Spring 2022

Under(neath) the Influence: A Study of Micro-Influencers & Content Creators and the Dynamics of Digital Labor

Madeleine Reilly
Bard College

Under(neath) the Influence: A Study of Micro-Influencers & Content Creators on Instagram and the Dynamics of Digital Labor

Senior Project Submitted to

The Division of Social Studies

of Bard College

By

Madeleine Reilly

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2022

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my friends and family for your unwavering love and support throughout this process and beyond. Thank you mom, for the long phone calls. Thank you Liana, for the proofreads and edits.

Thank you to my professors, especially my project advisor, Allison McKim, for your indispensable knowledge, advice, and encouragement. It has been a pleasure to be your student.

Lastly, thank you to the interviewees of this study for sharing your stories with me.

Table of Contents

The most important key is to be yourself, know your worth and work hard for your dreams. This wasn't a dream for me, but when I got the brand deal, I was like, okay, I'm going to work on this. I got to put myself out there, learn more, see how I can give back to the community. For example, nobody's like me. So being you it's like the best personal brand that you can work on. People are gonna like the way you are, because they see like actual stuff on [your profile] and they're going to feel like, 'okay, she's giving me a good vibe. And I like that. I don't feel like she's faking or like the type to get attention'. So people can see that in a way. It's like, just be you. - Anna

In her interview, Anna said that she had been using Instagram since the app launched in 2010. But in 2018, she decided it would be a fun idea to start creating video diaries that detailed her day-to-day life and sharing them with her small audience of followers. It was around this time where she also began posting videos and creatively-styled photographs of her favorite skincare products, highlighting the ones that she liked to use in her everyday skincare routine with a detailed description of their benefits. Anna quickly started getting more followers, mostly young women her age who had a similar affinity for learning and talking about new skincare products. Not soon after, skincare brands started directly messaging Anna on the social media app, offering to send her free products to review, photograph, and talk about in her videos. With only about a thousand followers at the time, Anna was shocked and flattered by the offer, as 'working with a brand' felt like a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to turn her creative hobby into something much bigger. After working on creating video content for a number of different skincare and makeup brands for over three years, Anna's main takeaway was that being as authentic as possible with her audience was the key ingredient to being a successful influencer. But according to her, this was no easy feat. "People think, 'oh you just take a picture'. Like, no, we need to set what we want to showcase on our feed. My feed is my portfolio. So it has so much backstage, like work that people can't see. They're just seeing the static posts that you do." Like other influencers, Anna recognized that when she started posting more consistently and

getting brand deals, creating content became something more than just a creative hobby. Behind the scenes, "being yourself" on social media was hard work.

Influencer marketing is now a global, multi-billion-dollar industry that was estimated to be worth $13.8 billion at the end of 2021.[1] At the center of this rapidly growing sector of social media advertising are the social media influencers. Influencers are individuals who have built a reputation for creating and posting content (images, videos, and text) on social media, where they have the potential to shape the attitudes of a larger audience.[2] Influencers partake in the creation and dissemination of trends in product consumption by generating and publicly circulating content that depicts a desirable lifestyle or way of being that is often backed by branded products.

Micro-influencing on social media is a new type of informal work that I will situate within two larger sociological conversations around the self and the changing organization of work in late modernity. First, social media has become a crucial way for people to shape a public version of themselves, affording users a cheap and accessible way to create a marketable online identity to gain visibility, attention, and sometimes potential opportunities for paid work.[3] Anthony Giddens posits that late modern society is characterized by the ideology that individuals are expected to think of themselves as ongoing, or "reflexive projects" and must be constantly striving to achieve self-actualization in all aspects of their lives, including their work.[4] Social media influencers take this one step further by not only marketing themselves as individual brands by posting snippets of an ideal lifestyle on social media, but also by marketing products

---

[1] Werner Geyser, "The State of Influencer Marketing 2022: Benchmark Report," Influencer Marketing Hub, 2022, https://influencermarketinghub.com/influencer-marketing-benchmark-report-2021/

[2] Karen Freberg et al., "Who are social media influencers? A study of public perceptions of personality," *Fuel and Energy Abstracts* 37, no.1 (March 2011): 90-92, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2010.11.001.

[3] Alice Marwick, "Self-Branding: The (Safe for Work) Self," In *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, and Branding in the Social Media Age*, (Yale University Press, 2013), 163–204.

[4] Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, (Stanford University Press, 1991), 2.

on their personal pages for branded companies who are looking to reach their specific audience of followers. Second, influencers can be recognized as being part of a larger independent workforce that has emerged in the past two decades through the dissemination of digital platforms. The rise in platform-based gig work has contributed to sustaining a new pattern of work organization attributed to post-industrial society: the increase of freelance work and independent entrepreneurial ventures, both of which are devoid of worker protections, the security of long-term employment, and any formal institutional support.[5] Online platforms, particularly social media, act as a digital infrastructure that connects workers to employers, and in this case, micro-influencers to brands.

The goal of this study is to examine the dynamics, conditions, and attitudes towards micro-influencing from the perspective of the content creators themselves. In identifying and excavating the sociological underpinnings of these factors, my research attempts to answer the following questions: What does the work of identity construction done by micro-influencers on social media say about the role of the internet in helping to shape modern neoliberal subjecthood? How does the independent nature of this work create challenges for a diverse pool of workers that have unequal access to informal support systems? How does the practice of influencing as a new form of work draw on gendered preconceptions of labor, leisure, and consumption?

Using data from 9 semi-structured interviews with micro-influencers on Instagram in the beauty, skincare, and fashion niche categories, I found that the personal brand of the micro-influencer can become blurred within the marketing goals of bigger brands, perpetuating the identity collapse that has come to define the social conditions of modern consumer culture;

---

[5] Steven Vallas and Juliet Schor, "What Do Platforms Do? Understanding the Gig Economy." *Annual Review of Sociology* 46, no.1 (July 2020): 273–94. doi:10.1146/annurev-soc-121919-054857.

that what we buy shapes who we are. Further, the evidence shows that micro-influencers had different justifications regarding what they considered to be fair compensation for their labor, as well as uneven access to informal support networks to assist them in negotiating the terms of their work with brands. Although many micro-influencers shared that they learned a lot from the community of influencers online, they still felt a sense of insecurity and personal responsibility for handling all aspects of their work on social media. The shifting of responsibility in managing potential risks off of employers and institutions and onto the individual is a key characteristic of work in late modern society, and is the organizational framework upon which social media and other platform-mediated gig work operates.[6]

The following paper begins with a brief description of micro-influencers, followed by a review of the relevant literature, including studies and broader theories that will be used to position the work of micro-influencers within contemporary sociological conversations pertaining to the relationship between work and the self. The review section starts by providing a macro overview of the changing dynamics of work organization in late modernity, considering how the rise of the platform economy has furthered this transformation through the widespread impact of the internet, service-based platforms, and social media in shaping modern economic life. This overview is followed by an exploration and critique of three theories that have been used by scholars to conceptualize the relationship between work and the self in late modernity: self-branding, aspirational labor (or free labor), and emotional labor. After the literature review is a section detailing the research methods used for the study, followed by a presentation and analysis of the main findings.

---

[6] Ibid.

Who are Micro-Influencers?

While people typically think of influencers as people who have large social media followings, there is now an emerging group of influencers with much smaller audiences and higher rates of engagement (i.e. users comment, like, and share their content more frequently) who branded companies have started tapping to do product reviews and sponsored posts.[7] These 'micro-influencers' are valued by businesses for many reasons. They are significantly less expensive to work with in comparison to influencers with millions of followers, and they cultivate niche audiences who see them as more authentic, and therefore trust their opinions and ideas. A "niche" on social media is a specific category of content. The term refers to broader popular categories of content like food, travel, beauty, lifestyle, and fitness, as well as more specific ones like natural pet care or craft micro brewing. Niches can be important for the personal brands of influencers, as creating a specific type of content is more likely to attract a specific brand's interest, which then potentially translates into more opportunities for paid work. Instagram is currently the most popular platform for influencer marketing, with 89% of marketers using the platform (70% use Facebook and Twitter and 59% use YouTube) to work with influencers.[8] Although Instagram has recently started implementing ways for influencers and creators to get paid directly through the platform[9], brand-sponsored posts remain the main way that these groups are compensated for their creative labor.[10]

---

[7] Monika Ewa Rakoczy et al., "In the Search of Quality Influence on a Small Scale - Micro-influencers Discovery," *OTM Conferences*, (October 2018): 138-153.
[8] Michelle Krasniak, "Social Influencer Marketing on the Rise: New Research," 2016, http://www.socialmediaexaminer.com/social-influencer-marketing-on-therise-new-research/.
[9] Arielle Pardes, "Instagram Will (Finally) Pay Influencers," WIRED, 2020, https://www.wired.com/story/instagram-finally-pay-influencers-badges-igtv-ads/
[10] Sydney Bradley, "How Much Money Instagram Influencers Make: Real Examples," Business Insider, 2021, https://www.businessinsider.com/how-much-money-instagram-influencers-earn-examples-2021-6#:~:text=Influencers%20also%20make%20money%20on,2020%20through%20affiliate%20links%20alone.

Micro-influencers are essentially their own one-person production companies; they take all of their own photos and film their own videos, edit all of their own content, write detailed photo captions and video descriptions, and act as the on-camera talent, while also negotiating their terms of service with branded companies and consistently communicating with their audience to maintain a trusting relationship. Much of the work that micro-influencers do on social media is either unpaid or compensated by gifted products until creators reach a certain number of followers or initiate a paid deal with a brand.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE & THEORY

Changes in Work Organization and the Rise of the Platform Economy

Giddens theorized that late modernity is characterized by its absence of the traditional structures that once shaped the conditions of social life. He argues that members of society have now become "disembedded" from these structures that once provided them with a sense of security and stability.[11] Now that the future of a person's life can no longer be determined by the traditional life-course paths of those that came before them, Giddens asserts that people are now imbued with a new sense of agency and responsibility for their own success and ultimately, their own survival. This shift in responsibility off of employers and institutions has led individual members of society to understand their identities as ongoing, "reflexive projects", meaning they are made personally responsible for constantly shaping and monitoring their efforts to self-improve, and for choosing the most suitable path ahead from a myriad of potential opportunities.[12]

---

[11] Anthony Giddens, Modernity and Self-Identity, (Stanford University Press, 1991), 2.
[12] Ibid.

These theories provided by Giddens focus on new approaches to selfhood in late modernity, yet they are inextricably linked to larger structural changes in the organization of work in late capitalist societies like the United States. particularly with the rise of non-standard, contingent jobs. These forms of work rose to prominence in the 1980s and 1990s, alongside the growth of part-time employment and service sector jobs that emerged as more women entered the workforce. This was also the same period of political adoptions of neoliberal policies, which mobilized the deregulation of private businesses in favor of a free-market economic system.[13] Since then, freelance work has become even more prevalent through the emergence of digital platforms and the subsequent rise of platform-mediated gig work.[14] The advent of platform-based companies like Airbnb, Uber, Postmates and Taskrabbit, as well as corporate social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter have created a way for people to generate income outside of more formal labor structures within the traditional economy. This new form of work is easily accessible to anyone with a smartphone (which is now 85% of Americans[15]) and gives workers a sense of flexibility and choice in how many hours they want to work, something that is not typically afforded by conventional models of secure, long-term employment.[16] However, platform-mediated gig work is highly precarious, and makes workers responsible for managing a wide range of potential risks (injury, damage to assets, harassment, poor treatment from customers, to name a few) that were once shouldered by employers or the state.[17][18][19]

---

[13] Alex de Ruyter, Martyn Brown and John Burgess, "Gig Work and the Fourth Industrial Revolution," *Journal of International Affairs* 72, no.1 (2018): 37-50, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26588341.

[14] Steven Vallas and Juliet Schor, "What Do Platforms Do? Understanding the Gig Economy." *Annual Review of Sociology* 46, no.1 (July 2020): 273–94, doi:10.1146/annurev-soc-121919-054857.

[15]"Demographics of Mobile Device Ownership and Adoption in the United States," Pew Research Center, 2021.

[16] Juliet Schor et al., "Dependence and precarity in the platform economy," *Theory & Society* 49, (2020): 833–861.

[17]Isak Ladegaard, Alexandrea Ravenelle, Juliet Schor, "Provider Vulnerability in the Sharing Economy," (2017) Unpublished paper. Boston College.

[18]Alexandrea Ravenelle, *Hustle and Gig: Struggling and Surviving in the Sharing Economy*, (University of California Press, 2019), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvcwp0kc.

[19] Alex Rosenblat, *Uberland: How Algorithms Are Rewriting the Rules of Work*, (University of California Press, 2018), http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctv5cgbm3.

Now that many of these platforms are over a decade old, a significant amount of scholarly research has been developed on the subject of platform-mediated gig work. Sociologists have created detailed typologies of platform workers, separating them into categories based on skill level, the type of work they are performing, if it is being performed online or offline, and whether it is based in a local area or can be done from anywhere in the world.[20] While this typology is helpful in understanding the wide range of work made available through platforms, it is more important in this context to consider the theories that have emerged regarding the power wielded by the platforms themselves. Juliet Schor and Steven Vallas use four metaphors to distinguish the emerging argumentative campus of sociological literature on platform work: platforms as incubators of entrepreneurialism, as digital cages, as accelerants of precarity, and as chameleons adapting to pre-established work environments.[21] The first camp argues that platforms benefit workers who use them because they foster horizontal business networks that decentralize traditional labor hierarchies and encourage individuals to pursue entrepreneurial ventures like building their own businesses and self-promoting. This is not always the case, as platforms are their own businesses, and therefore have the ability to scale and monopolize their role in facilitating the exchange of labor within a particular market. The second camp makes an argument that is opposite to the first, positing that algorithms exert immense control over how workers use certain platforms, and have effectively replaced the need for human managers. However, studies have found that platform workers, specifically ride-hail drivers and food couriers, have been able to find creative ways to resist algorithmic control. The third emphasizes the image of the platform worker as someone who is dependent on platforms as their main source of income, but this has also been countered by a number of studies that found

[20]Steven Vallas and Juliet Schor, "What Do Platforms Do? Understanding the Gig Economy." *Annual Review of Sociology* 46, no.1 (July 2020): 273–94. doi:10.1146/annurev-soc-121919-054857.
[21] Ibid, 274

that most participants were earning supplemental income from platform-mediated gig work. The fourth and final camp is much less prominent, but argues that the dynamics of platforms depend on the institutional landscape in which they are situated, meaning platforms operate differently depending on the legal constraints of particular countries.[22] All of these approaches hold valuable insights, but have certain limitations that run the risk of oversimplifying the organizational powers of a wide range of global platforms, and the specific positionalities, motivations, and interests of the workers who participate in them. Schor and Vallas argue instead that platforms represent a "distinctly new form of economic activity", where they act not as managers of a specific group of workers, but rather as a digital infrastructure that connects employers, workers, and customers.[23] This is a particularly helpful framework for understanding the labor done by micro-influencers on social media platforms. Social media are used by brands (the employers) to connect with micro-influencers (the workers), and by both brands and micro-influencers to connect with a targeted audience (the customers). In exploring the relationship between brands and micro-influencers, this study supports the argument that businesses utilize platforms to source workers, and that platforms then relinquish regulatory control over these interactions, and expands the viability of this argument by offering first hand accounts from social media content creators that highlight the unequal and under regulated business relationship between brands and micro-influencers.

Social Media and Self-Branding

Sociological research on the subject of platform-mediated gig work has given very little attention to the productive labor happening on social media platforms. This is somewhat

[22] Ibid, 274-281.
[23] Ibid, 282.

understandable, as users of these platforms are not typically conceived of as workers, but rather as people looking to connect with friends and family, find online communities, or seek information or entertainment. However, this conventional wisdom of social media users, and the current affordances of social media in general, is extremely limiting. Social media platforms have become some of the most important spaces of creative and cultural activity today, with an estimated 3.6 billion users involved in the creation and exchange of user-generated content.[24]

While other platforms are marketed as providing a service to individual users, social media platforms service marketing companies by selling them user data. While this exchange is happening privately, users are also adopting social media platforms to construct their own digital identities that are then made publicly available to be viewed by others. The construction of one's identity on social media is supported by Giddens' conceptualization of the self in late modernity as a 'reflexive project'.[25] Building a public identity on social media invites users to put a considerable amount of effort into thinking about how they want to present themselves to the world. Users can change their usernames or profile photos, delete pictures and post new ones, and choose how to arrange their profiles in an effort to display a particular identity that casts them in a positive light. This encourages users to think of their identities as not only something that they can control, but something that they are personally responsible for constantly adjusting in an effort to improve themselves. Social media also allows us to broadcast our offline personal accomplishments that support the identity we are trying to portray online. Hey, look! I'm at the gym! Hey, look! I'm reading a book! Hey, look I got a promotion! Hey, look! I got a new haircut! You get the idea. Giddens writes, "The reflexive project of the self, which consists in the

[24] "Number of social media users worldwide from 2017 to 2025," Statista, April 2022, https://www.statista.com/statistics/278414/number-of-worldwide-social-network-users/.0many%20people%20use%20social,almost%204.41%20billion%20in%202025.
[25] Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, (Stanford University Press, 1991), 2.

sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised biological narratives, takes place in the context of multiple choice as filtered through abstract systems."[26] Social media is not only a way to create an ideal version of ourselves; it is a way to provide proof that we are constantly working on making ourselves even better.

Sociologist Alice Marwick argues that the self-improvement and self-promotional principles of social media are directly influenced by the environment in which these platforms were created. [27] In 2013, she did an ethnographic study of the Silicon Valley tech scene, which is home to the headquarters of various social media companies and the epicenter of venture-backed startup companies in the US. In her research, Marwick found that young professionals in the tech industry used social media platforms as a personal and professional marketing tools, through which they would "adopt self-consciously constructed personas and market themselves, like brands or celebrities to an audience or fanbase."[28] She positions these efforts as strategies of self-branding, where workers seek to shape their online identities to set them up for professional success. Further, she points out that this approach to social media has been disseminated through the platforms, and has been adopted by users around the world.[29] The central idea of self-branding is that anyone can benefit from having a marketable public identity that is responsive to the needs or interests of an audience, and that success in late modernity is not just measured by direct financial gains, but by status, attention and visibility online.[30] Marwick's argument is essential to understanding the power of social media as a self-branding tool, but is

---

[26] Ibid.
[27] Alice Marwick, "Introduction" In *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, and Branding in the Social Media Age*, (Yale University Press, 2013), 7.
[28] Ibid, 5.
[29] Ibid, 7.
[30] Susie Khamis, Lawrence Ang and Raymond Welling, "Self-branding, 'micro-celebrity' and the rise of social media influencers," Celebrity Studies 8, no. 2 (2017): 191-208, https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2016.1218292

only one component of a larger discourse happening around the self-promotional efforts of freelance workers in culture, media, technology, and creative industries.

Aspirational Labor & Free Labor

In her book *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love,* Brooke Erin Duffy makes the argument that social media is used by bloggers and influencers to perform what she refers to as "aspirational labor". She draws this conclusion from her ethnographic study of fashion bloggers and influencers, who perform aspirational labor through both the strategic construction of their identity on social media, and by promoting branded products in an effort to be noticed by potential employers to get hired for paid work in the exclusive and glamorous fashion industry. Aspirational labor is defined by Duffy as, "(mostly) uncompensated, independent work that is propelled by the much-venerated ideal of *getting paid to do what you love*".[31]

The cultural ideology of pursuing a career path aligned with one's personal passions (the motto of "do what you love") has been linked to broader changes that emerged with the new economy, particularly with the rise of precarious work arrangements and career trajectories being even less stable and predictable.[32] Passion for one's career has been found to be a common characteristic amongst entrepreneurs and freelance workers in creative industries, where participants must find ways to "justify or reframe [the] negative effects" of their insecure economic positions.[33] Duffy's study focuses on how this ideology motivates bloggers and content creators to perform aspirational labor, but it can also be applied to workers in other industries.

---

[31] Brooke Erin Duffy, *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love: Gender, Social Media, and Aspirational Work*, (Yale University Press, 2017), 4.
[32] Lindsay J. DePalma, "The Passion Paradigm: Professional Adherence to and Consequences of the Ideology of 'Do What You Love,'" *Sociological Forum* 36, no. 1 (March 2021): 134–58. doi:10.1111/socf.12665.
[33] Ibid, 138.

Notably, the aspirational labor theory is not just a relevant explanation for understanding the work of social media content creators. Studies of freelance workers in the culture, media, and technology industries have found that individuals in these areas perform all kinds of free labor in an effort to gain status or exposure in their respective fields.[34][35][36] In this research, self-promotional work has been framed by scholars as "free labor", because it is unpaid, yet produces surplus value for the industry at large.[37] The labor theory of surplus value was originated by Marx, who used the concept to explain the origins of worker exploitation under capitalism.[38]

While aspirational labor and free labor are different approaches to understanding why workers consent to performing uncompensated work, these theories are essentially two sides of the same coin. Take for example, an unpaid internship. Unpaid interns are typically understood to be significantly less experienced than paid employees, and perform tasks for their employers free of charge because their compensation is framed as the experience that they garner from the opportunity to work in their desired field. But interns are often performing tasks that significantly reduce the workload of formal workers, and are therefore contributing value to the everyday operations of their workplace. Duffy's definition of unpaid work highlights why workers choose to perform free labor (aspiring to enter into a particular career field), whereas the free labor perspective reveals how these efforts benefit the formal industries that people are attempting to break into. Both approaches are connected to how freelance and less-experienced

---

[34] Alexandre Frenette, "Making the Intern Economy: Role and Career Challenges of the Music Industry Intern," Work and Occupations 40 no. 4, (2013): 364-97.
[35] David Hesmondhalgh, "User-Generated Content, Free Labour and the Cultural Industries," *Ephemera* 10 no. 3, (2010): 267-84.
[36] Gina Neff, Venture Labor: Work and the Burden of Risk in Innovative Industries, (MIT Press, 2012).
[37] Ashley Mears. "Working for Free in the VIP: Relational Work and the Production of Consent." *American Sociological Review* 80, no. 6 (2015): 1099–1122. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24756410.
[38] G.A. Cohen, "The Labor Theory of Value and the Concept of Exploitation." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 8, no. 4 (1979): 338–60, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2265068.

workers manage risk and precarity by performing uncompensated labor with the hope of it "paying off" later in their professional careers.[39]

Free labor done by people both on and offline, and in both formal and informal work organizations, may also be compensated in the form of gifts or perks.[40] In her study of VIP clubs and the young women who work for free for club promoters, Ashley Mears found that freelance workers in informal work scenarios are more likely to consent to being paid in-kind because of the "relational work" happening between employers and employees to construct the work as leisurely and fun, rather than as laborious.[41]

Freebies, free stuff, and gifts hold significant meaning, yet are often an overlooked part of relational exchange within economic life.[42] Ashley Mears and Noah McClain argue that there are multiple meanings of 'free' depending on the situational context in which items are being given and received. They present Marcel Mauss' theory that gift-giving always comes with a certain obligation of reciprocity, but contend that this is not the case in scenarios involving high-status individuals, like celebrities at award shows who receive free swag as "a form of compensation for the celebrities' implied endorsements, and companies write off the giveaways as promotional expenses."[43] When gift-giving is not perceived as a form of payment from the perspective of the recipient, as is the case with unpaid women in VIP clubs and celebrities at award shows, the exchange of value between giver and recipient is rendered practically invisible. Duffy found that fashion bloggers in her study were often 'gifted' products by branded companies, but that these items did not necessarily come without any strings attached. She writes, "there is an

---

[39] Brooke Erin Duffy, "Entrepreneurial Wishes and Career Dreams," in *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love: Gender, Social Media, and Aspirational Work*, (Yale University Press, 2017).
[40]Ashley Mears. "Working for Free in the VIP: Relational Work and the Production of Consent." *American Sociological Review* 80, no. 6 (2015): 1099–1122. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24756410.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Noah McClain and Ashley Mears, "Free to those who can afford it: The everyday affordance of privilege," *Poetics* 40, no.2 (April 2012): 133-149.
[43] Ibid, 5.

expectation–if not an outright contract–that in exchange for the bounty, individuals will favorably review these products on their social media sites" and that they are expected to do so "in an authentic way."[44]

Duffy's conclusion is more closely related to Mauss' theory that gifts generate an expectation of reciprocity, but is complicated by the fact that influencers are often perceived as high-status individuals in these scenarios. From Mears' perspective, this would mean that they are less obligated to do anything in return, but according to Duffy's findings, there is a clear expectation from brands that influencers will promote them for free, and do so in a way that appears honest and natural to their followers. Part of the effort of this study is to further investigate Duffy's findings to see if beauty, skincare, and fashion micro-influencers on Instagram also faced similar pressures when they were gifted 'free' products by brands.

Emotional Labor

Because social media users are both the creators and consumers of online content, the boundaries between labor and leisure are easily blurred in the social media landscape and can be difficult to separate. Duffy found that this blurriness presented particular issues for bloggers and influencers in her study, who faced a number of behavioral contradictions when trying to figure out how to present themselves online as both casual creatives and aspiring professionals. The main patterns of contradiction that she found in her interviews with participants were framed as such: (1) authenticity vs. self promotion, (2) creativity vs commerce, and (3) hobby vs. professional status.[45] All three of these dichotomies reveal how the work of social media bloggers and influencers demand that they establish and maintain an online identity that is

[44] Brooke Erin Duffy, *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love: Gender, Social Media, and Aspirational Work*, (Yale University Press, 2017), 158.
[45] Ibid, 7.

inherently contradictory. They are expected to appear as both genuine and self-branded, self-expressive but commercially-aligned, and free-spirited but also career-driven. While one side of this identity is aligned with more personal desires, the other is rooted from the desire to fulfill market demands in order to achieve professional success.

In her analysis, Duffy argues that authenticity is a key component of the influencer brand, which requires participants to do a considerable amount of emotional labor to maintain an appearance and personality online that may not match their true feelings behind the scenes.[46] The term emotional labor was famously first introduced by Arlie Hochschild in her book *The Managed Heart*, where she defines it as "the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display", adding that this can be observed in certain work modern contexts where, " emotional labor is sold for a wage and therefore has exchange value."[47] Hoschild uses the case of flight attendants to demonstrate how emotional labor has become essentially a job requirement for women in the formal sector of the service industry, where they are required to display a controlled set of emotions towards customers that are not necessarily aligned with their true feelings, which may result in feelings of alienation or "emotive dissonance".[48] While Hoschild's theory of emotional labor has been applied to numerous studies of the service industry and beyond, Duffy is one of the first to consider how fashion bloggers and influencers face similar demands in their work on social media platforms.[49] This study will add to the investigation of emotional labor in the informal work context of social media influencing, linking the responsibility of constructing the 'authentic self' on social media to the external

---

[46] Ibid, 134.
[47] Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*, (University of California Press, 2012), 7.
[48] Ibid, 90.
[49] Brooke Erin Duffy, *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love: Gender, Social Media, and Aspirational Work*, (Yale University Press, 2017), 72.

pressures of customers and consumers to find micro-influencers trustworthy, knowledgeable, friendly, and relatable.

What makes the emotional labor of social media creators different from that of workers in formal industries is that influencers are personally responsible for managing their own 'correct' emotional countenance that brands and audiences are seeking. Aspiring influencers do this without the guarantee of a paycheck. This is not the case in other formal service jobs where workers are sometimes trained (like the flight attendants in Hochschild's study), and regularly held directly accountable for their emotional presentation by managers or other organizational superiors, and their compensation is secured for as long as they remain employed. However the two groups are still very similar in that emotion management, and the presentation of an authentic emotional state that workers construct and maintain is seen as imperative to achieving professional success.

Taking the valuable insights provided by theories of self-branding, aspirational labor/free labor, and emotional labor and situating them within the context of broader shifts in work organization in late modernity, I concieve micro-influencers as group of individuals whose motivations for building and maintaining a social media presence and creating brand-sponsored content are underpinned by these larger concepts. This study uses the case of micro-influencers to examine how these ideas thrive within the social media landscape and in the offline lived experiences of the participants.

RESEARCH METHODS

Over the course of four months, I conducted 9 confidential, semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions with beauty, fashion, and skincare micro-influencers on Instagram. I chose to focus on micro-influencers in these specific categories for a couple of reasons. First, beauty and fashion are two of the biggest consumer markets in the world. The beauty (cosmetic) industry, of which the skincare industry is a subset, is estimated to be worth $532 billion globally,[50] while the fashion industry is estimated to be worth $2.5 trillion.[51] Micro-influencers in the niche categories that correlate with the products being bought and sold in these highly profitable industries contribute to their growth by working as direct-to-consumer advertisers on their personal social media pages. Second, micro-influencers in these categories are predominantly women, and drawing on previous studies that emphasize the importance of using a gendered lens to examine the changing conditions of work, I believe that studying another area where the labor is mostly performed by women will contribute to the body of research that uses a similar approach.

I chose to recruit participants through Instagram because it is the social media platform where brand-sponsored content is most prevalent today.[52] It is also a highly visual medium made up of personal profiles with photos and short video clips, and the format makes it easy to search for specific types of content by using hashtags or key phrases. My initial method for finding influencers was by searching through hashtags, which on Instagram are used to categorize and search for content from any public account where that particular hashtag has been used. In 2019, the Federal Trade Commision required that influencers must disclose if their posts are sponsored in order to maintain transparency for their audience by adding hashtags like #ad,

[50] Pamela N. Danziger, "6 Trends Shaping the Future of the $532B Beauty Business," Forbes, 2019.
[51] "The State of Fashion 2022," McKinsey & Company, 2022.
[52] Sydney Bradley, "How Much Money Instagram Influencers Make: Real Examples," Business Insider, 2021..

#paidpromotion, or #sponsoredpost in their caption[53], so I suspected that searching for posts with these hashtags would be a generative method. However, this method had one major setback. The influencer demographic is expansive, meaning that hashtags are used by every single possible type of influencers, not just within the beauty, skincare, and skincare niche categories. This made it difficult to find enough influencers within these specific categories.

When I realized that the hashtag method was not yielding enough influencer accounts in these areas, I shifted to using the search function on Instagram to find users who self-identified as micro-influencers of content creators in their profile bios (an account biography is a brief description of a user at the top of their profile, and typically includes a name, job title, and other identifying information). I then looked through their profile to see if they had any brand-sponsored posts, a defining factor of influencing work that is essential to the interests of this study. This was a much more effective method for allowing me to find micro-influencers to connect with, but it too had some limitations. It prevented me from finding any aspiring micro-influencers who had yet to advertise a branded product on their page, as well as any user who had done sponsored posts but did not self-identify as either a micro-influencer or content creator in their profile description. The majority of participants were instead selected because they self-identified as influencers or micro-influencers in their account bios, and/or had at least one post on their page promoting a brand. Interestingly enough, there were many individuals who proclaimed that they were beauty influencers, but had no sponsored posts. This just goes to show that the title of 'influencer' has a certain social value, and is freely used as a self-descriptor for individuals hoping to reach a public audience on social media.

I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews to generate more findings for qualitative analysis. Interviews allowed for free-flowing conversations, and the semi-structured framework

[53] "Disclosures 101 for Social Media Influencers," Federal Trade Commission, 2019.

provided space and flexibility for participants to share their stories without the pressure of adhering to a strict set of questions. Participants seemed eager to discuss each topic in as much detail as possible and answer questions quickly and ‘accurately’ once they learned that I was an undergraduate student doing research for her senior thesis. It is possible that this made participants feel discomfort at times when they were unable to provide specific answers regarding technical aspects of the work. However, our age similarities and shared knowledge of social media platforms helped to re-establish a more casual and conversational dynamic during interviews. All interviews were conducted through video calls on Zoom and lasted approximately one hour.

One final limitation to this study was the small number of participants (9). This smaller sample size means that there is a limit to the variability of accounts regarding the experience of micro-influencing. However, the personal accounts from participants provide a critical window into the nature of this work, and how women are navigating social media during a time where an underregulated, underreported, and potentially exploitative labor process is forming.

The women in this study were between the ages of 22-29, with one participant who was 37. Reported annual incomes revealed that most women would be considered middle-upper class, and the majority held a bachelor's degree from a four-year university in the US.

PART ONE: DIGITAL IDENTITIES: SHAPING THE SAFE-FOR-WORK SELF

Starting Out: Different Approaches to Influencing

> It just started as personal, like how everyone uses it, you know, just to connect with friends. And then when I started seeing girls, you know, turning this into a career, I followed a bunch of influencers that inspired me and that I loved from YouTube or from just like anywhere online that I found on Instagram again. And I was just like, I can do this too. So I just tried to replicate what they are doing because eventually I want to make it into a business and make money off of it. -Lexi

Lexi is a 26-year-old fashion micro-influencer from southern California. She has her bachelor's degree in communications, and when I spoke with her last she was working full-time as a nanny. Lexi's Instagram account consists of an array of aesthetically-pleasing photos where she is seen posing in trendy outfits in front of various beachy landscapes. Lexi shared with me that she has "always loved social media" and kept a fashion blog on a website when she was in college. She said that she "liked the idea of having an online identity", explaining that she thought of the internet as a way to display a personal portfolio that reflected her love for fashion. When Lexi saw that there were other young women out there who had found a way to make money from their social media presences by becoming influencers, she jumped at the chance to do the same. Although there is nothing innate or "natural" about posting pictures of yourself online, Lexi expressed that for her, it felt that way. "I thought the influencing thing suited me really well because I love fashion and I love helping people and I've always felt like a leader for young girls." Lexi expressed that influencing was the perfect job for her because it aligned with the things that she was already passionate about. Her phrasing suggested that she believed her success in the industry would come naturally because of the qualities that she already possessed as a person.

Lexi also said that she followed a lot of fashion bloggers growing up, whom she admired for their content and ability to monetize their online presence. She had been using her Instagram to post outfit photos for years, but only six months prior to our conversation was when Lexi decided to make a conscious switch. “I was like, okay, I’m going to take this seriously because it’s obviously something that has been building for a long time”. Another fashion influencer that I spoke with named Kelly had a similar response when asked about her initial interest in influencing.

> I started on social media, taking it really seriously, I would say two years ago, but I've always really been obsessed with all things, social media, since I was like 11 years old. I started on Tumblr and I think that I was always inspired by the influencers. They wouldn't be considered influencers, but like the girls that would just do really cool aesthetic shots on Tumblr and they would tell their life stories. Those were like the first girls I ever saw really taking social media and making a brand for themselves. And I thought it was super inspiring. And I also just loved how they were able to teach us, influence a group of people they didn't even realize they influenced.

Kelly is another fashion and lifestyle influencer from California. She has her bachelor’s degree in Political Studies and Communications, and when I spoke with her she was working full-time on the social media marketing team of a large-scale beauty and skincare brand. The idea of influencing was not a reality to Kelly until she had more free time to think about her future after graduating from college. Her initial plan had been to go to law school, but seeing other women building their own businesses from social media influencing pushed her to change pathways, causing her to pivot to working in marketing while creating content to share on her social media pages in an effort to become an influencer. The choice to ditch law school befuddled her parents, who had no idea what influencing was and whether or not it was a legitimate form of work.

> I think the biggest hurdle was my parents because they wanted me to go to law school and I was like, no. I like marketing and strategizing. And they are older, so they didn't

> know that that is a lucrative career. And I was explaining to them and showing them this, and they are starting to learn more. And now they are like a hundred percent supportive and it's so exciting cause they get it and they're like, 'there's money in it' and it's not just money, but it's like, they see that I'm happy and they love that because I was not happy in law school.

When Lexi and Kelly spoke about taking social media "seriously", they were referring to changing their approach to social media in order to turn it from just a hobby into a potential source of income, hoping to one day create a business out of their 'personal brands'. For the influencers I spoke with, many of whom had only recently taken direct action to pursue this work, early ideas of what influencing was and how to do it well were shaped by the influencers that came before them– YouTube beauty gurus, fashion bloggers who transitioned from writing on personal websites to creating content on social media platforms like Instagram, and Tumblr girls– mostly young women who rose over the years to celebrity-levels of internet stardom, and signaled to their audiences that making content on social media was not only fun and easy, but could be highly lucrative. Lexi and Kelly's approach to social media exemplifies broader contemporary culture's image of success as the risk-taking entrepreneur, who finds a way to take their creative passions and turn them into a business.[54]

Another way that participants expressed their initial interest in creating content on social media had nothing to do with career aspirations. Rather, they framed their social media projects as a way to creatively share the knowledge and expertise in a subject area that they were passionate about. Jess, a 29-year-old content creator from Connecticut changed her personal Instagram account to a page dedicated to reviewing skincare, makeup, and hair products after years of working as a salesperson at a beauty supply store in her hometown. From that experience, Jess learned a lot about hair, makeup, and skincare products, and frequently made

[54] Brooke Erin Duffy, *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love: Gender, Social Media, and Aspirational Work*, (Yale University Press, 2017), 2.

product recommendations to customers, friends, family, and coworkers. After she quit her job and started working as a social media manager for a local retail boutique, she found herself missing the beauty industry.

> I wasn't doing beauty anymore and I really missed it and everyone was coming to me for beauty advice. Everyone was asking me, you know, um, what should I use, what should I pick? Like, you know, help me with this, help me with that. And I just was like, you know what, I can take this online. Like I'm already doing it for my friends and coworkers. Like why not just share it with the world and get to use my photography degree a little bit and get a little creative that way?

Like Lexi and Kelly, Jess also grew up watching and admiring the women who built successful careers off of their social media presences. However, Jess did not describe her decision to turn her personal profile into a page focused on beauty tips as a career move. Instead, she saw Instagram as a platform where she could use the skills that she had acquired from working at the beauty supply store to educate more women about the efficacy of certain beauty products, something that she noticed she was already doing for close friends and family offline, and use her photography skills to take high-quality photos with good lighting. Even though Jess was not directly seeking opportunities to work with brands when she first started out, a number of companies reached out to her only a few months after she started posting product reviews more consistently. Anna, a 22-year-old skincare content creator, said that she was not even aware that brand deals were a possibility when she started posting skincare product reviews and advice on her Instagram. Like Jess, she saw social media as a way for her to share knowledge about skin care products that helped her treat her acne.

> I started learning how to properly care for my skin and I wanted to share the products I had found in the drugstore or if I went to the beauty supply and found a good deal. I wanted to share about it. And then I saw things like Sephora and Ulta. I said, oh, there's people that know about this stuff. And I wanted to share my point of view on that brand and see how people were going to interact with me.

Like Jess, Anna framed her approach to social media as both a creative outlet and an opportunity to share knowledge about beauty products with a larger audience. Another skincare content creator, Jenny, shared a similar justification with Anna as to why she began sharing skincare tips and product recommendations on her personal social media page. Jenny had been struggling to find ways to care for her skin, and was trying out a number of different products to help with her breakouts. During this process, started posting photos of herself and some of the products she liked on Instagram as a way to document her journey.

> I was trying to learn more about skincare. I had really bad cystic acne and for the most part, I was saving things, like a lot of information about skincare ingredients that would help me and my sister. And that was mainly what it was. And every day I would do a diary saying things like, 'this is what's happening in my life and this is the routine that I used' and things like that.

For participants like Jess, Anna and Jenny, who did not change their approach to social media with the intention of becoming paid influencers, they felt as if the opportunity to work with brands sort of fell into their laps–none of the women thought of social media as a way to make money at first, or at least did not express that that was their primary goal. To them, platforms served as creative outlets where they could share their skills and knowledge about skincare and makeup with other women who had similar interests. It was only after brands started reaching out that the concept of influencing as a job became more of a tangible reality, and the women began thinking differently about the potential of their online presence. Like a number of fashion bloggers in Brooke Erin Duffy's study, these women described their success with brand deals as largely unplanned, instead justifying their social media production as "fundamentally self-expressive".[55] Although the micro-influencers in this study had similar creative interests in posting online, they also acknowledged that sharing tips and suggestions that

[55] Brooke Erin Duffy, *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love: Gender, Social Media, and Aspirational Work*, (Yale University Press, 2017), 53.

they had learned on their own with other women on social media was an equally motivating factor. This finding was consistent amongst almost all participants, regardless of whether or not they expressed the desire to monetize their online presence. This ethos fits quite well within the "sharing" ideology of the platform economy. The platform economy has also been commonly referred to by scholars as the "sharing economy", where "actors are largely motivated by factors other than profit, e.g., altruistic values related to sharing, helping others, and contributing to a more sustainable way of life."[56]Although this approach is typically used to explain why people utilize platforms like AirBnb or Uber to share their homes or use their cars to provide rides, it can easily be extended to consider the motivations behind content creation for micro-influencers on social media platforms, who are motivated to share knowledge with their followers as members of a global peer-to-peer network.

Jess, Anna and Jenny did not acknowledge that what they were doing could potentially get the attention of brands at the beginning, but their accounts demonstrate that they were already working diligently to post on social media consistently, talking about and making recommendations for branded products to their followers, and presenting themselves online as friendly, authentic, and trustworthy. Like Kelly and Lexi, they were already taking their social media presences seriously, but just did not think of it as a career pathway until brands started noticing.

Unlike other forms of work that require a candidate to submit a job application or resume, most of the brand work for micro-influencers happened when brands messaged participants directly to ask if they would be interested in doing a deal. However, these interactions were clearly not where the work began. Regardless of whether or not micro-influencers perceived

[56] Christopher Laurell and Christian Sandström, "The sharing economy in social media: Analyzing Tensions between market and non-market logics," *Technological Forecasting & Social Change* 125, (2017), 59, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2017.05.038

social media as a pathway to future work opportunities, as a creative outlet, or an educational tool (or all of the above), they all put a considerable amount of effort into creating consistent, high-quality, informative, and aesthetically pleasing content for their followers. Many framed these acts as a way to pair their creative interests with larger moral missions like women's empowerment, which in a consumer society has also become an important brand marketing strategy that suggests to women that purchasing new products will help them move forward on their journeys in excavating their best selves. This narrative is historically the most resonant in the beauty and fashion industries, where women are recognized as the primary customer base. Self-improvement in these areas of commerce is focused on 'correcting' or 'embellishing' the external self, which is supposedly meant to lead to internal improvements. This can also be seen with the rise of the self-care movement, which was quickly commercialized through social media, and adopted as a marketing tactic by businesses for selling face masks and other skincare and bath products as tools to help people 'relax' and 'unwind' from the stress of daily life. In theorizing the central characteristics of late modernity, sociologist Zygmut Bauman argued that our self-improvement efforts are embedded in our high rates of consumption, where achievement of the actualized self is dependent on constantly acquiring the newest tools and technologies.[57]

Micro-influencers already represent this ideal personhood (buying new skincare products to 'fix' acne, purchasing the latest high-end foundation to cover imperfections and feel more confident, etc.), which is also in conjunction with the commercial interests of the beauty and fashion industries to increase sales. More importantly, influencers instill their admiration for self-improvement through consumption within their followers. The way that influencers construct their online identities, the way that they "brand" themselves, is therefore already

[57] Zygmut Bauman, "Introduction: On Living in a Liquid Modern World" In *Liquid Life*, (Polity Press, 2005), 514-521.

aligned with the brand ideology that many makeup, skincare, and fashion companies look to achieve in their own marketing.

Keeping It Real: Self-branding and authenticity

Self-branding is when individuals take marketing strategies traditionally used by businesses and apply them to themselves. It requires ongoing self-monitoring in an effort to construct an authentic self-image to appeal to a particular consumer audience.[58] The participants in this study are performers of front-facing labor on social media, where their work requires that they take part in a careful construction of their identity in order to self-promote and maintain the attention of their followers. At the same time, social media is a digital environment where influencers have come under scrutiny over the years for posting photos in which they edit their physical appearance to hide imperfections, or for attempting to make their lives appear more luxurious or unattainable than they truly are. Because the relationship between beauty, fashion, and skincare micro-influencers and their audiences is built on the concept of trust, as well as an understanding that the influencers have expert opinions they are willing to share at zero cost, many influencers in the study expressed the desire to be genuine with their audience. This expression was associated with a willingness to share personal information (typically unrelated to brand work) in order to maintain the appearance of being open and truthful. When I asked Anna about whether or not she felt that she presented herself differently online than in her daily life, she responded,

> I like to present myself the most genuine I can be, because I don't want to reflect something that is fake. I want to show them my ups. I want to show them my downs. I want to show them when I'm successful. I want to show them when I'm a failure, because I want to say to them that I am human, not [just] an account, like showing photos and all that, so they can see like I'm human too.

[58] Alice Marwick, "Introduction" In *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, and Branding in the Social Media Age*, (Yale University Press, 2013), 7.

For influencers like Anna, coming off as “fake” was seen as detrimental, as it had the potential to negatively impact their relationship with their followers. There was a common understanding amongst participants that influencing was a stigmatized practice; that the women who did it were perceived as shallow, vapid, and narcissistic, and were accused of photoshopped their bodies and faces, viewed unfavorably as anything but ‘real’ women. As a micro-influencer, Anna expressed that she felt personally responsible for marketing herself as genuine on social media, merging her self-branding efforts with a consistent emotional presentation of authenticity. In working with micro-influencers, brands are then able to commodify this emotion work in order to reach customers who have already been conditioned to trust the influencer, and therefore trust their purchasing recommendations.

Kelly shared a similar account, expressing how in recent years she had made the choice to be more ‘authentic’ on her page.

> I feel like I'm a lot more authentic with what I post now. I feel like two years ago I was not that person. And, um, I was trying to create a facade, but it's like, now I'm like, I'm just going to post. This is who I am. It's realistic. Like I'm just a 23 year old woman trying to figure out life. I'm not going to hide what I do for work. I'm not going to hide whatever, like it is what it is now. And I think the more authentic I got, the easier it is to post and create content now.

While authenticity and openness were seen by many as important qualities to showcase in order to be successful at micro-influencing, there were a number of participants who also shared their justifications for keeping certain things about themselves and their personal lives private. Elizabeth, a 37-year-old beauty influencer from Massachusetts, talked about how her focus on luxury beauty (a niche associated with high-end makeup and skincare products, as opposed to inexpensive drugstore cosmetics) required her to maintain a certain appearance that was different from how she looked when she was not making content for her YouTube and Instagram pages.

Similar to employees at luxury beauty counters, Elizabeth's put-togetherness was very much a part of the experience that she was selling to her followers.

Elizabeth joked that her followers probably assume that she wakes up in the morning on silk bed sheets and walks around her home in "a fabulous robe with feathers", when in reality she is woken up by the hand of her toddler-aged daughter hitting her in the face. "It's very real", she said, marking a boundary between the true dynamics of her personal life and the high-end persona that she displayed online. Elizabeth also expressed that she chose not to share much about her personal life on her social media pages, with concern that doing so would open the floodgates for hateful and judgmental comments about things that were completely unrelated to beauty or makeup.

> I don't share a lot of my parenting or my marriage because you know, opinions about that are not wanted here. I don't want to know what you think of that. And, um, I also just don't feel like it's a part of what I'm like, my brand, and what I'm, what I'm I'm looking to focus on and that's how I like to keep it, um, and just keep the family stuff or the private stuff, private.

Elizabeth had several reasons for not making certain elements of her private life public online. First, she was concerned about receiving comments about her relationship with her husband and her parenting style. Influencers, regardless of the number of followers that they have, are potential targets of hateful comments simply because they cater to a public audience on the internet. Elizabeth shared that being too open with people on social media felt dangerous to her, as it gave people online (followers or not) the opportunity to be overly critical and sometimes, just straight-up cruel. Further, Elizabeth felt that sharing pictures of or talking about her family did not align with her personal brand. Elizabeth's personal brand, which she shaped within the larger niche category of 'luxury beauty', was very much aligned with the interests of

both brands and her loyal followers. In addition to branding herself as a ‘luxury beauty enthusiast’, Elizabeth described her personal mission on social media as a way to help Black women find high-quality makeup products that worked well for them. She discussed how there is a notable lack of products on the market that compliment the complexion of darker-skinned women, and that she thought it important to share her discoveries with other women online. While other influencers talked about being as open as possible about who they are as people offline in an effort to appear authentic to their audiences, Elizabeth’s approach was to keep her work on social media and her personal life separate, adding that she preferred to be as professional as she could, “because I look at this as a job”. Elizabeth was amongst a smaller cohort of respondents who expressed wanting to keep their personal lives and social media presence separate with the concern that giving too much away was distracting from the real task at hand.

Ruby, a 23-year-old haircare and fashion content creator, was first reached out to by brands when she started working on curating her personal profile in an effort to promote herself as an actor. Now, Ruby works with multiple brands and has gained more followers since sharing a series of posts about her hair care journey as a woman of mixed race. When I asked her what she learned through micro-influencing in regards to choosing what to share online and what to keep private, Ruby expressed similar reservations to Elizabeth regarding safety and unwarranted hate comments.

> I guess not putting too much out there. I feel like when I had way less followers, I could do that, but I feel like nowadays I don't. So really being careful about what I'm saying, especially about my life, just, you know, for my safety, but also for my sanity, I guess. Cause I feel like sometimes if you share too much, like it can, I don't know, like people can like to use that or in general, I like keeping some things private because I don't like how it feels with people like knowing about it.

The different responses from influencers about their approach to self-branding on social media is aligned with the argument made by sociologist Alice Marwick that self-branding as "inherently contradictory".[59] In their work, micro-influencers face this incongruity between "authenticity" and business-targeted self-presentation, which requires them to constantly be considering how their presentation on social media will impact both their relationship with their followers, and potential business opportunities. For micro-influencers like Anna, Kelly, and Jenny, part of their understanding of the requirements for success in a competitive influencer labor market was to be very open about their personal lives with their audiences in an effort to remind "authentic", while others found themselves less willing to share those aspects in an effort to remain "professional". While there seemed to be benefits to both approaches, micro-influencers in both groups still had to manage the potential risks of choosing to share too little or too much on the internet.

Making time: Pursuing the Hustle

The process of becoming a micro-influencer is one that begins with identifying the value in online self-promotion aligned with one's creative hobby, whether it be putting together fashionable outfits, doing trendy makeup looks, or trying out new skincare products. After undertaking this new approach to social media, the process of maintaining an online presence required a considerable amount of labor for participants on top of other work and familial responsibilities offline. For micro-influencers, stepping into the world of influencing comes with an understanding of social media as a scalable model for their personal brand, and therefore requires constant upkeep to maintain audience engagement and the interests of corporate brands. In a recent article, sociologist Tressie McMillan Cottom addressed how digital technologies (like

[59] Alice Marwick, *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, and Branding in the Social Media Age*, (Yale University Press, 2013), 167.

social media platforms) shape the future of economic opportunity. Cottom explains how hustling ("income-generating activities that occur in the informal economy") is the ideological framework through which digital workers approach and interact with platforms in an effort to make an income. Cottom directly references platform workers and points directly to influencers, who in her words participate in this form of labor by "develop[ing] personal brands on social media platforms and exchang[ing] their share of market capture in the attention economy".[60] The majority of micro-influencers in this study were employed either full-time or part-time in occupations that would be considered part of the formal economy, considering their work as influencers to be a secondary job that requires work that takes place during non-traditional working hours. Participants shared with me the different ways in which they made time to do both, and the cases where external circumstances made influencing an unsustainable venture.

Elizabeth was the only stay-at-home mother that I spoke with. Even though she was not employed at the time, her responsibility for caring for her daughter required her to create an organized system for creating and posting content that revolved around her daughter's daily schedule.

> So in the beginning of the day in the mornings, I will do photos. And then after I've gotten my daughter together more and tired her out a little bit with some play time and get her down for a nap, then I will put on my makeup and either she goes out or, you know, I try to have somebody watch her while I'm doing my recording. After I finish recording everything, I will get back to being a mom and a wife like making dinner and things like that. And then when she goes to sleep I can edit because you know, it doesn't matter what I look like when I'm doing that, it doesn't matter about lighting or anything. So I will usually edit at night.

Elizabeth's case was also unique in that her husband's full-time job provided him with a large enough salary to support their family. This made her an outlier in the study, as most of the other micro-influencers worked full-time or part-time jobs that served as their main source of

[60] Tressie McMillan Cottom, "The Hustle Economy," *Dissent* 67, no.4 (2020): 19.

income. There was only one other participant, Ruby, who had just graduated college and was unemployed and living at home with her parents who supported her financially. Although Elizabeth was responsible for taking on the labor of childcare and housework, the stability provided by her husband's income allowed her some room to pursue the more risky and precarious work of influencing. However, Elizabeth's account of using early mornings, late evenings, and any other free time to make content was very similar to that of other women who worked full-time jobs in the formal economy. These women each had different accounts of how they made time in their busy schedules to create content. Anna explained that she used her lunch break to post photos, and kept an organized schedule for when to post and when to engage with her followers to "have that balance" between her primary job and her influencing work. Fashion influencer Kelly started her full-time job in social media marketing during the pandemic, and had been working from home ever since. She expressed feeling "lucky" in regards to her work situation, which she said gave her much more flexibility when it came to balancing her day job and hours spent on making and posting content, which she did in the evenings and on weekends. Lexi, who worked a 9-5 job as a live-in nanny, also had the weekends off and used that time to create content. Lexi, like most participants, was keen on expressing that influencing is much more than posting a few photos with witty captions, and therefore takes a serious time commitment. "There's a lot of behind the scenes that people don't really know, like posting a photo. You can just make it look so easy online, but like so much goes into it. It's really exhausting."

Because micro-influencers are emerging members of a much larger world of influencers, they cannot afford to hire a team of employees that assist with the day-to-day operations of their social media pages. Instead, Micro-influencers are personally responsible for everything that

goes into making and posting content. They take their own photos, edit their own videos, act as the on-camera talent, and do all of the administrative work related to communication with brands. Because participants approached their work on platforms with the belief that more effort led to more follower engagement, and therefore hustled to post and engage consistently, some found their attachment to improving their online presence resulted in spending very long hours working on their social media projects. When I asked Mary how much time she spends a day creating content and engaging with her followers, she laughed and said that she had lost track.

> To be honest with you, it never ends like you don't, you don't have a day off this, even the days that you're not, it's like a 24 hour thing because for me personally, I'm answering every single comment that comes through, at least attempt to. And you're constantly, always thinking about what's the next best product or you're trying to figure out like, what are the next trends going to be? Like, you're constantly thinking. So I feel like the amount of hours that I put in, it's just astronomical because it's just, you can't turn that off.

Mary works part-time as a receptionist, getting off most days at two in the afternoon. While her hours at work were less than that of many other participants, she would arrive home from work and immediately start making content. It took her three to four hours to film videos where she would do full makeup looks with products that brands sent her to try out, another two hours to edit, and another hour to create a caption with all of the branded products that she used in the video, and post. However, this was not where the daily hustle ended for Mary. After posting, Mary would spend even more time replying to comments to engage with her followers and other influencers. Mary also expressed that because she could do the work from anywhere on her smartphone, she struggled to remain present in social situations with friends and family. When Jenny first started doing influencing, she recalled coming home from her full-time job and staying up until two or three in the morning every day making content and engaging with other creators. “So definitely not sustainable, but I made it work somehow”. When I spoke with Jenny,

she had just been hired at a new job at an advertising company that demanded even longer hours than her previous job due to understaffing, which resulted in her deciding to take some time off from making content.

> What really made me drop off was that my current job was understaffed in the beginning, so I was working maybe 50 to 60 hours a week. And I was working from like 9:00 AM until like 8:00 PM every day. So that kind of made me drop off Instagram since I didn't want to, like, because Instagram work is basically still work in a way and I wanted to just relax. So that was basically my downfall.

Unlike a number of other participants who had more flexibility to pursue influencing alongside work and other daily responsibilities, the long hours of Jenny's full-time job made it more difficult for her to find time to work on creating content. While Mary struggled to find a way to take a break from it, Jenny's formal occupation forced her to confront how she was using the limited free time that she had to rest. These accounts demonstrate how one's economic position, occupation status, and level of support from informal networks are all factors that impacted participants' abilities to pursue influencing as an entrepreneurial venture.

PART TWO: WORKING WITH BRANDS

The first section of the analysis covered the ways that micro-influencers adopt an entrepreneurial approach to social media, where platforms become important spaces for self-branding and self-promotion. This effort, reflected by micro-influencers putting in significant time and energy in carefully curating and developing their online presence, is anticipated by some, but not all, to lead to future opportunities for paid work. On Instagram, the main way that influencers generate income is by working for brands to promote their products. All kinds of branded companies, ranging from energy drinks to theme parks, pay influencers to tell their followers about new products and exclusive deals in an effort to reach a younger and larger audience. Micro-influencers in the fashion, beauty, and skincare categories tend to create content for brands that sell clothes, makeup, and other products that align with the content that they already create for their followers. In this way, influencers act as direct-to-consumer salespeople who are responsible for making and sharing advertising content alongside their self-promotional efforts on social media.

There are levels to the compensation that micro-influencers receive from brands for creating content that showcases their products, and micro-influencers in this study shared that they were responsible for determining what they deemed to be the appropriate compensation for their work for brands. The following section outlines the two main levels of compensation received by participants: gifting and monetary payment. Micro-influencers accepted gifts in exchange for their labor when first starting out, but then moved on to asking brands to be paid, which required them to learn how to read contracts and negotiate with brands without any formal training or experience. This sometimes led to influencers being undercompensated or taken advantage of by brands, who had more leverage and bargaining power than in these exchanges.

Gifting

The majority of the micro-influencers in this study started working with brands when company marketing teams reached out on social media, asking they would be interested in receiving 'gifted' or 'free' products in exchange for a review or promotional post. Anna was one of the micro- influencers I spoke with who did not create or develop their Instagram pages with the intention of working with brands, so when they did reach out, she saw it as an opportunity to take what she considered to be a hobby to the next level.

> I started focusing on skincare in 2019, and then some brands reached out to me like, 'oh, I like your content, I want to give you some products if you want to try', and I was like, 'oh, this is a thing'. So I started working on that and putting myself out there and seeing what opportunities I can have.

When Anna was first approached by a small makeup brand who offered to send her some free products, she was flattered. She did not have prior knowledge about ambassador or affiliate programs (alternative phrases for influencer marketing that frame the influencer as a 'partner' to the brand), but the proposal was intriguing nonetheless. She described the experience as "unreal", surprised that companies wanted to "work with [her]". As a micro-influencer with a very small following at the time, Anna did not see herself as someone who brands would send free products, and was excited to be recognized as such. Anna accepted multiple offers to create and post content for brands in exchange for the 'free' products that they sent her, citing those exchanges as opportunities for her to grow as a creator. Jess had a similar account in regards to her early experience being offered products by brands in exchange for a post.

> It started with brands reaching out and just offering me products in exchange for a post. And I probably had between like 500 and 700 followers at the time. So I was psyched. Like, even though it wasn't, you know, a big name brand, I was like, this is cool. People are going to send me free products to use. Why wouldn't I? It's a free product.

For micro-influencers, receiving free or 'gifted' products was an early sign that the labor that they put into their content on social media was being recognized by larger, formal organizations as having economic value. Receiving free products from brands is also a well-known status symbol in the influencing world, where popular influencers frequently post online about receiving elaborate customized packages (called PR boxes) full of complementary products from companies. Accepting these offers, and promoting the products online without monetary compensation was a common experience amongst micro-influencers, many of whom saw it as a jumping-off point for future opportunities to receive more free products and eventually land paid brand deals. Further, Jess's expression of excitement over receiving free products revealed how skincare, makeup, or fashion products also appealed to the women as consumers, who were already buying items in these categories with their own money, which is evident from videos and photos where they display their latest purchases to their followers.

It has been argued by sociologists that freebies (free stuff) are an overlooked, yet essential part of economic life that reproduces privilege, where commodities that have real costs for some are given to others at no cost due to their higher status. In an economically stratified society, the elite class are often the ones who end up with the most free access to material goods.[61] However, the meaning of 'free' changes depending on different social contexts. Take for example the "swag bags" that celebrities received for attending the 2022 Oscars, which included a private vacation at a 10-bedroom castle in Scotland estimated to be worth $50,000 per guest.[62] Celebrities are not obligated to do anything in exchange for these gifts. Instead, they receive them simply because of their status. In the case of micro-influencers, who are not necessarily

[61] Noah McClain and Ashley Mears, "Free to those who can afford it: The everyday affordance of privilege," *Poetics* 40, no.2 (April 2012): 133-149.
[62] Ben Gilbert, "See Inside the $138,000 Gift Bags From This Year's Oscars," Business Insider, (March 2022), https://www.businessinsider.com/oscar-nominees-swag-bag-gifts-2022-3.

high-status individuals, free products are also framed by brands as ‘gifts’, but unlike the celebrity swag bags, they often come with certain expectations of reciprocity. This framing of the products that brands give to micro-influencers as complimentary masks the real exchange going on behind the scenes. While micro-influencers are not contractually obligated to share what they receive from brands for free online, many shared that they did anyways, as brands shared a certain expectation to do so. Lexi shared her experience with gifted products in exchange for content.

> You’re not obligated to, it's not like you're signing anything, but it's like common courtesy to, you know, if a brand reaches out to me and says, “hi, we loved your profile. We think that you would fit our brand really well. And we love that you're really active on Instagram, blah, blah, blah. If we give you this item, will you in exchange do like two or three stories and one in-feed post?” And if I liked the brand, I'd say yes. Sometimes you say yes, then it comes in the mail and I don't love it. And then I'm like, well, I don't have to post it. I'm just going to keep this item because I didn't sign anything. And also they didn't offer payment. So if a brand pays me, I'm going to post.

Lexi’s use of the phrase “common courtesy” in regards to the labor she performs creating content in exchange for products labeled by brands as ‘free’ or ‘gifted’ is directly linked to the sociological argument made by Marcel Mauss that in our society there is a desire to give gifts because they sustain ties between the giver and the recipient, mark the status of each, and create an obligation for the latter to reciprocate.[63] Typically, brands have the upper hand in these scenarios; they are the ones deciding which micro-influencers deserve recognition in the form of free products, and micro-influencers are the ones striving to be recognized as standing out in the highly-saturated social media landscape. As micro-influencers gain brand visibility, they are able to be more selective about the products that they review or endorse on their personal pages. Lexi, who had more followers than the majority of the participants, shared that she received up to ten messages from brands every single day, offering to send her gifted products in exchange for a

[63] Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The forms and reason for exchange in archaic societies,* (Cohen & West, 1954).

post, which she said gave her the opportunity to only post about the brands that she truly liked. “It’s really flattering to get emails from brands, but they don’t always align with what you want to put out there”.

Lexi’s ability to be selective once she got noticed by more brands does not negate the fact that most micro-influencers were willing to create content in exchange for items that any brands labeled as ‘free’ or ‘gifted’ when they were first starting out. Instead, her case demonstrates how higher visibility (more followers) translates into more attention from brands, giving micro-influencers the opportunity to leverage their social media presence to receive real money as opposed to ‘free’ stuff.

Paid Brand Deals

While micro-influencers expressed willingness to create content in exchange for products in their early stages of developing their online presence, they also shared that the next goal in their journey was to get paid. When brands start offering payment for influencers to create content for them, or when influencers reach out themselves and ask for paid compensation, is when a whole new set of rules and expectations come into play. Unlike gifted products in exchange for posts, participants shared that sponsored posts typically involve a formal agreement between brands and micro-influencers in the form of a contract, which included things like the number of posts required (typically more than one), what the influencer should say about the product, deadlines for posting, and the amount the brand is willing to pay the creator. Most times, influencers had to ask for payment before brands offered, which required them to compile a proposal or application (also called a media kit) including things like samples of their content,

their follower demographics, and a personal statement explaining why their approach to social media and their skills in content creation make them "worth" the brand's investment.

Micro-influencers shared that they were predominantly solo actors in this exchange. They did not have the bargaining power of a union, formal legal assistance, or the level of organizational support of the brands that they were up against. Instead, they relied first and foremost on themselves to figure out proper paid compensation, and to decide whether or not working with a particular brand had their best creative, personal, and professional interests in mind. When they felt lost or confused in these scenarios, micro-influencers tapped into their personal networks, as well as the network of influencer communities on social media to get a better understanding of this more formalized, yet still not fully regulated dimension of their work.

One of the most common things that I heard from participants who had done paid sponsorships was that they felt that they were being significantly underpaid for their work by multiple brands. After a couple of years doing only unpaid brand reviews in exchange for products, Elizabeth started asking brands for money. She would send them her media kit, as well as a budget summarizing the labor costs of making the content (hours, equipment, materials, etc.). She also shared that she had gotten to know a few other women who made makeup videos on YouTube, and that they would openly discuss their rates with each other, which Elizabeth found to be an extremely helpful asset in navigating the process whenever she felt lost or confused.

When I asked Elizbeth about her experience with negotiating for a certain amount of money for a job, she explained how being a Black woman posed unique challenges to efforts to receive fair compensation .

> There were times I did have to say, I guess we'll just have to revisit working together at another time. Because unfortunately, Black and Brown content creators do tend, and this is something that has been discussed very widely, that we tend to get very low balled significantly. Because I have influencer friends across the board in terms of ethnicities and backgrounds, and we do talk with each other about what we get paid to do things. So if I'm hearing from my girlfriends that you're giving them three times what you're planning to give me and we have comparable platforms, that's just insulting and I'm not going to work with a company that does that.

Elizabeth's story reveals something larger going on in the influencer space that white participants were less aware of, which is that there has been a track record of discriminatory issues regarding fair and equal compensation for content creators on social media. In 2020, a number of Black influencers started coming forward about this issue, including the extremely popular social media beauty influencer Jackie Aina, who spoke out on Good Morning America about a time early in her career where she learned that a white influencer of the same caliber (same number of followers, same niche) had been paid four times the amount that Aina had received for making a sponsored video for the same makeup brand.[64] Naturally, the discussion of discrimination and unequal pay for influencers quickly spread on social media. A Black talent agent who manages influencers created an Instagram account called Influencer Pay Gap in 2020 to expose this pattern of pay disparities, sharing messages of first-hand accounts of Black creators who had stories about waiting for payments from brands that never came, and others who were suspicious that they were being underpaid and wanted the opinions of others for comparison.[65] The main issue that all influencers face is that there is no real transparency when it comes to pay rates. Instead, influencers are expected to either know what exactly they should be charging, know how to negotiate for it, or simply take what they are offered by a brand.

---

[64] "Black creatives on TikTok open up about pay disparity on social media," Good Morning America, February 9, 2022.

[65] Ashley Carman, "Black Influencers are Underpaid, and a new Instagram account is proving it," The Verge, July 14, 2020. https://www.theverge.com/21324116/instagram-influencer-pay-gap-account-expose

Jenny, Jess, and Mary all shared that they had unknowingly accepted very low compensation for their first paid brand deals. Although Mary was the one influencer who landed a paid gig from a huge beauty brand very early on (due to a number of her videos going viral on the social media app TikTok), she detailed how her lack of experience doing paid brand deals and lack of transparency from the brand warped her understanding of what the company should have paid her for making a makeup tutorial video where she showcased their products.

> I think I asked for, I forget how much money at the time, but maybe like a hundred dollars. And I thought that was like over the moon because that's a lot of money. And as I grew, I realized that they were basically stealing from me. Like that's how much, like they should have paid more at the time, but they weren't transparent about that.

Although Mary's first time working with a brand could be understood as a singular unfortunate experience, she went on to explain how it was not. She shared that while some experiences after the first one were positive, others were a "freaking nightmare". There were a number of instances that Mary recalled where brands would send her contracts and then ask for different things to include in the video after she had already signed a formal agreement. Mary expressed that she found this to be a common occurrence for smaller creators, because in her words, brands "take advantage of the knowledge that you don't know". Mary is an example of a creator who did not have any sort of formal or informal support in navigating contract negotiation outside of the influencer communities that she has found online.

There were other micro-influencers in this study who had outside assistance and work experience that helped them avoid what Mary experienced. Skincare content creator Jenny shared that she had a friend who did micro-influencing as well, and that her friend's father, who was a lawyer, drafted them contracts to send back to brands to protect them from liability and damages. Her partner was also in law school, and helped her dissect jargony contracts from

brands and draft counter-offers. Although Jenny, like Mary, started out accepting whatever brands were willing to pay her, the skills and knowledge derived from personal networks became an important tool for getting ahead of potentially exploitative scenarios. Another way that some micro-influencers were able to learn how to negotiate with brands and figure out what they should be getting paid was through their full-time jobs. Kelly, who works for a large beauty company that utilizes influencer marketing for advertising, shared how her proximity to the other side of the industry offered her a glimpse into pay disparities between influencers and professional production companies doing the same level of advertising work.

> I don't do influencer media relations, but I understand how it is. And I know that for one video, our production will probably be like thousands of dollars, right? And so an influencer will create a video and do all this stuff oftentimes for free. And a brand will only offer $100 versus a thousand dollar budget. And then they will use that video multiple times on multiple platforms. So they have usage rights.

Kelly's insight brings up another important element of paid brand deals. There is a range of types of content that influencers make, as well as a range of ways that brands may pay (or not pay) to use that content. Influencers can make content that is only meant to be shared on their personal account, or brands can also pay an additional amount for usage rights, which allows them to use the content made by creators on their accounts, websites, and for any other promotional purposes. There were some instances where creators found out that brands were using their content for advertising without their knowledge or consent, meaning they were unable to profit off of selling the brands usage rights in the first place. This means that influencers were creating advertisements for brands, acting as individual production companies, but being paid far less, and sometimes not at all, in comparison to professionally-recognized production teams.

Kelly added that her observations about what brands could afford versus what they paid caused her to focus more on “knowing her worth”. This narrative came up multiple times with interviewees, who stressed the importance of “standing your ground” and “knowing what you have to offer” as essential to receiving fair compensation. Micro-influencers did not see themselves solely as brand advertisers. Instead, they saw themselves as women who educate and empower other women to make informed decisions about which products to buy, while encouraging their audiences to feel confident in their own skin. While brands choose micro-influencers for this messaging, they are more interested in how that messaging can be used to boost sales, not how it helps these women negotiate for fair compensation for their work. In response to brands who are looking to maximize their profits by underpaying influencers, participants regurgitated this similar language of self-empowerment, the kind that they understood to have real payoff for their audiences and themselves. This was also the kind of language that micro-influencers found in their online influencer communities, one of the most common places for micro-influencers to learn from each other about how to negotiate terms of paid work with brands. Many participants were a part of group chats with other influencers. These avenues of collective communication helped micro-influencers get their questions answered about working with brands answered by others who had more experience, while also being an informal community of like-minded people that participants expressed gave them a sense of belonging to something much bigger than themselves. Influencer communities were also the primary way that participants learned from other influencers about different measurements of monetary compensation. However, there were many different impressions of what was considered “fair” pay and how paid compensation is calculated by both micro-influencers and the brands for whom they create sponsored content.

Conclusion

Micro-influencing is a form of work that ties women's construction of their online identity to broader contemporary ideals of selfhood and professional success. In late modernity, the shift from standard work arrangements to more freelance and casual work arrangements has left workers with the responsibility to manage themselves and assume ownership over the potential risks that come with their informal occupation status. With the popularization of social media platforms, many workers aspiring to enter into technology and creative industries manage their insecure positions as outsiders by creating public profiles in an effort to self-promote, hoping that garnering attention and status online can then be translated into improved career opportunities. Success stories of optimizing one's social media presence are also evident with the rise of internet celebrities and influencers monetizing their creative projects on social media more directly through creating brand-sponsored content. The findings in this study reveal that the amount of behind-the-scenes work that goes into producing and maintaining a brand-friendly social media identity is extensive. Personal accounts from influencers also reveal why smaller-scale creators consent to performing undercompensated labor for brands, and how they struggle to navigate and participate in this new form of work that is devoid of any formal support or social protections. The next few paragraphs outline the main findings of this study, followed by a discussion of recent developments in regulation and worker protections for influencers.

There were two main ways that participants talked about their origins as social media influencers. While only two shared that they made a conscious choice to take their social media 'seriously' in an effort to achieve larger career goals directly related to influencing, most others thought of their social media as a casual creative project that could be shared with others–that is until they started receiving attention from brands.

When micro-influencers discussed how they approached branding themselves on social media, there were also two overlapping narratives. The first was that micro-influencers felt it was deeply important that they be as authentic as possible with their followers, which to them meant sharing more details of their personal lives with their audiences. At the same time, other creators expressed concerns about sharing too much online, fearing that sharing certain aspects of their personal lives came off as unprofessional and was potentially dangerous. A third group had concerns about both approaches, yet all were responsible for managing the tensions and potential consequences of sharing too much or too little with their audiences.

Participants also spent a considerable amount of time on their social media projects every day, hustling to maintain a loyal relationship with their followers. They would create strategic plans for making sure that they had time to accomplish this, often working long hours to shoot videos, reply to comments, and communicate with brands in between caring for children and working full-time jobs. Influencing was looked at as something that was only as promising as the amount of time participants spent working on building and maintaining their online presence, which led subjects to feel overworked as they struggled to stay on top of all of the new trends and product releases, and tried answer every comment and direct message from their followers. The demands of the full-time work of some participants forced them to pull away from influencing for a while, while others relied on the flexibility of their jobs and the support of friends and family to continue making content on a consistent basis.

Most participants started creating content for brands when they were offered free products in exchange for a post on their social media pages. At first, being paid in kind was rationalized by most influencers, who were excited and flattered to be noticed by businesses who were asking to “work with them” (implying that the relationship between independent

micro-influencers and branded businesses is equal) when they had such small followings. Content creators felt that these gifts marked their status as influencers and reaffirmed the work that they were already doing online to share their creative passions and create a close and trusting relationship with their followers. Receiving gifts as compensation for their work masked the efforts of influencers in producing valuable advertising content for brands.

Once participants started to draw larger audiences and get more offers from brands to create content in exchange for free products, they started asking brands for monetary compensation, which required them to figure out how to read contracts and adhere to the brand's guidelines for their posts without having any prior knowledge or experience of how to do so. Further, the micro-influencers who had done paid posts were adamant that they were being severely underpaid for their work. They based their conclusions off of discussions with other influencers with whom they discussed proper rates and from formal job experience in the marketing industry, where brands were willing to pay professional production companies far more for doing the same amount of work. Black participants expressed that they were especially susceptible to exploitation by brands, citing a history of discriminationatory pay practices where white influencers tend to get paid more by brands for doing the same amount of work as Black influencers. These accounts demonstrate how micro-influencers are made responsible for knowing things about their work that were not explicitly made available to them by brands or any credible resource other than their peers. This lack of transparency creates a cycle of exploitation for emerging creators that up until the past couple of years has gone largely unnoticed by regulatory agents.

In 2019, the Federal Trade Commission placed regulations on brand-sponsored posts, requiring that influencers disclose if they were paid by a brand to advertise their products on

their social media pages. The FTC did not limit the definition of payment to monetary compensation, meaning the regulation also requires that sharing gifted or discounted products comes with a written disclaimer.[66] This is the only formal regulation of influencer marketing currently in place. While it increases transparency between influencers and their followers by making it clear that a post is endorsed by a brand, it does not protect the influencers themselves. If anything, this regulation places even more responsibility on influencers to ensure that they follow the appropriate steps to avoid facing legal consequences.

Luckily, there has been one very recent effort to include influencers within a larger labor organization, which would provide them with more collective bargaining power and allow them to be recognized as workers that require legal protections. In February of 2021, the labor union SAG-AFTRA (Screen Actors Guild - American Federation of Television and Radio Artists) announced that influencers were now eligible to apply to become union members.[67] Although this is a notable development, influencers are required to meet a number of criteria to be considered eligible to join the union; they must go through a process of incorporation to become legally recognized as independent businesses, and must have a contractual relationship with the brands that they work with.[68] These obligations make it nearly impossible for any emerging creator or micro-influencer to be eligible for union status, even though they are the ones who would benefit the most from collective bargaining power and other worker protections. In the meantime, micro-influencers must continue to rely on their individual efforts, their personal offline networks, and on their fellow creators to help them make sense of the blurry, complex, and transient nature of their work on social media.

---

[66] "Disclosures 101 for Social Media Influencers," Federal Trade Commission, 2019.
[67] Diep Tran, "What SAG-AFTRA's New Influencer Agreement Means for Brands," Backstage, April 29, 2021. https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/what-sag-aftras-new-influencer-agreement-means-for-brands-73170/
[68] "Influencer Agreement Fact Sheet," SAG-AFTRA, 2022. https://www.sagaftra.org/influencer-agreement-fact-sheet

Bibliography

Bradley, Sydney. “How Much Money Instagram Influencers Make: Real Examples.” Business Insider, 2021. https://www.businessinsider.com/how-much-money-instagram-influencers-earn-examples-2021-6.

Carman, Ashley. “Black Influencers are Underpaid, and a new Instagram account is proving it.” The Verge, July 14, 2020. https://www.theverge.com/21324116/instagram-influencer-pay-gap-account-expose

Cohen, G. A. “The Labor Theory of Value and the Concept of Exploitation.” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 8, no. 4 (1979): 338–60. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2265068.

Danzinger, Pamela N. “6 Trends Shaping the Future of the $532B Beauty Business,” Forbes, 2019.https://www.forbes.com/sites/pamdanziger/2019/09/01/6-trends-shaping-the-future-of-the-532b-beauty-business/?sh=167dfeb6588d

DePalma, Lindsay J. “The Passion Paradigm: Professional Adherence to and Consequences of the Ideology of ‘Do What You Love,’” *Sociological Forum* 36, no. 1: 134–58. 2021. doi:10.1111/socf.12665.

Duffy, Brooke Erin. *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love: Gender, Social Media, and Aspirational Work*. Yale University Press, 2017. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1q31skt.

Federal Trade Commission. “Disclosures 101 for Social Media Influencers,” 2019. https://www.ftc.gov/system/files/documents/plain-language/1001a-influencer-guide-508_1.pdf

Freberg, Karen, Kristin Graham, Karen Mcgaughey, and Laura A. Freberg. “Who are social media influencers? A study of public perceptions of personality,” *Public Relations Review* 37 no.1:90-92. 2011. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2010.11.001

Frenette, Alexandre. "Making the Intern Economy: Role and Career Challenges of the Music Industry Intern." in *Work and Occupations* 40, no.4: 364-97. 2013. https://doi.org/10.1177/0730888413504098

Geyser, Werner. “The State of Influencer Marketing 2021: Benchmark Report.” Influencer Marketing Hub, 2022. https://influencermarketinghub.com/influencer-marketing-benchmark-report-2021/.

Giddens, Anthony. *Modernity and Self-Identity*. Stanford University Press, 1991.

Gilber, Ben. "See Inside the $138,000 Gift Bags From This Year's Oscars." Business Insider, 2022. https://www.businessinsider.com/oscar-nominees-swag-bag-gifts-2022-3

Good Morning America. "Black creatives on TikTok open up about pay disparity on social media," February 9, 2022, video. https://www.goodmorningamerica.com/culture/video/black-creatives-tiktok-open-pay-disParity-social-media-82767282

Hesmondhalgh, David. "User-Generated Content, Free Labour and the Cultural Industries." *Ephemera* 10, no.3: 267-284. 2010.

Hochschild, Arlie Russell. *The Managed Heart*. University of California Press, 2012.

Khamis, Susie, Lawrence Ang and Raymond Welling. "Self-branding, 'micro-celebrity' and the rise of social media influencers," *Celebrity Studies* 8, no. 2: 191-208, 2017. https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2016.1218292

Ladegaard, Isak, Alexandrea Ravenelle, Juliet Schor. "Provider Vulnerability in the Sharing Economy," Unpublished paper. Boston College, 2017.

Laurell, Chistopher and Christian Sandström, "The sharing economy in social media: Analyzing Tensions between market and non-market logics," *Technological Forecasting & Social Change* 125 no. 59, 2017. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2017.05.038

Marwick, Alice E. *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, and Branding in the Social Media Age*. Yale University Press, 2013. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5vkzxr.7.

Mauss, Marcel. *The Gift: The forms and reason for exchange in archaic societies.* Cohen & West, 1954.

McClain, Noah and Ashley Mears. "Free to those who can afford it: The everyday affordance of privilege," *Poetics* 40, no. 2: 133-149, 2012.

McKinsey & Company. "The State of Fashion 2022." 2022. https://www.mckinsey.com/~/media/mckinsey/industries/retail/our%20insights/state%20of%20fashion/2022/the-state-of-fashion-2022.pdf

McMillan Cottom, Tressie."The Hustle Economy," *Dissent* 67, no.4. 2020.

Mears, Ashley. "Working for Free in the VIP: Relational Work and the Production of Consent." *American Sociological Review* 80, no. 6: 1099–1122. 2015. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24756410.

Neff, Gina. *Venture Labor: Work and the Burden of Risk in Innovative Industries*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012.

Pardes, Arielle. "Instagram Will (Finally) Pay Influencers," WIRED, 2020. https://www.wired.com/story/instagram-finally-pay-influencers-badges-igtv-ads/.

Pew Research Center. "Demographics of Mobile Device Ownership and Adoption in the United States." 2021. https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/mobile/.

Rakoczy, Monika, Amel Bouzeghoub, Alda Lopes Gancarski, Katarzyna Wegrzyn-Wolska. "In the search of quality influence on a small scale: micro-influencers discovery." *OTM 2018: On the Move to Meaningful Internet Systems Conferences*, Valletta, Malta..138-153, 2018.

Ravenelle, Alexandrea J. *Hustle and Gig: Struggling and Surviving in the Sharing Economy*. 1st ed. University of California Press, 2019. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvcwp0kc.

Rosenblat, Alex. *Uberland: How Algorithms Are Rewriting the Rules of Work*. 1st ed. University of California Press, 2018. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctv5cgbm3.

Ruyter, Alex de, Martyn Brown, and John Burgess. "Gig Work and the Fourth Industrial Revolution: Conceptual and Regulatory Challenges." *Journal of International Affairs* 72, no. 1: 37–50, 2018. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26588341.

SAG-AFTRA."Influencer Agreement Fact Sheet," 2022. https://www.sagaftra.org/influencer-agreement-fact-sheet

Schor, Juliet, William Attwood-Charles , Mehmet Cansoy, Isak Ladegaard, Robert Wengronowitz. "Dependence and precarity in the platform economy." *Theory & Society* 49: 833–861, 2020. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-020-09408-y

Statista. "Number of social media users worldwide from 2017 to 2025," April 2022. https://www.statista.com/statistics/278414/number-of-worldwide-social-network-users/. 0many%20people%20use%20social,almost%204.41%20billion%20in%202025.

Tran, Diep. "What SAG-AFTRA's New Influencer Agreement Means for Brands," Backstage, April 29, 2021. https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/what-sag-aftras-new-influencer-agreement-means-for-brands-73170/

Vallas, Steven and Juliet Schor, "What Do Platforms Do? Understanding the Gig Economy." *Annual Review of Sociology* 46, no.1: 273–94, 2020.