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Influencer Engagement Pods and the Struggle Over Measure in Instagram Platform Labour

Victoria J. O'Meara, *The University of Western Ontario*

Supervisor: Hearn, Alison, *The University of Western Ontario*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Media Studies

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the phenomenon of Instagram influencer engagement pods to explore the dynamics of antagonism, resistance, and struggle unique to the structuring conditions and valorization processes of platform capitalism. I argue that beneath the seemingly frictionless data-driven accumulation strategies of social media platforms like Instagram lies a familiar struggle between the subjects of labour and capital, the “struggle over measure” (de Angelis & Harvie, 2009).

Instagram influencers are native-to-online, professional content producers who have amassed an online following that they monetize in various ways. These digital producers are the unique progeny of platform capitalism; they operate as independent entrepreneurs-of-the-self, yet they are tethered to platform companies whose business interests and proprietary digital infrastructures set the conditions for their work and employability. The influencer engagement pod is one response to their conditions. Engagement pods are platform-prohibited communities of strategic engagement and data production, where participants trade likes, comments, and follows to inflate their metrics, and attempt to “game” Instagram’s algorithms.

Through sixteen in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Instagram influencers who have experience with pods, I unpack the specific tensions and antagonisms that animate this emerging field and explore the possibilities and limits of collective organizing against social media platforms. I ask, how do Instagram influencers understand their relationship with Instagram and the role that it plays in their work? What impasses, coercions, and constraints do engagement pods respond to? How do Instagram influencers see their own power and resistance in and through the pods? And what does this tell us about the broader possibilities for struggle and resistance for subjects of platform capitalism?

Findings illustrate a struggle over autonomy and value between influencers and the platform that endows them with “influencer” status. I propose that influencer engagement pods express the contradictions of influencers’ conditions, articulating both a challenge and a commitment to the measures and value regimes of Instagram. Nevertheless, I argue this data-

based subversion reveals the platform's operations of data "capture" to be the site of a persistent struggle to subordinate subjects to the instruments of capitalist valorization - the daily struggle over measure. Theoretical implications and future research agendas are discussed.

Keywords

Platform capitalism, Instagram, influencers, engagement pods, struggle over measure

Summary for Lay Audience

This dissertation examines the phenomenon of Instagram influencer engagement pods to explore the dynamics of antagonism, resistance, and struggle under platform capitalism. I argue that the Instagram influencer engagement pod is illustrative of a familiar labour struggle: the "struggle over measure" (de Angelis & Harvie, 2009).

Instagram influencers are native-to-online, professional content producers who have amassed an online following that they monetize in various ways. These digital producers are the unique progeny of platform capitalism; they operate as independent entrepreneurs, yet they are tethered to platform companies whose business interests and proprietary digital infrastructures set the conditions for their work and employability. The influencer engagement pod is one response to their conditions. Engagement pods are platform-prohibited communities of strategic engagement and data production, where participants trade likes, comments, and follows to inflate their metrics, and attempt to "game" Instagram's algorithms.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Summary for Lay Audience	iii
Acknowledgments.....	v
Table of Contents	vi
List of Figures	ix
List of Appendices	x
Chapter 1	1
1 Introduction	1
1.1 Research Questions	3
1.2 Chapter Breakdown	3
Chapter 2	6
2 Literature Review, Theoretical Frame, and Methodology	6
2.1 Literature Review.....	6
2.1.1 Influencers and Micro-Celebrity	6
2.1.2 Influencers and Self-Branding	7
2.1.3 Influencers and Cultural Labour	8
2.1.4 Influencers and Political Economy	10
2.2 Guiding Theoretical Concepts	11
2.2.1 Autonomist Marxism and Struggle.....	12
2.2.2 The Social Factory and Immaterial Labour	13
2.2.3 Digital Labour	16
2.2.4 Platform Capitalism	18
2.3 Method	22
2.3.1 Semi-Structured In-Depth Interviews	22

2.3.2	Recruitment and Participation Criteria	24
2.3.3	Interview Analysis	26
2.3.4	Participant Observation in Engagement Pods.....	27
2.3.5	Limitations	31
Chapter 3.....		33
3	The Rise of the Instagram Influencer.....	33
3.1	What is an Influencer	33
3.1.1	Employment Status	34
3.1.2	A Note on Terminology: Influencers vs. Creators.....	35
3.2	Where the Influencer Came From.....	36
3.2.1	The Influencer Marketing Industry Expands	39
3.3	Instagram and its Influencers	42
3.4	The Creator Economy: Fan-Funding and Other Tertiary Services.....	47
3.5	“Influencer Creep”	49
3.6	Conclusion	52
Chapter 4.....		53
4	The Start of an Algorithmic Antagonism.....	53
4.1	The Algorithm Changes	53
4.2	A Note on “The Instagram Algorithm”	55
4.3	Introducing the Interviewees.....	56
4.4	Algorithmic Frustrations	59
4.4.1	The Ranked Feed as Algorithmically Configured Precarity.....	59
4.4.2	Giving the Algorithm What It Wants.....	64
4.4.3	The Algorithmic Meritocracy: Negotiating Autonomy Without Control. 70	
4.5	Conclusion	74
Chapter 5.....		76

5	Grassroots Collective Organizing: The Instagram Engagement Pod.....	76
5.1	Challenges to Digital Labour Organizing	77
5.2	Digital Labour Organizing Across Industries	79
5.3	The Instagram Engagement Pod	81
5.4	What is an Instagram Engagement Pod?	81
5.5	The Utility of the Engagement Pod	88
5.5.1	Engagement Pods as Cooperative Algorithm Hacking.....	88
5.5.2	Engagement Pods as Networks of Deliberation and Information Sharing	89
5.5.3	Engagement Pods as Professional Image Management.....	91
5.5.4	Limits and Risks of the Pod	92
5.6	Mutual Aid and Support: Organizing Against Precarity.....	94
5.7	“Tickling” the Algorithm: The Pod as Gamification From Below	95
	Chapter 6.....	98
6	Influencers, Pods, and the War Over Measure.....	98
6.1	The War Over Measure.....	101
6.2	Instagram Influencers and the Struggle Over Measure.....	104
6.3	Facebook Responds	106
6.4	What Can Influencers’ Struggle Over Measure Accomplish	108
6.5	Conclusion: Platform Capitalism and Data-Based Struggles	112
	Chapter 7.....	114
7	Conclusions	114
7.1	Future Work	114
	References.....	117
	Appendices.....	142
	Curriculum Vitae	157

List of Figures

Figure 1: Description of One Engagement Pod	83
Figure 2: Bot-Moderated Engagement Group	84
Figure 3: WhatsApp Organized Engagement Group	86
Figure 4: Facebook Organized Engagement Group.....	86
Figure 5: Avoiding the Shutdown 1.....	99
Figure 6: Avoiding the Shutdown 2.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Figure 7: Avoiding the Shutdown 3.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Figure 8: Shadowban Warning	Error! Bookmark not defined.

List of Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Guide.....	142
Appendix B: Recruitment Email.....	144
Appendix C: Recruitment Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook Direct Message	144
Appendix D: Third Party Introduction Email	146
Appendix E: Organizations and Agencies Request for Distribution Email.....	147
Appendix F: Recruitment Poster.....	148
Appendix G: Prescreening Survey	149
Appendix H: Letter of Information and Consent.....	150
Appendix I: Ethics Approval	155

Chapter 1

1 Introduction

On April 3, 2018, in San Bruno, California, Nasim Najafi Aghdam walked onto the YouTube campus with a semi-automatic pistol and opened fire on a group of YouTube employees eating lunch on an outdoor patio. She wounded three people before turning the gun on herself and ending her own life. Aghdam had been a Youtuber, and her content had been subject to a series of decisions by the platform that negatively impacted her income from advertising, decisions that are commonly referred to as “demonetizations.” A review of Aghdam’s social media presence would later reveal that she had become increasingly angry about a decrease in her YouTube views, which she saw as intentional and targeted censorship on the part of the platform. “I am being discriminated on YouTube [sic] and I’m not the only one. [...] my new videos hardly get views” (Wakabayashi, Erdbrink & Haag, 2018).

The shooting was heart-rending in its violence, but it also reflects a profound sense of helplessness that should raise important questions about the power relationships that exist between platform companies and the users who populate them with their social connections and creative content. As these platforms have become thoroughly integrated into the fabric of modern life, the reputation economies of “likes,” “views,” and “comments” that they coordinate and control have become deeply significant and produce very real consequences in the lives of the people who use them.

This dissertation interrogates these consequences by taking up the subject of the “Instagram influencer” and the phenomenon of the “Instagram engagement pod.” It hopes to illuminate and explore the tensions, antagonisms, and resistance that animates the emergent realm of platform-mediated self-employment, and help to map the terrain of struggle for the subjects of platform capitalism.

The Instagram influencer is an independent digital content creator who has amassed an online following through their acts of self-presentation and relationship building on Instagram and is hired on contract by advertisers to produce and circulate sponsored content to that audience. In this dissertation, I conceptualize Instagram influencers as the unique progeny of platform capitalism, creative entrepreneurs who enact and exemplify the forms of participatory selfhood that undergird the ongoing profitability of platform-based businesses like Instagram. Influencers negotiate an ongoing tension that is characteristic of much contemporary platform-mediated work: career autonomy and platform dependence (Duggan, Sherman & Carbery, 2020; Pichault & McKeown, 2019; Wood, Graham & Lehdonvirta, 2019). They operate as creative entrepreneurs, independent from the Instagram platform company itself, yet they are tethered to Instagram as the digital architecture that sets the terms and conditions of their employment. They are bound by Instagram's infrastructure, Terms of Service, and business interests in ways that profoundly shape their work.

The influencer engagement pod has emerged as a unique act of collective organizing among these otherwise independent entrepreneurs that takes aim at their shared "digital point of production" (Gandini, 2018) – the platform. Engagement pods are clandestine communities of platform-prohibited data production, where members trade likes, comments, and follows to inflate each other's metrics, and work collaboratively to "beat," "hack," or "game" Instagram's algorithms into circulating content more widely across the Instagram ecosystem. The practice of engagement podding highlights a fraught relationship between content creators and Instagram. Through sixteen in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Instagram influencers who have experience with engagement pods, this dissertation will identify the specific tensions and antagonisms that animate this emerging model of work and will explore the possibilities and limits of collective organizing against the apparently unilateral power of social media platforms. It finds that Instagram influencers negotiate persistent tensions between their sense of professional autonomy and their lack of control over the conditions of their work, and between their own valuations of their work and the measures that Instagram assigns to them. Influencer

engagement pods are symptomatic of these tensions, articulating both a challenge and commitment to Instagram's measures and value regimes. This thesis argues that this data-based subversion highlights the fact that the platform's data-driven mode of accumulation is the site of a persistent struggle to subordinate subjects to the instruments of capitalist valorization - the daily struggle over measure.

1.1 Research Questions

In order to explore the emerging terrain of resistance and struggle unique to the structuring conditions of platform capitalism through the example of Instagram engagement pods, the dissertation asks the following four questions: How do Instagram influencers articulate their relationship with the Instagram platform and the role that it plays in their work? What impasses, coercions, and constraints do the engagement pods respond to? How do Instagram influencers see their own power and resistance in and through the pods? And what does this tell us about the broader possibilities for struggle and resistance for subjects of platform capitalism?

To answer these questions, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with sixteen self-identified Instagram influencers. Interview data was supplemented with in-depth observation of seven Instagram engagement pods organized via Facebook and Telegram, which helped further elucidate how these communities are organized and the types of communal practices and discussions that occur within them.

1.2 Chapter Breakdown

In the following pages, I provide an analysis of the platform-mediated work of the Instagram influencer and interrogate the engagement pod as a fraught but analytically rich response to their conditions of platformized self-employment. Chapter Two includes a literature review of scholarship on influencers, an overview of the theoretical concepts that guide this project, and the methodology used to gather and analyze the data. Chapter Three defines the influencer and offers an overview of the contextual and historical developments that have given rise to this figure. It also examines the proliferation of

various technology companies, talent management agencies, and marketing firms that have formalized and industrialized the practice of “influencer marketing,” and explores in detail recent developments at Instagram that signal the company’s effort to make the platform a key infrastructure of the burgeoning “creator economy.” This chapter argues that these developments are a part of larger shifts in the ways that work and employment are being reconfigured in the era of platform capitalism.

Chapter Four draws on empirical interview data to interrogate influencers’ relationship to Instagram and the metrics that the platform generates and assigns to them. It argues that, while the uncertainty of the platform’s algorithmic logic is generative of productive orientations toward Instagram, these conditions and the measures they produce are contested, as influencers negotiate their independent status and identity against the constraints and interests of the platform company. In Chapter Five, I continue to draw on interview data to conceptualize Instagram engagement pods as unique forms of collective action that correspond to the particularities of influencers’ shared platform-mediated conditions, where contract employment opportunities are allocated on the basis of metrified reputation. I argue that engagement pods function as networks of solidarity, strategizing, and mutual aid intended to mitigate the precarious, algorithmically configured conditions under which participants live and work.

Chapter Six considers the conceptual threat that engagement pods present to Instagram and Facebook’s practices of valorization via behavioural data capture and monetization. I argue that the conflict between influencers and Instagram, exemplified in the influencer engagement pod, expresses a data-based “struggle over measure” (de Angelis & Harvie, 2009), where the platform’s efforts to manage the production of useful (valuable) data is met by the refusals of users, operating according to alternative value regimes. Ultimately this struggle is fraught; while it expresses an impulse towards a broader collectivity, it is animated by influencers’ commitment to the measures and value regimes of Instagram. Chapter Seven concludes the dissertation by providing a summary of the work, reflecting

upon its theoretical implications, and offering suggestions for the direction of future research.

Chapter 2

2 Literature Review, Theoretical Frame, and Methodology

2.1 Literature Review

In recent years, the figure of the social media influencer has become the subject of growing academic attention. Much of this research focuses on influencers' practices of purposeful self-presentation and reputation-seeking. In a context where proliferating social media platforms encourage people to curate themselves for the general public, many scholars explore the different forms of self-presentation that have emerged and been shaped by these conditions. Some notable research examines the texts that influencers produce (blogs, selfies, and "outfit of the day" photos, for instance) in order to interrogate the extent to which they challenge or reproduce the hegemony of mainstream media representations (Pham, 2011; Rocamora, 2012). Some authors see subversive agentic power in influencers' self-curatorial practices. Crystal Abidin, for instance, offers the concepts of "agentic cute" (2016a) and "subversive frivolity" (2016c) to describe the strategically feminized forms of self-presentation enacted among Singaporean influencers that is designed to solicit online affection and followers. Other scholars are less optimistic; Alice Marwick (2015a) argues that despite the egalitarian ethos that animated internet culture in the first decade of the 21st century, the visual curation practices of the "Instafamous" on Instagram tend to mimic and reproduce the presentational formats and hierarchies of conventional celebrity culture.

2.1.1 Influencers and Micro-Celebrity

The influencer is frequently examined through a framework of celebrity, fame, and publicity (Abidin & Brown, 2019; Marwick, 2015a). Like conventional celebrities, influencers engage in a self-conscious and strategic performance of the self that is intended for "public consumption rather than personal reflection" (Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2016, p. 6), and is designed to attract attention and build recognition. This type of self-presentation that seeks visibility has been conceptualized as "micro-celebrity," a

framework originally developed by Theresa Senft (2008) in her analysis of camgirl culture in the early 2000s. Practitioners of micro-celebrity capitalize upon the affordances of network communication technologies in such a way as to “inhabit a popular subjectivity that resembles, even if vaguely, that of the conventionally famous” (Marwick, 2015b, p. 335). Rather than a scaled-down version of traditional celebrity, Marwick (2015b) argues that micro-celebrity describes “a mindset and set of practices” (p. 334) adopted from celebrity culture that anyone can use “to boost their online attention and popularity” (Marwick, 2015a, p. 7). Broadly speaking, this mindset involves conceptualizing the self as a product to be packaged and sold, and perceiving others as a potential audience, fanbase, or consumer base for one’s activity online (Marwick & boyd, 2011; Marwick, 2013a; Marwick, 2015b). The practices of micro-celebrity involve curating an authentic persona and cultivating the perception of intimacy (Raun, 2018), interconnectedness (Abidin, 2015), and community (Cunningham & Craig, 2017) with that audience.

Influencers are conceptualized as a type of micro-celebrity (Abidin, 2018; Khamis, et. al. 2016): otherwise “ordinary people who, through concerted effort, cultivate an online following and loyal fanbase that they affectively manage and monetize through advertising and fan funding. Various authors take up this framework to think through the reputation-management and self-presentation practices of influencers and the aesthetics, norms, and logics of influencer culture (Abidin & Brown, 2019; Abidin, 2017; Abidin 2016a; 2016b; 2015a; Abidin & Thompson, 2012; Marwick, 2015a; 2013a; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Raun, 2018).

2.1.2 Influencers and Self-Branding

Another theme within the literature locates the influencer, and her practices of online self-promotion and reputation-seeking, as an extension of “self-branding” (Hearn, 2008; 2010), a practice that has intensified since the 1990s (Khamis, et. al, 2016; Marwick, 2013b). In a context of widespread economic instability and neoliberal individualism, the logic of self-branding has, for several decades, encouraged individuals to understand

themselves as a company, as “Me Inc” (Peters, 1997), and to adopt the techniques of advertisers, marketers, and publicists to curate a coherent and consistent branded identity that will give them an edge in the labour market (Hearn 2008, Marwick, 2013b).

Examined from this vantage point, the influencer’s curation of a branded online persona, which functions as a “promotional apparatus” (Carah & Shaul, 2016) for brands, has been criticized as demonstrative of the way that commodity logic has thoroughly colonized contemporary forms of online sociality and selfhood (Aires, 2020; Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016; Hund & McGuigan, 2019).

2.1.3 Influencers and Cultural Labour

Other scholarly work examines influencers as a new cohort of cultural workers representative of transformations to media industries and cultural production. In this vein, David Craig and Stuart Cunningham (2019) take an industry-level approach, announcing the arrival of the industry of “social media entertainment” (or SME). They describe SME as a distinct type of “proto-industry” (p. 5) at the intersection of Hollywood and Silicon Valley, where powerful platform intermediaries and professionalizing content producers are transforming the screen industries for the 21st century. Their work sketches an “anatomy” (p. 6) of this emerging field and the interdependencies between platforms, creators, monetization systems, and management structures.

In the context of this emerging industry, some research has sought to tease apart the threads of continuity and change that exist between labour in the legacy media and culture industries and that of the emerging influencer or creator economy. For instance, various authors have examined the discourses of “autonomy,” “community,” and “authenticity” that structure and differentiate native-to-online producers from their counterparts in the established media industries (Cunningham & Craig, 2017; Duffy & Hund, 2015; Duffy & Wissinger, 2017; Marwick, 2013a). Authenticity, in particular, is a key discursive mechanism that differentiates the cultural texts of creators as more honest and “real” than the polished outputs of the traditional media and culture industries (Cunningham & Craig, 2017; Marwick, 2013a), and helps to differentiate influencers

themselves from industry insiders (Duffy, 2015) whose autonomy and honesty is ostensibly more constrained by the expectations of their employers. Indeed, a discursive apparatus that positions influencer production as the fun, non-strategic self-expression of amateurs and enthusiasts who stumble into economic success (Duffy, 2015; Duffy & Hund, 2015) seems to deny the presence of any external pressures or explicit labour at all.

Despite the presence of these differentiating discourses, Brooke Erin Duffy and co-authors highlight the parallels that exist between influencer content production and that of traditional media industries workers, where “passion” is often expected to subsidize for the reality of low wages, long hours, few protections, and perpetually precarious employment (Duffy, 2017; 2015; Duffy & Wissinger, 2017). In many ways, the mythology of a fun, independent, and a fulfilling career “just being me” that permeates influencer culture tends to obscure many of these less glamorous realities (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017; see also Duffy, et. al, 2021), while downplaying the time, money, and labour involved in “making it” (Duffy & Hund, 2015).

Scholars who position influencer activity as labour have offered a variety of terms to conceptualize and clarify the dynamics of this work. Each of these terms emphasizes a different aspect of what the influencer does. Duffy names the gendered and unwaged work of industry hopefuls “aspirational labour” (Duffy, 2015; 2017). Abidin calls the work of seeking online prominence “visibility labour” (Abidin, 2016b). Mavroudis refers to the work of online status-maintenance as “fame labour” (Mavroudis, 2018). Nancy Baym posits the term “relational labour” to name the work influencers do producing affective ties with fans (Baym, 2015), and Elizabeth Wissinger refers to the embodied and image-based work of creating an aura of cool in the modeling industry as “glamour labour” (Wissinger, 2015). Some of these scholars draw upon theoretical concepts such as “immaterial labour” (Lazzarato, 1996; Hardt & Negri, 2000; 2004) to explain the ongoing colonization of new spheres of life and human subjectivity by capitalism. I

unpack the concept of “immaterial labour” in more detail in the next section (2.2 Guiding Theoretical Concepts).

Various scholars have recently turned their attention towards the “platformization of cultural production” (Nieborg & Poell, 2018; Poell, Nieborg & Duffy, 2021) and the challenges this poses for influencers. Some scholars examine the ways influencers operate within and against an infrastructure of opaque and unpredictable decision-making, where platform companies leverage power and knowledge asymmetries to compel particular actions and behaviours (Partin 2020; van Doorn & Velthuis, 2019). Others demonstrate that changes to platform infrastructure or governance rules have a powerful impact on the content production process and income of influencers, exacerbating experiences of professional precarity (Duffy, et. al, 2021; see also Arriagada & Ibáñez, 2020; Bucher, 2018a; O’Meara, 2019). Sophie Bishop’s work foregrounds the role of algorithms and algorithmic culture in shaping cultural production, highlighting the ways that inequities of gender, race, sexuality, etc. manifest and change across these infrastructures (2021; 2020; 2019; 2018).

2.1.4 Influencers and Political Economy

Scholars like Alison Hearn contextualize the rise of the social media influencer within broader transformations to labour and value production under post-Fordist and platform capitalism (Hearn, 2017; Hearn & Banet-Weiser, 2019; Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016). Hearn and Schoenhoff (2016) chart the historical trajectory of celebrity value of which the influencer is the latest example. They position the social media influencer “against the backdrop of proliferating always-on social media platforms and [...] an exhausted neoliberal political economic system, marked by perpetual crisis, austerity regimes and employment precarity” (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016, p. 194). Within this context, influencers’ practices of “self-branding” (Hearn, 2008; 2010) and “micro-celebrity” (Senft, 2008; Marwick, 2015a; 2015b) reflect a labouring subjectivity disciplined to cope with the profound instability of current political economic conditions. Hearn’s work offers a necessary critique of the platform as a capitalist enterprise through and through;

its structures incentivize specific forms of self-presentation, sociality, and participation as part of a broader disciplinary apparatus that conditions and subsumes subjectivity and selfhood to capitalist interests (Hearn, 2017).

My own contribution seeks to build upon some of these insights. Like Hearn, I approach the influencer not as a set of performative practices or a new job in the creative industries, but as the exemplar of an emergent and diffuse productive subjectivity that has developed within and is conditioned by the socio-technical and political economic context of platform capitalism. This is a figure who, in many ways, personifies a broader restructuring of the relations between the subject of labour and the valorization processes of capital. Influencers model the type of performative, participatory, hyper-individualized, entrepreneurial subjectivity that late stage, high technology capitalism requires from all of us. Nevertheless, I maintain that the process by which individuals become subjects is not homogenous, immutable, and powered exclusively by external forces. Humans are “knowledgeable agents” who act with awareness and intention, even if they do so “within historically specific bounds of unacknowledged conditions and unintended consequences” (Giddens, 1994/[1982], p. 152). With this possibility for agency in mind, this project’s aim is to explore and contribute to mapping the dynamics of antagonism, resistance, and struggle as they manifest for this subjectivity within the broader context of platform capitalism’s regime of accumulation.

2.2 Guiding Theoretical Concepts

The project is shaped by a broadly Marxist political and theoretical orientation. I follow Marx (1977/[1867]) in beginning from the position that capitalism is a structurally unequal and class-based system of accumulation carried out via evolving forms of violent domination, coercion, exploitation, extraction, enclosure, and theft. In this, it is an economic system and social order constituted by antagonist social relations and animated by struggle over the subordination of life to the reproduction of capital (Cleaver, 2017). In prioritizing the centrality of struggle, I align myself with Autonomist Marxism. More

specifically, I utilize concepts such as the social factory, immaterial labour, platform capitalism and expropriation to guide the analysis undertaken here.

2.2.1 Autonomist Marxism and Struggle

Autonomist Marxism is a strain of Marxist thought with roots in the Italian *operaismo* (or ‘workerist’) movement of the 1960s (Tronti, 2012). The *operaismo* movement developed from the “fundamental axiom” that the activity of the working class “precedes and prefigures” (Hardt & Negri, 2002, n.p.) the movements of capital. This formulation constitutes a powerful inversion and break with dominant Marxist thinking of the first half of the 20th century, which, in trying to clarify the logics and operations of capital, had reduced labour to an instrument of production subordinated to capital’s total command (Tronti, 1962; Cleaver, 2000). Through that lens, capital operates according to its own internal logic and linear progression to which labour is subordinated and against which it must organize. Workerism, however, asserts a “Copernican inversion,” whereby capital is reactive to labour’s actions, rather than the other way around (Toscano, 2009). Instead of viewing labour as “a victimized cog in the machinery of capital” (Cleaver, 2000, p. 58) or as a hapless mass in need of political leadership by professional revolutionaries, this crucial reformulation places labour in the role of protagonist, attributing primacy to *resistance over domination*.

The Copernican inversion puts struggle back at the centre of Marxist analyses, where labour’s various strategies of refusal and resistance are understood to compel capital to devise new configurations and develop new instruments and processes to control labour’s activities and maximize the appropriation of surplus value. From this vantage point, economic history develops, not as the steady and inevitable march of objective economic laws and technological progress, but as an ongoing battle between the subjects of labour and capital. Capital’s instruments, processes, and strategies of control are perpetually met by labour’s “inherent striv[ing] towards autonomy” (Wood & Lehdonvirta, 2019, p. 6), self-actualization, and pursuit of its own interests, values, and ways of being. Harry Cleaver (2017) argues that recognizing the subversive and resistant practices of the

working class, “reveals the capitalist world to be one of antagonistic conflicts between the constraints imposed by their rules of the game, our resistance to those rules, and our search for better ones” (p.5). Importantly, the outcome of this struggle is never certain or inevitable. In this formulation, the trajectory that capitalism takes is understood to be “the outcome of two intersecting vectors – exploitation and its refusal in a constantly recurrent eruption of fight and flight by which rebellious subjects seek a way beyond work, wage, and profit” (Dyer-Witheford, 1999, p. 63).

To explore the dynamics of this struggle, Autonomist Marxism employs the concept of “class composition” (Cleaver, 1992). Where Marx (1977/[1867]) elaborated upon capital’s capacities with the concept of the “organic composition of capital,” “class composition” describes the configuration of working-class power as the counterpoint to capital (Cleaver, 1992). As strategies of resistance and refusal arise within a particular composition of labour and develop into capacities that threaten the capital accumulation process, capital attempts to dismantle, or “decompose,” that composition through periodic organizational restructurings and various technological innovations. In turn, workers “recompose” around new productive processes that give rise to new capacities and different potentialities for organizing and resistance. This process of composition/decomposition/recomposition is conceptualized as the “cycle of struggles” (Dyer-Witheford, 1999, p. 66). At each moment of recomposition, both labour and capital are remade as dynamics are transformed and new capacities develop. In this sense, and following Marx, the autonomist perspective maintains that it is the struggle against capital that defines the working class, rather than any specific productive function (Zerowork Collective, 1975; Cleaver, 1992).

2.2.2 The Social Factory and Immaterial Labour

In the churn of this cycle of struggles, capital has been driven towards “successively wider and deeper dimensions of control” (Dyer-Witheford, 1999, p. 67) and has sought new compositions and new sources of value that might be subordinated to its machinations of production. This has resulted in what has been termed the “social

factory.” The concept of the social factory has its roots in the work of thinkers like Mario Tronti (1962) and Raniero Panzieri (1964), who, writing in the context of post-war industrial production of the 1950s and 1960s, theorized that society beyond the factory was increasingly oriented towards facilitating capitalist productivity. Panzieri (1964), for instance, identified various technological and state interventions as the supportive infrastructure for capital that signaled the expansion of the “planning function of capital” (p. 286). Feminist autonomist thinkers such as Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James (1972) have further elaborated upon the factory-society relationship in regard to the gendered division of labour, where the unwaged and unseen domestic labour of the housewife (i.e. cooking, cleaning, and raising children) reproduces the labour power of the male factory worker.¹

Tronti’s (1962) analysis of the factory-society relation describes how life and social relations are progressively subordinated to the capitalist regime of production in such a way as to extend capital’s dominance over the whole of society. Tronti (1962) writes,

The more capitalist development advances, that is to say the more the production of relative surplus value penetrates everywhere, the more the circuit production-distribution-exchange-consumption inevitably develops; that is to say that the relationship between capitalist production and bourgeois society, between factory and society, between society and the state, become more and more organic. At the highest level of capitalist development, social relations become moments in the relations of production, and the whole society becomes an articulation of production. In short, all of society lives as a function of the factory and the factory extends its exclusive domination over all of society (p. 20).

¹ As Dyer-Witheford (1999) argues, Fordism synchronized domestic life with the rhythms of factory production through the construct of the housewife, “whose consumerist schedule was organized largely through the new organs of mass communication, such as radio and television” (p. 74). At the same time, the expansion of the film, television, and magazine industries configured leisure time outside of the factory around the consumption of mass-produced media products.

Tronti's arguments build upon Marx's (1977/[1867]) contention that capital tends to subsume ways of being and doing into its relations of production; he describes a progressive developmental process whereby the circuits of capitalist valorization increasingly expand to encompass the maintenance of capitalist relations across the whole of society, beyond any particular moment of this cycle. As capitalism penetrates more deeply into the social fabric, it becomes directly productive of social relations and subjects.

Critical theorists associated with the *post-operaismo* (or post-workerist) faction of Autonomism, including Maurizio Lazzarato, Antonio Negri, Michael Hardt, Paolo Virno, and Franco Berardi, build upon these insights, arguing that labour within the social factory is "immaterial." The theory of "immaterial labour" emerged in the context of significant changes to the capitalist mode of production, away from assembly line labour associated with Fordism and towards what has been termed the post-industrial or post-Fordist economy. As manufacturing declined in the West in 1970s, it was offset by the expansion of the service economy, technology sector, and media and culture industries, where work involves the manipulation of information, communication, affect, and other intangible cognitive processes. The product of these industries is similarly "immaterial" (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p.292) such as information, knowledge, culture, services, and experience. Post-operaismo thinkers posit "immaterial labour" to describe transformations to the composition of labour and the commodities it produces.

Immaterial labour draws the creative, communicative, affective, cognitive, and co-operative capacities of subjects into the production process. These cumulative human faculties, knowledges, and skills, which have been developed at work but also outside of it, become part of the production process. In this way, the "very stuff of human subjectivity" (Neilson & Rossiter, 2005, n.p.) is made productive by capital. Immaterial production not only relies on subjectivity; it also *produces* subjectivity and the social context in which that subjectivity takes shape (Hardt & Negri, 2004, 2009). Simply put, the *object* of immaterial production is also the *subject* (Hardt and Negri, 2009). In

producing communicative moments, information, knowledge, culture, relationships, affect, and experiences, immaterial labour gives shape to “relationships and social life itself” (Hardt & Negri 2004, p. 109).

The notion of immaterial labour within the social factory posits that we have arrived at a moment when capitalist valorization has come to involve the direct production of subjectivities and social relations, which is to say, it involves the reproduction of the capitalist social order itself. In this, Lazzarato (2004) argues that the capital-labour relationship expands into a “capital-life” relationship, as all spheres of human activity come to be “mediated by the capital accumulation process and viewed through the lens of the market” (Mumby, 2020, p. 2).

2.2.3 Digital Labour

This extension of labour and capitalist logics beyond the walls of the factory is at the root of the political analysis and critique of “free labour” and “digital labour.” In her very influential work on “free labour,” published in 2000, Tiziana Terranova (2000) advances the thesis that the internet is animated by the free labour of users who engage in productive forms of community building and maintenance in exchange for free access to online tools and services provided by internet companies. This labour, Terranova (2000) argues, is “free” in a dual sense, both in the way that it is freely given and in the fact that it is unremunerated. The concept of digital labour, as Alessandro Gandini (2021) explains, “represents an expansion of [this] seminal essay” (p. 371), to mount a critique of internet-based companies, including social media companies, as rooted in the exploitation of users’ unwaged leisure-based activities. (Brown, 2014; Cotê & Pybus, 2007; Fisher, 2015). The users who gather to socialize, create digital texts, and consume those created by others are the producers of the content and data that allows Facebook to sell targeted advertising, for example. According to digital labour’s most prolific proponent, Christian Fuchs, users are best conceptualized as unpaid workers for platform companies who are subject to “an extreme form of exploitation” (Fuchs, 2011, p.298; see also 2010; 2012a; 2012b; 2014).

The view, however, has been thoroughly contested (Andrejevic, 2013; Arvidsson & Colleoni, 2012; Comor, 2015; Fuchs, 2010; Kaplan, 2019; Rigi & Prey 2015) and has prompted lively debates over what constitutes work, labour, value production, and exploitation under digital capitalism. David Hesmondhalgh, for instance, (2010) raises questions about the critical and analytical purchase of the concept of labour; is the user creating and sharing memes on 4Chan subject to the same dynamics of surplus value extraction as the cobalt miner? Some authors have taken issue with Fuchs' interpretation of Marx's labour theory of value and its application to social media companies. Adam Arvidsson and Eleanor Colleoni (2012), for instance, argue that the labour theory of value is incompatible with the value creation processes of social media because value in the digital realm is "poorly related to time" (p. 135). Instead, they argue that the source of value is user affect, which social media companies realize through financialized forms of valorization (Arvidsson & Colleoni, 2012). Other interventions dispute both these positions, refuting the notion that users' labour is productive of surplus value and thus subject to exploitation, as Fuchs' work suggests (2010; 2014), while reasserting the continued validity of the application of Marx's labour theory of value to social media companies (Comor, 2015; Huws, 2014; Rigi & Prey, 2015). Bolaño and Vieira (2015), for instance, locate productive labour with the "professionals that produce statistics, interfaces, and algorithms" (p. 58), that produce the social media audience commodity for advertisers, rather than with platform users.

In the face of these efforts to demarcate categories, clarify processes, and settle the question of how the user is positioned in the circuits of capital accumulation, Michael Kaplan (2019) explains that the digital labour debate has reached an "impasse." He writes,

no agreement has emerged among media theorists on even the most rudimentary questions, such as whether the activity of SNS [social networking sites] should count as work (e.g., Andrejevic, 2002; Jhally & Livant, 1986), whether this work counts as labor (e.g., Fuchs & Sevignani, 2013; Mosco, 2011), or whether such labor is the ultimate source of industry profits (e.g., Andrejevic, 2015; Scholz, 2012) (p. 240).

Reflecting upon the evolution of the digital labour debate, Alessandro Gandini (2021) proposes that the proliferation of forms of *paid* work mediated by digital platforms necessitates that scholars step away from diagnosing digital labour *per se*, and towards interrogating its contextual specificity. Indeed, the widespread practice of influencing on Instagram and other platforms undermines the notion that social media participation is simply an unwaged leisure activity. Such developments, Gandini (2021) argues, “incarnat[e] a shift from the exploitation of unpaid, leisure-based user activity that is typical of social media – to the subordination of certain activities undertaken by users to a direct capital-labour relationship overseen by a digital platform, which entails new forms of control and surveillance” (p. 370). This shift, which researchers have begun to examine using the language of “platform labour” (van Doorn, 2017) and the “gig economy” (Graham & Woodcock, 2019), are part of a broader transition towards “platform capitalism” (Srnicek, 2016).

2.2.4 Platform Capitalism

The decade following the 2008 crash has seen the rise of companies like Google, Facebook, and Amazon to economic dominance, a development that has been termed “platform capitalism” (Srnicek, 2016). As Nick Srnicek (2016) notes, in the face of declining rates of profit rates in manufacturing, the digital platform has emerged as one of capital’s “new frontiers” to coordinate the appropriation of value “through data- and finance-driven modes of accumulation” (van Doorn & Badger, 2020, p. 2).

Platforms are digital intermediaries; technical infrastructures and economic actors that operate as the grounds upon which different groups meet, creating marketplaces and coordinating exchange. In this, they constitute a “new type of firm,” (Srnicek, 2016, p. 40) whose business model is premised upon the ownership and strategic control of digital infrastructures. Data is at the heart of the accumulation strategies of platform companies. These intermediaries coordinate the capture of data which can be enlisted into the self-expansionary projects of the company in various ways. For instance, various authors have shown how on-demand labour platforms like Deliveroo and Uber use data generated by

gig workers to develop managerial knowledge about labour processes that can be used to intensify productivity and increase profits in a fine-grained enactment of Taylorism or scientific management (Moore, 2020; Moore & Robinson, 2016; van Doorn & Badger, 2020). Behavioural data is also frequently channeled into machine-learning algorithms to refine the operational effectiveness of a technology or service (Levy, 2017). Platform companies may use exclusive data-based knowledges to develop new proprietary products or services that they can sell or license. Finally, as is the case of Instagram's targeted advertising business model, user behavioural data is used by the platform to refine the company's targeting capabilities and extract monopoly rents from advertisers for access.

Jathan Sadowski (2020) argues that the proliferation of platform companies "represent[s] an evolution and expansion of rentierism" (p. 570), whereby value appropriation occurs through ownership rights and control over assets (Birch, 2020). Digital platforms operate as rentiers, maintaining control of particular technologies, markets, or services and collecting rent in the form of user data or money in exchange for access to it. Instagram, for instance, collects data rents from users in exchange for access to its infrastructure, as well as monetary rents from advertisers for access to the company's consumer targeting tools. Furthermore, recent developments at Instagram, explained in more detail in the next chapter, show that the company is positioning itself to intensify its extraction of monetary rents from its growing subset of professional content producers as well.

Rentierism has long characterized the operations of the landlord with landed property, however platforms have made new "spaces, things, and interactions" (Sadowski, 2020 p. 564) available to rentier relations, "open[ing] up new frontiers for the expansion of the logics of property and blur[ring] the borders between processes of governance and dynamics of capitalist valorization" (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2017, p. 11).

The arrival of platform rentiers has expanded the gig economy and given rise to new forms of platform-mediated labour such as that which the Instagram influencer does. Neils van Doorn and Adam Badger (2020) argue that work in the gig economy under

platform capitalism is characterized by a process of “dual value production” (p. 2), wherein the paid labour that gig workers do through platform interfaces is accompanied by an “informational service” (p. 2) that they provide to platform companies in the form of the data generated in the process of carrying out that work and interacting with the platform interface. The informational service gig workers provide is non-optional and unremunerated. The data their actions generate is claimed by the platform company and used to increase the platform’s operational effectiveness and speculative value (van Doorn & Badger, 2020). Influencers are also gig workers, whose work is characterized by these conditions; the paid work they do for brand contract employers is paralleled by the non-optional and unremunerated informational service they provide to Instagram in the form of behavioural data about themselves and their followers.

van Doorn and Badger (2020) draw upon Nancy Fraser’s work on “expropriation” (2016) to characterize the relationship between platforms and gig workers. Fraser (2016) posits “expropriation” as a third dimension of capitalism’s circuits of accumulation that exists alongside exploitation and exchange. Expropriation involves “*confiscating* capacities and resources and *conscripting* them into capital’s circuits of self-expansion” (Fraser, 2016, p. 186, emphasis in original). It is an ongoing, parallel, and complementary process to that of exploitation, although it is often less visible, relegated to an outside, or framed as a precursor to “normal,” everyday contractual employment relations and market exchange. For Fraser, the realm of expropriation constitutes the hidden and racialized² condition of possibility for wage relations and exploitation (see also Fraser, 2014). In the context of platform-mediated gig work, data is expropriated by platform companies.

Other authors point out that the new frontier of data accumulating platforms has a clear lineage with histories of colonialist expansion, where peoples, land, and resources are pillaged, usurped, and made to serve the expansion of particular state powers (Couldry &

² The racialized conditions of expropriation are well exemplified in the brutal history of chattel slavery and the white settler colonialist confiscation of the resources and land of Indigenous peoples in the Americas.

Mejias, 2016; 2019; Shepherd, 2015; Thatcher et al., 2016). Various authors use the language of “enclosure” (Sadowski, 2020; Dean, 2014), or “land grabs” (Fraser, 2019), or “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey, 2014 cited in Thatcher et al., 2016) to foreground the way that platform intermediaries claim, privatize, and profit from the interactivity and informational resources that are “produced by all in common” in what amounts to “a new round of primitive accumulation” (Dean, 2014, p. 10). Jodi Dean (2020) argues that the arrival of platform capitalism is indicative of a return to feudal relations (Dean, 2020; Taylor, 2009), albeit in a “hyper-modern form” (Morozov, 2016, n.p.).

Some critics have surveyed this landscape and warn that, as a result of platforms’ practices of data capture and the ever-more advanced and autonomous systems of predictive analytics that it feeds, we are hurtling towards a dystopian future where our needs are not only anticipated by corporate actors but generated by them as well. As more and more of our activity is mediated by digital platforms, previously inaccessible aspects of ourselves and our lives are captured as data to be parsed, packaged, and sold. These scholars warn that the ongoing appropriation of behavioural data may one day form a complete enough picture of the human subject to not only predict behaviour, but provoke or stimulate it. “The goal now,” Shoshanna Zuboff (2019) warns, “is to automate us” (p. 6).

The picture painted in this literature is foreboding. It underscores platform capitalism as comprised of increasingly powerful tools which will subsume all of life, subjectivity, and social relations to the reproduction of the capitalist social order. However, this narrative also risks overlooking agency and the capacity for struggle by subjects. Where might we find antagonism, struggle, and resistance within the digital complexes of platform capitalism? I offer the analysis that follows as a contribution to that line of inquiry.

2.3 Method

The methodology undertaken for this dissertation involves a combination of semi-structured, in-depth interviews with self-identified Instagram influencers, supplemented by participant observation in Instagram engagement pods.

2.3.1 Semi-Structured In-Depth Interviews

The decision to conduct interviews with influencers was informed by Rosalind Gill and Andy Pratt's (2008) assertion that "to understand emergent subjectivities, to understand what Marx would have thought of as the difference between a class in itself and a class for itself, centrally requires attention to the meanings that cultural workers themselves give to their lives and work" (p. 28). I agree with these authors that subjectivity is inevitably "mediated by the meanings which people give to their experience" (Gill & Pratt, 2008, p. 27). As such, it is important to incorporate into the research design opportunities for influencers to articulate the meanings of their experiences in their own words. In-depth, one-on-one interviews provide the best vehicle to do so.

Sixteen semi-structured, in-depth interviews over Skype with self-identified Instagram influencers were conducted between January and August 2018. In-depth interviews "commonly involve one-on-one, face-to-face interaction between an interviewer and an informant, and seek to build the kind of intimacy that is common for mutual self-disclosure" (Johnson & Rowlands, 2001, p.103). Admittedly, telephone interviews do not foster the same intimacy that in-person meetings do, and they can take longer to develop a rapport with the research participant (Dialsingh, 2008). However, this approach made it possible to include the experiences of content producers from different geographic locations and allowed me to expand recruitment beyond a local scope. Each interview was between one and one and a half hours long. The topics discussed included work biographies; brand partnerships; the Instagram platform, and strategies employed to improve visibility and metrics on that platform. All interviews were conducted in English.

Brinkman (2013) argues that a total of approximately fifteen participants is common in interview-based studies and this benchmark was used here. This sample size keeps the data set manageable without compromising the quality of the analysis that can be achieved (Ritchie, et al., 2014, p. 118). Qualitative interviewing of this type and sample size is well-suited to research that prioritizes the depth of a participant's experience, rather than breadth of experience across a population. As Brinkman (2013) notes, "The aim is not statistical representativeness, but instead the chance to look in detail at how selected people experience the world" (p. 59). This project is geared towards better understanding how influencers experience and understand their platform-mediated work, and for that reason, a smaller sample size of in-depth interviews is appropriate.

I chose semi-structured interviews in order to remain flexible and adaptable to each interviewee's responses over the course of the interview and to allow study participants to articulate "their experiences on their own terms" (Gill, 2007, p.11). This allows the interview to develop organically and remain conversational in tone. Semi-structured in-depth interviews are also "best suited to research questions of the descriptive or exploratory type" (Johnson & Rowlands, 2012, p. 101). This research project is indeed exploratory, seeking to clarify the experiences, challenges, and frustrations of social media influencers and the forms of support that these non-traditional worker-subjects have developed.

I developed a research guide organized around three subject areas: (1) the influencer labour process and working identity, (2) relationships with Instagram, and (3) relationships with brands. My list of questions was an evolving document of roughly 37 prompts (Appendix A) that was adapted as the interviews clarified which questions were germane and which were too vague or irrelevant. This document was treated primarily as a guide during the interview process that allowed me to return to those three key sites of inquiry as the interview progressed. I allowed the discussion to unfold organically and adjusted my line of questioning as interviewees articulated their own experiences and what they saw as significant. This methodological approach prompted me to supplement

my interviews with participant observation in several Facebook and Telegram engagement pods (see Section 3.2 of this chapter for an overview of this process).

2.3.2 Recruitment and Participation Criteria

Interviewees were recruited via a combination of personal relationships, snowball sampling, 242 direct email invitations (Appendix B), direct message on Instagram and Facebook (Appendix C), and circulating a call for participants on social media. The email addresses used were publicly available and collected from representation agency websites and influencer Instagram account bios. I also emailed several Western University student organizations, including Western Propel Entrepreneurship, Western Undergraduate Student Council, FIMS Undergraduate Student Council, and Ivey Student Council, as well as various influencer-focused organizations, including the Internet Creators Guild, BlogHer, and the Independent Web Creators of Canada, with a request to share the invitation to participate on their social media (Appendix D & E). Finally, I posted flyers promoting the study across Western University campus (Appendix F), although no participants were recruited via this method.

Three participants were recruited from personal relationships developed prior to the research process. Two participants were recruited from snowball sampling, and the rest were recruited from email invitation or direct messages on Facebook or Instagram. There was no compensation offered for participating in the study.

The criteria for participation were threefold: (1) participants must run a publicly visible social media channel, (2) they must have an online audience that extends beyond their personal network of offline friends, family, and colleagues, and (3) they must have experience partnering with brands to produce sponsored posts or branded content in exchange for either monetary or other forms of compensation. In the case of email and direct message recruitment, I confirmed that the influencer met these criteria prior to sending an invitation to participate. Those who were recruited as a result of a third-party organization circulating a call on social media were asked to complete a prescreening

questionnaire to determine their eligibility (Appendix G). I also confirmed their experience creating sponsored content by looking at their public profiles.

The research participation criteria were kept broad because the research questions were not dependent upon the size of the following or the respective level of influence a participant might command, but on the experience of navigating Instagram as an explicit site of work. In fact, a broad recruitment strategy that facilitated the participation of small-scale influencers allowed me to interrogate the influencer-platform relation more directly. The top-level career professionals who stand out as exemplars of having “made it,” have established strong reputations in the industry and have multiple revenue streams that make them less dependent upon the ebbs and flows of platforms such as Instagram. Those with smaller audiences and less established careers, however, are well-positioned to articulate the stakes of their platform-mediated work. Operational changes to the platform have a larger impact on their metrics, circulation, and, ultimately, their employability. In this way, these subjects are better positioned to discuss the role the platform plays in structuring the influencer labour process.

During recruitment, I maintained a broad focus upon “social media influencers” as this study’s protagonists. However, while several interviewees produced content for a variety of platforms,³ every participant explained that Instagram was where they had started creating content professionally; the platform had remained their primary site of digital production, and it was where they continued to invest the majority of their time and energy. As a result, the study evolved to focus more narrowly upon the platform work of Instagram influencers, specifically.

³ Including Facebook, YouTube and Snapchat.

2.3.3 Interview Analysis

Interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded, and interpreted using principles from the grounded theory approach (Dougherty, 2002; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; 2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Grounded theory is “a research paradigm for discovery” (Glaser, 2005, p. 145), and a methodology well suited to exploratory research and theory building. Grounded theory “privileges context (phenomenon) over a priori academic theory” (Walsh, et al., 2015, p. 592). Barney Glaser puts it most simply; “[Grounded theory] is simply the discovery of patterns in data [...] It is the generation of theories from data” (Walsh, et al., 2015, p. 593). In the interpretive stage, the data went through two rounds of coding. In the first round I developed twenty-five largely descriptive codes to organize the content of the interviews. In the second round I synthesized these codes into twelve analytic codes that helped to refine and clarify emergent themes within the data and became the basis of subsequent analysis. For instance, original descriptive codes that captured “employment status” and “multiple jobs,” were later compiled into “precarity management.” Descriptive codes such as “engagement pods” and “botting” later became “platform visibility strategies.”

In interpreting these interviews, I also follow Pettinger (2013) in focusing “on the account of the experience, not upon the truth of the story” (p.186). The shrouded and mutable algorithmic logics that structure the Instagram platform and constitute the influencer’s conditions of work necessitate that interviewees trade in rumours and “algorithmic gossip” (Bishop, 2019). These tacit, communal knowledges no doubt vary in their proximity to the “truth” of the platform’s functioning or design. Nevertheless, these narratives have explanatory power for the community and are a “productive force” (Bucher, 2018a, p. 62) in their own right; they inform the way that this group engages with Instagram, which, in turn, shapes the algorithmic decision making of the platform and the governance decisions made by the company.

2.3.4 Participant Observation in Engagement Pods

I supplemented the in-depth, semi-structured interviews with observations of engagement pods on Facebook and Telegram. All interviewees expressed some level of experience with engagement pods. However, they articulated a diverse array of experiences, perspectives, and reservations in relation to them. Observing pods directly provided context to ground and situate the endorsements and criticisms that interviewees expressed. As a site of research, online forums such as these constitute a unique source of “naturally occurring data” (van Doorn & Velthuis, 2018, p. 180) in that the researcher can observe conversations and discussions among community members without interrupting and intruding on that process (Jones, 2016, p. 233 cited in van Doorn & Velthuis, 2018).

For two years I observed in the “messy web” (Postill & Pink, 2012) of Instagram engagement pods on Facebook and Telegram to better understand the operations of these groups in practice. I began by performing keyword searches on Facebook for groups that were dedicated to organizing Instagram comment pods. I used keywords including “Instagram influencers;” “Instagram comment pod;” and “Instagram engagement group/pod.” As I continued to search for and click on Instagram engagement organizing groups, Facebook’s algorithms offered recommendations for similar groups to join. Through this process, I compiled a list of engagement groups and contacted administrators to explain my interest in joining and ask for their permission to do so. I was permitted access to seven groups on this basis. Within the groups, individuals occasionally posted links to other engagement groups. On two occasions, I requested and was granted access to engagement groups organized on Telegram. In this way, my method of accessing this population involved “follow[ing] the medium” where I took “advantage of the functional logic of the internet itself” (Rogers, 2009 cited in Caliandro & Gandini, 2017, p.901), moving across groups and platforms through a combination of search, community shared hyperlinks, and algorithmically generated recommendations.

This stage of the research involved a process of “following the (digital) action” (Postill & Pink, 2012, p. 129). I would check in with these groups two or three times a week to review and make note of the engagement activity and discussion that had taken place. My activity soon prompted Facebook’s algorithms to serve me these updates in my newsfeed and so these research efforts became integrated with my everyday Facebook activity. Over the course of observing these communities, I developed five subject areas that capture the different types of activity and discussion that go on in an engagement pod. These include (1) engagement threads; (2) discussions of algorithm changes and strategizing; (3) automation; (4) shadow-banning and evading detection; (5) career and aesthetic advice. Each pod has its own unique set of rules outlined and regulated by group administrators, as well as more organically developed participatory norms, which I examine in more detail in Chapter Five. Some, particularly on Telegram and within the larger groups, had restrictions against discussion-based posts, limiting interactivity to engagement trading only. Others had a more flexible structure that combined reciprocal engagement tactics with conversations about the work. Chapters Five and Six include screenshots of some engagement pod activity to illustrate the general operations of a pod. However, the names of groups and group members have been anonymized.

Observation of these online communities raises some important questions regarding ethical decision-making as it pertains to members’ perception of privacy, the sensitivity of the content, as well as the vulnerability of users (Markham & Buchanan, 2012; Whiteman, 2012). Engagement pods violate the Community Standards of Facebook and Instagram. For the researcher, there is a danger of calling attention to these groups, who want to remain under the radar and risking their removal by the platform. In fact, Facebook did remove these groups while I was conducting my observation. This concern is compounded by the fact that group members may rely upon these communities to support their personal businesses. To shield against unintended repercussions and to protect the anonymity of group members, I have redacted the names of groups and their members throughout this dissertation.

The Facebook groups I observed were not explicitly public; they required administrative permission to join. I was transparent with administrators when requesting permission to enter these groups, communicating my interest in observing as a researcher. However, community members were not often made aware by administrators or myself that I had been permitted to join in order to observe.⁴ Group members are, of course, entitled to their privacy. However, each of the groups that I joined were populated by several thousand members, who, undoubtedly, were not closely associated with all other members of the group. These were not tight-knit groups of personal friends and colleagues, but large assemblies attempting to use the scale of their operations to improve their personal metrics and influence Instagram's algorithms. Based upon the large size and loose interpersonal relationships of the communities, I reasoned that group members could "reasonably expect to be observed by strangers" (Townsend & Wallace, 2016, p. 8) in these spaces. In making this decision, I followed the "Social Media Ethics Framework" of Leanne Townsend and Claire Wallace's (2016). Nevertheless, the presentation of this data is anonymized in order to protect the privacy of users. In future, research could ensure group members are more actively aware of and involved in the research process, perhaps by posting an introduction and directives to contact the researcher with any questions or concerns.

2.3.4.1 Internet Research and the Methodological Challenge of Ephemerality

While observing engagement pod activity, three of the largest Facebook-based engagement pods I was following were deleted from the platform for violating Facebook's and Instagram's Terms of Service and Community Guidelines. This meant that these communities were no longer available for observation. Engagement pods are explicitly prohibited in the user policy documents of Instagram, and Facebook

⁴ On two occasions on Facebook and once on Telegram, group members were made aware of my presence because I posted in the group (with permission) an invitation to participate in an interview.

Companies, more broadly.⁵ For instance, Instagram's Community Guidelines (2020) prohibits participation in "'like,' 'share,' 'comment,' or 'follower' exchange programs."⁶ Such policies reflect the fact that engagement pods undermine the operational effectiveness of the platform and threaten advertising revenues.

The removal of the groups I had been observing underscores the methodological challenge of "ephemerality" that comes with conducting internet research (Schneider & Foot, 2004). Ephemerality is typically discussed as a feature of online communities where the research subjects are not known to the researcher and are transient members of the community under study (Bernstein, et al., 2011; Schlesinger et al. 2017). It describes the way that membership in many online communities is not necessarily stable, and groups are susceptible to unexpected dissolution that can halt the research process.

While the engagement pod deletion underscores the methodological challenge of ephemerality and speaks to the instability of online groups, in this case, the communities did not disappear as a result of group members' choices, their weak social ties, or the transitory participatory norms of the community. Rather, these large communities were removed due to the enforcement actions of the platform company. Beyond ephemerality, then, this event is testament to the challenges of conducting research on commercial platform infrastructures. It is an illustration of the way that the corporate interests of platform companies can shape, delimit, and quickly transform the research process concerning the online communities that develop there. Methodologically, the removal of

⁵ While Instagram and Facebook are branded as distinct apps, the platforms "share policies," such that "if content or behavior is considered to be violating on Facebook, it is also considered violating on Instagram" (Community Standards Enforcement Report, 2019, n.p.).

⁶ Instagram's Community Guidelines (2020) document mandates "not artificially collecting likes, followers, or shares" (n.p.) Facebook's Community Standards document (2019), which constitutes the most comprehensive description of Facebook and Instagram's shared policies contains a ban on platform users "abusing our platform, products, or features to artificially increase viewership," "mislead[ing] Facebook about the popularity of Facebook or Instagram content or assets," and "artificially increase[ing] distribution for financial gain" (Community Standards, 2019, n.p.).

these groups is a lesson in the need to build redundancies and archival processes into research methodology when studying user communities on corporate platforms. For instance, had I made note of the group administrators' names, I could have contacted these organizers to find out if they had set up new groups. Future research projects should develop a plan for how they can continue to "follow the (digital) action" (Postill & Pink, 2012, p. 129) in the event of an unexpected shutdown. This is particularly important when studying "deviant" communities that violate the platform company's Terms of Service, as engagement pods do.

2.3.5 Limitations

The design of this study has several limitations. First, in an effort to keep the scope of this project manageable, I have made the choice to focus narrowly on the influencer's interactions with the Instagram platform. However, influencers typically manage multiple accounts across multiple platforms, as well as host their own personal blogs, websites, and/or online stores. They also negotiate relations with talent representation firms and influencer marketing platforms that also shape the context of their work. While the narrow focus upon the Instagram platform has allowed me to interrogate the influencer-platform relationship in depth, it also has meant that I could not capture the full scope and complexity of this emergent, platform-mediated configuration of work and employment. Future research should examine influencers' work across multiple platform infrastructures and in conversation with different players who are part of this ecosystem.

Second, as with most internet research, this analysis is inevitably a historical study to some degree. The empirical data presented here offers a snapshot of a particular moment in the development of social media influencers and "social media entertainment" (Cunningham and Craig, 2019), the evolution of different strategies of algorithmic manipulation, as well as the development of Instagram as a digital infrastructure, company, and economic actor.⁷

⁷ Engagement trading remains a common practice in the social media space. A quick search on Facebook, for instance, indicates that pod organizing has also cropped up for newcomer, TikTok. These groups also

What works as a strategy of subversion one week, may be less successful the next. What might be a popular tactic one week, may be abandoned the next. There is little stability in terms of strategies to hack any platform, and as engagement pods wane in effectivity and popularity, other tactics emerge to take their place. There is inevitable volatility in studying this subject matter; as users find ways to game the system, the platform responds with attempts to neutralize these actions, to which users respond with revised strategies. While this ongoing churn may be seen as a limitation to this analysis' efficacy as a set of instructions for strategic organizing among digital influencers, it nevertheless, stands as an evocative example of the continuity of struggle across the terrain of platform capitalism.

violate TikTok's Community Guidelines, which explicitly prohibits, "Content or activity that seeks to artificially inflate popularity on the platform," as well as "coordinated attempts to manufacture inauthentic activity," and "any attempts to manipulate platform mechanisms to increase interaction metrics." However, the efficacy of the engagement pod is contested across the social media ecosystem. Some believe that Instagram has adjusted its calculation for content ranking in a way that can account for these forms of "inauthentic" engagement, and as a result these tactics are less effective than they once were. In a post from early 2021, for instance, Instagram claimed that the platform's "feed ranking is powered by machine learning, which is constantly adapting to new patterns in the data. So it can recognize inauthentic activity and make adjustments." It's impossible to verify the truth of such claims, and by contrast, some academic research suggests that engagement podding remains an effective way to improve content ranking and increase circulation across the platform (Weerasinghe et al., 2020).

Chapter 3

3 The Rise of the Instagram Influencer

3.1 What is an Influencer

The past ten years have seen the arrival and rapid proliferation across the cultural landscape of the figure of the social media influencer. “Influencer” is a catchall term that describes a growing cohort of digital entrepreneurs of the platform economy whose practices of self-presentation, social interactivity, and digital content production have amassed them a sizeable online audience, which they convert into streams of revenue. Influencers can be thought of as savvy social media platform users who leverage the affordances of the platform infrastructures to garner attention and authority within an online community, parlaying them into a marketable brand, entrepreneurial venture, and source of income. Primarily, influencers operate as professional digital content producers. They create platform-mediated texts or events, such as videos, photographs, written posts, memes, or livestreams designed for circulation and consumption on social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, TikTok, Twitter, and Twitch. These professional content producers cover a wide array of niche interest and categories of cultural production, such as health, fitness, beauty, fashion, travel, technology, gaming, home design, finance, business, and sports, to name only a few of the most influencer-saturated genres (“The State of Influencer Marketing,” 2022). The seemingly endless parade of awkward portmanteaus appearing in trade publications and the popular press, like “mom-fluencers” (Petersen, 2021), “fit-fluencers” (‘These are the 10’, 2021), “tech-fluencers” (Hurwitz, 2021), and “fin-fluencers” (Egkolfopoulou, 2021) testify to the widespread practice of influencing across social media platforms and suggest that the influencer has become an important social and economic figure in the era of platform capitalism.

Influencers are desirable brand endorsers because of their proven ability to attract attention and build loyalty and credibility with an online fanbase. As a result, they often

earn at least some of their income from advertising, although they may also generate revenue from other supplementary sources including affiliate link programs; paid appearances; fan meet-and-greets; online shout-outs; and various forms of fan funding, including the sale of merchandise (Bradley, 2022). As participatory media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, have drawn eyeballs away from broadcast media, so too have they drawn the interest of advertisers. Influencers offer additional advantages to marketers; in contrast to the highly polished and tightly controlled world of traditional celebrity endorsers, influencers interact directly with their audiences, granting access their personal lives and building a sense of trust, intimacy, and authenticity that brands are only too eager to tap into. Advertisers contract these producers to create and share “sponsored content,” or paid-for posts that feature the products or services of the brand “wrapped in the glossy veneer of ‘authentic’ or ‘organic’ brand advocacy” (Duffy, 2019, p. 378). In producing sponsored content for advertising clients, influencers can be understood as hyper-individualized “media brands” (Craig, 2019), funding the production of cultural texts with advertising dollars and mimicking a business model that has long sustained traditional media industries. Sponsored content is only one of a variety of avenues that influencers can use to generate streams of income from their digital presence and online fanbase.

3.1.1 Employment Status

The Instagram influencer’s employment status defies strict categorization. Influencers often think of themselves as self-employed creative entrepreneurs because they don’t have a traditional employer, work independently, and have sole responsibility for the success or failure of their entrepreneurial ventures (Duffy, 2017). However, Instagram influencers don’t enjoy the same levels of ownership and control over their businesses typical of traditional self-employment. Their digital self-brand and audience is tethered to Instagram, and they are subject to the platform’s governance rules and infrastructural constraints. In some ways, influencers operate in a similar way to freelance creative professionals; they typically earn income from a series of contract jobs to produce sponsored content for advertisers. However, some characteristics of the influencers’ work

distinguishes it from other freelance creative workers. Unlike the freelance writer or photographer whose work involves completing a project to the client's specification, the influencer retains creative control over what she will produce under contract with brands and for how she integrates brand messaging into the mini-media empire that she has built on Instagram. Additionally, advertising contract work is only one of the growing list of ways influencers generate income. The sale of merchandise or content subscriptions to fans, for instance, are revenue streams that don't involve the contractual relations of freelancing and align more readily with the structures of self-employment.

The influencer is most usefully conceptualized as a type of gig worker, defined by Duggan, et al. (2020) as a form of contingent labour mediated by digital platforms. Influencers run their Instagram profiles like media businesses and earn income from a series of platform-mediated "gigs" such as producing advertorial content or coordinating live performances for fans. Like on-demand gig workers in the ride sharing and courier industries, they are considered independent from Instagram, however, their work is dependent upon the platform infrastructure.

3.1.2 A Note on Terminology: Influencers vs. Creators

While I use the term "influencer" throughout this dissertation, it is worth noting that the language used to describe this emerging cohort of platform-mediated entrepreneurs is not settled. "Influencer" is the standard language of the influencer marketing industry. However, the term is often eschewed by influencers themselves in favour of "creator." Platforms also tend to address these subjects as their "creator community." The term "influencer" carries undesirable connotations of manipulation, power, and an association with advertising that undermines perceptions of trust and authenticity that are so important to audience members. The term has the unfortunate effect of foregrounding the commercial incentives that underpin the strategic performance of selfhood and relationship-building all influencers engage in.

However, as Bishop (2021) points out, the terms “influencer” and “creator” don’t usefully differentiate between two categorically different occupations. Influencers are, indeed, professional creators of content, and creators frequently generate income from advertising because they have an audience they can influence. In this way, the different terminology serves less to clarify a categorical ambiguity than to assign a particular meaning and value to the subject in question (Bishop, 2021). While the term “influencer” tends to foreground her role as promotional vehicle and positions this subject alongside the figure of the celebrity endorser, or perhaps less favorably the salesperson, “creator” emphasizes her role as producer of culture and positions the subject alongside that of the inventor or the artist (Bishop, 2021). It is also important to note that these labels are gendered. “Influencer” is far more commonly used in the feminized genres of fashion, beauty, and lifestyle, while “creator” is the dominant terminology in gaming or technology verticals (Grey Ellis, 2019). The distinction draws upon a well-entrenched imagery of the masculine creative genius or producer, and the feminine shopper or consumer (Grey Ellis, 2019).

Whether we are speaking of influencers or creators, both terms describe independent, platform-mediated content producers, who earn income as a result of their interactivity and content production on social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. I have chosen to use the term influencer to foreground the aspects of this activity that make it possible to professionalize. While all social media users can be said to *create* content, it is the strength of one’s influence – the extent to which a person can draw attention, generate activity and discussion, and inform the opinions of others – that will determine the economic opportunities that result from their practices of content production.

3.2 Where the Influencer Came From

The social media influencer as we know her today began claiming her space in the popular consciousness in the late 2000s in the wake of the 2007/2008 financial crash, and beginning of the fashion, beauty, and lifestyle genres of digital cultural production

(Hund, 2019). However, the ascent of this figure has a historical trajectory that extends prior to this – in particular, with the explosion of the reality television genre in the 1990s (Hearn, 2006). As part of what Graeme Turner (2010) calls the “demotic turn,” reality TV⁸ elevated the visibility of “ordinary” people across popular culture, popularizing the figure of the “ordinary celebrity” (Turner, 2010). Many of the stars of reality television managed to leverage their public recognition and notoriety into profitable licensing deals, books, and appearance fees. These “image entrepreneurs” (Hearn, 2006; 2016) were early templates of the self-conscious and image-based construction of the self as a brand and source of value extraction that have since proliferated across a digital media landscape, modeling the communicative and strategic self-presentation skills that we’ve come to expect from the figure of the influencer (Hearn, 2016; see also Hearn, 2008).

While reality TV granted a select few ordinary people access to mass audiences and the celebrity production process, the proliferation of social media platforms in the first decade of the 21st century extended these logics across the population at large. In contrast to the hierarchical structure of broadcast media, network communication technologies lent the instruments of visibility, publicity, and attention to the masses (Khamis, et al., 2016; McQuarrie et al., 2013; Turner, 2010), seemingly democratizing access to celebrity and the power and privilege that come with it. Everyday people were no longer reliant upon broadcast institutions to fold them into the narrative structure of television programming (McQuarrie et al., 2013). Ostensibly, anyone could “fashion their own autonomously authored brand [...] independent of the resources and dictates of legacy media” (Khamis et al., 2016, p. 8). For the most optimistic commentators, these developments signaled the “egalitarianization of celebrity, as the means of production are seized by the ordinary citizen” (Turner, 2010, p. 15). This optimism about the democratizing force of new media echoed a broader enthusiasm of the early 2000s about the participatory possibilities of Web 2.0 to transform the landscape of cultural

⁸ Such as competition shows, confessional talk-shows, and game shows, for example.

production, empower audiences to become producers, bypass traditional gatekeepers, and disrupt the power imbalances of the broadcast and print media models (Gillmore, 2004; Jenkins, 2006; Rosen, 2006).⁹

The financial crash of 2008 brought widespread economic and professional uncertainty, and many aspiring and precariously employed professionals leaned into the promises of the expanding digital media ecosystem to deliver new opportunities. In 2009, when several prominent fashion bloggers were given front-row seats at New York Fashion Week, it seemed to confirm the potential of digital media platforms to help aspirants penetrate glamorous and notoriously competitive creative fields rendered unstable by a global recession. The event garnered significant media attention (Kamer, 2009) as a legitimizing gesture that acknowledged bloggers' authority as a new class of tastemakers and signaled an alternative route to a creative career. As Leandra Medine Cohen, the founder of the popular fashion blog *manrepeller.com* explains, "Many of us couldn't land the jobs we wanted, so we just made our own" (Medine, 2013 cited in Rocamora, 2018). Fashion blogging grew exponentially during this time (Findlay, 2015; McQuarrie, Miller & Phillips, 2013), as aspirant creative professionals sought to curate and perform a professional identity, showcase their skills, tastes, and competencies to potential employers, build a professional network, and establish authority and legitimacy as an expert in their field. As Emily Hund (2019) explains, the performance of the digital self-brand via blogging and social media lent a sense of control and "offered a chance to move forward in a time marked by inertia and uncertainty" (Hund, 2019, p. 44).

⁹ Optimism surrounding online platforms in the early 2000s was on display in 2006 when *Time Magazine* designated 'you' as Person of the Year, celebrating the web users editing Wikipedia entries, uploading videos to YouTube, building communities on Myspace, and generally contributing to a lively and dynamic digital culture. This enthusiastically techno-utopian discourse celebrated the power of digital technologies to democratize voice, reduce barriers to market entry, and allow everyone to participate more equally economic and social life. As *Time* put it, Web 2.0 users exemplified "the many wresting power from the few" ("You – Yes You," 2006).

At the same time, the recession wrought tighter advertising budgets, as companies sought to minimize unnecessary expenditures.¹⁰ In a climate of cautious spending, marketers looked to digital media to coordinate inexpensive and measurably successful campaigns (Bernoff & Li, 2008). Launched in 2010, Instagram’s visual aesthetic combined with its rapidly expanding userbase drew the attention of marketers (Frier, 2020). In its early days, Instagram did not have an official advertising mechanism, and the company did not start selling traditional ad space until 2014 (Carah & Shaul, 2016). In the absence of such tools, instrumentalizing popular user accounts as promotional vehicles offered an alternative entry point for advertisers who were keen to find ways to “penetrate the social tissue of the platform” (Aires, 2020, p. 494). While the earliest Instagram influencer marketing campaigns featured traditional celebrities (Frier, 2020),¹¹ the platform soon became a hub for experimental partnerships between advertisers and otherwise ordinary users who had proven capable of capturing the attention of online audiences otherwise fragmented and increasingly ad resistant. The brands who sought cheap and impactful ways to capture the attention of online audiences found a welcome partnership in a growing cohort of social media micro-celebrities and self-branders eagerly curating their persona and online reputation in the face of a fickle and hyper-competitive post-crash labour market (Hearn, 2010; Hund, 2019).

3.2.1 The Influencer Marketing Industry Expands

Since these early days, influencer marketing has exploded into a multibillion-dollar industry. The global market has more than doubled since 2019, growing from \$6.5 billion to \$13.8 billion in 2021 (“The State of Influencer Marketing,” 2021a), making it one of the fastest-growing business sectors. Each year, companies are reportedly shifting larger

¹⁰ Ad spending in the U.S. at the time dropped 13% (Scott, 2019).

¹¹ The first sponsored Instagram post is commonly attributed to Snoop Dogg, who in 2011 posted a photo of himself holding a can of *Blast*, a fruity alcoholic beverage from Pabst Brewing Co, with a caption that read, “Bossin’ up wit dat Blast” (Frier, 2020).

portions of their advertising budgets towards marketing via content creators. According to an industry survey done by the influencer marketing company Linqia, 71% of marketers have increased their influencer marketing budget in 2021, a substantial jump from the 57% who intended to do so in 2020, and the 39% who did in 2019 (“The State of Influencer Marketing,” 2021b).

As a steady stream of advertising money flows to contracting independent producers, an extensive ecosystem of intermediaries has emerged to coordinate, formalize, and take a cut of these advertising contracts. For instance, marketing agencies that specialize in influencer marketing, such as Mediakix, The Influence Agency, and Pulse Advertising, have emerged to assist advertisers in conceptualizing campaigns, liaising with potential influencers, coordinating the execution of campaigns, and reporting their results. On the other side of these exchanges, talent agencies like Shine, Shade, and The Ministry of Talent offer representation to popular creators and handle administrative tasks like seeking out on-brand collaboration opportunities, managing bookings and scheduling, and negotiating the terms of contracts. These firms function via a similar logic to that of traditional talent representation agencies, offering personalized, hands-on service to an elite group of producers who meet the popularity benchmarks that can justify their inclusion on a roster of exclusive represented talent. Indeed, legacy talent agencies that typically represent traditional celebrities such as United Talent Agency, Creative Artists Agency, and William Morris / Endeavor Group have recently expanded their operations to include online influencers (Chess, 2020; Chikhoun, 2021; Whitten, 2022).

At the other end of the spectrum, influencer marketplace platforms have also arrived on the scene to automate and streamline the process of coordinating the promotional labour that influencers do for brands, making it possible to easily scale up these campaigns. Platforms such as Upfluence, TapInfluence, Klear, HYPR, and Intellifluence, for

instance,¹² offer brands large searchable repositories of social media accounts and associated analytics for finding influential content creators. Some of these products aggregate public social media data and function primarily as search engines, which can be paired with the services from companies like Keyhole and Social Blade that provide measurement or analytics software that marketers can use to discern the impact of potential contract hires. Other influencer marketplace platforms maintain large directories of signed-up creators and offer brands a one-stop shop to search, contract, manage, and measure the work of many different influencers simultaneously. For instance, the influencer marketing platform, HYPR (recently merged with Julius), promotes its low barriers to entry, advertiser dashboard, and large repository of creator accounts as a selling feature for advertisers looking to capitalize on economies of scale:

While most of the industry competes for relationships with the world’s largest and most sought-after influencers, *HYPR* is influencer agnostic. We treat influencers as a commodity: We ensure you have as many options as possible to evaluate, engage and measure performance easily (HYPR, 2021).

On slightly different marketplace platforms such as The Plug, Dealspotr, and, Tribe, prospective influencers can search and apply for different brand campaigns. In some instances, such as on Tribe, influencers produce and submit branded content as part of their application and advertisers select the “winning” creators to integrate into their campaigns. On The Plug, selected content producers are compensated per conversion, while on Dealspotr, promotional work is compensated via discounts, products, or small up-front payments.

In the past few years, the landscape of agencies, platforms, and services dedicated to influencer marketing has expanded rapidly. By the count of the trade publication Influencer Marketing Hub (“The State of Influencer Marketing,” 2021a), there were 190

¹² Intellifluence is largest influencer marketplace platform currently on the market, boasting a database of over 70 million profiles. Upfluence claims 4 million (“14 Best Influencer Marketplaces”, 2022).

such companies in 2015, but by 2020 that number had ballooned seven-fold, reaching 1,360. According to their latest report (“The State of Influencer Marketing,” 2022), the industry has added another 3,850 new companies in the last year alone. The explosion of this ecosystem has helped to extend and amplify the prospect of becoming a self-enterprise and monetizing online networks of social relationships, regardless of their size or demographic makeup. Such developments have helped to disperse and render increasingly normative forms of selfhood and sociality that are deeply saturated by marketplace logics, normalizing the performance of what Hund and McGuigan (2019) call the “shoppable life,” whose constituent elements are available for purchase.

3.3 Instagram and its Influencers

From the beginning, Instagram has been a powerful infrastructural agent that has shaped the emergence and development of influencer culture and economic activity. The platform was founded in October 2010 by Kevin Systrom and Michael Krieger, two Stanford University graduates living and working in the technology start-up culture of Silicon Valley in the late 2000s. Instagram was initially called “Burbn,” a location-based social media app designed by Systrom for whiskey enthusiasts to share plans and photos with friends (Frier, 2020). After securing \$500,000 in seed funding from Baseline Ventures and Andreessen Horowitz (Blystone, 2022), Systrom brought Kreiger onboard to help with development. At the time, location-based check-in apps like Foursquare and Shopkick were quite popular, but the focus upon mobile phone photography combined with social sharing capabilities was a novel and less crowded marketplace. The founders soon pivoted, stripping *Burbn* down to this function. They developed a series of image filters modeled from the popular photography application Hipstamatic, which gave photographs taken with a cellphone camera a vintage and artistic aesthetic, and rebranded Burbn as Instagram (Carr, 2012; Frier, 2020).

The application was an immediate hit. Instagram’s userbase expanded quickly. On the first day of its launch, it had 25,000 signed up users, and within two months it had reached one million. This early popularity drew attention from other social media

technology investors, including Twitter co-founder Jack Dorsey, who reportedly made a \$500 million offer for Instagram that Systrom declined (Frier, 2020). Then, in April of 2012, less than two years after its launch, Instagram was acquired by Facebook for \$1 billion in cash and stock, a figure unprecedented at the time (Rusli, 2012). Zuckerberg's move to acquire Instagram, which, by then, had over 30 million users, was a pivotal moment that helped to secure Facebook's dominance over the social media market. In her book *No Filter* (2020), chronicling the rise and impact of Instagram, journalist Sarah Frier explains that regulators didn't seem to clearly understand how this acquisition would concentrate power into Zuckerberg's hands, a miscalculation that analysts would later call "the greatest regulatory failure of the decade" (Frier, 2020, p. 78).

Instagram's initial design featured a specific combination of tools and functionality that helped to lay the groundwork for the emergence of the influencer. It had a particularly simple interface in comparison to its contemporaries. Social interactions on Instagram were initially limited to liking or commenting on posts and following other accounts. The quantity of comments, likes, and followers were displayed publicly for any user to see, producing a straightforward system for measuring popularity and establishing a clear hierarchy of status between accounts. Unlike Facebook and Twitter, Instagram did not include a "share" or "retweet" functionality, which had the overall effect of ensuring that the content posted by an account was created by that user (Frier, 2020). While the ability to share posts on these other sites helped to facilitate circulation and virality, its absence on Instagram made the platform particularly amenable to the curation of a specific point of view, online persona, and visual aesthetic.

Instagram had other instruments for channeling attention and building popularity as well. The "Suggested User List," for instance, was an exclusive selection of Instagram accounts, hand-picked by Instagram employees, that was promoted to all newcomers to the platform (González, 2012). Inclusion on the list guaranteed those accounts a daily influx of new followers, while the profiles it featured templated the aesthetic norms and self-branding techniques for other users to follow. The "Top Posts" page was another key

innovation that elevated the visibility of certain accounts, displaying the most liked posts associated with different hashtags and topics and bringing new followers, comments, and likes to the most popular content producers in that area. These mechanisms were early innovations that helped to elevate the visibility of some Instagram users to a type of celebrity status across the platform.

In its early days, Instagram discouraged users from creating sponsored content or doing explicit promotional work for brands. Systrom himself was an amateur photographer with an artistic sensibility who saw blatant commercialism as incompatible with the artisanal ethos of taste-making he had intended to cultivate on the platform (Frier, 2020). But, at this point, there was little he could do. The exploding popularity of certain Instagrammers was hard to ignore for advertisers eager to get their products in front of online audiences. By 2014, the huge success of sponsored content campaigns from reality television stars like the Kardashians drew more attention from brands and catalyzed the launch of Instagram Business Profiles that came equipped with additional metrics and dashboards to analyze follower impressions (Khaimova, 2019).

Since this time an economy of influence has flourished on the platform. Instagram has come to recognize the value of its burgeoning influencer class, seeking new ways to insert itself into influencer-brand partnerships and generate profits more directly from the activities of its popular content producers. Recent organizational moves at Instagram confirm the centrality of the influencer to Instagram's business model. In the last four years, the company has released a series of features and tools explicitly designed for its expanding community of independent professional producers, hoping to elicit increased productivity from these popular accounts.

For instance, in 2019, Instagram rolled out "Creator profiles," with additional "growth insights" on follower count fluctuations, and account management tools such as the ability to filter messages from brands and rank requests by priority (Jarvey, 2018). In the same year, the company also expanded the Facebook "Brand Collabs Manager" to Instagram, a tool for finding and managing brand partnerships, which gives brands access

to influencers' account analytics to measure the performance of sponsored content ("Helping Creators Turn Their Passion," 2019).¹³ The development of this interface to facilitate the fulfillment of brand-influencer contracts problematizes the straightforward classification of Instagram as an "advertising platforms" (Srnicsek, 2016), and troubles any clear demarcation between it and other "digital work platforms" (Gandini, 2021).

A variety of new creative tools have been launched since 2020 with professional producers in mind. In June of 2020, the company launched the Instagram Creator Studio, a desktop friendly interface for scheduling posts, measuring performance, and managing business partnerships (Marais, 2021). The same year saw the announcement of "Collabs," a tool that allows influencers to co-author posts with others and maximize the potential audience for their content (Wong, 2021). The Instagram Help Centre now features a series of "Instagram Creator Tools," including a "Video School," with instructions for aspiring influencers on "content best practices" for growing their audience on the platform ("Instagram Creator Tools," 2022). One new content production tool that particularly underscores Instagram's focus on influencers is the incredibly successful "Reels." Reels is a short video feature designed to compete with the success of TikTok, which facilitates the discovery of new accounts to follow rather than viewing the activities of personal contacts. The announcement accompanying the release of Reels promoted the new tool as giving "anyone the chance to become a creator on Instagram and reach new audiences on a global stage" ("Introducing Instagram Reels," 2020).

To compliment this growing collection of content production tools aimed at professional and aspiring influencers, the platform has also recently released a series of new monetization tools. "Shopping From Creators," for instance, facilitates fan purchases of featured products and pays influencers a percentage ("Helping Creators Turn Their Passion," 2019). The company also recently launched "Badges," a fan tipping feature

¹³ Prior to this point, the standard practice involved screenshotting these numbers and forwarding them via direct message or email.

similar to TikTok's "Tips" and "Gifts" functions (Hayes, 2020), as well as Twitch's "Twitch Bits" (Johnson & Woodcock, 2019; Partin, 2020). Instagram has also introduced revenue sharing options from in-stream video ads on Instagram Video (previously IGTV), a rollout that seeks to compete with the revenue sharing model of YouTube. The platform also expanded the eligibility criteria for its "Shops" and "Checkout" features to enable more accounts to generate streams of revenue from selling merchandise or other products to followers. In June 2021, Instagram announced that the company was testing a "native affiliate tool" for creators to earn a commission from the purchases they drive on Instagram ("New Ways for Creators," 2021, para. 5). In the following month, they introduced a "Bonuses" program that offers cash incentives for creators to sign up for Instagram Video ads, offer followers the option to purchase Badges, and provides one-time payments for Reels that perform particularly well ("Earn Bonuses," 2021).

This expanding array of new features and tools underscores that Instagram is engaged in an aggressive project to establish itself as a key infrastructure of the burgeoning creator economy. Indeed, Instagram recently announced that it had earmarked \$1 billion to develop tools to serve "the creator community" ("Investing \$1 Billion," 2021). Such investments, some industry commentators argue, are part of a broader "paradigm shift" in the business model of the Internet, away from the "attention economy," with a revenue model based upon "selling eyeballs at scale," towards one where platform intermediaries position themselves in such a way as to be able to "tak[e] a cut of what creators are getting paid directly" (Lessin, 2021). Indeed, it appears that Instagram is positioning itself to better account for and extract value from the relationships between influencers and their followers, and to configure these in such a way as to maximize company revenue.

The changes also reflect a transition in Instagram's identity under Facebook's ownership, moving it further away from a space to stay connected with friends and family, and towards a venue to cultivate and monetize one's digital self-brand. Recent comments from Instagram head, Adam Mosseri, seem to confirm this organizational pivot. In a

video posted to the platform addressing the various transformations underway in 2021, he explained that Instagram is “no longer a photo-sharing app, or a square photo sharing app.” Rather, he redefined the platform as a place that people go “to be entertained” (Bonifacic, 2021). These investments in facilitating influencer production and the rebranding from the company’s leadership seem to undercut any lingering sentiment that Instagram specifically, and social media platforms more generally, remain venues for the expenditure of “free-time” or leisure. The platform is increasingly configured to facilitate and generate profits from the entrepreneurial labour of an expanding faction of professionalizing content producers.

3.4 The Creator Economy: Fan-Funding and Other Tertiary Services

The changes being implemented at Instagram are taking place in the context of enormous investment in the creator economy, which, by some estimates, topped 1.3 billion in funding in 2021 (“The Creator Economy,” 2021). A fleet of third-party start-ups have arrived on the scene with software and services designed for the micro-entrepreneurial needs of influencers.

Some of these new players, such as Type Studio, Kapwing, and Splice, focus on content creation and offer influencers production and editing tools beyond what’s available on Instagram. Other companies, like LinkTree and Koji, are distribution-oriented and provide a simple interface for influencers to organize their content and direct audience traffic as it comes to their profiles. Laylo, Circle, and Disciple bill themselves as community management services, offering tools to coordinate the release of new content across platforms, organize and monitor community discussions, and provide additional options for engaging with followers (“The Creator Economy,” 2021).

A diverse set of monetization tools has developed to facilitate new forms of fan-funding, expanding the earning potential of independent producers and helping to extend this individualized and entrepreneurial model of work across the economy at large. For

instance, platforms like Patreon, OnlyFans, Gumroad, and Substack provide the infrastructure for individuals to generate streams of revenue from an online audience via subscriptions or one-time payments that grant access to otherwise paywalled content. Firms like Spring and Fanjoy offer simple tools to design and sell branded merchandise to fans. Platforms like Buymeacoffee and Ko-Fi function like the mobile payment apps Venmo and Cash App, where individuals can solicit tips or donations from followers. Other niche firms like Cameo allow individuals to directly monetize interactions with audience members, selling personalized video messages or “shoutouts.” Relative newcomer, NewNew further enables the monetization of any mundane action; the company allows influencers to solicit paid votes on any life decision, from the topic of their next social media post or what to eat for breakfast, to which Netflix series to watch (Lorenz, 2021). Such developments invite individuals to understand all of their actions through the lens of potential exchange, intensifying the trend towards what Hearn (2011) calls the “monetization of being” (p. 315).

Beyond direct monetization, measurement and analytics tools like Conviva, ChannelMeter, and StreamBee offer to equip influencers with detailed analytics to inform their content strategy and help them “prove [their] value across all content types” (“Explore the Conviva Platform,” 2022). These services testify to the way that the platform economy further institutionalizes the rationality of neoliberal post-Fordist capitalism, where individuals demonstrate their value by performing their productivity (Hearn, 2010; 2008), packaging themselves as a uniquely desirable product on the labour market, and constantly selling themselves to prospective employers (Hearn, 2008).

Financial technology companies have also emerged to incentivize and support the entrepreneurial conditions of the online influencer, where temporary, project-based employment and multiple, erratic income sources are the norm. Stir, for instance, offers to compile various streams of revenue from different sources and on divergent payment schedules into one management interface to help independents organize their finances. Creator Cash offers to provide cash advances for influencers who find themselves waiting

on payments. Karat is a credit card company marketed explicitly to influencers who may lack the traditional markers of financial stability, such as a consistent, predictable income each month, and permanent full-time employment. Instead, Karat integrates social media metrics into their calculations to determine an applicant's eligibility and credit limit (Paul, 2021).

3.5 “Influencer Creep”

Early commentary from 2020 speculated that the pandemic might bring about the “end of influencing” (Bryant, 2020; see also Bishop, 2020), as restrictions were placed on travel, restaurant dining, festivals, large gatherings, and other public events. Indeed, the first few months saw a major slump in ad spending on influencer marketing as brands slashed marketing budgets and cancelled planned collaborations in response to the uncertainty of the pandemic (“The State of Influencer Marketing,” 2021a; Pardes, 2021). There have also been several high-profile incidents where influencers have become the targets of fierce public criticism and had advertising deals revoked for pandemic-related missteps such as leveraging personal connections to access COVID-19 tests when they were in short supply (Dellatto, 2020), or flouting public health orders and social distancing guidelines (Davis, 2021; Scanlan, 2021).

However, it now appears that the global pandemic has actually accelerated the growth of this sector. In the two years of lockdowns and quarantines, social media use has skyrocketed, as people have spent more time at home, distant from friends and family, and come to rely more on their digital devices and platform interfaces for work, school, and leisure. In this context, influencers have reported sharp increases in followers and engagement across platform environments. According to a report from the marketing firm A&E (2021), influencers saw a 67.1% increase in likes and 51.3% increase in comments on their posts in 2020. In an interview with the Wall Street Journal, YouTuber Roberto Blake explained that the pandemic had intensified viewership for him and other creators, “People started watching *obsessively* [...] A lot of people started hosting lives [livestreams] just so people wouldn't feel alone throughout their day” (“The Pandemic's

Impact,” 2021, emphasis added). This increase in attention has put influencers in high demand with advertisers, a demand compounded by the fact that influencers can continue to produce content from home, while commercial photo shoots and studio productions have proven especially vulnerable to shutdowns and delays (Perelli & Whateley, 2020). Reports from the influencer agency, The Motherhood, state that creators had been able to increase their rates 44% from 2020 to 2021, and another 45% in the first six months of 2022 (Hale, 2022).

As a result, there has been an influx of influencer aspirants. As the pandemic seemed set to plunge the world into the second economic crisis in as many decades, millions of people turned toward platform intermediaries in the hopes that they might transform their skills, talents, hobbies, or personality into a source of income and new career as a self-employed entrepreneur via YouTube, Instagram, or TikTok. For many who suddenly found themselves at home and out of work, investing in their digital self-brand and seeking out a market for it emerged as a practical pursuit. As YouTuber Roberto Blake describes,

I think that the situation with quarantine was just an eye opener and a catalyst for people embracing the new world, embracing remote work, embracing the gig economy, [and] embracing the creator economy that I’m a part of [...] I feel that this whole transition awakened people up to the fact that you don’t control the circumstances that allow that 9 to 5 job to exist. It’s not about you getting fired. It may not even be the business or the company’s fault. What if the industry collapsed for some reason? What if it was something with the stock market that was beyond my control? What if there was any other act of God? I think [the pandemic] was this shift and mental reset for people. And it’s scary. I’ve lived through it. But the thing is once you realize, my skills are what make me valuable. The job is a mechanism and a utility that I’m using to serve people. The job is an appliance for how I’m delivering my value. I just need to determine another appliance or build one. And the thing is now with these platforms, largely through social media, you have reach. You can learn to use these platforms to connect the value that you can create through your specialization with people who desire it and can afford it. I think now, people see these things not only as escapism, but they really value it as a utility (The Pandemic’s Impact, 2021).

For Blake, the particulars of an individual's job training, skill set, or field of expertise are inconsequential; via platforms, anyone can find a market for what they offer and build an independent business. In a sentiment that echoes the promises of the blogosphere in 2008, these social media platforms represent a chance to secure financial stability in a time of significant economic and professional uncertainty. Recent data suggests that Blake's reading of the moment could be right. According to a 2021 report from VC firm, SignalFire, more than 50 million people in the United States alone call themselves "creators" (Yuan & Constine, 2021). Education platforms like *Critical Learning*, *Udemy*, and Skill Share host influencer training courses to teach budding entrepreneurs how to curate their unique self-brand. The Yiwu Industrial and Commercial College in east China even offers its own "influencer training school" (Tan, 2017).

Influencer culture is also recreating professional practice across fields. In academia, faculty transform the mundane aspects of their daily work into amusing content for #ProfessorsofTikTok (Duffy, 2022). In retail, companies identify "brand ambassadors" among their employees. At the clothing retailer, Zappos, for instance, new employees receive Twitter training and are encouraged to share the day-to-day aspects of their job using the hashtag #InsideZappos (Azyan, 2015). Walmart has also recently launched an in-house employee influencer program to "showcase a behind-the-scenes look at life at Walmart" (Waters, 2020, n.p.). Even dentists are encouraged to invest in establishing their online presence and unique brand: the website of the dental marketing firm, Delmain, offers to help dentists "attract the right audience," and counsels that they follow other "dental influencers" to "get ideas [...] stay updated [...] and] make contacts" ("Top 19 Dental Influencers", 2022). Sophie Bishop (2022) refers to this phenomenon as "influencer creep," where the self-documenting and self-branding practices typical of influencer culture are increasingly present in other industries and other facets of life. Among the artists that Bishop studied (2022), for instance, recording time-lapse videos of themselves working or uploading behind-the-scenes photographs were some strategies deployed to convert their process into content.

These developments across industries signal the ubiquity of a new productive subjectivity specific to and conditioned by the socio-technical and political economic context of platform capitalism. In many ways, we are all increasingly called upon to *become* influencers, to establish our “niche,” perform our productivity, cultivate our reputation, build our following, and attempt to leverage all of this into a marketable and revenue-generating brand (Hearn, 2017). The influencer, then, stands out as an exemplar of transformations to work, employment, and labouring subjectivity that have occurred alongside the proliferation of the platform as the dominant socio-technical infrastructure and business model of contemporary capitalism.

3.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have provided a description of the influencer and offered an outline of the contextual developments that have given rise to this new subject position. I have provided an overview of the growth of influencer marketing and the various players that have emerged and proliferated to formalize influence into a billion-dollar industry. I also examined recent developments at Instagram that exemplify the platform’s ongoing efforts to establish itself as a key infrastructure of the emerging creator economy. I argue that these developments are constituent elements of political economic shifts in how work and employment are organized and express changes in the relationship between the subject of labour and capital’s valorization processes under platform capitalism.

Chapter 4

4 The Start of an Algorithmic Antagonism

4.1 The Algorithm Changes

In March of 2016, Instagram announced that the platform was transitioning away from a reverse chronological presentation of posts towards a curated Instagram experience for users. Using content tailoring algorithms, Instagram would now display content deemed most “meaningful” to each end-user based upon their user history, the timeliness of a post, and the demonstrated popularity of a post on the platform. In the company’s public messaging, Instagram explained that the change was a response to the growth of the user base and the significant increase in the quantity of content that followed. According to the company, the average Instagrammer was missing 70 percent of the content posted by those they follow; they argued that this transformation would improve the user experience by prioritizing and elevating posts that reflect “the moments we believe you will care about the most” (“See the Moments,” 2016).

The algorithm change reflects and enacts the business priorities of Instagram as an “advertising platform” (Srniczek, 2016). Content tailoring algorithms are designed to be “sticky,” compiling a seductive content environment that keeps users on the platform for longer periods of time, scrolling, swiping, liking, commenting, posting, sharing, and generating the data at the heart of Instagram’s business model. In this regard the change has been a categorical success. In a 2019 interview with *New York Magazine*, the company’s founder Kevin Systrom, characterized it as a major growth moment for Instagram: “The inflection point happened when we started ranking feeds [...] Usage went through the roof” (Bugbee, 2019).

The ranked feed was a growth strategy modeled of Facebook’s success. Algorithmically ranking posts and displaying them based upon that rank was pioneered by Facebook and has guided the user experience on that platform since 2011 (D’Onfro, 2016). As Systrom puts it, “Facebook invented that science. We adopted it” (Bugbee, 2019). The pivot to the

ranked feed brought Instagram closer in line with the business goals and operations of its parent company. By the time Instagram released it in 2016, Facebook had already established a reputation across Silicon Valley for aggressive growth-driven strategies, and many saw the change on Instagram as indicative of Facebook's priorities being imposed upon its new acquisition (Newton, 2018; Frier, 2019).

Instagram's transition to algorithmic curation was also in step with that of other industry players. In that same year, Twitter launched its own version of the same technology (Kantrowitz, 2016), and YouTube released a whitepaper reporting on a shift in the platform's recommendation system away from "watch time" to more personalized recommendations (Covington, Adams & Sargin, 2016). Both moves were met with some public outcry from users (DeVito et al., 2017; Bucher, 2018b). The change on Instagram was met with a similar uproar. Some Instagrammers sought to pressure Instagram into reconsidering the platform's strategy; a Change.org petition demanding that Instagram revert to chronological order garnered 343,011 signatures (Heard, 2016). Instagram did not respond.

Discontent with the change was particularly pronounced among Instagram's growing cohort of professionalizing content creators, whose self-brand and employability as influencers is contingent upon being able to demonstrate their influence via the platform's metrics. Under the conditions of algorithmic curation, influencers' posts were no longer necessarily visible to all their followers, lowering their "engagement" metrics, and potentially crippling their ability to secure paid advertorial work. Many creators responded by asking their followers to turn on notifications so that they would be alerted to newly published content and reminded to interact. The anxiety regarding how this change would affect their businesses was palpable. As one commentator described it, the imposition of the algorithmic feed constituted "death by algorithm" (Dillet, 2016) for many.

Algorithmic curation and personalized newsfeeds have since been normalized as a mainstay of the social media experience, shaping what becomes visible to whom, and

structuring what goes viral and what ends up languishing in relative obscurity. In my interviews, I asked influencers about their experiences navigating these conditions. Their responses underscore the tensions and frustrations that animate their relationship with the platform company. They highlight feelings of insecurity and exacerbated employment precarity, alongside frustration with the state of perpetual uncertainty that demands constant reinvestments of their time and creative energy, and skepticism with regards to what their metrics *mean* in the context of opaque algorithmic decision-making. Their complaints, I argue, express the seeds of an antagonism with the Instagram platform, whose authority over the infrastructure of circulation and measure is not stable nor settled.

4.2 A Note on “The Instagram Algorithm”

It is somewhat of a misnomer to refer to “the” (singular) Instagram algorithm. The algorithmic decision making that structures the Instagram platform is more precisely described as an ensemble of algorithms, an amalgamation of coded instructions written by different engineers at different times to help meet different needs and priorities. Nevertheless, the participants of this study frequently referenced “the Instagram algorithm” when discussing their daily interactions with the platform, and in this chapter, I do the same for the sake of continuity, clarity, and simplicity. By doing so, I am referring to a complex and opaque interplay of mutable calculations that sort, classify, and rank content for circulation on Instagram.

Algorithms cannot be understood in isolation from the data they process and the outputs they produce. Dourish (2016) points out that “since algorithms arise in practice in relation to other computational forms, such as data structures, they need to be analyzed and understood within those systems of relation that give them meaning and animate them” (p. 2). “The” algorithm only *becomes* a perceptible, meaningful entity to influencers by way of contextual cues, the most important of which are Instagram metrics. Metrics, such as the number of likes or comments a post receives; the number of followers on an account; or the number of users a post is circulated to (called “reach” in “Instagram

Insights”), communicate the respective visibility and popularity of any particular post and, by association, the influencer. Changes to an influencer’s metrics are what make the changes to Instagram’s algorithmic decision-making perceptible as an event. An influencer’s metrics, then, operate as an important space of dialogue between influencers and the Instagram platform.

4.3 Introducing the Interviewees

Prior to exploring the themes identified in my interviews, I first introduce the group of research participants who took part in this study. The sixteen influencer interviewees who contributed to this project work across a variety of genres that include lifestyle, beauty, fashion, travel, health and wellness, cooking, crafting, and interior design. 15 identify as women and one identifies as a man, reflecting the fact that the influencer economy is particularly well established in feminized sites of cultural production (Hellenkemper, 2019). At the time of our interviews, participants were between 24 and 41 years of age, and located in anglophone countries including Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand.

Demographic information concerning race or ethnic background was not actively collected during the interview process. While several interviewees present as visible minorities in their public Instagram profiles, I do not intend to label the racial or ethnic identity of study participants without their active participation in how that identity is constructed.¹⁴ That said, research into how racial identity differentially shapes the platform-mediated labour of content creators is needed. This is particularly the case in light of recent reports in the media, and a growing body of research on racial bias in

¹⁴ On two occasions, interviewees did discuss race or ethnic identity in their work as influencers. One interviewee attributed her feelings of discomfort with sharing personal stories online to her Nigerian background. Another expressed embarrassment and frustration with the lack of diversity in the advertorial campaigns she was repeatedly involved in. She explained, “I did a campaign with Ugg last year and I got to the shoot and I was like, ‘Oh my god, it’s literally all white women!’ I was horrified.”

algorithmic decision-making across platforms like Instagram, TikTok, Google, and elsewhere (Benjamin, 2019; El-Wardany, 2020; Noble, 2018; Strapagiel, 2020).

Interviewees hold diverse levels of perceived influence in the industry. Their audiences range in size from 1,000 followers to roughly 200,000, which positions them within the mid-tier influencer (over 100K followers), micro influencer (between 10K and 100K followers) and nano influencer (less than 10K followers) ranges (Wise, 2022). The study does not include any macro- or celebrity-level influencers. The fact that some participants are able to generate income from their content production without a large Instagram audience is representative of a transition within the influencer marketing space, where brand campaigns are increasingly oriented towards working with micro-influencers (Shoenthal, 2018) because they are viewed as having more engaged and invested fanbases, who are more likely to be persuaded; “In an age of increasing distrust towards influencers, marketers feel micro influencers who command the attention of a close-knit group will provide better return on investment” (Tait, 2019, n.p.). Of course, influencers with smaller followings also appeal to advertisers because they charge less for their work, allowing advertisers to expand the scale of their campaigns (Pusztai, 2019).

Participants report income ranging from \$175 (USD) to £1600 (BP) per Instagram post. Four interviewees have representation from public relations agencies that broker advertising partnerships on their behalf. The rest operate independently, contacting brands directly and negotiating deals on their own. Several report they are signed up to influencer marketing platforms, such as those discussed in Chapter Three, which facilitate brand-influencer partnership for advertising campaigns. They receive work proposals that they can accept or decline in a similar structure to the online labour marketplace of platforms such as Upwork or Fiverr.

For seven interviewees, content production on Instagram is their primary source of income. Five interviewees report that their work as a content creator provides a supplemental income to another full-time job. The four remaining study participants report having more than two jobs and sources of income. For instance, Alison works as a

yoga instructor, professional photographer, and outdoor adventure influencer. Elizabeth also works as a professional photographer, in addition to running a small textiles business that acts as a source of content for her work as a lifestyle influencer. Gloria reports that she was working at four jobs until two days before our interview when she had been laid off from a part-time position at a magazine in her crafting niche. However, she isn't worried about the loss of income because she is still employed as a social media assistant for a crafting company, and she has a third part-time administrative position with her municipality that allows her plenty of time to work on her brand. Her Instagram persona has been an important asset that helped her secure other positions. These participants describe a work life characterized by multiple jobs and income streams, where the work done for one is repackaged and repurposed for another and the call to productivity never ends.

Half of the participants interviewed (8) report working full-time hours as influencers and the other half split their time between content creation and another job. Of those who work part-time, five aspire to quit their other work and "go pro" as a full-time content creator in their niche. As Kathi explains, "As of right now, I need to have a second job, but I'm planning on completely quitting my job at some point and doing this full-time." The final three interviewees view their Instagram-based businesses as building towards other creative industries careers. Sarah sees her work as a travel and style influencer as a supplement to a budding broadcast journalism career. Her online presence has been instrumental in landing her a recurrent appearance on a national morning television show. Alison explains that her work as an outdoor adventure influencer gives her ample opportunity to build her skills and portfolio as a professional nature photographer; and Lauren is hopeful that the online community she has built will be advantageous in launching her own digital marketing agency. For all the interviewees who participated in this study, their work as Instagram influencers is quite meaningful to them. Nevertheless, their comments also indicate that they share a set of common frustrations and challenges.

4.4 Algorithmic Frustrations

In what follows I outline three broad thematic topic areas that emerged in interviews with influencers about their experience working upon Instagram. In the first, I unpack interviewees' accounts of their experience with the algorithm change in 2016 and offer the concept of "algorithmically configured precarity" as an organizing frame for these experiences. In the second, I outline interviewees' diverse theories about Instagram's logics and the experiments that they engage. These experiments demonstrate that the uncertainty of the platform consigns influencers to the work of constant innovation, engagement, and data production for Instagram. In the final section, I explore the paradox of "autonomy without control" that influencers must negotiate in their platform-mediated work. For some interviewees, this contradiction is stabilized through the mythology of an algorithmic meritocracy, while others challenge the legitimacy of the platform's power and the validity of its instruments of measure.

4.4.1 The Ranked Feed as Algorithmically Configured Precarity

When reflecting upon the outcome of the algorithm change and introduction of the ranked feed, all interviewees report stagnation or decline in the vital performance metrics of reach, engagement, and followers. Their posts now reach roughly ten percent of their total audience. Comments from Elizabeth, a 32-year-old lifestyle and photography influencer in California, are representative of this common experience.

Basically, the thing that I've found is that, right now, Instagram will not show more than ten percent of your following any of your work. And just in general, even if [the post is] doing like really, really well. It might go up to like twelve percent or fifteen percent, but it really doesn't go beyond that. And that's pretty consistent across the board. [...] No one is seeing anything over ten percent right now. Which obviously feels so shitty. You're like, "Come on! We work so hard to build these followings and they're just not seeing it?" So that sucks. It gets some people really down, and they get really, really, *really* bummed out about it.

Less reach garners fewer interactions from audience members, and so audience engagement metrics suffer as well. Jennifer, a 35-year-old interior design influencer in

California, explains the impact in terms of a decrease in the number of likes she receives on her posts:

It's definitely frustrating. When they first instituted the algorithm, my engagement was literally cut in half. Everyone's was, you know? I had maybe 50,000 followers [at the time], and I was getting 2,500 to 3,000 likes per photo, but then after the algorithm, I was lucky if I hit 1000 likes.

Jennifer's feelings of frustration underscore the discomfort she experiences in having to adjust to her new numbers and what these could mean for her Instagram-based business. Receiving less engagement on posts makes it more difficult to meet the benchmarks that get content onto on the "Top Posts" and "Explore" pages of Instagram. These are important spaces of audience growth. The Top Posts page is where the most popular content for a particular hashtag is displayed and the Explore page is where users discover new content and accounts. Having content displayed in these spaces exposes it to users who are not yet followers, and who may then engage with the content or follow the account. Kathi, a 26-year-old fashion influencer from North Carolina, describes the challenges she experiences trying to grow the size of her audience since the change: "It's really hard to grow right now. It's hard to get on the Explore page; hashtags aren't working like they used to. Instagram is just really weird right now." Kylie, a 30-year-old fashion, travel, and beauty influencer in New York, raises a similar complaint about growth. "My Instagram grew really hard before the algorithm and then afterwards, like now, my growth's been stuck for months."

Audience size, reach, and engagement are key metrics that influencers use to demonstrate their value to brands for advertorial contracts. Lower metrics undermine influencers' ability to sell themselves as influential and desirable candidates for advertising campaigns. They also weaken their bargaining power when negotiating contracts with brands. Elizabeth's metrics, for instance, have become a source of stress in her interactions with brands. She worries that these numbers no longer convey a strong message that advertisers should be confident in her ability to generate returns.

Algorithms definitely influence things and especially when brands ask for feedback on how many people saw a post. Sometimes that's like 'Ugh, really? Do I have to?' It's really embarrassing. I want you [brands] to like what I did and be proud of the content I created and the engagement I created. When it's just like, 'Hey guess what! Twelve percent of my followers saw the thing you gave me to post.' That really sucks.

Elizabeth's comments highlight a tension between how she values her work and the instruments of measure that her advertising contract employers use to evaluate her. She wants them to understand her value in terms of the aesthetic quality of the photographs and videos that she produces, and the strength of her relationship with her followers. For Elizabeth, quantified indicators like "reach" misrepresent the value of what she does. Her feelings of embarrassment over these measures, and her hesitancy to share them with advertising partners, highlight her concern that low scores will disqualify her from being hired to work on future campaigns. Kylie has similar feelings of insecurity in her relationships with brand partners.

It definitely makes it a lot harder because it cuts your reach, [and] that means it cuts your engagement. So, your engagement drops rapidly, and they keep on making it worse and worse and worse. Which also means the brands that you're working with are getting less and less visibility, and your work is getting less visibility. In a way, it all makes you feel insecure.

This feeling of insecurity is common among interviewees. They find themselves in the position of being accountable for unimpressive results that they cannot entirely explain, predict, or control. This is also a concern for Sarah, a 34-year-old travel and beauty influencer in Toronto, who told me "The algorithm changes on a whim and you have no control over that!" Sarah struggles with how to reassure her brand clients that their advertising dollars are well spent in the face of diminished numbers.

It's hard when people are relying on this as their business or their main form of income. [...] Because brands totally care about how much engagement, how many likes. Brands are so numbers focused that an algorithm change that might drop your engagement by fifty percent can have a dramatic effect on how much income you're going to make, so it's tricky.

Sarah's comments highlight the precarious position she occupies, where she feels that she has no control over the "whims" of Instagram's calculations, which can shift at any time and "dramatically" affect her business and income. Jennifer also draws attention to the precarity of her situation when she explains that she feels lucky in comparison to some of her influencer colleagues: "My engagement hasn't dropped as much as some others that I know. If I were really in the toilet like some of my colleagues, I would just throw in the towel and go drive Uber."

Jennifer's comments underscore the fragility of her and others' membership to the vaunted "creative class" (Florida, 2002) under conditions of "platformized cultural production" (Nieborg & Poell, 2018), where she has little control over or insight into Instagram's operations. She recognizes that Instagram has little obligation to her, and that sudden changes to the platform's governance rules or infrastructure of circulation can effectively eliminate her business without warning. Jennifer's recommendation to her colleagues whose numbers are "in the toilet" demonstrates the requisite flexibility that workers of the platform economy must internalize. She expresses a readiness to pivot to an alternative platform and to establish alternative sources of income should changes in Instagram's policy or structure unexpectedly cripple her brand and earning potential as an influencer. As a self-employed independent, she expresses no expectation of support, recourse, or accountability from the platform where she and her colleagues work; they simply remain ready to adapt.

The allusion to alternatively working for/on Uber is also worth examining in more detail. Like influencers, Uber drivers also have their work organized by opaque algorithmic decision-making that they cannot access nor control. They have a set of personal performance metrics they must maintain in order to remain eligible for work on the Uber platform (Lee, Kusbit, Metsky & Dabbish, 2015; Möhlmann & Zalmanson, 2017; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). For instance, an Uber driver's customer ratings, acceptance rate, and response time are all metrics that figure into how Uber allocates work and

certain driver “perks.”¹⁵ Jennifer’s point, however, draws our attention to the *uncertainty* of outcomes that she and her colleagues navigate. They cannot know what constitutes a job well done according to Instagram’s logics. How she is being measured is unclear, and therefore, how she can best optimize her content to be successful on Instagram is a mystery. In her mind, the task of satisfying the platform’s evaluative mechanisms is clearer, more predictable, and achievable on Uber.

Sarah’s frustrations with her precarious conditions are particularly palpable. When asked what could be done to improve her working conditions, she told me, “Leave it alone! Just let it be chronological and stop wreaking havoc on people’s lives!” Her response is telling of the stakes for platformed producers. The uncertainty and instability of Instagram make for acutely precarious working conditions, where influencers have little control over their circulation nor insight into how their posts are being ranked. Nevertheless, they are accountable to their brand clients for those numbers.

Precarious employment has long been a hallmark of the cultural industries, where short-term and project-specific contracts produce “bulimic” patterns of work (Gill & Pratt, 2008). However, discussions with influencers about working on Instagram emphasize the specific challenges of *algorithmically configured precarity* that they must negotiate under platformed conditions. Their self-enterprise is perpetually vulnerable to changes in platform architecture or policy that they do not have meaningful access to, cannot predict or explain, but that have the potential to radically transform their income and employability.

¹⁵ In calling attention to these similarities, I don’t intend to collapse differences in status and, sometimes, pay that exist between work in the vaunted cultural industries and that of the less glamorous service economy (see Gregg, 2015; Neilson & Rossiter, 2005).

4.4.2 Giving the Algorithm What It Wants

The algorithmic systems whereby Instagram ranks and circulates content are a well-guarded proprietary trade secret. The platform's logics are hidden within what has elsewhere been termed the algorithmic "black box" (Pasquale, 2015). The specific variables and calculations that determine who sees what are not accessible or knowable to its network of users. Influencers cannot be sure about how best to "optimize" for the platform's logics. This environment of uncertainty is fertile ground for speculation, and the diverse theories and strategies that interviewees use to navigate it generates a dynamic and evolving landscape of ongoing experimentation and discussion. Lifestyle influencer, Christine, characterizes this discursive community as the "Instagram rumor mill" where invested parties conduct experiments, swap anecdotes, and seek confirmation of their experiences from other similarly motivated producers.

For instance, lifestyle and fashion influencer, Kathi explains that she always takes photos within the Instagram app, rather than with her personal camera because Instagram prefers this. "I heard that if you take pictures from your camera, you don't get as much engagement. Like Instagram hides it. But if you take photos with your iPhone, you know through the Instagram app, you get more engagement." Alison, an outdoor sports influencer, is quite selective about who she follows on Instagram because she believes that Instagram favours posts from accounts with a high ratio of followers to following: "I think there's a percentage of how many people you should be following vs. following you which is supposed to be better for Instagram." Food influencer, Ruth, keeps detailed notes about the actions that garner her posts wide circulation, and includes a location tag in her posts because she's convinced that the algorithm ranks these posts higher: "I did notice that you can get a better reach if you post a location on your picture. A location and a hashtag will definitely help." Jennifer infers from her experience that Instagram devalues thematically inconsistent content: "The algorithm prioritizes photos that are consistent with what I usually post. So, if I post something totally out of character it's going to bump it down and not show it in people's feeds at all." From the inverse perspective, Christine believes that the algorithm deprioritizes posts that *receive*

engagement from Instagram accounts that are dissimilar from her own. “Say, for example, an account on dairy farming from England likes my photo, then Instagram would be like ‘I’m so confused now as to what people are liking her photos and what her type of audience is.’ So, then they’ll just, like, downgrade me in the algorithm.”

The beliefs and strategies interviewees describe reflect the lively communities of tacit, experiential knowledge and information sharing developed in response to the opacity of the platform. These are significant sites of meaning making that respond to the “privatization of process” across “algorithmic culture” (Striphas, 2015). Taina Bucher (2018a) uses the framework of the “algorithmic imaginary” to describe the way that networked publics confront and iteratively shape the algorithms they encounter. Sophie Bishop (2019) terms the communal knowledges about algorithms that YouTubers produce “algorithmic gossip.”

I would further contend that these practices of algorithmic sense-making respond to the uncertainty that structures influencers’ working conditions. These rumours and strategies constitute efforts to create a bulwark against uncertain outcomes under conditions of perpetually precarious employment. In what Christina describes as “the Instagram rumour mill” we can see the desire to optimize for the platform’s instruments of measure and minimize the instability of their work. The following chapter will explore the engagement pod as one collectively organized response to these precarious conditions.

Uncertainty can be a powerfully productive state. It compels a response or resolution, and, in this way, it can be a powerful stimulant of activity and innovation. David Beer (2016) argues that this makes uncertainty an apt operational strategy for neoliberalism. It cultivates an active, resourceful, and entrepreneurial posture because “it continually opens up opportunities for action” (Stark, 2009 cited in van Doorn & Velthuis, 2018, p.181). In their analysis of the webcamming platform, Chaterbate, Neils van Doorn and Olav Velthuis (2018) argue that the veiled logics of the platform’s ranking system produce an environment of “manufactured uncertainty” that fuels a culture of innovation among performers who are constantly seeking new ways to improve upon their previous

rankings (van Doorn & Velthuis, 2018). In a parallel fashion, my interviews indicate that the uncertainty of outcomes in terms of Instagram metrics cultivates a similarly productive practice of ongoing participation, experimentation, and innovation.

For instance, several interviewees engage in experimental forms of interactivity with their followers, other influencers, and brands to try to improve their reach and engagement numbers. Elizabeth explains that she is experimenting with reciprocal engagement with audience members in the hopes that this will extend the reach of her posts.

Recently, I've started an experiment where I told people when I posted a photo in my feed. I went to my Stories and said, "Hey guys, I just posted a photo and if you go comment on it then I'll comment on your last photo." I was wondering if it would change the algorithm at all and if I would get more engagement.

This is no small task; Elizabeth has roughly 75,000 followers. Lauren, a photography and digital marketing influencer, has a more elaborate and no less time-consuming strategy that targets other influencer accounts. She practices something she calls the "\$1.80 rule," which is intended to "systematically make sure that you're engaging in a meaningful way with other people in your niche."

You pick ten hashtags that have to do with your content. So, if you're trying to be a fitness influencer, I'm going to look into #fitness, #gymlife, #running, whatever has to do with your content. You go to every single one of those hashtags, you look at the top nine posts of that hashtag and you leave a long meaningful comment on every single one of those posts. So, you're leaving your two cents on nine posts for nine hashtags. $2 \times 9 \times 9 = \$1.80$. Or wait, what is it? Nine plus nine dollars? Wait nine plus ten ... I don't know. Ten hashtags, nine comments, two cents – somewhere in there the math makes a \$1.80.¹⁶

Lauren concedes that the strategy is a time-consuming one. However, she hopes to see it pay off by encouraging these more popular accounts to respond in kind or follow her account, which she believes will improve the ranking of her own posts.

¹⁶ The formula here is: (10 hashtags x 9 comments) x \$0.02 (your two cents) = \$1.80

Alison makes a point to interact frequently with brands on Instagram because she believes that Instagram's instruments of content ranking prioritize such activity.

It's not just how much you post. It's how much you interact with other brands by commenting. So that kind of stuff is all part of your job too. To be like, 'Ok, yes. I do have to go through *Instagram* and make comments and do that kind of stuff,' because that's part of the algorithm.

Elizabeth's, Lauren's, and Alison's practices of strategic interactivity illustrate that the uncertainty of the Instagram platform is, indeed, quite productive of experimental forms of interactivity in pursuit of better rankings, better metrics, and better visibility across Instagram. Their efforts are representative of the significant investments of time, energy, and affective resources that creators put into the platform in the face of uncertain outcomes.

Many interviewees explain their frustration with the platform in terms of the demand it places on their time. Alison explains, "Part of it is also just time. I need to learn how to master Instagram and that's such a big job." Similarly, Christine points out, "A lot of people just struggle to find the time to go through and figure out what works and what doesn't." Importantly, this project of figuring out what works is never-ending. Instagram is powered by machine learning, which is to say that its algorithms are continuously and autonomously adapting to patterns in the data stream (Domingos, 2015). As a result, the infrastructure of content ranking is constantly changing, subject to continual tweaks and adjustments to refine the company's targeting capabilities. As a result, influencers find themselves on constantly shifting terrain, where they cannot predict future outcomes based on past actions because "the link between the tried and the true is routinely destabilized" (van Doorn & Velthuis, 2018, p.189).

Interviewees express frustration with how keeping up with the platform's transformations compels constant investments of time and ingenuity from them, to keep up with the platform's transformations. As Maya, a travel, health, and fitness influencer in North Carolina, puts it, "It seems like it's changing all the time and just trying to keep up with

the latest strategies to beat the system has been really challenging.” Kylie echoes this sentiment,

It’s like a constant struggle of finding out how the algorithm works best for you. [The algorithm is] constantly changing, so it’s hard to really figure it out, because once you figure it out, they’ll probably change it again and then you’ll have to do it all over. And I don’t know anything about the whole technology behind it so for me it’s really hard to figure out.

Sarah is similarly frustrated with the constant mutability of Instagram and the attention that it requires: “It’s really frustrating to see the algorithm change and then you have to scramble to figure it out before they change it again.” For her, the ongoing research and experimentation has become onerous; “I think social media changes at such a rapid pace right now that it’s really difficult to keep up with [...] I do research on hashtags because those are always changing. What worked two months ago, might not be working now.” These comments reflect influencers’ dissatisfaction with the “necessity of continuous algorithmic learning” (Duffy & Sawey, 2021, p. 142) that characterizes their work. The uncertainty and instability of the platform disciplines a practice of perpetual attention, experimentation, and revision undertaken in order to maintain metrics and remain competitive for employment opportunities. Perhaps most importantly, it consigns influencers to continual data production for Instagram. In this, it functions to intensify their working day.

No doubt, perpetually unpredictable outcomes align influencers’ practices with the business priorities of Instagram; they compel the ongoing participation and engagement that generates the behavioural data that is the basis of the company’s business model. My interviewees are well aware of the contribution they make to the company’s profitability, and several believe that Instagram rewards them for this contribution. For instance, Sarah explains,

I think, basically, at the end of the day Instagram's goal is to make money and the way they make money is by selling sponsored placements, right. And the way they are able to ask more for those placements is to be able to show metrics for how much time users spend on their platform. It's in their interest to be promoting

and support features that increase the amount of time everyone spends on the platform. So, if you're a creator, a lot of your followers are likely staying on the platform longer [for your content], and so they'll throw you a bone by also promoting or putting your other content higher in other people's feeds. It's like a reward feedback loop.

Sarah may be uncertain about the precise calculations Instagram's algorithms are making, but she is unequivocal about what the platform company wants from her. For Sarah, Instagram's algorithm is not merely a personalizing mechanism designed to give audiences "the moments they'll care about the most," rather, it is a system of incentives that rewards influencers who are able to provoke others into spending more time and generating more data for the company. Jennifer and Elizabeth also perceive the algorithm as a system of compensation. Elizabeth explained, "One thing I will say, just in general, when it comes to all algorithms, they're all set so that any new feature that comes out, if you use it, then you get more engagement. [...] In general, they just reward you if you evolve with them." Similarly, Jennifer believes that when creators encourage their followers to interact with the latest features, like Stories or Reels, "the algorithm rewards you by bumping the photos from your main feed as well." While none of my interviewees perceive themselves as working *for* Instagram, they do perceive that maintaining their brand and business on the platform necessitates that they attend to the business interests of the platform company.

In the context of the factory shop floor, Michael Burawoy (1979) found that uncertainty of outcomes, when held in the appropriate balance with worker's control and ability to affect outcomes, was generative of consent to the production process. The experience of meeting challenging targets was motivating to workers because the demonstrated skill garnered respect from peers and affective rewards such as feelings of accomplishment. In a similar fashion, the uncertainty of outcomes that my interviewees confront with regards to their metrics functions to galvanize active and ongoing participation, innovation, strategizing, and data production on the Instagram platform. Nevertheless, their frustration with being compelled to do so is also palpable. There is an undercurrent of resentment for the investment of time and energy required of them.

4.4.3 The Algorithmic Meritocracy: Negotiating Autonomy Without Control

In its messaging, Instagram insists that “high quality, on-brand content” (“Aside From Ads,” 2019) reigns supreme on the platform. Algorithmic content moderation is intended to eliminate the happenstance of the timing of posts, to deliver the right content to the right user, and better measure for quality and relevance in the way that content circulates across the site. What’s implied is that, through algorithmic curation, Instagram operates as an improved meritocracy, where the best inevitably rises to the top. Some interviewees, like lifestyle influencer Christine, express faith in Instagram as an algorithmic meritocracy that better measures for quality and distributes visibility accordingly. She explains,

I think all its meant is that it [the platform] now demands higher quality content from the users on Instagram, which I think is right [...] Only those who are posting good content are coming out on top. That’s what I think. [...] If you post good content and engage with people in your niche, you’ll actually get rewarded for it.

The inverse of this argument, of course, is that those who have low numbers should understand this to be a more accurate measure of their skill, the quality of their work, and the quality of their relationships with their followers. Kylie has had several conversations with colleagues who work at Instagram who give voice to this logic, explaining to her that Instagram now rewards good work. She says,

I’m in touch with some people at Instagram. I feel like they have something to defend because it’s their policy, and I don’t like their policy. [...] In my experience, they deny most of the things that I tell them are my issues. They say, ‘no that’s not the case.’ Obviously, they can’t deny the algorithm, but they would say, ‘This should work to your benefit. It should actually make things better.’ But I don’t actually see how it makes things better! Let’s agree to disagree is usually how those conversations end.

What is implied in Kylie’s conversation with her Instagram colleague is that Instagram’s algorithmic curation more accurately measures for quality, rewarding the best, most engaging posts with broader circulation. If she is experiencing negative results, the

problem lies with the quality of her work as a creator, rather than the platform's instruments of measure.

This explanation encourages producers to turn inwards; if they focus on their brand, improve their content, and produce more consistently they *should* see positive results. Creators are asked to trust in the accuracy of Instagram's evaluative mechanisms and focus their energies on improving their own work. This is a position that Angela, a 35-year-old travel influencer in Toronto, adopts with some resignation. Because she has trouble moving the needle on her metrics, she focuses on the aspect of her work that she can control – her content.

I have literally tried every best practice out there and my likes are still incredibly low. My analytics show that only ten percent of my audience is even seeing my content and that's enormously frustrating, especially since I have no control over that. I've stopped focusing on the numbers and just put out my best content.

Angela's decision to turn towards improving her content and to stop questioning or challenging the platform's instruments of measure is the desired outcome for Instagram; it positions any challenges with metrics as the personal shortcomings of individual producers. Such is the subtext of the algorithmic meritocracy, and it is one that reflects a broader neoliberal rationality that suggests all challenges should be seen through the lens of personal responsibility and self-management. The neoliberal logics of personal accountability are particularly perceptible in Melanie's views. She explains,

My feelings are if something on Instagram changes and it has a negative impact on what you do then you need to take a look at yourself and be like, 'how can I keep up with it?' [...] I've had times where my photos haven't been seen very much, and so I've looked at it and thought, 'what can I do to change it?' I never liked the thought of putting the blame on Instagram because I think you need to take responsibility for yourself.

Melanie's comments capture the spirit of the "self-controlling self" of neoliberalism, who "calculates about itself, and works upon itself in order to better itself" (Rose, 1996, p. 164). Her stance of personal accountability, initiative, and self-discipline are well suited to the "individualistic and competitive structures of the new economy" (Morgan &

Nelligan, 2015, p. 68). She demonstrates a willingness to be adaptable to keep up with the platform. This flexibility is the requisite state of the entrepreneurial subject of neoliberalism (Gill & Scharff, 2011; Neff, 2012), and it is a useful skillset for navigating the turbulent labour market she faces. Interestingly however, while Melanie espouses taking personal responsibility for the performance of her posts, she also explains that she feels that she has little control over her metrics. She told me that her performance metrics no longer inform her content production strategies: “Because I’ve come to think you can’t have that much control. I think you can understand where the likes come from, but I don’t think you have that much control. Not really.” Melanie advocates for taking responsibility for outcomes that she, herself, feels she cannot affect. In this, she gives voice to a tension that permeates much platform-mediated work, where ostensibly autonomous self-employed independents operate with limited control over many of the structuring conditions of their work (Ravenelle, 2019; Wood, et. al, 2019). Confronted with the fact that she has little ability to affect these measures, Melanie chooses to believe that Instagram operates as an algorithmic meritocracy and focuses upon improving the quality of her posts to remain competitive. Like Angela, she is able to resolve the paradox of autonomy without control by choosing to trust that Instagram’s shrouded logics of circulation are fair and its measures accurate.

Others make it clear that they are not as willing to acquiesce to these conditions. Some are reluctant to accept that their low metrics are a more accurate statement of their popularity, their influence, and their skill as content creators. 26-year-old Toronto fashion influencer, Rachel, grapples with how much personal responsibility she should take for her low numbers.

Beforehand, I would easily get 2,000+ likes on photos, 3,000+ even. It was really, really great. And then you notice this massive drop. When you think about it, it’s like, how does someone have 30,000 followers, but a maximum of 400 likes? It doesn’t add up. It sucks and obviously it plays a lot on your mentality at times. You think, am I producing good stuff? Are people liking what I’m doing?”

Rachel struggles with whether to *believe* her metrics – to accept these as true expressions of her audience’s interest in her posts, or to view them as expressions of algorithmic gatekeeping that hides her content from an otherwise interested audience. Kylie, similarly, grapples with the dissonance between how she evaluates the quality of her content and her relationship with her audience, and what the metrics indicate. She expresses skepticism regarding the responsibility that she should accept for these outputs.

Sometimes it makes me insecure about even the quality of my work. Like am I doing something wrong? Because these used to do so well and now, you know. I guess it makes you insecure about the product that you deliver. Although, if I think about it, I know it’s not the product, I know it’s the technology. But at the same time, you’re trying to explain it for yourself, thinking “what could I do better?” or “what could I do to improve this for myself?” So yeah, that’s a struggle.

Both Kylie and Rachel express feelings of professional doubt when confronted with low numbers. Their concerns exemplify the strong “affective force” that social media metrics exert (Hearn & Banet-Weiser, 2019, p. 7). These measures don’t simply express the relative success of a particular piece of content. They are also symbolic of social esteem within an online community, markers of the skill, credibility, and legitimacy of the influencer, as well as expressions of friendship, admiration, respect, and love. As such, they are meaningful in a way that transcends the work. The affective dimension of metrics compels action (Grosser, 2014; Kennedy & Hill, 2018). It works in combination with a state of perpetual precarity to provoke the ongoing experimentation, innovation, and investment in the platform outlined in the previous section. As Kylie says, it prompts her to ask, “what could I do better?” or as Melanie put it, “how can I keep up with it?” The implications of the affective force of metrics for collective organizing among these independents is examined in Chapter Six.

Kylie’s and Rachel’s comments also indicate that the legitimacy of Instagram’s control over circulation and visibility is not stable or resolved. A gap has opened up between influencers’ own valuations of their work and their relationships with their audiences, and what the platform’s measures tell them; between what de Angelis (2007) calls the “value

practices” that influencers enact and the “value systems” (p. 24-28) that shape their employability as influencers. These influencers are conflicted, experiencing tension over whether they should accept this system of measurement and its evaluations of the quality of their work and the interests of their audience. Their comments signal a degree of skepticism, as they question the company’s assurances that its algorithmic decision-making processes reward quality and elevate visibility on the basis of merit. Kylie and Rachel wonder if Instagram has inserted itself as an illegitimate gatekeeper and judge of their skills, influence, and value as cultural producers and creative entrepreneurs. They question the validity of this system and are resistant to the notion that they should internalize responsibility for low visibility and accept as truth what their weak metrics suggest.

4.5 Conclusion

My interviews with influencers about their experiences working on Instagram under algorithmically configured conditions finds three themes with regards to the challenges and frustrations they face in their work. First, influencers highlight feelings of insecurity and precarity arising from their lack of control over how content circulates on Instagram and a lack of insight into how their metrics are calculated. Second, interviewees describe that the uncertainty of outcomes compels continual reinvestments of time and energy into the platform, and express a sense of frustration with this requirement. Finally, interviews highlight disagreement and debate about what Instagram’s metrics mean in the context of algorithmic content curation. While some interviewees accept their metrics as reflections of the quality of their work as influencers, others question how much ownership they should take over these numbers. This group feels that the platform is operating as an unwelcome arbiter of quality who has inserted itself between producers and their followers, threatening their businesses, and placing additional demands on their time, attention, and ingenuity.

The interviews also suggest that the legitimacy of the company’s control over the technical infrastructure of the platform is not settled or without controversy. The

frustrations, complaints, questions, and challenges raised by interviewees underscore that the platform's algorithmic decision-making and the metrics this produces are "contested terrain" (Kellogg, Valentine & Christin, 2020). For Kylie, in particular, the impact on her metrics has laid plain a discrepancy between her contribution to the platform company and her lack of power with regard to how it operates. In our discussion, she raises questions about a fundamental inequity between Instagram and the influencers who animate it with social and economic value:

And I know a lot of influencers are complaining about it on Instagram, but Instagram doesn't seem to really care. Although, I guess, girls who are doing what I'm doing (along with all the other people that are on Instagram), we built this platform! So, yeah, I feel like it would be so great if they would actually listen to our side of the story, as well. Because without the users they wouldn't be where they are. I think there are a lot of other ways for Instagram to make money without cutting everybody's reach. I would love to talk to Instagram about that.

Kylie's frustration represent the seeds of an antagonism. She understands that her work and that of her colleagues produces value that unevenly and unfairly accrues to Instagram, and she resents this arrangement. In the following chapter, I focus on one particular expression of collective action that has emerged to contest the conditions my interviewees describe – the engagement pod. My interviewees indicate that the engagement pod functions as a coordinated effort to manufacture some stability in the face of unpredictable outcomes and unstable employment.

Chapter 5

5 Grassroots Collective Organizing: The Instagram Engagement Pod

On July 10th, 2019, a mere three years after its founding, the Internet Creators Guild (ICG) announced it was shutting down (Alexander, 2019). The organization had been conceived as a centralized body to represent, develop resources for, and advocate on behalf of digital content creators (Green, 2016). In an email statement to members, the Guild cited insufficient membership that left no “path to financial stability” (Weiss, 2019). Former Executive Director Anthony D’Angelo explained in an interview with *The Verge* that the individualized nature of creators’ work and the enormously divergent levels of financial and social security among them made it difficult to communicate the value of collective representation for all producers (Alexander, 2019). Ultimately the body couldn’t inspire the widespread support required to organize creators from diverse social and economic contexts. The ICG’s closure illustrates the obstacles that confront organizing efforts for cultural producers working on private platforms, where the work is deeply personal and unique to the individual creator and where the workforce operates in social and spatial isolation from each other and confront wildly divergent cultural contexts and levels of economic precarity. While the formal institutional structure of the ICG may have failed to unify this group, an alternative grassroots practice has proven more successful at generating a sense of solidarity among diverse creators in the name of their common interest – the engagement pod.

This chapter explains the particular conditions of digital labour that undermine traditional forms of collective organizing and goes on to outline examples of alternative strategies that have emerged from platformed workers instead; it positions the Instagram influencer engagement pod among these grassroots collaborative strategies.

Instagram influencers share the infrastructural constraints of the Instagram platform, the expectations of its Terms of Service, and the metrics that it delivers. As the previous

chapter describes, the platform infrastructure and the metrics that it produces shape creators' working day, and it is around this "digital point of production" (Gandini, 2018) that they organize through the engagement pod. The phenomenon of the engagement pod is a unique form of collective action that corresponds to the particularities of influencers' shared conditions, where contract employment opportunities are allocated on the basis of their ability to successfully negotiate the logics of the platform.

5.1 Challenges to Digital Labour Organizing

Across various sites of platform-mediated labour, scholars have criticized the way that platform companies hold workers at a distance from one another, keeping them isolated and atomized in their struggles (Suri & Gray, 2019; Prassl, 2018; Rosenblat, 2018). Without a fixed, shared, and permanent place and time of production there is little opportunity to see and deliberate on common conditions and form relationships of solidarity (Terranova, 2014). Exacerbating this, workers operate from diverse cultural, geographic, and socio-economic positions with different experiences, politics, needs, priorities, and levels of commitment. This makes it difficult to establish a unified set of demands or a clear vision of the required action (Alexander, 2019), and can create interpersonal frictions and stall any potential momentum for collective action (Salehi, Irani & Bernstein et. al, 2015). Platform-mediated workers also maintain asynchronous schedules across different geographic locations and time zones, rendering "the old forms of blocking production obsolete, if not impossible" (Terranova, 2014); labour actions like the work stoppage or strike become difficult to coordinate. There is also the question of where to target labour's antagonisms; platform work is "managed" by algorithms (Lee, et. al, 2015; Rosenblat 2018) and workers rarely have meaningful access to platform owners to express grievances or demands (Prassl, 2018). Platforms have few legal obligations to the users who animate these spaces, and accounts are easily suspended, deactivated, or demonetized by automated processes that cut individuals off from their source of income often without clear appeals processes (Suri & Gray, 2019; Romano, 2019). Given these potential consequences, engaging in any coordinated oppositional action comes with considerably high stakes.

Creative work faces additional obstacles. As others have argued, a professional culture of “cool jobs” in “hot industries” (Neff, Wissinger, & Zukin, 2005) tends to undermine campaigns to organize (Cohen & de Peuter, 2018). Creative work is disciplined through the notion that it is rewarding in its own right. The ethos of the cultural industries holds that if you are lucky enough to “do what you love,” your work serves your own self-interest as much as it serves the employer (Tokumistu, 2014). This belief reduces wages and encourages a type of “sacrificial labour” (Ross, 2001) where passion stands in for a lack of social and financial protections (McRobbie, 2016; Sandoval, 2017). Forms of solidarity and cooperation are also “structurally difficult among creative workers, where a prestige economy operates the same way as in any star system” (Pasquinelli, 2006). Indeed, competitive individualism is a strategic advantage when project-based work is doled out via informal networks that necessitate ongoing self-promotion and self-reliance (Davies & Ford, 2000). Yet, paradoxically, structural power imbalances are difficult to articulate and rally around in a field that is saturated in discourses of “openness, egalitarianism and meritocracy” (Gill, 2014; see also Littler, 2013).

More broadly, the forms of subjectivity constituted within the post-industrial economy, informed by neoliberal rationality and production processes that prioritize immaterial labour, present more fundamental challenges for organizing. At a time when subjectivity constitutes the “raw material” (Lazzarato, 1996) of capitalist production, work and the self are increasingly fused, and work takes on a new intimacy (Gregg, 2011). As the borders between work time and non-work time – self and job – collapse, the experience of alienation, oppression, and coercion that fueled much antagonism under Fordism are entangled with, and diluted by, parallel affective experiences of pride, belonging, satisfaction, and passion for the work. Can we reasonably expect subjects to reject productive activities that are tethered closely to their sense of identity and generate important affective use-values (Gill & Pratt, 2008)? As McRobbie (2010) reminds us, “labour now comprises subjects far less engaged as ‘workers’” (p. 61-62) and far more engaged as entrepreneurs. As neoliberal rationalities insist on the cultivation of an entrepreneurial spirit, individualism, competition, and self-reliance, the possibilities for

collective action are increasingly foreclosed (Gill, 2014; Gill & Pratt, 2008; McRobbie, 2010).

5.2 Digital Labour Organizing Across Industries

The participants in this study face similar obstacles. They operate independently of one another, have different brand clients, and, at any given time, are working on different campaigns with different expectations and contractual commitments. Their work is affectively meaningful and animated by the sense that they are lucky to have creative autonomy in their work, and to be getting paid to “do what they love,” undermining any sustained criticism of precarious employment, low wages, and perpetual emotional, relational, and self-branding labour (Duffy, 2017; Duffy & Wissinger, 2017; Weeks, 2017). They operate within a winner-take-all “prestige economy” (Pasquinelli, 2006) organized around accumulating likes, followers, and comments which lends itself to competition and comparison. These things are structurally at odds with conditions that have historically nurtured solidarity and mobilized forms of collective action.

While it may be true that traditional models of mobilization are ill-equipped to contend with the transformed spatial, temporal, and affective dimensions of contemporary work however, the recomposition of work around precarious, platform-mediated employment “does not necessarily exhaust dissent but instead remixes its coordinates, reshuffles its actors, and revises its demands” (de Peuter, 2011, p.421). Subjectivity, Tsianos and Papadopoulos (2006) point out, develops as “workers are confronted with the impasses in their life situation, the micro-oppressions and exploitation” (n.p.). In that sense, oppositional action remains possible, albeit in transformed ways. The absence of traditional organizing does not necessarily mean that there is no desire to resist.

Recent incidents of rupture, tension, and conflict across platform industries reflect this fact. Unionization efforts have cropped up across the platform economy from new media journalists to Instacart shoppers, Foodora couriers, and Uber drivers, all of whom are seeking better job security, rights, and protections. (Cohen & de Peuter, 2019; 2018;

Colwill, 2019; Statt, 2020; “Foodora Union Voting Ends”, 2019; Godoy, 2020). In court systems, gig workers in service industries fight to be reclassified as employees with the attendant benefits (Collier, Dubal & Carter, 2017; Fabo, Karanovic & Dukova, 2017; Marshall, 2020). Evidence suggests growing interest in the potential benefits to unionization among creators as well. 2020 saw the launch of the American Influencer Council in the United States and The Creator Union in the UK (Tait, 2020), associations that primarily aim to protect content creators from the predatory practices of brand employers.

Workers are also using technology to coordinate strategic action, engage in everyday acts of resistance, and enact forms of mutual aid that respond to specific conditions. Chat platforms like WhatsApp are used to organize roadway blockages (Davies & Merchan, 2018) and protests at platform headquarters (Paul, 2020). Workers coordinate mass log offs to challenge pay cuts (Shenker, 2019) and to trigger algorithms into offering surge pricing (Solman, 2017). In China, drivers on Didi Chuxing share software packages that allow them to refuse rides without being penalized by the platform (Chen, 2017). Moore (2019) describes a case where a project worker used a self-tracking app to prove that he was being underpaid by his employer. Online networks of platform workers also proliferate. On collective action platforms like Turkopticon and We are Dynamo, crowd workers on Amazon Mechanical Turk can rate requestors to warn each other of predatory practice, and have organized a letter writing campaigns to Jeff Bezos (Salehi, et al. 2015). In the industry of “social media entertainment” (Cunningham & Craig, 2019), the YouTuber Union Facebook Group and Fairtube.info are spaces where YouTubers connect and strategize around their shared interests. Through forums on Reddit and Facebook groups,¹⁷ otherwise isolated platform mediated workers share stories, ask for advice, and warn of bad employers. For instance, care workers on Care.com have Facebook groups in which they discuss what constitutes reasonable requests and

¹⁷ See TurkerNation on Reddit or Uberpeople.net for example.

compensation rates (Mateescu, 2017; see also Ravenelle, 2017; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016; Caraway, 2010; Suri & Gray, 2019 for examples from other fields). The Instagram engagement pod should be seen as but one of these emergent strategies of platformed worker resistance, support, and collective care.

5.3 The Instagram Engagement Pod

In what follows, I describe the features of an engagement pod as explained by interviewees and based upon my observations of seven engagement pod groups on Facebook Groups and two on Telegram. I then outline the three primary functions of engagement pods as highlighted by interviewees, arguing that engagement pods function as networks of solidarity, strategizing, and mutual aid intended to mitigate the precarious working conditions. I then theorize the engagement pod as a practice of “gamification-from-below” (Woodcock & Johnson, 2018), which indicates an impulse to disrupt and subvert the algorithmic distribution of “life-chances” (Fourcade & Healy, 2017). In this way, engagement pods invite us to reimagine what resistance can look like under platform capitalism.

5.4 What is an Instagram Engagement Pod?

An Instagram engagement pod is comprised of a group of Instagrammers who mutually agree to consistently comment on, like, share, or otherwise generate data in relation to the content posted by other group members. Each member must do this regardless of whether they actually like the content or care to respond to it. When a group member posts, others are obligated to respond with the agreed upon form of engagement.

The Instagram engagement pod evolved from blogger networks, where communities of bloggers would leave comments for one another and link to each other’s blog posts as gestures of mutual support, encouragement and audience sharing. As Kathi explains:

Back in the day the little bloggers would have a group and just support each other, and no one knew about it. It would probably be a small group of 4 or 5 girls, and we just kept commenting.

These early communities operated based on an often unspoken and largely informal expectation of communal reciprocity, where bloggers support the work of other bloggers. As the network effect of the platform economy has concentrated audiences and content producers onto centralized platforms (Srnicsek, 2016), the industry of influencer marketing has expanded and formalized around these sites, with Instagram emerging one of the most prominent (Hellenkemper, 2019; Guttman, 2020a). For content creators in the lifestyle, fashion and beauty genres, Instagram's metrics have taken on particular importance (Guttman, 2020b). What had once been a culture of informal support among bloggers has transformed into more deliberate groups of reciprocal engagement focused upon inflating those metrics. As described in Chapter Four, when Instagram deployed the ranked feed metrics plummeted across the influencer community. In the wake of that change, engagement groups proliferated across the Instagram ecosystem (Weerasinghe, et. al, 2020). They became larger with broader participation, more formalized in their structure, and more strategic and complex in their actions. The publicly visible description for one engagement group that I observed on Facebook explains their goal (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Description of One Engagement Pod

My observations of Instagram engagement groups indicate that engagement group participation is not isolated to a particular genre, industry, or demographic. The diversity of participants underscores the extent to which a strong social media presence and ready-made following is viewed as an asset that can grant access to other opportunities. While the comment pod is the most common form of Instagram engagement group, like-only pods are also quite popular because they require a smaller investment of time and can accommodate more participants as a result. In other groups, rounds of activity that trade different forms of engagement (likes, comments, follows, shares, or saves) at designated times are the norm.

Engagement pods vary in size. Some are small niche communities, organized around a particular theme, where members boost each other's posts and share strategies when changes to the algorithm are perceptible. Other groups have thousands of members and are managed by bots that handle administrative tasks such as welcoming new members, answering questions, scheduling, opening and closing rounds of posting, and publicly

shaming and/or ejecting non-participants or “leechers” as they are sometimes called (Tooby, n.d.).

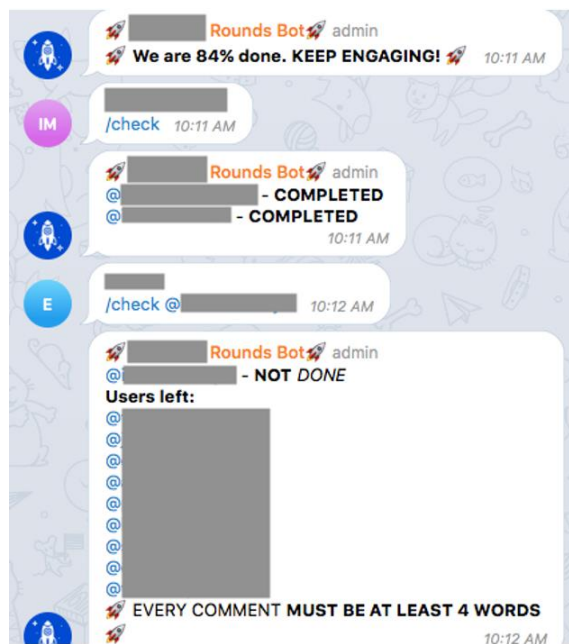


Figure 2: Bot-Moderated Engagement Group

The frequency of activity within a pod varies similarly; some groups agree to a schedule of one or two posts per member each day, other groups run around the clock and on complex schedules. Kim manages a pod with thousands of members and maintains a complex engagement schedule that demands a high level of coordinated action among members. He explains,

At the beginning the group wasn't very big and so we could handle just posting in it once a day like, “Hey, let's comment and engage on each other on this thread.” We'd be able to manage it. But once it started getting bigger and there were more people from different time zones, we had to add different threads – some in the morning, some at night, some in the middle of the night. So, then we had to use the Facebook scheduler and also have moderators from around the world, being able to close the threads manually. [...] All of the threads would be listed on a schedule and we used universal coordinated time so that everyone from different time zones would know.

Groups are sometimes organized on Instagram, although they are also often organized on sites like Telegram, Facebook Groups, WhatsApp (Figure 3), and occasionally Reddit. The site where a group gathers typically depends upon the size of the group and the organizing tools required. Different platforms offer different affordances and constraints. For example, direct message groups on the Instagram platform have the benefit of being conveniently located within the app. This helps keep the activity centralized, and several of my interviewees reported operating small engagement pods of fellow creators directly through the platform. However, at the time of the interviews, Instagram limited the number of people you can include in a direct message to 32 (“How many people,” n.d.), which made it ill-suited to larger, more complicated efforts. Facebook Groups functions as an accessible alternative, where there are no limits on membership and rounds of engagement activity can be started, monitored, and shut down by moderators or group admins. Telegram, an encrypted messaging application, is used for more complex engagement groups. The platform can accommodate group chats of up to 200,000 members (“Telegram FAQ,” 2020) and has the added benefit of not being owned by Facebook. They also offer a “Bot API” that can help group administrators automate the management of the daily operations of their pods (Figure 2).

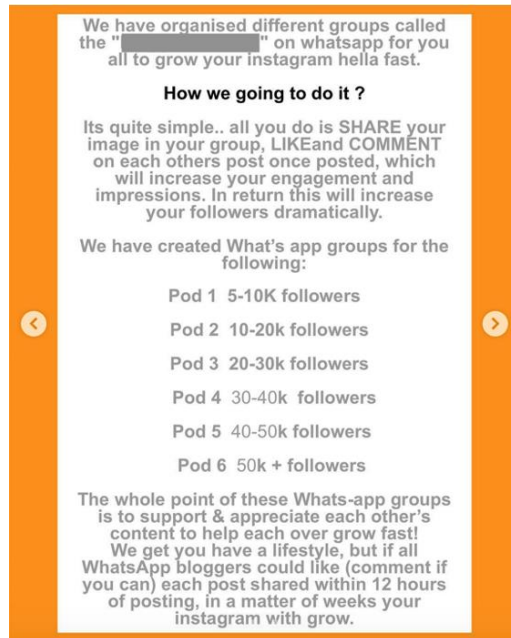


Figure 3: WhatsApp Organized Engagement Group



Figure 4: Facebook Organized Engagement Group

In some larger groups, such as those on Telegram, users are permitted to set up and engage with other group members' posts using a secondary shell account. In these cases, participants request to receive engagement on their primary account, while engaging reciprocally with other group members' content through this secondary account. I have seen Instagrammers develop as many as six shell accounts from which they generate engagement for fellow pod members. The goal of this practice is twofold; it safeguards against cluttering the primary Instagram account with content that is irrelevant to the account holder's interests, and it avoids engaging in behaviours that the platform or the creator's audience might find suspicious or inauthentic. The shell account does this while still managing to participate reciprocally to generate the required engagement for other members. Overall, engagement pods tend to have strict rules for membership: participate consistently and in accordance with the group rules or risk getting kicked out of the group.

Speed is crucial in an engagement pod. In the pods I observed and among my interviewees the general view is that strong engagement numbers within the first ten minutes of posting triggers Instagram's algorithm to circulate that content to a broader audience (Lekach, 2018). Participants are expected to be prompt. A timeframe of 24 hours was common in the groups I observed, although Kim's pod worked within a timeframe of six hours, and Sarah's stricter pod required engagement within one.

Typically, comments are expected to be at least five words long and always tailored to each individual post. A series of emojis or a short, generic comment like "Nice shot" or "Ordering now" will not suffice. One reason for this is to encourage members to pay attention to the content of each post, rather than make the same comment on all posts, in order to move quickly through the task. This kind of behavior contravenes the expectation of mutual support in the group. Ruth, for instance, is adamant about leaving meaningful comments. "It's not just about going in there and saying 'oh, looks nice.' Or 'cool!' No, if I'm going to comment I'm going to leave you a valuable comment. I'm not just going to leave you one word." Generic comments risk being irrelevant or

inappropriate to the post and exposed as insincere or fake. For example, a group member who is not paying attention could mistakenly comment “Gorgeous!” on a post that details a traumatic event. This is viewed as inappropriate and exposes the commenter to accusations of insensitivity and inauthenticity, a particularly damaging indictment for influencers. Crochet and knitting influencer, Gloria, explains that she and the members of her pod believed these types of comments are also “flagged as bot activity” that can result in content being “shadowbanned,” a term for being deprioritized in Instagram’s ranking systems, curbing online visibility. For these reasons, longer, contextually appropriate comments are the expectation of engagement pod participants.

5.5 The Utility of the Engagement Pod

My respondents identify three primary functions of the engagement pod: (1) as a means of gaming the algorithm into prioritizing their content; (2) as an information sharing network concerning all things algorithm; and (3) as a way to maintain the appearance of consistent popularity to secure future contract employment opportunities.

5.5.1 Engagement Pods as Cooperative Algorithm Hacking

Interviewees explain engagement pods as a type of cooperative algorithm hacking that targets the technical infrastructure of Instagram in an effort to improve the visibility of group members across the Instagram ecosystem. Participants work together to capitalize upon Instagram’s algorithmic logics of content curation and direct them towards prioritizing their own content. As Sarah explains, her comment pod is “a good way to get people to see what I’m posting, especially when algorithms are changing, and it [her content] might not be showing up in their feed all the time.” This is a type of self-aware strategic data production intended to provoke the algorithm into assigning a high ranking to an influencers’ content by manufacturing the signposts of nascent virality that Instagram’s algorithms are designed to seek out and amplify. Across the Instagram community, this practice is often articulated as a way to “fight” (Thompson, 2017), “game” (Pathak, 2017), “beat” (Cheung, 2018), or “hack” (Barkho, 2017) Instagram’s

algorithm. Melanie describes the engagement pod as “a way to cheat the system,” while Christine calls it a “game.” She explains it this way:

The end of the game is to take the algorithm into account. It [the algorithm] takes all of the actions that have happened on a post as soon as you post it, and if there are a lot of interactions happening, they’re [Instagram] like ‘Oh my gosh, this must be a really valuable post, we’ll push it out to more people.’

Comment pod participants generate a quick barrage of engagement in the hopes that this will result in their content being visible to more of their followers and featured on the Explore page or in Top Posts for new potential followers to discover. For lifestyle influencer, Emma, this is the “ultimate goal” of the pod she moderates; having a large audience with high engagement increases the chances of securing advertising contracts from brands.

With higher engagement, your image is more likely to appear under *Top Posts*, as well as the Explore page. Ultimately, the exposure means increased followers. That is the ultimate goal – to gain as many followers as possible within your niche because more followers lead to promotional opportunities.

This coordinated effort to provoke the algorithm to expand the circulation of content is a type of communicative performance for the machine. It demonstrates that influencers fashion themselves to become “algorithmically recognizable” (Gillespie, 2017), turning their actions directly towards the platform infrastructure. However, it further indicates that these well-motivated creators, not only orient themselves so that the algorithm might recognize them but also so that they might seduce it, drive it to action, or “make it speak” (Bucher, 2018a, p. 60) on their behalf. Importantly, they organize collectively in order to do so. As Gloria explains about her own comment pod, “We help each other out with engagement and stuff like that to fight the algorithm.”

5.5.2 Engagement Pods as Networks of Deliberation and Information Sharing

While generating engagement is the primary function of an engagement pod, and typically the initial reason one is organized, several interviewees explain that theirs have

come to serve a second important purpose – as a space of deliberation and strategizing. For instance, Elizabeth’s pod soon came to operate as a clandestine forum of information sharing concerning the algorithm.

I think, for the most part, what I’ve found with the pods is that [...] they’ve been great, not necessarily for engagement, but just for, ‘Hey guys, has the algorithm just changed again? What’s happening?’ Doing a lot of talking with other influencers who care about that sort of thing, because normal people who just use Instagram for fun are not going, “OMG did it just change? What happened? How do we get around it? How do we do it right? What do we do?” So [the pod is about] having a space to talk about that with people who know different people than I do, who are trying different things and can kind of report back to each other.

Elizabeth’s pod is a space of deliberation, where she can discuss the algorithm’s operations and effective strategies to “get around it” with other producers. Her description reflects the way that these creators navigate a dearth of definitive knowledge about the operations of the platform. Faced with the fact that the conditions that determine their visibility are obscured and subject to ongoing changes, they work collectively to decipher the logics of the algorithm by “reporting back to each other” about the successes or failures of their personal experiments. In this way, the pod is a repository of tacit, “experiential knowledge” (Bucher, 2018a) built from their collective encounters with the operational logics of Instagram. Elizabeth’s description of a typical conversation in her own pod illustrates the way information circulates through the pod community. She continues,

Every so often someone might post, “Hey guys have you found that your engagement is especially low this week?” And others will weigh in saying, “No, mine’s been great,” or “Oh yeah, totally.” Then someone else might say, “Have you heard anything? Has anything changed?” And then someone else might be like, “Oh yeah, my friend who works in marketing says that her friend works at Instagram and they said that they’ve changed it. They want people to be posting more often. Instead of it being twice a week, they want people to be posting all the time.” So now, if you’re posting more than 2 times a week then your photos are going to start showing up more.

This chain reflects the intricate network of algorithmic information sharing influencers tap into. Such “algorithmic gossip” (Bishop, 2019) may or may not be accurate, but it is an important mechanism whereby influencers attempt to overcome the information asymmetries that characterize their platform-mediated work. Through these networks of experimentation and discussion they seek to know and exert more control over how their content will circulate across Instagram. Kim’s pod involves similar discussions and strategizing.

Like when news would break, or new updates, new changes to the algorithm or something, we would post about it or ask questions about it. [...] We would post about what other people had been experiencing, seeing if other people were experiencing the same issues or like the same changes.

Within pods, influencers share information, discuss strategy, and offer advice to one another about best practices to capitalize upon the logics of the algorithm. Such a forum is not unlike the online networks established by gig workers in other fields, such as Uber drivers (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016), care workers (Mateescu, 2017), and crowd workers (Suri & Gray, 2019), where workers can communicate about their otherwise isolated circumstances and experiences. Pods operate as hubs of strategic experimentation and deliberation, where individualized experiences become forms of collaborative knowledge intended to minimize the uncertainty of outcomes that characterize the field.

5.5.3 Engagement Pods as Professional Image Management

When the engagement pod works as intended, advertisers, other Instagram users, and potential future employers see a large, growing, and actively engaged community around the influencer. In order to maintain their status as a creative professional, creators must maintain this impression; it helps to secure future promotional opportunities and strengthens their position when negotiating the terms of contracts with brand partners. When branded content doesn’t perform well, future contracts with advertisers are put into jeopardy. Pods provide some assurances for influencers by guaranteeing a particular quantity of engagement from fellow pod members. Food and wellness blogger, Ruth,

describes the genesis of her pod as the result of attempts to manage professional appearances to advertisers.

It didn't start as a comment pod. It started so that we could keep in touch with each other about different things going on. But we ended up making it a comment pod. One girl just posted one day and was like 'Hey, I'm doing my first sponsored Instagram post, can you guys go over and check it out.' And we were like 'Oh yeah.' Because we know if you don't get a certain amount of numbers ... you know. We know that brands are going to ask for your analytics afterwards.

The comment pod for Ruth's group began as a way to meet the expectations of potential advertisers and improve the chances of being asked to work on future campaigns. Emma underscores a similar motivation for becoming a moderator in her pod. She explains that her group prioritizes getting on the Explore or Top Posts pages because "increased followers lead to promotional opportunities." Both Ruth and Emma see their participation in pods as a reliable source of audience engagement and growth that advertisers look for when organizing influencer marketing campaigns. The pod is a space where influencers offer clandestine contributions to one another's reputational capital that (hopefully) secures them future jobs or boosts the price they can command for their content. Where metrics are made unpredictable by algorithmic infrastructure, the guarantee of consistent mutual engagement from other pod members offers the assurance of some stability in terms of employability. In these instances, the engagement pod functions as a space of mutual aid, where participants subsidize one another's influence to acquire or maintain advertising contracts.

5.5.4 Limits and Risks of the Pod

Opinions concerning the efficacy of the engagement pod are mixed and the subject of ongoing debate (Brown, 2018; Liu, 2019). Instagram's algorithms are mutable, and so strategic workarounds that seem to work one week are suddenly experienced as less effective the next. Some interviewees report that they did not experience the algorithmic boost that pods are supposed to deliver. Jennifer, for instance, didn't notice any change in her metrics from her participation in a pod and found the time commitment burdensome.

I didn't notice any positive results from being in the pod. So mostly it was just taking up a lot of my time and asking other people to do things for me that I wasn't, frankly, really willing to create time to do for them.

Jennifer's remarks provide a glimpse of the emotional and relational labour involved in producing meaningful comments for all members of the pod. Doing so makes additional demands of her time, energy, and affective resources. Paradoxically, a strategy that is designed to ease the demand of Instagram to be perpetually creating novel, affectively poignant, and engaging content ends up adding to this workload.

Other interviewees underscore that the tactic of the engagement pod is a risky one.

Advertisers and industry publications have characterized engagement pods as “influencer fraud” (“Influencer Fraud,” 2018) and Instagram terms them “inauthentic behavior” that violates its Terms of Service. Melanie and Rachel abstain from joining because they fear the possible ramifications. Melanie, for example, is sympathetic to the reasons why some of her peers participate in pods, but she avoids them because she worries about punishments from Instagram.

I've always been very anti-comment pods because I just feel like you can never really cheat. I just feel like Instagram always knows. If you find a way to cheat the system, they'll clamp down on it and penalize you for it.

Melanie's trepidation stems from the fact that she is very conscious that she must abide by Instagram's Terms of Service or risk being suspended or “deplatformed” (Perlman, 2021; Tiffany, 2021) and losing her primary source of income. Similarly, Rachel stopped her pods activity for fear that advertisers would revoke her paid contracts. She recounts, “I was in a few before until my PR person told me to get out of them. Because brands see that, and they don't like it. It's not real engagement.” For these interviewees, Instagram or their advertising partners finding out about their “inauthentic” activities poses a threat to their livelihoods that outweighs any benefit of mutual support belonging to such a community might offer.

5.6 Mutual Aid and Support: Organizing Against Precarity

Among those who do participate, membership in engagement pods – whether intended to improve circulation and audience engagement metrics, share information, or control appearances to advertising partners – is an attempt to combat the perpetual state of precarity that characterizes the working lives of these producers operating on Instagram. The influencer’s work is short term, project-based, platform-mediated, and algorithmically configured. She does not share an employer, nor a physical workplace with other influencers, and the criteria by which her work is evaluated are veiled and constantly changing. The engagement pod has emerged as a way to cope with these conditions. “It’s kind of like a support group, basically,” Kathi told me. Pods function as networks of solidarity, strategizing, and mutual aid among a group of creators who otherwise have virtually no traditional or institutional supports at their disposal. In this way, the phenomenon exemplifies what de Peuter and Cohen (2015) call “alternate constellations” (p.591) of organizing designed to contend with the unique conditions of flexible, independent, algorithmically managed, and platform-mediated work.

Through the assurance of mutual engagement that pods offers, these independent creators attempt to carve out a measure of stability for themselves and each other; they help to manufacture consistent metrics to mitigate an unpredictable system of evaluation. Engagement pods are organized efforts to speak to the algorithm, a type of communicative performance designed to provoke algorithmic decision-making to act in their interests. Cooperative algorithm hacking of this sort, although quite distinct from traditional organizing strategies, responds to the algorithmic volatility that threatens influencers’ potential livelihood. The engagement pod is a grassroots collectively organized response to the algorithmically induced precarity of the field.

While engagement pods do not transform the precarious conditions of content creators’ lives or liberate participants from the infrastructures of datafication that measure, categorize, and rank them, they do foster cooperative practices of mutual aid and

demonstrate collectivity and community in the face of conditions that encourage competitive individualism (van Doorn & Velthuis, 2018; McRobbie, 2010; Pasquinelli, 2006). Interviewees explain that their pods help promote a sense of community and solidarity among group members. Christine has forged several genuine friendships within her pod; “I find comment pods for influencers are good at building real life connections.” Gloria’s description also underscores the importance of socializing in her pod; “It’s basically a coffee shop group, but we’re all online.” Similarly, Kathi explains that the members of her pod are an ongoing source of “encouragement” when she is struggling with low numbers. These comments suggest that a strategic solidarity among precariously employed, platform-mediated gig workers who operate as independent creators can evolve into stronger social bonds. It is such a solidarity that sustains larger political projects and alternative economic models (de Peuter & Cohen, 2015).

5.7 “Tickling” the Algorithm: The Pod as Gamification From Below

In many ways, engagement pods express an underlying antagonism. From the position of these self-employed but platform-dependent creators, they constitute a small-scale form of collective resistance against the algorithms that work to intensify their productivity on the platform.¹⁸ Pods express a demand for some control over the processes whereby influencers’ activities are organized and subject to measurement and evaluation. In that sense, pods represent a refusal of the algorithmic management of Instagram platform labour.

The engagement, reach, and follower metrics that influencers attempt to elevate through engagement pods constitute part of what Fourcade & Healy (2017) call “übercapital, a form of capital arising from one’s position and trajectory according to various scoring, grading and ranking methods” (p. 14). Übercapital is “bestowed algorithmically” (p. 14)

¹⁸ Although, as Jennifer’s comments exemplify, it is a fraught effort that expands the working day by necessitating additional investments of time and emotional labour from participants.

via logics that are opaque and operations that are imperceptible (Pasquale, 2015) and that shape each individual's access to various resources and opportunities across an increasingly digital world. In this way, algorithmic systems are increasingly organizing the distribution of "life-chances" (p. 22).

The engagement pod is a small but noteworthy site of resistance to these conditions because its participants do not accept the veracity of the algorithmic decision-making that ranks and controls the circulation of their content. Their actions express a challenge to the authority of Instagram's logics of measurement and circulation. They attempt to decode the algorithmic infrastructure, direct it towards their own goals, and exert some agency over how they work and how that work is judged. Yet a playful spirit permeates their actions. Elizabeth's comments are particularly representative of this sentiment. She describes her engagement pod members working collectively to "tickle the algorithm."

The algorithm changes so much and we're – "we" meaning influencers who are always talking about this stuff – we're very aware of that and we're always on top of what's changed. What's changing? How do we tickle the algorithm now?

The effort to "tickle the algorithm" is, at base, a concerted effort to encourage it to speak in their own interests, to capitalize upon its operational logics, and in so doing, to exert some control over their work, their reputation, and their employability. Yet, there is a playful subversion present in the metaphor of "tickling" the algorithm. The idea evokes a mischievous interaction. It involves a frivolity and light-heartedness that downplays the underlying antagonism that fuels their subversion. This playful approach is also expressed by Alison, "The algorithm, for me, I just use it like a game, and I try to beat it." Melanie also explains that she thinks of it, "like an ongoing game." These comments treat the platform's logic of circulation much less as a set of meritocratic rules to respect and more as a game to win or a puzzle to solve.

Of course, making "games" out of work is not an inherently subversive act. Game elements (quotas, point scoring, rankings, and leader boards) have long been used to align worker's behaviours with management's interests (Burawoy, 1979). Indeed,

“gamification” has become an established management strategy to increase productivity and efficiency in ways that have been criticized as “exploitationware” (Bogost, 2011a; 2011b). However, the games that go on in the engagement pod do not respect the platform’s rules of engagement that reward the winners with elevated visibility and relegate the losers to toil in relative obscurity. Instead, they seek to undermine and exploit the scoring systems of the platform, capitalizing upon the game’s rules. In that sense, engagement pods operate as spaces of “disruptive play” (Dragona, 2014, p. 239), where participants do not act with deference to the platform’s rules or outputs. Instead, they “tickle” it and “try to beat it.” They engage in forms of “counter-gamification” (Dragona, 2014), that “purposefully apply rules in unexpected ways, [while] ignoring and surpassing the ones imposed by the platform” (Dragona, 2014, p. 239).

This subversion contains a playful spirit, but it nevertheless responds to conditions of precarious employment, constant measurement, and the pressure to maintain strong metrics (Beer, 2016). Woodcock and Johnson (2018) propose the concept of “gamification-from-below” for such a playful yet political project. Refusal of these conditions, they argue, “can come in the form of play” (p. 550). The engagement pod represents one such space of transgression -- a form of gamification-from-below that uses the logic of the platform against itself. By turning the algorithm into an unauthorized site of playful experimentation, podders express a challenge to the platform’s authority to measure the quality of their work as influencers and, therefore, to determine their value on the labour market. Such an impulse constitutes a small act of refusal of the algorithmic distribution of “life-chances” (Fourcade & Healy, 2013; 2017). In this way, the engagement pod invites us to reimagine what resistance might look like for the entrepreneurial subjects of platform capitalism more broadly.

Chapter 6

6 Influencers, Pods, and the War Over Measure

On May 11th, 2018, ten large Instagram engagement pods organized through Facebook Groups were suddenly deleted from the platform. A day earlier, Alex Kantrowitz, a BuzzFeed News reporter, had contacted Facebook for comment on the existence of large-scale Instagram engagement pods; within 24 hours, the groups Kantrowitz named in his email were no longer accessible to group members or visible in Facebook Search. A Facebook spokesperson confirmed that the platform had taken these groups down, explaining that the pods violated the company's Terms of Use. Facebook declined to comment further on the decision (Kantrowitz, 2018). The sweeping act of platform content enforcement came as a shock for many. These engagement exchange communities had been sizeable – one had over 200,000 members. The communities that so many creators had invested in and relied upon no longer existed.¹⁹

Chaos in the pod community followed the shutdown. A flurry of activity erupted as participants and administrators attempted to regroup, reorganize, and protect the engagement exchange communities they had cultivated. The administrators of one deleted group began a campaign to migrate their operation onto an alternative platform, Reddit. In the pods that had been overlooked in the raid, groups began discussing strategies to avoid being identified and shut down. With the knowledge that the company had become aware of their collaborative efforts, groups deliberated on how to best protect their accounts, their tactics, and their communities from possible platform reprisal. Several groups went dark for a period and waited for the heightened scrutiny to subside.

¹⁹ Of the seven Facebook organized pods that I had been observing for this project, three were removed at this time. As discussed in Chapter Two, transience and ephemerality have been long-standing methodological challenges for researchers of online communities (Schlesinger et al. 2017; Schneider & Foot, 2004). However, this event stands out as an example of the particular methodological challenges of conducting research on proprietary platforms, where owners exercise absolute authority over the space and the communities therein.

Others changed their groups' names, reclassified groups to invite only, or created back-up groups in case these spaces were also shut down (Figures 5). Some groups discussed the logistics of moving their operations to other encrypted platforms such as Telegram and debated the importance of avoiding “trigger words” that might be flagged or that might attract the attention of Facebook’s human moderators.

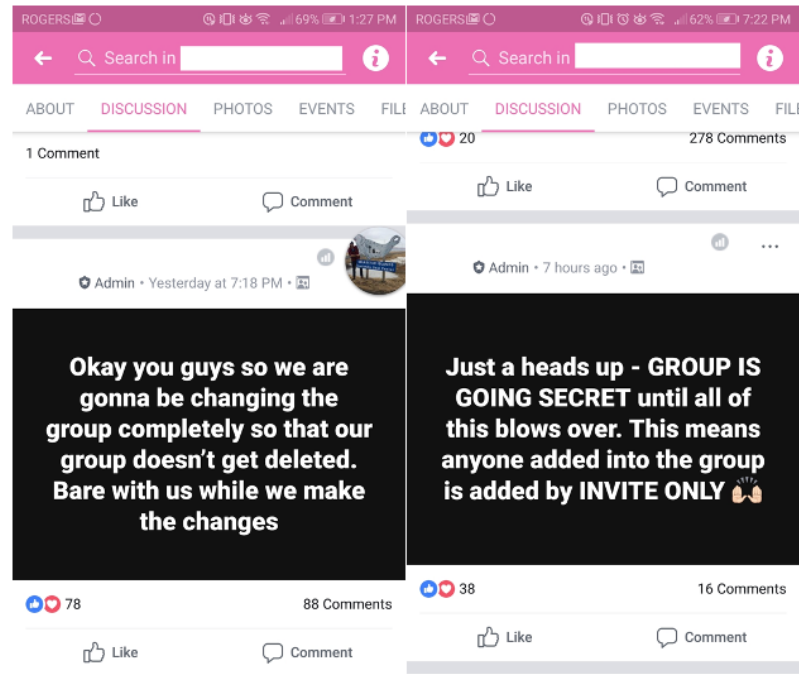


Figure 5: Avoiding the Shutdown 1

As strategizing evolved in the days following this shutdown event, a theory began to circulate that Facebook and Instagram could identify engagement pod activity from any barrage of engagement that originates from the same location. There were concerns that these posts would then be deprioritized on Instagram, while putting pods and individual accounts at risk of being discovered. To protect against this, instructions about how to conceal the origin of likes and comments began circulating across pods (Figure 6).



Figure 6: Shadowban Warning

There is an ongoing game of cat and mouse happening here. Influencers find ways to game the system to improve the ranking of their content and their metrics, and, as the platform learns of these manipulations, they recalibrate their instruments to better measure activity which, in turn, prompts creators to regroup and develop new strategies of subversion. The platform's efforts to accurately measure, classify, rank, and circulate user content lives in tension with the influencer's objective to secure strong social metrics as a condition of employability. In this, the Instagram influencer engagement pod is indicative of an ongoing struggle across this emergent space of platform-mediated work.

This dissertation has sought to interrogate the influencer-platform relation and identify the antagonisms that animate it. Chapter Four explored interviewees' experiences with Instagram and demonstrated that the platform exerts a coercive force that undermines influencers' autonomy through the imposition of opaque and mutable algorithmic decision-making that affects their circulation and metrics. Chapter Five argued that the influencer engagement pod is a collective and collaborative practice of mutual aid born out of precarious contract employment and the unforgiving classificatory architecture of the platform. Interviews with influencers indicate that these are communities of care that respond to the chronic instability of temporary employment shaped by unpredictable metrics produced by the unknowable calculations of the platform.

This chapter considers what the subversive data production of the engagement pod indicates about the terrain of struggle for workers of platform capitalism more generally. It argues that the Instagram influencer engagement pod is indicative of what Massimo de Angelis and David Harvie (2009) call the “war over measure.” Across a workforce of so-called independents, the platform enacts a regime of measurement that is deeply contested. The Instagram influencer engagement pod, specifically, illustrates the antagonism, struggle, and resistance that continues across these new spaces and configurations of labour. While the players and tactics of worker struggle are being redrawn and reorganized, the tension expressed by the example of engagement pods focuses our attention on measure as an important site of struggle under platform capitalism.

6.1 The War Over Measure

Massimo de Angelis and David Harvie (2009) argue that the capitalist production of value is, itself, a “category of struggle” (p. 15). Following Harry Cleaver (2000), they argue that socially necessary labour time – the substance of value – is not simply an expression of “a past given quantum of labour” (p. 7). It is also perpetually inflected by an ongoing “struggle over measure” (de Angelis & Harvie, 2009). The struggle over measure points to the subversions, refusals, and acts of resistance that occur in the daily effort to subordinate labour’s activities to capital’s measuring instruments and processes. As Angelis and Harvie (2009) put it, the struggle over measure is “the daily struggle over the *what, how, how much, why* and *who* of social production” (p. 15). For these authors, the capitalist production of value involves a dialectic of coercion and resistance that occurs at the point where capital’s need to measure meets and grapples with labour’s stubbornly persistent capacity to exceed or evade its efforts to do so. For instance, Frederick Taylor, one of the early architects of scientific management, observed factory workers using a stopwatch to measure the time it took to complete each step in the process. These measures allowed management to establish quotas, benchmarks, and expectations for the pace of work. However, workers on the shop floor pushed back against the imposition of management’s measures and the coercive force they inevitably

exert over their actions. They sought to impose their own norms of production through intentional mis-recordings, forms of cooperative work slowdown, or outright sabotage (Braverman, 1974). Measurement, then, has been a site of ongoing struggle. Its quantitative outcomes express – however flatly – the tensions of the competing interests of labour and capital.

De Angelis and Harvie’s assertion that measure is a site of struggle responds to the immaterial labour thesis as developed by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. As described in Chapter Two, Hardt and Negri (2000; 2017) argue that value is no longer measurable in the socially necessary labour time that it takes to produce commodities. Because immaterial labour consumes and produces “*social life itself*” (Hardt & Negri, 2005, p.146, emphasis in original), its value has its “foundation in the common” (p. 147). Labour, therefore, ceases to be the measure of value.

The work that influencers do producing communicative moments and affective experiences for their audiences is representative of the immaterial labour that Hardt and Negri argue exceeds measurement. They argue that its cooperative production processes can’t be disciplined, regimented, segmented, and structured by capital’s usual techniques (de Angelis & Harvie, 2009). For them, immaterial labour produces “excesses” (p. 147) of value that cannot be captured by capital’s measures. Hardt and Negri argue that there is an emancipatory potential to this immeasurability. In its cooperative, creative, and autonomous composition, immaterial labour potentially “constitutes new grounds upon which to build a revolutionary subjectivity” (Hearn, 2010, p. 60), one that is capable of organizing itself according to alternative value regimes. In other words, labour can begin to self-valorize and transcend capital in a “kind of spontaneous and elementary communism” (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 294).

de Angelis and Harvie (2009) critique Hardt and Negri’s arguments about immaterial labour by showing how their own work as academics remains very much subject to the

imposition of measure over its immaterial production processes.²⁰ Just because the work involves ephemeral forms of subjectivity, communication and sociality does not mean capital will stop trying to measure it. Indeed, it just tries harder, by unleashing “an army of economists, statisticians, management scientists and consultants, information-specialists, accountants, bureaucrats, political strategists and others” (p. 5-6). Through these purveyors of measure, the endeavor to quantify, render commensurate, and express value in capital’s terms remains persistent and pervasive across the existing mode of production. Capital continues to “devise and impose metrics adequate to its need to measure” (Harvie, 2005, p. 154).

For de Angelis and Harvie, capital’s measurement processes are not a series of static instruments for labour to transcend via its immaterial composition. Measure is lived, relational, and “always a discursive device that acts as a point of reference” (de Angelis, 2007, p. 176). It is the dynamic process where the norms, standards, and benchmarks for production (whether material or immaterial) are established and where producers are judged based upon their deviation from that norm. de Angelis and Harvie (2009) explain that,

Once the producer’s living labour is caught within the ongoing opposition between their own performance and a moving standard, and once the condition of their livelihoods is increasingly tied to the condition of meeting or beating these standards, we have in place the dynamic process that Marx associates with the formation of socially-necessary labour-time in capitalism (p. 16).

Measure exerts a powerfully disciplinary force over the labour process. It is a key managerial process whereby subjects are coerced and cajoled towards particular goals, actions, priorities, pace, and ways of doing. But each step of this dynamic process manifests a struggle as producers push back against the measurement processes intended

²⁰ Others have examined the immaterial and affective labour of restaurant servers (Dowling, 2007) and reality television workers (Hearn, 2010) to similarly demonstrate that capital does, indeed, find ways to measure immaterial labour adequate to its needs. See also Caffentzis (2005) for a critique of the immeasurability thesis.

to enclose and govern their activities and channel them towards maximizing value appropriation.

Capital's efforts to subordinate workers to its need for measure perpetually clashes with workers' own desires and value practices that undermine, defy, or exceed the measurement instruments; this is the struggle over measure. For example, in a factory context, labour resists management's attempts to measure by engaging in subversions, refusals, and sabotages on both the micro and macro scale. Assembly line workers might collectively agree to keep the pace of production slow in order to keep the quotas imposed by management low. This struggle can also be seen in more individualized acts of resistance, such as when staff ignore management's requests for feedback (Feldman & Sandoval, 2018), or engage in "mindless tick-boxing" (de Angelis & Harvie, 2009, p. 14) that intentionally misinterprets paperwork and flouts administrators' efforts to collect information. This daily struggle over measure expresses the broader antagonisms of the labour-capital relation. Behind the standards, benchmarks, quotas, and hours allotments that organize the norms of production, there is a daily exchange of demands and refusals, of coercions and resistance - a struggle in the register of measure.

6.2 Instagram Influencers and the Struggle Over Measure

The influencers interviewed for this study are paradigms of socialized labour whose work is aptly described as the (re)production of "subjectivity and the ideological environment in which that subjectivity lives and reproduces" (Lazzarato, 1996, p. 142). The work they do on Instagram is centrally concerned with communication, generating affective experiences, and cultivating interpersonal relationships. They are, indeed, engaged in the production of "*social life itself*" (Hardt & Negri, 2005, p. 146). Furthermore, the temporal and spatial boundaries between their work and non-work spheres is thoroughly dissolved as they draw from everyday life to produce a branded identity and self-enterprise. However, to read this work as beyond measure is to overlook the way that the influencer's metrics compel them to invest more time and energy into the platform.

Instagram's process of measure profoundly conditions influencers' content production, self-expression and online sociality. The emergence of ostensibly "bad" practices, like the Instagram engagement pod, demonstrate that the platform's measures are fraught and contested terrain, however. The Instagram influencer engagement pod signals an ongoing struggle over measure specific to the conditions of platform capitalism.²¹

Influencers are caught in the dynamic opposition described by de Angelis and Harvie (2009) between their own performance and the standards, norms, and expectations that shape their ability to generate income in the influencer marketing industry, and across the creator economy, more broadly. Their Instagram metrics must be sustained at a particular level, and their livelihoods are tied to the condition of meeting or beating those benchmarks. While influencers are independent from Instagram, the platform's system of measurement is, nevertheless, a disciplinary one. As we saw in Chapter Four, influencers are compelled to engage in ongoing experimentation, content creation, and different forms of social interactivity in pursuit of rewards in the form of a boost to their numbers that keeps their brand and business viable. As Sarah puts it, the platform will "throw you a bone" for enticing others to stay on the platform. The coercive force of these measures is made all the more powerful by the uncertainty of outcomes that characterizes them. Interviewees comments illustrate that this state of uncertainty is productive. They describe evolving strategies of innovation, experimentation, and engagement so they can, as both Sarah and Maya put it, "keep up with" Instagram and maintain strong numbers. Although influencers work independently from the platform, the platform's veiled calculations and the metrics they produce exert a powerful managerial force over the influencer's production, necessitating they make constant substantial investments of their creative energy, communicative capacity, and time.

²¹ The influencer engagement pod is one form "fraudulent influencer behaviour" that is policed on Instagram. Other practices include botting, purchasing followers, and follower loops, for instance. Although the present study focuses closely upon this one practice, I consider each of these to be expressions of the struggle over measure within this world of work.

The engagement pod responds to the disciplinary force of the platform's measurement processes and seeks to alleviate the pressure they apply on influencers to produce *more, better, and more frequently*. Through the engagement pod, influencers push back against the system of measure that demands their ongoing participation, innovation, and data production to remain visible. By subverting Instagram's Terms of Use, they resist Instagram's expectations for the "*what, how, how much, why and who* of social production" (de Angelis and Harvie, 2009, p. 15), particularly in the "like-only pods," whose rote form of interactivity is akin to the "mindless tick-boxing" of paperwork that de Angelis and Harvie (2009) point to as an expression of the struggle over measure in their academic work. While in academia, mindless tick-boxing saves faculty the time and effort required to generate meaningful responses, the mindless "liking" that takes place in these pods alleviates some of the demands made upon influencers' creativity, intelligence, capacity for generating affect, and relationship building. It helps to sustain their numbers on the days when they are unable or unwilling to fully invest the cognitive abilities, affect, or subjectivity. This mindless liking seeks to reduce the time and effort participants are compelled to put into the platform, and in this way, it is a struggle to work less. Such a struggle offers a glimmer of hope, as Cleaver (2017) writes, "Every reduction in the hours and effort we are forced to concede to capital is an expansion in those we have available for self-valorization and for developing alternatives" (p. 105).

6.3 Facebook Responds

The business model of advertising platform companies like Instagram is premised upon the appropriation of users' behavioural data, which is used to refine the platform's content targeting algorithms. Engagement pods, however, produce junk data that undermine the effectiveness of the platform's algorithmic decision-making. Liking, commenting upon, and sharing content that does not correspond with the account holder's genuinely held interests, opinions, and relationships introduces data noise into the system, which makes it difficult to measure and sort users accurately. Such behaviour pushes personal profiles and networks of connections into what Galloway and Thacker (2007) call a "hypertrophic state" that "attract[s] incongruent and ineffective control

responses” (p. 98) from the platform’s algorithms. The content and advertisements most suited to the user becomes difficult to identify in a sea of erroneous and superfluous data points. In their own way, engagement pods render the subject “immeasurable” by Instagram’s instruments, which, in turn, poses a threat to the platform’s revenues.

As a result, Instagram and Facebook are engaged in a perpetual project to police “authentic behaviour” across their userbase in order to ensure that self-expression and sociality aligns with what the platform hopes to measure. The company polices authenticity via changes to content ranking algorithms, which work to curb the effectiveness of strategic sociality, and the constant development of new tools to refine measurement processes and identify user misbehaviour. Enforcement against practices like the engagement pod are part of broader efforts to coerce subjects into the types of measurable behaviours that serve the platform’s profitability. These efforts to police authenticity, however, underscore that subjectivity is not “captured” in data; it must be “codif[ied] in line with the requirements of production” (Lazzarato, 1996, p. 134). Subjectivity that escapes those requirements must be disciplined back into line. In effect, Instagram sets the terms and conditions for what constitutes authentic forms of selfhood and self-expression and then polices subjects so that they will embody those norms.

Advertisers have also become increasingly aware of so-called fraudulent influencer behaviours like the pod. They have begun to put pressure on Instagram to eradicate these practices and provide more comprehensive tools to measure the independent content producers they hire for their campaigns. In June of 2018, for instance, Unilever Chief Marketing Officer, Keith Weed, announced the company’s intention to prioritize spending its €7 billion annual advertising budget on platforms that demonstrate a willingness to provide brands with “greater transparency in the influencer marketing space” and that “help eradicate bad practices throughout the whole ecosystem” (Weed, 2018). Unsurprisingly, Instagram is listening to these demands. Later that year, the World Federation of Advertisers convened a working group in partnership with Instagram to

discuss influencer “bad practices” and identify strategies to “bring increased trust, transparency and integrity in the influencer space” (Weed, 2018).

This collaborative initiative to refine Instagram’s measurement processes and eradicate subversive activity like engagement pods expresses advertisers stake in the struggle over measure. For them, the aim is to maximize profits from influencers’ content production work while minimizing the costs of their labour. These efforts exemplify the ongoing struggle to subordinate this emerging sector and its producers to a regime of measure that can be used to stabilize and express value, accordingly.

Independent producers are subjected to strategies of measurement that function to discipline and organize their behaviour and bring it in line with the appropriate logics of the platform, the contracting advertisers, and platform capitalism more generally. Although the instruments are new and the players involved have been redrawn, reclassified, and reorganized, this dynamic of data-based subversions and platform enforcements reveals the presence of a familiar struggle in the emerging world of platform-mediated work – the struggle over measure.

6.4 What Can Influencers’ Struggle Over Measure Accomplish

What are the stakes and transformative possibilities of this struggle? As Instagram’s business model and metrics render interpersonal influence commodifiable, they cannot be said to simply measure the strength of an individual’s influence. They actively *constitute* the subject position of “influencer” as a professional identity, as a creator, entrepreneur, and independent business owner (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016). On one hand then, influencers are *subjected to* measure by the platform, and they resist this imposition via the subversions, strategizing, and evasions that go on in engagement pods. On the other hand, they are also *subjectified in* these measures in ways that complicate the transformative power of any potential subversions they may enact.

For this reason, influencers' metrics are deeply meaningful to them. These measures ostensibly express the cultural value and salience of their posts and online persona; they have a powerfully "affective force" (Hearn & Banet-Weiser, 2020) because they are understood to be representations of social worth as well as measures of job performance. The affective force of Instagram metrics is visible in the influencer interviews. It can be seen in the way that interviewees express acute pride or shame, depending on what the numbers indicate. For instance, we saw in Chapter Four that Elizabeth describes any dip in her numbers as an "embarrassing" event that "obviously feels so shitty." She explains that unimpressive numbers can be acutely distressing for some, an experience that people get "really down," and "really, really, *really* bummed out about." Rachel also underscores the affective force of her metrics when she explains that a poorly performing post "plays a lot on [her] mentality at times," leading her to question her status as an influencer within her online community. She begins to wonder "Am I producing good stuff? Are people liking what I'm doing?" As the work of influencing is so closely tethered to the projection and production of a certain kind of personality or selfhood, it is little wonder influencers have such a deep sense of responsibility for the numbers they do or do not generate. While their Instagram metrics do, at times, appear as a set of frustrating and imposed performance evaluators that oblige influencers to take particular actions, influencers also see them as powerful indicators of their professional identity as independent creative entrepreneurs. In this sense then, influencers simultaneously invest and believe in the metrics, and repudiate them.

Influencers' affective ties with their metrics underscore that measure is a recursive process; it produces subjectivities that feel, experience, and understand themselves through their metrics. Practices like the engagement pod are, in many ways, symptomatic of this fact. As much as participants target the platform, reject its allotments, and coordinate to beat the algorithms, they are ultimately motivated by a desire to improve their performance on the platform's terms. While they may challenge the validity of their own metrics through the pod, they do not challenge the logic of this deeply individualizing system of evaluation and the distribution of employment opportunities

according to platform logic. They do not express a desire to cast off their relations of measure. Their aim is, more pragmatically, to succeed within them. In that way, the data-based subversions of the pod enact the resourceful, self-managing, participatory, and entrepreneurial spirit that neoliberalism has sought to cultivate. Participants are “optimizing” their self-enterprise for Instagram’s logics of circulation as well as the broader labour market. They remain committed to and dependent upon the individualized regime of valuation that Instagram’s metrics produce, even as they work collaboratively to subvert them. Their practices remain captive to and conditioned by capital’s logics of exchange.

The pod’s power as an act of resistance, then, is fraught and ambiguous. This ambiguity is illustrative of tensions at play across this platformized cultural production. Influencers are independent entrepreneurs and business owners who are tethered to and dependent upon a platform digital point of production they cannot access or control. The influencers interviewed for this study negotiate an unremitting contradiction in their relationship with the platform infrastructure; they feel a profound sense of ownership over their branded persona on Instagram and that identity is meaningful to them, yet they also recognize that they do not own or control the means or mechanisms through which their self-brand becomes monetizable. Their self-brand is inextricable from – and valueless without – the Instagram platform itself.

While my interviewees understand themselves to be autonomous creative entrepreneurs using the platform infrastructure to build their independent business, they also express feelings of being subordinated by Instagram’s instruments, processes, and interests. The sense of independence and ownership that animates their entrepreneurial subjectivity lives in tension with the coercive force of Instagram’s measurement and the way this system so powerfully structures their production process. As Kylie puts it, “I feel like they’re messing with my business.” Influencers’ identity as independent entrepreneurs is incongruent with the nominal control and custody they exercise over their Instagram-

based businesses. They are owners without meaningful possession; responsabilized without control; independent without autonomy.

In some ways, the pod exemplifies these tensions in the influencers' subject position. It is an assemblage of many hyper-individualized micro-enterprises that have collectively organized against a common target but are in pursuit of individual self-interest. The narrow focus upon improving their individual numbers ultimately limits what this struggle can accomplish. While podders may manufacture some stability for one another, their actions do not give them more knowledge of, or control over their platformed point of production. Indeed, the project of building that type of power requires a more explicit politics of solidarity, and cultivating solidarity necessitates overcoming the individualism that is central to the influencer or creator economy. Articulating a shared subject position poses a significant hurdle for a group whose work is deeply personal and predicated upon the production of a unique self-brand. The pod is not a practice that transcends the division and hierarchy that Instagram's measures produce. In the final instance, personal metrics still divide and stratify influencers. A transformative struggle would have to be rooted in alternative values that oppose the competitive individualism of neoliberal selfhood encouraged and perpetuated by these platforms.

Nevertheless, the pod is a tentative experiment in collectivity that violates the deeply individualizing structures of influencers' work. It is a site where a shared antagonism with the Instagram platform has been voiced and participants play with the power of collectivity against it. The practices of information sharing that take place within engagement pods constitute a space to map the terrain of a shared experience, where one would not exist otherwise. Across a dispersed and disassociated workforce of micro-enterprises, the engagement pod is a space to link and coordinate otherwise isolated and atomized struggles with the giants of platform capitalism.

In the act of collectively struggling against the platform's processes of measure, pod members enact value practices that the platform's ranking and metrics are not designed to measure or cultivate. This underscores de Angelis and Harvie's (2009) point that

“struggles against management’s measures and the values they promote are also the realm of alternative measures and values” (p. 14). In their pods, interviewees describe “supporting” one another and “helping each other out,” suggesting an undercurrent of alternative values, such as community, beneath the norms of competitive individualism. Kim’s comments indicate that solidarity is discovered and cultivated in the act of collectively struggling against Instagram’s measures. He explains that the rationale to start his engagement pod, which at the time had several thousand members, had originally been to “hack” Instagram, but had evolved into a lesson in the power of collectivity; “I think it became so much more after that. It became actually like a community and then the community was actually helping each other succeed.” In the struggle against Instagram’s measures and the values they promote, influencers experiment with the alternative values of community and collectivity. In the collective effort to oppose the status quo, there are opportunities for stronger solidarities to emerge and more politically powerful forms of collective action to take root.

6.5 Conclusion: Platform Capitalism and Data-Based Struggles

Contemporary critics of platform capitalism have theorized the data-based accumulation strategies of platform companies as a process of “accumulation by dispossession” (Thatcher et al. 2016); an expansion of the operations of extraction (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2017); colonialism (Couldry & Mejias, 2019); commons enclosure (Dean, 2014); and as a project of automating subjectivity itself (Andrejevic, 2020; Zuboff, 2019). These theories paint a powerful picture of capital’s appropriative impulses playing out across the digital terrain and provide useful metaphors to illustrate the stakes of the power relations involved.

The digital platform’s function as an intermediary makes it a potent mechanism for subordinating diverse value practices to the logic of exchange. However, the continued subversions of communities of influencers, and the efforts by Instagram to stop them, suggest that the broader processes of enclosing and commodifying new frontiers of life

through platform interfaces and data capture are more fraught and contested than is often accounted for. They suggest that the project of rendering the social world “smooth” (Thatcher et al., 2016) for economic extraction through data capture is not so straightforward on the ground. It is not sufficient to say that social media platforms enact the enclosure of the terrain of human sociality and communication (Dean, 2014). The research presented here indicates that platforms are engaged in a far more tedious and daily effort to coerce and cajole platformed subjects into the types of data productive activities that serve their circuits of valorization and expansion. As Facebook’s decision to shut down of the Instagram engagement groups shows, the influencers “data work” (van Doorn & Badger, 2020) must be subject to forms of surveillance and disciplining to bring their activities in line with the platform’s instruments of measure and valorization. The conflict over podding reveals a messy dynamic of subversion and enforcement, coercion and resistance. Rather than data capture, then, this process is better conceptualized as a struggle to subordinate the subjects of platform capitalism to a stable and coherent regime of measurement – the much more mundane and daily struggle over measure. In approaching these infrastructures as actors in a struggle we gain the conceptual space to account for the agency, desires, and value practices of subjects who engage with and push back against them.

Chapter 7

7 Conclusions

This dissertation has examined the phenomenon of Instagram influencers engagement pods and argued that they represent the dynamics of antagonism, resistance, and struggle unique to the structuring conditions and valorization processes of platform capitalism. The research included sixteen in-depth, semi-structured interviews with self-identified Instagram influencers supplemented by participant observation within influencer engagement pods on Facebook and Telegram. Interviews were oriented towards understanding how influencers, as platform-mediated entrepreneurs, articulate their relationship with the Instagram platform, the role that it plays in their working lives, and the practices they have developed to respond to their working conditions. Interview data was supplemented with observation of seven Instagram engagement pods organized on Facebook and Telegram to better understand how these communities are organized and the types of the communal practices that occur therein.

Findings revealed a struggle over autonomy and value between influencers and the platform that endows them with their influencer status. Influencer engagement pods express the contradictions of influencers' conditions, articulating both a challenge and a commitment to the measures and value regimes of Instagram. Nevertheless, the data-based subversion of the engagement pod constitutes a form of mutual aid and support that contradicts the individualizing structures of influencers' platformized conditions of work. It reveals that the platform's operations of data capture to be the site of a persistent and daily struggle to subordinate subjects to the instruments of capitalist valorization - the daily struggle over measure.

7.1 Future Work

This project raises several new questions that I hope can serve as a productive launching point for future research. First, this research finds that engagement pods function as communities of mutual aid and support that seek to mitigate the precarity of the

Instagram influencer's work. Future studies should seek to better understand the relationship between such "embryonic" forms of mutual support (Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020, p. 36) and long-term solidarity among content producers. Do these ties have staying power that can challenge the logic of competitive individualism engendered by the platform? The emergence of organizations such as the American Influencer Council in the United States, The Creator Union in the UK, as well as The Online Creator's Association suggest that content creators are recognizing, discussing, and organizing more formally around a set of collective interests. Future work could study the evolution of these groups and how they develop and articulate their position in relation to the platform, as well as the types of advocacy campaigns they organize and the actions they engage in.

On Instagram, the engagement pod is one strategy among many. For example, interviewees also commonly reported the use of "bots" to automate interactions with other Instagram accounts.²² Future work could investigate this and other strategies of algorithmic subversion to better understand the lived experience of digital entanglement "from the bottom up" (Couldry, Fotopoulous & Dickens, 2016).

This dissertation argued that the engagement pod constitutes a unique grassroots form of collective action organized around data production, adjacent to the more traditional pathways of labour organizing. Future work could continue to examine other forms of data-based subversion among platformized subjects. For instance, they might compare different strategies across different sites of work to clarify the shared conditions of platform-mediated labour and identify ways to coordinate struggles across different sites and forms of digital labour.

²² Engagement bots are third party software that can be used to automate the act of "liking," "commenting" or "following" other Instagram accounts. Also known as "botting," the idea is to have this bot engage with many different users, which may prompt them to click on your profile, engage with your content in reciprocation, or follow your account.

Finally, future research could identify and explore other sites and forms of data-based struggles in order to add texture to the more globalizing theories of platform capitalism as a system of “extraction” (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2017), “accumulation by dispossession” (Thatcher et al. 2016), “commons enclosure” (Dean, 2014) or the automation of subjectivity (Zuboff, 2019). Doing so constitutes a political project as much as it is a theoretical one. Failing to identify and interrogate these sites of data-dissent *as struggles* risks acquiescing to the knowledge and value regimes that platform companies produce, control, and hope to see entrenched.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Guide

The labour process and working identity

Tell me about how you got to where you are?

What does a typical day look like for you?

Where do you do your work?

What tools (digital or otherwise) are crucial for doing your job?

How does this work compare with other jobs you've done?

Where do you see yourself in 5 years?

How do you describe your employment status?

Do you have a boss?

What are the skills that it takes to do this job well?

How many hours a day do you spend 'on the job'?

Are there certain times, situations, or events that you will not post?

Who do you rely on to help you in difficult situations?

Tell me about your relationship with your audience

What does authenticity mean to you, and what role does it play in your work?

Relationship with *Instagram*:

In 2016, Instagram changes its algorithm. How did that affect you?

Has it changed how you do your work?

What kind of strategies do you use to ensure that your content gets seen?

Do you belong to a comment pod/engagement group? Why or why not?

Have you ever purchased followers or engagement? Why or why not?

Have you ever used automation services like *Instagress*? Why or why not?

If you run into a problem, what kind of support does Instagram offer?

If you owned Instagram, what would you change?

What role do your metrics play in the content you create?

How do your analytics shape your partnerships with brands?

How do they measure the success of your work?

How do you measure your success?

What don't your analytics capture

Relationships with brands

What do you charge and how did you arrive at that number?

Do you feel that you're accurately compensated for your work?

Do you ever partner with brands for non-monetary compensation? If so, why?

What are the biggest challenges in negotiating contracts?

How do you decide which brands you'll work with and when do you turn down request for partnerships?

Have you ever had a bad experience with a brand? If so, how did you handle it?

What would be the wrong way to handle a conflict with a brand?

What do you wish brands understood about your work?

Do you talk to other influencers about compensation? Why or why not?

In your experience partnering with brands, are there things you do differently now than when you first started?

Appendix B: Recruitment Email

Email Script for Inviting Participants

Subject Line: Invitation to participate in a research study about social media influencers

You are being invited to participate in a research study conducted by Dr. Susan Knabe and Victoria O'Meara from Western University. This study seeks to understand social media influencers as independent cultural workers. It focuses upon their labour process, working time, and their relationships with brands, audiences, and platforms.

If you agree to participate in this study it would involve an interview of approximately one hour. Interviews can be arranged in-person, or by Skype or telephone call.

Details on the study can be found in the Letter of Information attached to this email. If you would like to know more, or have any questions before agreeing to participate please do not hesitate to contact the researchers at the contact information given below.

Thank you,

Victoria O'Meara, PhD Candidate
Western University

Dr. Susan Knabe, PhD & Principle Investigator
Western University

Appendix C: Recruitment Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook Direct Message

Hi,

My name is Victoria O'Meara and I am a PhD candidate and researcher at Western University in London, Ontario. I'd like to invite you to participate in a research study on the working lives of social media influencers, such as yourself. The study seeks to understand the conditions of work in this field, and we've identified you as an eligible candidate for participation. We have created a Google Doc with more information about the study, which you can access via the provided link below.

Google Doc with study information:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1xXKk1H9rONeO6iDm9uox-gHPniZYPqiZonG2SAoSsDs/edit?usp=sharing>

If you have any questions, or are interested in participating, please do not hesitate to get in touch via the below contact information below.

Dr. Susan Knabe, Principal Investigator

Victoria O'Meara, PhD Candidate

Thanks very much and have a great day.

Victoria O'Meara, PhD Candidate, Media Studies

Faculty of Information and Media Studies, Western University

Appendix D: Third Party Introduction Email

Hi,

My name is Victoria O'Meara and I am a PhD Candidate in the Faculty of Information and Media Studies at Western University. I'm conducting a research study on the working lives of social media influencers (i.e. bloggers, Youtubers, and other social media users who partner with brands to create and circulate branded or sponsored content to their audience).

I am currently recruiting participants for one-hour interviews about their work and their relationships with brands, audiences, and platforms. I suspect there are **[insert community specific identifier i.e. Western undergraduate students, or FIMS students, etc.]** who have experience partnering with brands in this way. If you think the opportunity to participate in this study might be of interest to some of your membership, I would appreciate help spreading the word. For your convenience, I've provided some sample text below and attached a [.png](#) file with a short message to share on **[insert organization's name]** social media channels.

Thanks very much and do feel free to get in touch with any questions.

Sample text for social media post:

Invitation to participate in research study on social media influencers:

https://uwo.eu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_0NzQTkgHPiVcBxP

We would like to invite you to participate in a study about the working lives of social media influencers.

If you have experience partnering with brands to make sponsored content in exchange for compensation (monetary or otherwise), we'd like to hear from you.

Please complete this short survey (linked above) to determine your eligibility.

Very Best,
Victoria O'Meara
PhD Candidate, Media Studies
Faculty of Information and Media Studies
Western University

Appendix E: Organizations and Agencies Request for Distribution Email

Hello,

I am Victoria O'Meara, a PhD student at Western University, Canada. I am writing on behalf of Dr. Susan Knabe, also from Western University. We are working on an academic research study about the working lives of social media influencers, and hoping to interview independent content creators, such as bloggers, Youtubers, Instagrammers, etc., who partner with brands to create and circulate branded or sponsored content to their audience.

We would like to invite **[insert members of X association OR X clients]** to participate in our study by taking part in a telephone interview. If you think the opportunity to participate might be of interest to some of your **[insert members/clients]**, we kindly request your help in spreading the word by circulating an invitation to participate. For your convenience, I have attached an email and Letter of Information for distribution amongst your membership. **[*Note, documents titled “Recruitment Email,” and “Letter of Information” will be attached to this email]**

If you have any questions or concerns that might give you pause before distributing our invitation, please do not hesitate to contact Victoria O'Meara at [redacted] or Susan Knabe at [redacted]

Very best,

Victoria O'Meara, PhD Candidate,
Faculty of Information and Media Studies, Western University

Appendix G: Prescreening Survey

Qualtrix Pre-Recruitment Screening Survey Text

Page 1: Study Description

The Study:

The purpose of this study is to understand the working lives of social media influencers as independent cultural workers. It seeks to understand the skills required, tools employed, working hours, labour processes, and necessary relationships that constitute work in this field. It further aims to have social media influencers describe, in their own words, the unique benefits and challenges associated with work in this industry.

This short survey is meant to establish the eligibility of research participants.

Thank you for your interest in participating.

Page 2: Eligibility Criteria

Do you run a publicly visible social media channel (i.e. a Youtube channel, a blog, a public Instagram account, etc.)?

- Yes
- No
- Other. Please elaborate [text box included here]

Do you have an online audience that extends beyond your personal network of friends, family and colleagues?

- Yes
- No

- Not sure
- Other. Please elaborate [text box included here]

Do you have experience working in partnership with brands to create sponsored content and feature it on your social media channels in exchange for compensation (monetary or otherwise)?

- Yes
- No
- Other. Please elaborate [text box included here]

Page 3: Survey Completed Message

Thank you very much for your interest in this study. A researcher will be in touch shortly about your eligibility.

Appendix H: Letter of Information and Consent

Letter of Information: The Working Lives of Social Media Influencers

Principal Investigator:

Dr. Susan Knabe, PhD, Faculty of Information and Media Studies, Western University,

Co-Investigator:

Victoria O'Meara, PhD Candidate, Faculty of Information and Media Studies, Western University

Invitation to Participate:

You are being invited to participate in this research study about social media influencers because you have indicated/been identified as someone who works in this field.

Why is this study being done?

The purpose of this study is to understand the working lives of social media influencers as independent cultural workers. It seeks to understand the skills required, tools employed, typical hours, work processes, and necessary relationships that constitute work in this field. It further aims to have social media influencers describe, in their own words, the unique benefits and challenges associated with this practice.

What are the study procedures?

If you agree to participate in this study you will be asked to engage in a one-on-one interview with the researcher. The interview will be conducted at an agreeable public space (e.g. library, café, etc.) of your preference, or via Skype, and is expected to take one hour. This interview will be audio recorded for later transcription. The transcriptions will be anonymized. If you do not wish to be audio recorded, the researcher will take hand written notes. The study is expected to have a total of 40 participants.

We realize that being a social media influencer involves irregular hours. As such, if you need or want to answer emails, tweet, post, respond to comments, etc. during our discussion, please feel free to do so. In the event that this happens, and with your permission, the interviewer would like to make note of these processes, and discuss them if you are comfortable doing so.

What are the risks and harms of participating in this study?

One possible risk is that critical opinions expressed about brands, platforms, audiences, or fellow independent content creators could be detrimental to your relationships if they were to be disseminated. However all responses from you will be anonymized to minimize this potential harm.

What are the benefits?

Of possible benefit to you is an opportunity to discuss the unique challenges and benefits of being a social media influencer, and how you would like to see the industry evolve to better support people such as yourself.

The possible benefit to society will be an improved understanding of the dynamics of this increasingly common form of cultural production and possible future policy improvements as a result.

Can participants choose to leave the study?

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate, refuse to answer any questions or withdraw from the study at any time with no effect on your employment status. If you decide to withdraw from the study, you have the right to request withdrawal of information collected about you. If you wish to have your information removed please let the researcher know so that your data can be removed and destroyed from our database. We will give you new information that is learned during the study that might affect your decision to stay in the study.

How will participants' information be kept confidential?

All data collected will remain confidential and accessible only to the investigators of this study. The audio recordings of interviews will be stored on an encrypted file and password protected hard drive which only the primary investigator and research assistant will have access to. The recordings will be destroyed after transcription and the transcripts will be anonymized and stored on an encrypted and password-protected hard drive. If the results are published, your name will not be used.

While we do our best to protect your information there is no guarantee that we will be able to do so. If data is collected during the project, which may be required to report by law, we have a duty to report.

The researcher will keep any personal information about you in a secure and confidential location for a minimum of 7 years. A list linking your study number with your name will be kept by the researcher in a secure place, separate from your study file.

Representatives of The University of Western Ontario Non-Medical Research Ethics Board may require access to your study-related records to monitor the conduct of the research.

Are participants compensated to be in this study?

You will not be compensated for your participation in this research.

What are the rights of participants?

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decide not to be in this study. Even if you consent to participate you have the right to not answer individual questions or to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose not to participate or to leave the study at any time it will have no effect on your employment status.

If you decide to withdraw from the study, you have the right to request withdrawal of information collected about you. If you wish to have your information removed please let the researcher know so that your data can be removed and destroyed from our database

We will give you new information that is learned during the study that might affect your decision to stay in the study.

You do not waive any legal right by signing this consent form

Whom do participants contact for questions?

If you require any further information regarding this research project or your participation in the study you may contact:

Dr. Susan Knabe, PhD, Principal Investigator,

Victoria O'Meara, PhD Candidate,

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or the conduct of this study, you may contact The Office of Human Research Ethics at (519) 661-3036, email: ethics@uwo.ca

This letter is yours to keep for future reference.

Appendix I: Ethics Approval



Date: 3 January 2018

To: Susan M. Knabe

Project ID: 110097

Study Title: The working lives of social media influencers: Labour and gender at the fringe of the web 2.0 creative economy

Application Type: NMREB Initial Application

Review Type: Delegated

Full Board Reporting Date: February 2 2018

Date Approval Issued: 03/Jan/2018

REB Approval Expiry Date: 03/Jan/2019

Dear Susan M. Knabe

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the WREM application form for the above mentioned study, as of the date noted above. NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the expiry date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NMREB Continuing Ethics Review.

This research study is to be conducted by the investigator noted above. All other required institutional approvals must also be obtained prior to the conduct of the study.

Documents Approved:

Document Name	Document Type	Document Date	Document Version
Assent Letter - 13-17 years - version 1 - dec72017	Written Consent/Assent	07/Dec/2017	1
influencerstudy_socialmediarecruitment	Recruitment Materials	19/Sep/2017	1
Interview Questions - version1	Interview Guide	19/Sep/2017	1
Letter of Information and consent - 18+ - version2 - dec72017	Written Consent/Assent	07/Dec/2017	2
Letter of information and consent - parents - version 2 - dec72017	Written Consent/Assent	07/Dec/2017	2
Letter of Information and verbal consent - 18+ - version 2 - dec72017	Verbal Consent/Assent	07/Dec/2017	2
Letter of Information and Verbal Consent - parents 13 to 17 years old - version 2 - dec72017	Verbal Consent/Assent	07/Dec/2017	2
Organizations and agencies request for distribution email - version1 - dec72017	Recruitment Materials	07/Dec/2017	1
Prescreening survey text - version 2 - dec72017	Screening Form/Questionnaire	07/Dec/2017	2
Recruitment email - version2 - dec72017	Recruitment Materials	07/Dec/2017	2
Recruitment Poster - version2 - dec72017	Recruitment Materials	07/Dec/2017	2
Recruitment twitter and instagram message - version2 - dec72017	Recruitment Materials	07/Dec/2017	2
Skype Call Script - version1 - sept192017	Verbal Consent/Assent	19/Sep/2017	1
Third party introduction email - version2 - dec72017	Recruitment Materials	07/Dec/2017	2
Verbal Assent Letter - 13-17 years - version 1 - dec72017	Verbal Consent/Assent	07/Dec/2017	1

Curriculum Vitae

Name: Victoria O’Meara

Post-secondary Education and Degrees: Brock University
St Catharines, Ontario, Canada
2006-2010 B.A. hons

University of Windsor
Windsor, Ontario, Canada
2012-2013 M.A.

The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada
2014-2022 Ph.D.

Honours and Awards: Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC)
Doctoral Fellowship
2018

Ontario Graduate Scholarship
University of Western Ontario
2017

Ontario Graduate Scholarship
Carleton University – Declined
2014

A.R. & E.G. Ferriss Award
University of Windsor
2013

Related Work Experience Teaching Assistant
The University of Western Ontario
2014-2018

Research Assistant to Dr. Jaigris Hodson, College of
Interdisciplinary Studies and Dr. George Veletsianos, School of
Education and Technology
Royal Roads University
2021-Present

Research Assistant to Dr. Johanna Weststar, Department of
Management and Organizational Studies
University of Western Ontario
2015-2017

Publications:

O'Meara, V. (2019). Weapons of the Chic: Instagram influencer engagement pods as practices of resistance to Instagram platform labour. *Social Media + Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305>

O'Meara, V. (2019). The threat the bot brings: Instagram, influencers, and engagement automation. *Notes From Below*. Available here: <https://notesfrombelow.org/article/threat-bot-brings>

Gosse, C & O'Meara, V. (2018). Blockbotting dissent: Publics, counterpublics and algorithmic public sphere(s). *Stream: Inspiring Critical Thought*. 10(1), pp.3-11.

O'Meara, V., Gosse, C., Legault, M.J., & Weststar, J. (2017). The blame game: How video game workers frame barriers to diversity. *First Person Scholar*.