’m supposed to do in life. I’m soon turning thirty-four years old and I think I had, or have, this idea that I should be more ahead in life, I should be a more complete version of myself, I should have my stuff together. But I don’t. (Flodin 2022b)

All three influencers wanted something else than an ordinary white-collar job: they wanted freedom, independence and the sense of enchantment they associated with nature, both in their work life and in their personal life. In many ways, they wanted to break free from expectations on careerism and find peace and connection in nature. Yet, paradoxically, the influencers’ escape from the demands of the modern world was also what enabled their new, simpler lifestyle. Following Bennett’s (2001) notion that technology can be a source of enchantment in the modern world, the use of advanced digital equipment helped the influencers reach the sense of freedom, meaning and magic that they were searching for. However, staying connected to the internet and working as an influencer could also be a source of stress. The fact that they had turned their very lifestyle into a career meant that expectations and pressure became associated with it. It seems that in the case of Flodin, and many others situated in a digital terrain, the divide between work and leisure has collapsed in such a sense that not even the freer life he sought in nature could prevent it. In the video, Flodin (2022b) continues:

Every time when I’m taking a break, just laying out in the lawn just watching the clouds, I have this voice inside of my head telling me: ‘You should do a video right now, you should write another book’.

As exemplified in this video post, the influencers were often expressing themselves and relating to their work and lifestyle as entrepreneurs. This collapse of time and space in regards to work is something also described by others who have studied influencers (Nilsson 2023).

In the content the influencers produced, there was both a resistance against capitalist values on careerism and consumerism, and
a neoliberal work logic relying on values such as individualism, efficiency and flexibility. Even though self-realisation was initially meant to be about wholesome connection, living in tune with nature and being true to oneself, it also inevitably came to mean being constantly connected to the internet, and becoming successful as an influencer and digital entrepreneur. Starting out, all three wrote in their mother tongue; however, gradually they all switched to posting all content in English. While being situated in the Swedish north and searching for a connection with the surrounding nature, they were simultaneously at work, making a living out of their source of connectedness and peace, addressing an increasing global digital audience.

The Enchanted North

The influencers’ quest for connection and truthfulness towards the inner self was an ongoing journey that seems to be just as important for their social media content as the actual move from the city to the countryside in northern Sweden. As discussed, connection was closely linked to nature and enchantment – both the surrounding nature and the true human nature that crystallised when societal distractions were removed. The linking of the new place (which was commonly described simply as ‘nature’ or ‘forest’) and the self became visible as the influencers sometimes used the term ‘true’ to also describe the area they now resided in. Illustratively, Flodin had a podcast called ‘My True North’ and launched an app-based e-book titled Find Your True North. The app works as a guide to choose simplicity, and to ‘listen to that inner voice that has been telling you “it’s time to make a change”’. In the promotion for the book in Flodin’s website, there is a checklist of things that the reader will get from ordering it, including an ‘exclusive True North Community’:

In the description of the community that the e-book offers, ‘the true north’ appears to be a place that exists as much within oneself as in geography. The need for having a community of peers further gives the impression that moving into the nature is part of an inner
journey, where community is based on ideals and mindset rather than becoming part of the local community in the area of actual residency. This connection between one’s inner landscape and external conditions can be traced to twentieth-century ideas about the relationship between nature and soul. Like others have noted, in the Swedish context, urbanisation and the distancing from nature it caused consigned nature to people’s leisure time, and discovering nature became a way to discover oneself (Thurfjell 2020: 184). This is also highly present in Jinton’s Instagram account where photographs of beautiful landscapes are accompanied with existential reflections such as, ‘In the heart of the deepest forest there is another world’ (Jinton 2015b).

In the accounts, the Swedish north could also be described as a place that awakens different sides of the self. For many of the influencers, the new place was associated with healing and reconnecting with creativity, in much the same way as Jinton described spending time alone. In some cases, healing and connection could relate to gender. In an Instagram post from 2021, Kjaer writes:

I feel like living here in the beautiful surroundings of Sweden has really awaken my playful, dreamy and feminine sides again. I did have a tendency to be more in my masculine sides, when I was living in the city. The energy of always being outgoing and chasing the next thing. This Sunday brough me in to this deep forest, to recharge and getting ready for a new week. (Kjaer 2020)

In Kjaer’s quote, the city became associated with outgoing masculinity, while the rural surroundings of her new home in northern Sweden was associated with introspective and healing feminine energy. As many rural researchers have noted, rural areas are commonly perceived as more spiritual and soulful than cities (Cloke 2006; Halfacree 2007). The forest might appear as an imaginary entity filled with spiritualism, mysticism and enchantment in communities striving for a life outside urban modernity (Grossman-Horesh 2020). Feminist geographers have further highlighted how urban spaces, given that they are perceived as centres of business and production, are associated with masculine values, while the countryside is associated with reproduction and thus femininity (Little 2002). In Kjaer’s Instagram post, this divide is used to express her feelings and state of mind in the new place.

The feminine playfulness appeared not only in Kjaer’s social media content but also in Jinton’s social media accounts. Commonly performed as artistic photography, she pictured herself in the forest, often dancing, walking into the forest alone portrayed from behind
or wearing fairy-tale-like dresses. These imageries played with associations to Nordic folk-tales, sometimes without mentioning it and sometimes by including a photo caption about elves, trolls or other creatures from Scandinavian folklore. Others have discussed how these kind of folklore creatures were considered dangerous and frightening in the agrarian self-sufficient society where they formed part of everyday imagination (Klintberg 1972). The way they are usually represented in modern society, however, is linked to romantic ideas about the mysticism of nature and to ancient conceptions of mother earth reshaped in a modern form (Wall 2014).

The representations of Jinton and Kjaer can be seen as linked to place specific histories, but they are also entangled with digital cultures, such as #cottagecore and #fairycore. While #cottagecore is a digital subculture built around an often old-fashioned and romanticised cottage aesthetic, #fairycore takes the step into the world of fairy tales and folk culture. Jinton has worked extensively with representations of Scandinavian folklore in her social media feed, portraying for example the ghostlike fairies who dance in the mist, or her husband as Näcken – a naked man who plays violin in a water stream in order to lure women into the water to drown. The images, playful and artistic, engage with the past, with the forest as a place for mysteries and with heterosexual expectations and tropes.

In some of her artwork, Jinton also recreated classic illustrations from the Swedish artist John Bauer (1882–1918), who is known for his folk art of the Swedish forests and its creatures. In a sense, the art of Bauer picturing deep mystic forests and ‘trolls’ has become crucial for modern conceptions of the forest and nature in Sweden (Wall 2014). Jinton, who has dedicated much creative work into recreating his worlds, writes about her Instagram remaking of one of his famous works, *The Enchantment*, where she sits naked by a lake:

> For many years, I’ve had this photo in my mind. I was just waiting to find a place with the right magic atmosphere, and to find that right feeling. Finally, I did. ‘The Enchantment’ or ‘Förtrollningen’ in Swedish, is the result of all that I have dreamed and wished for. (Jinton 2015c)

She then describes how Bauer’s art gave her ‘a key into another world’ as a child, as he showed her ‘the magic in life’. It is the magic of the Bauer imagery that many contemporary Swedes return to when imagining the forest – sometimes to such an extent that the discrepancy with how actual forests look makes people disappointed (Thurfjell 2020: 270). In another of these pictures, Jonna is lying naked by a lake in an orange and autumn-struck forest. The caption follows:
Autumn is a time for our souls to be reborn. For our roots to grow deeper into the earth. And for our minds to expand above the clouds. A time to rise up, and take a first breath outside our comfort zone. (Jinton 2018)

The expansion of the mind is here articulated as a metaphor on rebirth, which is constructed around nature and femininity. Together, the quotes connect femininity with nature, but they also illustrate how the Swedish north as a place is commonly associated with mysticism and soulfulness, as it is often described as wild nature, empty of people in a similar way as Eriksson (2010) found when researching representations of northern Sweden. This imaginary of life in the ‘true north’ does not only play with the gendered reinvention of Swedish folktales and ideas about the forest but is also connected to ideas about wilderness and forest lifestyles present in #offgrid and similar hashtags in social media. We find it interesting how these paradoxes – the search for self-realisation in nature and the kind of imaginaries the influencers produced – is clearly connected to ideals and traditions of both modernism and romanticism while they are also connected to global digital imaginaries. Returning to Bennett’s (2016) theorisation of how modern life can be seen as enchanted, the way that nature is processed through technology, such as editing tools and social media, here works as a medium between the conception of wilderness and the modern.

Imaginaries of Wilderness

The idea that nature is true also connects to a view of nature as ‘untouched’ by humans, and even as devoid of human presence (Plumwood 1998). In the influencers’ social media feeds, the nature surrounding them seemed empty of humans and the forests appeared as an endless scenery, even though the influencers lived with neighbours within a walking distance. In an Instagram post, Jinton sits by a lake and observes the view:

Sometimes when sitting by the lake on a quiet evening with only the sound from the birds singing, I think about how many billion people there is in this world. And then I wonder how it is possible that not a single one of them is here. It is a magical feeling to have so much beautiful nature all to yourself. (Jinton 2015d)

The romantic view of nature as pristine ground for reconnecting with one’s true self or as a playing ground for mystic creatures, as discussed
above, is of course related to ideals of Romanticism and its wave of artists, philosophers and writers who imagined nature as a mystic place for sublime experiences. This is also crucially present in the way the influencers represent the spaces they inhabit. Jinton had several pictures in her feed where she was portrayed from the back, looking out from a cliff or a hill over an open landscape. For example, in one Instagram post she sits in front of a lake in a white dress. The text reads: ‘Sometimes I wonder how there can be so many people on earth with crowded cities. And yet, I am here all alone. In the middle of the night, embraced by silence and reflections’ (Jinton 2016). In the nineteenth century, artists and writers inspired by romanticism tended to connect nature with inner emotional life. One iconic image often given as an example of this is the early nineteenth-century painting *Wanderer Over a Sea of Fog* by David Friedrich where a man stands on a cliff with his back towards the painter, contemplating the scenery in front of him. This image is said to represent this epoch’s self-reflections and existential questions (Thurfjell 2020: 184). Similarly, the influencers connect much of their images of nature with existential questions and an adoration of nature that mystifies and enchants the sceneries. In another Instagram image, Jinton stands on a cliff in front of a river, portrayed from the back, an aesthetics intertextually linked to the *Wanderer Over a Sea of Fog*. In the caption Jinton addresses the landscape: ‘Hello my love. Your dancing rivers and snowy mountain tops gives me thousands of butterflies in my stomach. I could stand here forever watching your wild beauty’ (Jinton 2020). The search for rural simplicity is here conveyed through modernist imaginaries where the gaze on the landscape relies on romantic aesthetics and tropes of empty landscapes.

The social media content analysed here shows how people search for freedom and control over their time and lives, and they portray this search through an aestheticisation of nature and wilderness while it is simultaneously utterly about their inner experience. David Thurfjell has noted in regards to the painting *Wanderer Over a Sea of Fog* that the power over nature and the appreciation of its beauty are connected. As man rises above nature he is represented as free, ‘an independent subject with his own agency’, while nature ‘is there as a scene for him to conquer’ (2020: 184). In a striking irony, gender roles are turned around, since a young woman is the one who holds power to contemplate and address nature in Jinton’s images. Nevertheless, the romantic aestheticisation of nature performed by the influencers in images like these contributes to the conceptualisation of the Swedish north as a part of untouched wilderness.
While in reality, much of this idealised ‘wilderness’ is criss-crossed by extractive industries, and most forests are planted and subjected to continuous exploitation and deforestation, the illustration of nature as both untouched and empty was common in the social media accounts we analysed. This idea of ‘empty wilderness’ in Western societies is intrinsically entangled with the colonial notion of terra nullius (Gahman 2020). The imagery connects to a colonial tradition of portraying the northern territory and Sami land as empty; in other words, exploitation and extraction of natural resources in these areas affect no one (Sjöstedt and Fotaki 2018). Although the motive for the influencers’ way of representing the north is not malice, and they of course were aware of contested uses of the spaces they lived in – Jinton did for example engage in a struggle against extractive industries in her region – most of their content relied on the idea of the enchantment of living in pristine nature.

Further, the representation of humans in a desolate natural surrounding is also the result of the dichotomous notion of the divide between nature and culture, implying that humans are placed outside the realm of nature (Plumwood 1993). In this sense, wilderness could be seen as a cultural invention that over the years has been understood both as ‘an ideal form of essential nature untouched by humans’ and a construction ‘informed by strong social forces that reveal important cultural and political dynamics’ (Vannini and Vannini 2016: 11). We suggest that the way ideas of wilderness or an ‘empty’ nature appear in the analysed accounts are linked to centuries of colonisation, the history of early twentieth-century industrialisation, as well as to global digital imaginaries.

Like others have noted (Ehn et al. 1993; Thurfjell 2020), during the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Sweden – just like other European countries – went through major societal transformations where a self-sufficient rural way of life was replaced by industrialisation and urbanisation. This transformation affected cultural imaginaries about nature and the forest. During increased urbanisation and modernisation, conceptions of nature and wilderness changed. For centuries, the ideal nature had been described as domesticated, while the wilderness was understood as threatening and dangerous (Thurfjell 2020). As society was profoundly changed and the majority led their lives separated from the cycles of self-sufficiency and nature, the wilderness was conceptualised as a resource for the urban middle class’s health and well-being resulting in the early twentieth-century rise of the movement of outdoor life and the creation of national parks (Sörlin
2006). As others have noted, a great paradox of modernity was that on the one hand, nature was exploited through ditching and forest plantations, while at the other, the wild and non-productive nature became an object of the urban middle class’s adoration and longing (Frykman and Löfgren 1979). This resulted in a vivid tradition that recycled objects of folklore into a romantic imaginary of untouched nature seen in folk paintings in various forms, such as that of Bauer.

To produce images of an #offgrid lifestyle taking place in seemingly empty wilderness and fairy-tale-like environments, the influencers needed modern equipment. The question of what is empty, remote or even simple was thus complicated both by the fact that the influencers owned and worked with advanced technological equipment, and that some of the influencers upgraded their homes over time. As their life circumstances changed, the influencers described how their living facilities changed. In a YouTube video called ‘Building Dream Log Cabin in the Middle of Nowhere’, Flodin goes through all the changes that will be needed in the cabin for he and his partner to have children. He reflects on the deeper changes that this comes with:

I have honestly a bit of conflict inside of me, because I moved out here for simple living – I wanted it a bit tough, I wanted to challenge myself – and I don’t know how much simple living it’s going to be after we are done renovating and expanding the cabin, because we’re gonna have, you know, shower, toilet, even more rooms … We’re gonna have an office. We’re still gonna probably power the house by firewood mostly, but yeah, it’s a bit hard because I don’t know how much I wanna compromise with it, if that makes sense. I don’t wanna give up the reason I moved out here, but at the same time I understand that this is the necessary steps I need to take for my family’s sake as well. Compromising is tough. (Flodin 2022a)

In the same video, Flodin enters the firewood storage, sits down and continues to explain: ‘The compromising I would say is only one of the problems, the other problem is that we need to be able to pay for all of this’. He then reflects on the option to start a crowdfunding, although he admits that he does not feel entirely good about the idea. This example shows that on the journey the influencers were on, imaginaries, ideals and real life sometimes collided. The privilege to escape into the forest while producing content in the form of artistic scenarios or DIY videos was highly reliant on modern technology.

The influencers’ way of navigating paradoxes and collisions in their lives illuminates the hardships of trying to escape the modern society in a context that offers few options – in the neoliberal society, a digital career might appear as the closest to freedom and independence one
can get. However, in order to succeed in a digital career, the content creation drew on aesthetics and traditions that rely on both colonial and romantic ideas about the north.

**Conclusion**

By exploring ‘off grid’ representations in social media accounts, we have sought to give an insight into contemporary imaginaries of ‘the north’. We conclude that, through the fusion of modern technology and romantic imaginaries, digital representations of ‘off grid’ reproduce an idea of ‘the north’ as an enchanted and wild place, far from modern facilities and white-collar work life demands. In this imaginary, femininity and colonial ideas about an empty wilderness were important components that helped create the sense of enchantment that the influencers were striving for; dressing up in flowing dresses and posing in nature, the women influencers created pictures that alluded to folktales or settler aesthetics. Thus, the imaginary draws on a stereotypical idea of northern Sweden as traditional and almost empty of people – an idea that is already common in popular culture. In the enchanting of the rural and of voluntary simplicity, the Swedish north is constructed as a place untouched by humans, ignoring both the presence of local people that have lived here for centuries as well as the continuous exploitation of natural resources in these areas. Although not intended, and with some exceptions, the romantic picturing of northern Sweden as wild and empty thus fuels colonial perceptions of the area as unexplored land.

However, although the influencers did in some senses reproduce stereotypical ideas of rural places, the way that they always highlighted nature and the importance of maintaining a connection to it challenged anthropocentric ideals. Similarly, although they embodied the neoliberal dream of digital nomadism and flexibility, they simultaneously challenged a capitalist work logic where work gets to dominate all realms of life. They searched for an inner meaning and a way to live outside the confinement of neoliberal capitalist society and its ideals, reinventing relations to nature and to themselves. The off-the-grid lives mediated by the influencers and the increased attention they attracted during the late 2010s points us towards an increasing desire for escaping contemporary urban and neoliberal lifestyles, existing outside of structures and depending on oneself. An increasing global community seeks this kind of social media accounts, perhaps
in order to learn from others who have found a simpler lifestyle, who have actually gone off the grid or maybe just to nourish the idea of another possible way of life.

Taken together, the off-the-grid representations that the influencers created built on a set of (partly contradicting) ideals: neoliberal ideals on digital entrepreneurship, flexibility and self-realisation, anticapitalist and romantic ideals that sometimes touched upon colonial discourses. In this context, we see the influencers, their content and the fact that it attracts an ever increasing national and international audience as indicators of the ideals that pervades contemporary Western societies. These, we suggest, boils down to what could be defined as an era of neoliberal romanticism – a trend that reaches beyond the digital world and sets the expectations for how rural spaces can be lived and what a good and meaningful life is expected to look like.

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**Notes**

All translations are our own unless otherwise indicated.

1. This exploitation includes mining, water power plants, windmill parks and deforestation. Recently, the Swedish government also announced a ‘new’
industrialisation era in Sweden, which they labelled a ‘green industrialisation’. However, activists and other critics in the northern territory have called the initiative a ‘green colonisation’.

References


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