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The Ideal Influencer: How Influencer Coaches and Platforms Construct Creators as Monetizing for the Right Reasons

Taylor Annabell

Abstract

This article examines the construction of the ideal influencer across two sites of articulation within the influencer ecology: influencer coaches and platforms. It seeks to make visible the normative model that underpins and regulates influencer identities, practices and monetization, which is tied to the interests and values of different actors. Drawing on a sample of 70 TikTok videos and Instagram posts from influencer coaches, a dataset of 69 TikTok and Instagram policies, and a walkthrough of TikTok and Instagram creator accounts, I analyze what constitutes the ideal influencer through a critical feminist approach to influencer labor. In content shared by influencer coaches, the influencer is framed as a strategic actor who offers value to their community and embraces their identity as a professional entrepreneur. Through platform policies and interface design, the influencer is constructed as a skilful creator who engages their audiences in the "right" ways and assumes responsibility for complying with regulations. I argue that these constructions converge on the assertion that influencers should monetize for the "right" reasons. This steers influencers toward a worker subjectivity that is ideal for the platform, linking the construction of influencers as users—rather than workers who should be rewarded but not compensated for their labor—to the professionalization of the industry.

Keywords

influencers, monetization, coaches, intermediaries, platform governance

Introduction

In a "Get Ready with Me" (GRWM) TikTok video, Tess Barclay advises fellow influencers on how to position monetization, stating, "Obviously not everything is about money, but the girlies need to know." While applying her makeup, she narrates her journey of leaving a corporate marketing job to focus on her YouTube channel and shares four lessons: don't quit your job if you'll dislike creating content; diversify across platforms; brand deals aren't the only way to make money; embrace being cringe. Barclay's brand as an influencer coach is showcased in this 3-minute video, combining post-feminist rhetoric with industry expertise. It contributes to her construction of an "ideal influencer," which I argue is underpinned by normative assessments regarding self-presentation, labor, and monetization.

Within the influencer ecology, coaches like Barclay serve as intermediaries between influencers, brands, and platforms, contributing to the industry's professional development. However, unlike intermediaries like influencer marketing and talent agencies (Abidin & Ots, 2015; Stoldt et al., 2019), influencer management tools (Bishop, 2021a) and influencer retreats (Edwards, 2022), influencer coaches also participate in the creator economy as influencers themselves. Their expertise is reinforced by their success in generating income through a portfolio of streams: influencer marketing, ad-sharing revenue, subscriptions, donations, creator funds, and the direct selling of their coaching services and products. As a result, their strategies and advice are tied in part to their commercial endeavors and their ongoing demonstration of the value they offer to influencer communities.

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The article aims to contribute both theoretically and empirically to the burgeoning field of influencer ecologies and the creator economy. First, it introduces the concept of the "ideal influencer" as a means of critically analyzing influencer identities and the value of their labor. By influencers, I refer to content creators who cultivate a sense of closeness with followers and narrate their personal lives (Abidin, 2016b), while engaging with commercial actors through various monetization models (Goanta & Ranchordás, 2020). While this definition alludes to producing the "right" type of self-brand, the term "ideal" highlights the normative nature of curation and the assumptions that underlie practices and identities. Examining the ideal influencer is thus attuned to revealing the normative model that underpins and regulates how influencer practices ought to be enacted.

I show how the ideals of influencers and ideal influencer as subject and worker are explicit and implicit to theoretical and empirical research, gesturing toward how different actors in the influencer ecology and their interests impact the normative constructions of the influencer. More specifically, the formation of the "ideal influencer" emerges through literature addressing the influencer as (1) a celebrity embodying "new" ideals of authenticity and relatability, (2) an ideal neoliberal worker, and (3) an ideal for advertisers and platforms commercial interests. Thinking through the lens of the "ideal," I propose, is productive in questioning who the figure of the influencer is ideal for and who can embody this ideal, in keeping with the critical, feminist approach to influencer labor.

Second, the article interrogates the concept of the "ideal influencer" across two sites of articulation: influencer coaches and platforms. It brings influencer discourse on Instagram and TikTok into dialogue with platform governance of influencers through the analysis of influencer coach content, interface design, and policy documentation. Social media platforms hold significant power in regulating how monetization can occur (Caplan & Gillespie, 2020) and how content is rendered visible to audiences. In doing so, an influencer that is ideal for the platform is presented in policies and rules and steering influencers toward features and tools through the interface design. Examining the complementary and competing claims to what it means to embody the influencer ideal, illuminates how these different actors in the influencer ecology connect revenue generation and the commercial orientation of influencers to subjectivity and self-presentation.

This article opens with the theoretical framework of the "ideal influencer" and then explains the approach to data collection and analysis. The findings are organized around themes from each site of articulation: coaches construct the influencer as a (1) strategic actor, (2) valuable contributor, and (3) professional entrepreneur; platforms construct the influencer as a (4) skilful creator, (5) authentically engaging, and (6) responsibly compliant. I critically examine how the ideal of monetization for the "right" reasons underpin these constructions. In the conclusion, I address the tensions and synergies in how coaches and platforms steer influencers toward an ideal that benefits their interests.

Formation of the Ideal Influencer

Influencer as (New) Ideal Celebrity

Scholars have situated the influencer in celebrity studies, historizing the formation of the worker subjectivity and constructed commodity in the context of online fame and metrification (Abidin, 2015, 2018a; Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2015; Marwick, 2013; Senft, 2008). Approaching the influencer as a representation and reflection of ideal forms of selfhood like the celebrity, illuminates distinctive forms of self-presentation. Early research on microcelebrity examined how self-brands are characterized by everydayness and being more "real" (Marwick, 2013; Senft, 2008), intensifying the blurred boundaries between public and private life, extraordinariness and ordinariness of the celebrity figure. As microcelebrity techniques have become cemented as influencer industrial practices (Marwick, 2017), scholars have critically deconstructed how authenticity and relatability underpin the self-presentation of influencers, which remain steeped in culturally shaped ideals (Abidin, 2015, 2018b; Duffy, 2017; Duffy et al., 2022).

Critical feminist approaches to influencer labor and subjectivity pay attention to social constructions of gender that constitute such cultural context. For example, Duffy (2017) and Bishop (2018) consider how the emotional and affective expression of influencers affirm codes of femininity and align with normative standards of beauty. The logics of self-branding are infused with "problematic gender constructions" (Duffy, 2015, p. 711). Through an analysis of comments on influencer hateblogs, Duffy et al. (2022) show how unrealistic gendered images of success underpin critiques of influencer culture. Through their aspirational content, influencers come to exemplify and capitalize on the unattainable expectation that women "can have it all." Thus, this work speaks to how gender is entangled with the propagation of ideals by influencers, which is in tension with the "ideal influencer" as relatable and authentic.

In addition, the economic value of influencers also maps onto the historical construction of women as aspirational consumers, further demonstrating the connection between influencers and feminized labor. Influencers who engage in influencer marketing act as endorsers and promotional vehicles for brands and third parties, receiving payment in exchange for sharing content. As Hearn and Schoenhoff (2015) remind us, the subsumption of subjectivity to economic imperatives can be traced back to the figure of the celebrity in which celebrity value is also measured, extracted, and exchanged. With the influencer, this monetization practice becomes tied to a "right" way to be (or rather present and perform) ordinariness, reliability, and authenticity. On one

hand, we see the "ideal" of what constitutes celebrity value expand to the monetization of "being yourself." Yet, this is bound by normative restrictions related to popular feminism and certain images attractive to advertisers.

Influencer as the Ideal Neoliberal Worker

In Glatt's (2022) account of the platformized creative worker, the influencer comes to exemplify and epitomize the escalation of neoliberal logics and precarity. The emergence of the neoliberal worker–subject as flexible, entrepreneurial, and passionate with distinctive forms of sociality and work demonstrates how patterns of employment intersect with practices of labor and subjectivity. For example, Neff et al. (2005) outline entrepreneurial labor in two cultural industries of new media and fashion modeling, framed as "cool," creative, and egalitarian despite the internalization of risk, inequalities, and exploitation. They note how work identities extend beyond employment and are entangled with cultural images of rewards and value. Drawing together empirical studies, Gill and Pratt (2008) identify temporary, precarious jobs with long hours and low pay, blurred boundaries between work and private life, informal working environment, feelings of uncertainty along with passion and self-identification with work and entrepreneurial mindset as stable features in cultural and creative industries.

Such insights resonate with work experiences, as Duffy (2017) identified in her research with bloggers, noting the tensions between authenticity and self-promotion, creativity and commerce, and labor and leisure. That influencers can "do what they love" and achieve a "good life" (Duffy, 2017) represents an intensification of the blurred boundaries between work and life within the creative industries. Similarly, cross-platform labor speaks to the precarity of the industry in which influencers manage the risk by diversifying their self-branding efforts (Glatt, 2022). As such, we see how the worker–subject of the influencer becomes ideal for changes in the organization of capitalism within the platform economy. The issue of underpayment and free labor also maps onto unpaid social labor within patriarchal systems and the gendered history of invisible work. The specific niche of cleanfluencer in which housework is repackaged as lifechanging and the figure of the housewife is overtly refashioned (Casey & Littler, 2022) makes visible this parallel perhaps most explicitly: not only does the influencer produce content (only some of which she is financially compensated for) but also is part of the self-presentation.

The influencer as ideal for platform capitalism, due to their unpaid, aspirational labor, is further supported by the celebratory myth of openness and meritocracy (Duffy, 2017; Glatt, 2022). This is culturally mediated. For instance, the imaginaries of Latin American influencers in the United States align with that of the American dream (Arriagada & Craig, 2024). The assumption that anyone can become a successful influencer perpetuates ideals of entrepreneurialism (Duffy & Hund, 2015), overlooks how structural inequalities influence monetization practices (Christin & Lu, 2023; Glatt, 2022), and flattens localized precarity arising from the political climate and local production contexts (Bidav, 2024), but serves the interests of other key actors in the creator economy.

Monetization as Regulated by Ideal(s)

Scholars have grappled with how critical actors in the influencer ecology, including advertisers and platforms, influence practices. Through influencer marketing, ad-sharing revenue, and regimes of visibility and monetization programs, advertisers and platforms regulate practices and engender dependencies. The reliance that influencers have on other parties to share, monetize, and distribute their content indicates that the formation of the "ideal" influencer is shaped by their needs and interests. This marks a continuation of the role of advertising and other cultural intermediaries in the production of commercial communication (Matthews & Smith Maguire, 2014; Moor, 2008) while representing a reconfiguration of the structural arrangement surrounding the individual influencer rather than organizations.

The integration and dispersal of advertising into and alongside influencer content continues the pattern of media production being beholden to the interests of advertisers. For example, in Borchers' (2023) work on power structures in the influencer industry, he identifies control techniques employed by marketers in their collaborations with influencers. Feedback and evaluation processes foster concertive control as influencers learn to anticipate expectations and adapt their practices, thus internalizing values and objectives from the industry.

The relationship between advertisers and influencers is also mediated by issues of brand safety, suitability, and friendliness, which are formalized by platforms, given their reliance on advertising business models. Scholars have critically examined how specific platform policies pertaining to brand safety (Griffin, 2023) and content (Kopf, 2022) impact what content is deemed monetizable. It gives rise to what Joseph and Bishop (2024) dub "advertising as governance." Looking at YouTube, they argue that the business model of advertising is baked into policies and guidelines, which govern how creators endeavor to build audiences and produce content if they wish to generate income.

Influencer management tools further entrench brand safety into the influencer through algorithmic calculations used by influencer marketing. Bishop (2021a) argues that these metrics map onto long-standing hierarchies of desirability and employability, which are raced, gendered, and classed. Put another way, algorithmic recommender systems on platforms reward influencers who are "brand-safe" through their allocation of visibility. This is further supported by research with influencers from historically marginalized identities or who were producing stigmatized content who

shared understandings and experiences of inconsistent and biased allocation of visibility on platforms (Are & Briggs, 2023; Duffy & Meisner, 2023; Duffy et al., 2021; Glatt, 2022). Glatt's (2023) work considers how this is consequential for marginalized creators. She demonstrates how structural exclusions impact visibility and income-generating opportunities, which contributes to alternative revenue streams through crowdsourcing, and such audience-dependent income generates further risks.

Edwards' (2022) work on influencer retreats illustrates the extent to which the ideal influencer for advertisers and platforms is perpetuated within the industry by intermediaries. Through her analysis of Pangea Dreams, Edwards uncovers the construction of an ideal influencer as young, White, Western, wealthy, and traditionally feminine. This arises from the retreat's rhetoric and the content produced by participants who simultaneously market their own self-brands and secure brand partnerships during the retreat, generating a feedback loop.

This body of literature collectively gestures toward how actors in the influencer ecosystem interpellate an "ideal" influencer. However, while scholars have identified identities, expressions, and types of content that do not fit narrow criteria (White, male, middle-class, heteronormative, brand-friendly), they face increasing obstacles that reinforce and solidify existing structural inequalities. I propose that our understanding of what constitutes the ideal remains limited. At the platform level, the focus on how brand safety mediates opportunities for monetization and, in turn, self-branding practices and content production, indicates the value of sustained examination of how monetization programs shape a normative model of the influencer. This research seeks to extend that understanding through its broader focus. Similarly, not only have influencer coaches not received scholarly attention as part of the burgeoning professionalization of the industry, but given that they perform educative and disciplinary functions similar to influencer retreats, their articulation of the ideal influencer is consequential. Furthermore, there is an implied coherence between different levels of the ecosystem that I aim to explore through my analysis.

Data Collection and Research Design

To examine the formation of the ideal influencer, I analyze two sites of articulation: influencer coaches and platforms. Influencer coaches assist influencers in developing skills, strategies, and careers within the creator economy through courses, workshops, and one-on-one sessions, as well as content shared on platforms. I position influencer coaches as part of the intermediaries that contribute to the organization and professionalization of the influencer economy (see also Abidin & Ots, 2015; Bishop, 2021a; Edwards, 2022; Stoldt et al., 2019) and as influencers who monetize their coaching content through their social media accounts.

A purposive sampling technique was used to collect 70 TikTok videos and Instagram posts from 10 influencer coaches. To identify coaches, I began with the search functions on both platforms using keywords and hashtags in English (influencer coach; content creator tips). I then examined the accounts that produced this content to identify influencers who explicitly identified as coaches or whose business model involved coaching, excluding creators who offered advice in content but did not position this as central to their self-branding or monetization strategies. This resulted in 10 selected coaches from the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada. Inspired by the sampling approaches of Zhao and Abidin (2023) and Civila and Jaramillo-Dent (2022), the selection of videos and posts was informed by a prioritization of narratives and familiarity with content. In this instance, those centered on how to be an influencer and monetize content enable the analysis to explore how the ideal influencer is constructed through the particularities of audio-visual content and platform affordances.

The sample was analyzed using qualitative content analysis, deriving themes from the data through a subjective interpretation of TikTok videos and Instagram posts and a systemic classification process of coding (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Given videos and posts comprise textual elements (captions, hashtags, written overlay text), visual and moving images and audio (voiceover, music), the qualitative content analysis is sensitive toward the multimodality of representation and communication, in which meaning is constructed through relationships between modes. Each post or video was coded to identify narratives of the ideal influencer as a worker and subject and monetization practices and techniques used by the coach to present their advice and construct their identity as a coach. After the close, multimodal reading of individual posts and videos, I identified patterns across the dataset in an iterative process to develop themes focused on what constitutes the ideal influencer, paying attention to how monetization practices were integrated into the conceptualizations and were visible in the production of content itself.

Because of the orientation of influencer coaches to reach aspiring and working influencers in the creator economy coupled with their pursuit of "high visibility" (Abidin, 2020) through hashtagging practices, modes of address and approach to engagement with commenters, the names and screenshots of influencer coaches are included in the article.

I turn to each platforms interface and policy documentation to examine how TikTok and Instagram construct the ideal influencer. A modified version of the technical walk-through method developed by Light et al. (2018) was employed to generate a corpus of data for analyzing how the platforms portray the influencer as an ideal user and guide their use in relation to monetization. I systematically navigated through the registration processes for various account types and everyday use, employing Light et al. (2018) categories of user interface arrangement, functions and features,

textual content and tone, and symbolic representation to orient my observations analytically. I draw upon a larger dataset of platform documentation (Annabell et al., forthcoming) to select 67 documents that regulate influencers on TikTok and Instagram (see Table 1).

I bring together observations regarding interface design and selected extracts from policy documentation to critically examine the construction of the ideal influencer. In this analysis, I developed themes through an iterative process, moving between interface and documentation, and across the platforms to reflect on similarities and differences in their construction of an ideal.

Findings

Coaching Influencers Toward an Ideal

I address influencer coaches across both platforms in the analysis, identifying when platform-specificity is part of their advice and the construction of the influencer. The analysis reveals how the ideal permeates across TikTok and Instagram despite differences in the modes of presentation. First, coaches present the influencer as a strategic actor, in which success and monetization are positioned as a by-product by employing the "right" tactics and practices. Second, the influencer is constructed as a valuable contributor, which, I argue, pushes back against the gendered perception that influencers are inward-focused and shallow. Third, the influencer is implored to embrace their identity as a professional entrepreneur, which explicitly connects intentional practices and sharing with purpose to monetize the "right" way. I then address how coaches communicate this vision of the ideal influencer. I demonstrate how their construction as experts who possess insider knowledge is reinforced by the monetization of their own content and publicizes their coaching business.

Strategic Actor. Influencer coaches construct influencers as strategic actors through the content they share on Instagram and TikTok. By providing guidance and informing audiences on how to be and become an influencer, they position content creation as a strategic performance and the influencer as a worker who develops their skills over time. Unlike merely stumbling into fame and influencing through virality, this production is 'achieved'—to borrow from Marwick's (2013) terminology. Critically, I suggest that the emphasis lies on the strategic nature of practices. The influencer is portrayed as active and empowered (due to their deployment of strategic practices) to achieve success in the "right" way and is urged to pursue influencing intentionally as a career.

Speaking directly to the camera, Tyla provides her take on the need for influencers to "niche down" (see Figure 1), exemplifying how coaches blend generalized advice with specific tactics. She confidently advises her audience to develop content around three to six consistent themes and to narrow down who they are addressing. This speaks to the way influencers should cultivate a self-brand strategically. Identifying themes, or "brand pillars" and "content buckets" as other coaches refer to them, presumes a relationship between content and identity in which the influencer reframes their everyday life, interests, and talents through the lens of what they anticipate will resonate with their audience. Tyla presents the hypothetical scenario of a breakup, described as a "relatable" life experience that could be injected into one of the established content themes while also contributing to the overall cultivation of a "really confident girly" image. The fusion of self-presentation approaches (e.g., being relatable, showing confidence) with specific tactics often based on metrics (e.g., ensuring content relates to one of the identified themes) is emblematic of how coaches articulate their advice and the distinctive way claims are made.

Alice also uses a hypothetical example to structure her response to a comment on niche influencers. She walks us through how she would expand a "niche" on Henry VIII's wives as she reached follower milestones: 10k, 50k, 100k. Like Tyla, Alice directly addresses her audience from a sofa in her home using written text to pinpoint the key takeaways (see Figure 2). Although not contradictory, their different perspectives on how to strategically approach "niches" as an influencer, hints at the multiplicity of theories, advice and "algorithmic gossip" influencers must navigate as the influencer coaching niche grows. The term "niche" also exemplifies the integration of influencer marketing and corporate marketing jargon, further solidifying strategy as central to influencer work.

Coaches produce their own distinctive personal slogans that become part of the strategic speak of influencing. Tess weaves her signature "Being cringe is a side effect of future success" into her videos (see Figure 3), allowing her strategic advice to be deliberately deployed to build her personal brand as a coach. The "original sound" audio elaborating her theory of "embracing cringe" is used in 86 videos (at the time of writing, which indicates how this resonates with audiences to the extent it is repurposed in content.

Forms of labor and self-branding practices discussed by scholars are evident in this advice, indicating an overlap between different spheres of expertise and analysis. The development of parasocial relationships and cultivation of interconnectedness (Abidin, 2015; Duffy & Hund, 2019) underpins strategies for building community and thinking about relatable experiences for your audience; authenticity labor (Abidin, 2016b; Duffy, 2017) underpins being yourself and "embracing the cringe."

Within this articulation of the influencer, monetization is treated as an outcome and often a by-product of enacting these strategies and tactics rather than the sole focus. To return to the examples from Tess, in some of her captions that mobilize the call to embrace being cringe, she uses the money with wings emoji, inferring how success can be understood financially. However, her focus across

Table 1. Overview of Instagram and TikTok Policies That Refer to Monetization and Use of Platform by Influencers.

Platform	Name	Last updated	Jurisdiction	Eligibility criteria	URL
Instagram	Instagram Badges Purchase Terms	No date	Global	Yes	https://help.instagram.com/2616421785238765
Instagram	Instagram Badges Terms—Creator	No date	Global	Yes	https://help.instagram.com/1322213587984073
Instagram	Instagram Branded Content Discovery Feature Terms for Brands	No date	Global	Yes	https://help.instagram.com/488723392994445
Instagram	Instagram Content Monetization Policies	No date	Global	No	https://help.instagram.com/2635536099905516
Instagram	Instagram Creator Incentive Terms	No date	Global	Yes	https://help.instagram.com/383069119533156
Instagram	Instagram Gifts Creator Terms	No date	Global	Yes	https://help.instagram.com/621360509478751
Instagram	Instagram Partner Monetization Policies	No date	Global	Yes	https://help.instagram.com/512371932629820
Instagram	Instagram partnership ad specifications for creators	No date	Global	No	https://help.instagram.com/1022082264667994
Instagram	Instagram Promotion Guidelines	No date	Global	No	https://help.instagram.com/179379842258600
Instagram	Instagram Subscription Creator Terms of Use	6 March 2024	Global	Yes	https://help.instagram.com/428170012083491
Instagram	Instagram Subscription Fan Terms of Use	No date	Global	Yes	https://www.facebook.com/help/instagram/243491874278176
Instagram	Instagram Terms of Use	12 January 2024	EU	No	https://help.instagram.com/581066165581870
Instagram	Meta Advertising Standards	No date	Global	No	https://transparency.fb.com/policies/ad-standards/
Instagram	Meta Branded Content Policy	No date	Global	No	https://www.facebook.com/business/help/221149188908254
Instagram	Meta Privacy Policy	3 November 2023	Global	No	https://privacycenter.instagram.com/policy
TikTok	TikTok Branded Content Policy	1 August 2023	Global	No	https://www.tiktok.com/legal/page/global/bc-policy/en
TikTok	TikTok Branded Content Policy Country Specific Requirements	No date	Regulations divided into regions	No	https://ads.tiktok.com/help/article/branded-content-policy-country-specific-requirements?lang=en
TikTok	TikTok Business Products Data Jurisdiction Specific Terms	1 January 2023	Global with references to US EEA,UK, BR, JP	No	https://ads.tiktok.com/i18n/official/policy/jurisdiction-specific-terms
TikTok	TikTok Business Products Data Terms	23 September 2021	Global	No	https://ads.tiktok.com/i18n/official/policy/business-products-terms
TikTok	TikTok Business Terms of Service	1 August 2023	EEA, UK, CH	No	https://www.tiktok.com/legal/page/global/business-terms-eea/en
TikTok	TikTok Coins Policy	1 June 2022	EEA, UK, CH	Yes	https://www.tiktok.com/legal/page/global/coin-policy-eea/en
TikTok	TikTok Commercial Music Library Terms	No date	Global	No	https://www.tiktok.com/legal/page/global/commercial-music-library-user-terms/en
TikTok	TikTok Community Guidelines	1 March 2023	Global	No	https://www.tiktok.com/community-guidelines/en/
TikTok	TikTok Creativity Program Beta Terms	10 March 2023	Eligible countries [BR, FR, DE, JP, KR, UK, US]	Yes	https://www.tiktok.com/legal/page/global/tiktok-creativity-program-beta-terms-br/en
TikTok	TikTok Creator Fund Terms	No date	US [IT, FR, ES, DE, UK]	Yes	https://www.tiktok.com/legal/page/global/tiktok-creator-fund-terms/en
TikTok	TikTok Creator Marketplace Agreement for Services in Australia	No date	AU	Yes	https://creatormarketplace.tiktok.com/protocol/transaction/AU
TikTok	TikTok Creator Marketplace Agreement for Services in Canada	No date	CA	Yes	https://creatormarketplace.tiktok.com/protocol/transaction/CA
TikTok	TikTok Creator Marketplace Agreement for Services in the US	No date	US	Yes	https://creatormarketplace.tiktok.com/protocol/transaction/GB
TikTok	TikTok Creator Marketplace Agreement for Services in UK, Europe and Israel	1 March 2022	EEA, UK, CH, IL	Yes	https://creatormarketplace.tiktok.com/protocol/transaction/US
TikTok	TikTok Creator Marketplace Brand Code of Conduct	No date	US	Yes	https://creatormarketplace.tiktok.com/protocol/terms/PH
TikTok	TikTok Creator Marketplace Brand Terms of Use (EEA UK CH)	1 January 2023	EEA, UK, CH	Yes	https://www.tiktok.com/falcon/tcm/h5/tcm_term/?file=https://lf16-tiktok-creator-market.ibytedtos.com/obj/tiktok-creator-market-us/ad/star_fe_i18n_h5/pdf_files/transactions/cancel_policy/20220527/UK.pdf

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

Platform	Name	Last updated	Jurisdiction	Eligibility criteria	URL
TikTok	TikTok Creator Marketplace Cancelation Policy	1 May 2022	Global	Yes	https://creatormarketplace.tiktok.com/protocol/conduct/US
TikTok	TikTok Creator Marketplace Creator Terms and Conditions	26 May 2022	EEA, UK, CH, IL	Yes	Only accessible through app
TikTok	TikTok Creator Marketplace Privacy Policy—Brands and Talent Managers	1 January 2023	AU, CA, FR, DE, IT, MY, PH, SG, ES, CH, UK, US	Yes	https://creatormarketplace.tiktok.com/protocol/privacy/PH
TikTok	TikTok Creator Marketplace Starter Pack Cancelation Policy—UK creator side	No date	UK	Yes	https://www.tiktok.com/falcon/tcm/h5/tcm_term/?file=https://sf16-sg.tiktokcdn.com/obj/eden-sg/u81p_lm_yhaz_kh/ljhwZthlaukjlkulzlp/Static/SP/Creator/SP_Cancellation_Creator_GB.pdf
TikTok	TikTok Creator Marketplace Terms of Service (Other Regions)	1 January 2023	Not EEA, UK, CH, US, CA	Yes	https://creatormarketplace.tiktok.com/protocol/terms/SG
TikTok	TikTok Creator Marketplace Terms of Service (US and Canada)	1 January 2023	CA, US	Yes	https://creatormarketplace.tiktok.com/protocol/terms/US
TikTok	TikTok Effect Creator Rewards Terms (EU)	11 October 2023	EEA, UK, CH	Yes	https://sf16-va.tiktokcdn.com/obj/eden-va2/nuvzeh7ullssvj/effect_creator_rewards/EU_English_Effect_Creator_Rewards_2.0_Terms.pdf
TikTok	TikTok Effect Creator Rewards Terms (Non-EU)	11 October 2023	Eligible countries not EEA/ UK/ CH [AU, BR, CA, ID, JP, KR, MY, PH, AE, US, VN]	Yes	https://sf16-va.tiktokcdn.com/obj/eden-va2/nuvzeh7ullssvj/effect_creator_rewards/Non-EU_English_Effect_Creator_Rewards_2.0_Terms.pdf
TikTok	TikTok Effects Guidelines	No date	Global	No	https://effecthouse.tiktok.com/learn/guides/general/effect-guidelines
TikTok	TikTok Effects Terms of Service	No date	Global	Yes	https://effecthouse.tiktok.com/learn/guides/general/terms-of-service
TikTok	TikTok Exclusive Content Access Terms	1 June 2023	Eligible countries	Yes	https://www.tiktok.com/legal/page/eea/tiktok-series-sale-terms/en
TikTok	TikTok Intellectual Property Policy	7 June 2021	Global	No	https://www.tiktok.com/legal/page/global/copyright-policy/en
TikTok	TikTok LIVE Subscription Exclusive Content Creator Terms	1 August 2023	Eligible countries	Yes	Only accessible through app
TikTok	TikTok LIVE Subscription Terms	1 May 2022	Global	Yes	Only accessible through app
TikTok	TikTok Music Terms	1 August 2023	Global	No	https://www.tiktok.com/legal/page/global/music-terms-eea/en
TikTok	TikTok Political Ads Policy[9]	No date	Global	No	https://support.tiktok.com/en/using-tiktok/growing-your-audience/government-politician-and-political-party-accounts
TikTok	TikTok Privacy Policy (EEA UK CH)	19 November 2023	EEA, UK, CH	No	https://www.tiktok.com/legal/page/eea/privacy-policy/en#privacy-row
TikTok	TikTok Promote Terms	22 December 2022	Global	No	Only accessible through app
TikTok	TikTok Rewards Policy	1 June 2022	EEA, UK, CH	No	https://www.tiktok.com/legal/page/global/rewards-policy-eea/en
TikTok	TikTok Rewards Terms and Conditions	No date	Global with references to EG, JP, ES, PT, BR, ID, KR	No	https://www.tiktok.com/tiktok-rewards/terms-conditions
TikTok	TikTok Series Creator Terms	1 November 2022	Global with references to BR, KR	Yes	https://www.tiktok.com/legal/page/row/tiktok-series-creator-terms/en
TikTok	TikTok Shop Partner Center Terms of Service	30 October 2023	Global with references to CN, Southeast Asia, UK, US	Yes	https://partner.tiktokshop.com/doc/page/63fd7444715d622a338c508e
TikTok	TikTok Shop Streamer Creator Terms of Use	1 March 2023	Global with references to UK, Southeast Asia	Yes	https://shop.tiktok.com/streamer/agreement/view?id=b86de487-f2b4-4480-8f16-751ae04a4dad

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

Platform	Name	Last updated	Jurisdiction	Eligibility criteria	URL
TikTok	TikTok Shop UK Affiliate Marketing Guidelines	9 August 2023	UK	Yes	https://seller-sg.tiktok.com/university/essay?knowledge_id=2874121260189441&role=1&identity=1
TikTok	TikTok Shop UK Content Guidelines	4 August 2023	UK	Yes	https://seller-uk.tiktok.com/university/essay?knowledge_id=8913678280345345&identity=1
TikTok	TikTok Shop UK Merchant Terms of Service	14 September 2023	UK	Yes	https://seller-uk.tiktok.com/university/article/agreement?knowledge_id=10001431&identity=1
TikTok	TikTok Shop UK Privacy Policy	18 January 2023	UK	Yes	https://seller-uk.tiktok.com/university/article/agreement?knowledge_id=10001432&identity=1
TikTok	TikTok Shop US Content Policy	21 September 2023	US	Yes	https://seller-us.tiktok.com/university/essay?knowledge_id=6837891779151617&from=policy&role=1&identity=1
TikTok	TikTok Shop US Creator Performance Evaluation Policy	13 September 2023	US	Yes	https://seller-us.tiktok.com/university/essay?knowledge_id=6837869503317761&role=1&identity=1
TikTok	TikTok Shop US Creator Terms of Use	29 December 2022	US	Yes	https://lf3-cdn-tos.draftstatic.com/obj/ies-hotsoon-draft/magellan_ecommerce/2e1bc607-edf1-4d2a-b42c-9dff68e83b61.html
TikTok	TikTok Shop US Intellectual Property Policy	21 August 2023	US	Yes	https://seller-us.tiktok.com/university/essay?knowledge_id=6837901778306818&from=policy&role=1&identity=1
TikTok	TikTok Shop US Seller Terms of Service	18 July 2023	US	Yes	https://seller-us.tiktok.com/university/article/agreement?knowledge_id=10013296&identity=1
TikTok	TikTok Terms of Service (EEA UK CH)	1 August 2023	EEA, UK, CH	No	https://www.tiktok.com/legal/page/eea/terms-of-service/en
TikTok	TikTok Tips Terms and Conditions	No date	Eligible countries [US, UK, FR, DE, IT, ES]	Yes	https://www.tiktok.com/legal/page/global/tip-terms/en
TikTok	TikTok Virtual Items Policy (EEA UK CH)[11]	1 June 2022	EEA, UK, CH	No	https://www.tiktok.com/legal/page/eea/virtual-items/en
TikTok	TikTok Virtual Items Policy (Other Regions)	1 October 2022	Not EEA, UK, CH	No	https://www.tiktok.com/legal/page/row/virtual-items/en

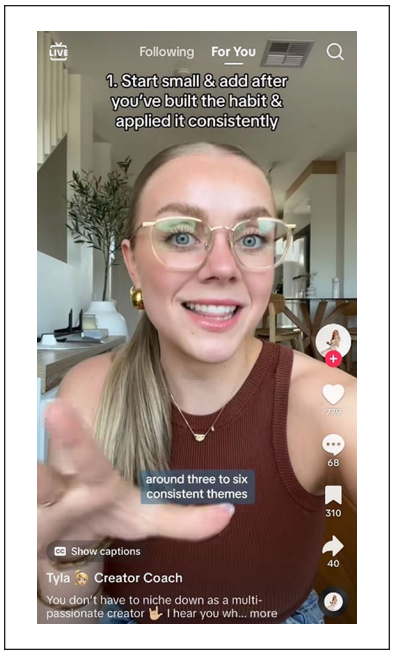

Figure 1. Still of @stylasocials' (Tyla Creator Coach) TikTok video (shared 11 October 2023) on how to approach "niching down" in which overlay text is used to highlight key takeaways.

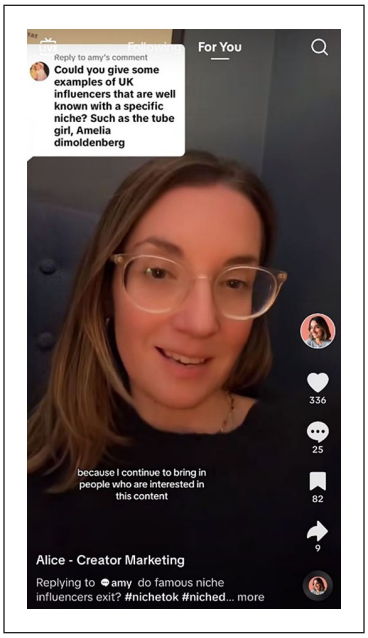

Figure 2. Still of @aliceisgratified's (Alice—Creator Marketing) TikTok reply video to a comment on niche influencers, shared 5 March 2024.

these videos rests on reframing cringe. Lo more explicitly articulates this logic. In one of her videos on how to "build a personal brand and infuse your lifestyle content," again adopting the format of filming herself speaking assertively to the camera and using overlayed written text, she frames this as "groundwork" to create a business, "do TikTok shop and marketing this and doing that" because "people are going to buy into you first."

The ideal influencer, therefore, is positioned as a worker who deliberately engages in labor practices in pursuit of their career. While becoming and being an influencer is not portrayed as an effortless endeavor, the barriers to entry and success are limited to possessing the "right" knowledge and skills. The collective sharing of such advice regarding strategy and tactics equips aspiring influencers. I argue that this understanding nuances the myth that "anyone can become an influencer" but perpetuates the rhetoric of self-improvement and internalization of risk (Duffy, 2017; Glatt, 2022), obscuring structural and material conditions.

Valuable Contributor. Another core characteristic of influencers, as presented by coaches, is their orientation toward community. Influencers are encouraged to share with purpose, which requires identifying their underlying "why" that is expected to underpin the "what" of creating and sharing content as an influencer. This is articulated by coaches across TikTok and Instagram, indicating how the influencer, as a valuable contributor, transcends platform cultures and vernaculars. However, it is expressed differently as the self-brand of the coach emerges through this articulation. For Tess, there is a postfeminist, entrepreneurial framing ("make it about the audience, girlie"), so "your content solves people's problems," compared with Alice's educational emphasis through the development of a framework ("you, we, me") and Angela's direct, practical advice ("shift your focus from numbers to real human connections"). To achieve these directives, some coaches implore the influencer to look beyond themselves to the needs of their audience and to be outward-focused. Others suggest that the starting point is turning inwards, understanding the self better to build community.

There is a shared belief that monetization cannot be the primary purpose for creating content and becoming an influencer. This is presented as shallow for the audience to buy into (not commercially viable) but also undesirable for the influencer as a person. As Julia puts it, "people are sick of being sold to" but "once you establish that community and that connection with your audience the added bonus is that they want to buy from you." The position of monetization as a by-product of strategic performance is reinforced here, where purchasing becomes an expression of trust. Rather than only focusing on the advertising value of the audience for the influencer, there is a focus on how the influencer offers their audience value. In one of Alice's series, Roast My Followers, she audits creators who have voluntarily put themselves forward. On this occasion, she opens with the bold statement "your content is selfish," before taking us through how the trip to Paris or digital detox videos could have been improved, leading to her generalizable advice to "have value in there. Something of education. Something of entertainment. Something of emotion."

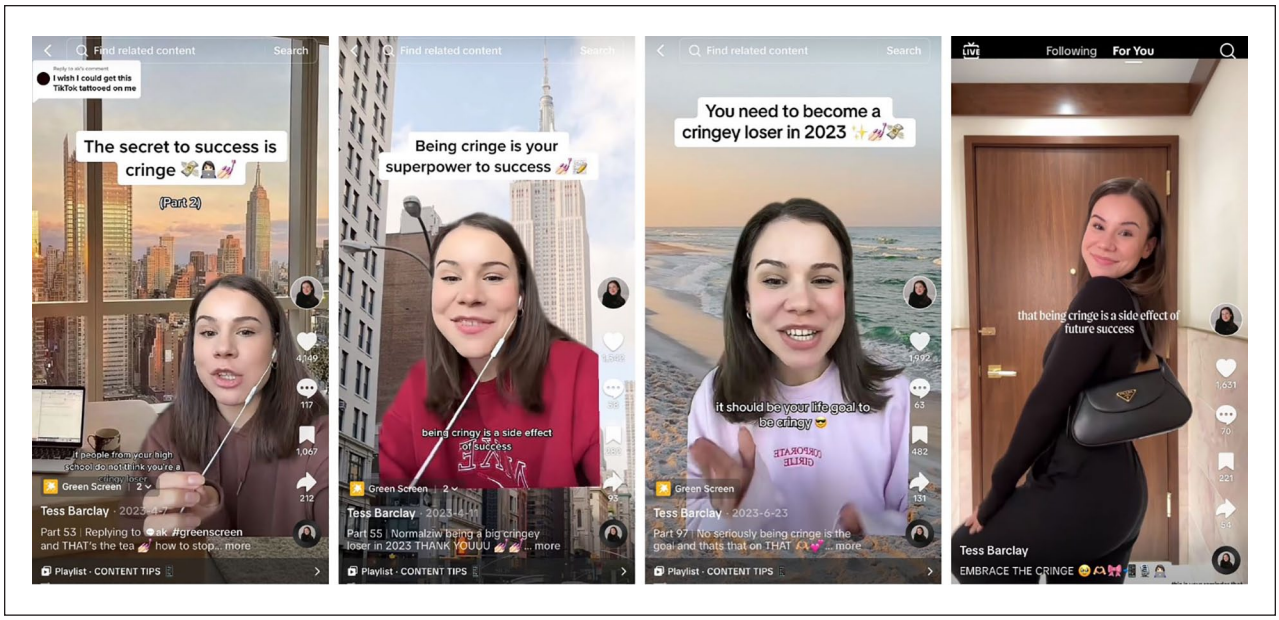

Figure 3. Stills of a selection of @tessbarclay's TikTok videos that include her signature slogan on embracing cringe.

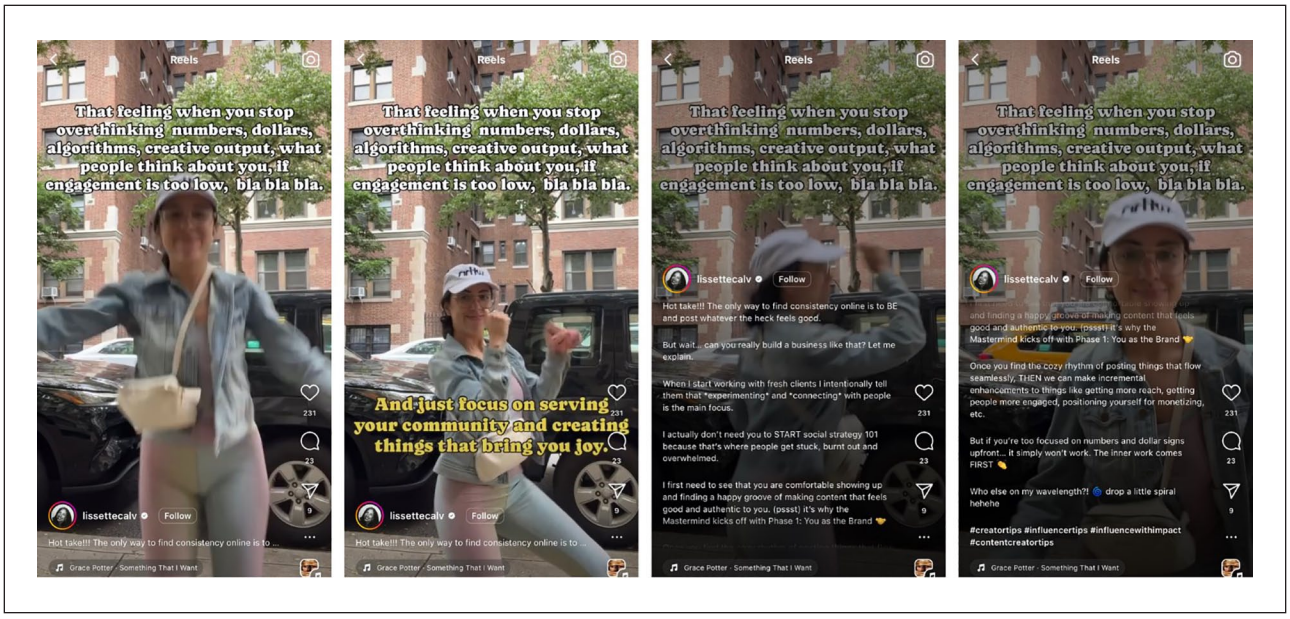

Figure 4. Stills from @lissettecalv's Instagram reel (shared 8 February 2024) in which her advice on how to be an influencer is expanded upon in the caption.

Alongside developing content that holds value for others, influencers must recognize their own worth. In other words, an influencer's performance as a valuable contributor relies on cultivating self-worth. Coaches create content addressing theories of mindset and self-belief that permeate the professional identity and work of influencing. This also forms part of how the measurement of value is discussed. While influencers utilize metrics as part of their role as strategic actors, they are urged to avoid becoming overly fixated on these metrics. They should neither base their decisions on metrics nor view them as proof of their self-worth. In one of Lissette's Instagram reels (see Figure 4), where she dances in the street, she has overlaid the text "that feeling when you stop overthinking numbers, dollars . . . , " which is followed a few seconds later by the accompanying text "and just focus on serving your community and creating things that bring joy." The upbeat, positively charged message continues in the caption, where the simple narrative arc is elaborated to suggest that increased engagement and monetization will ultimately follow. Lissette's reel also exemplifies how captions on Instagram serve as an

important communication space, often expanding on points integrated into the image, video, or carousels, which differs from TikTok captions, where coaches tend to summarize the key points explored in the video.

The ideal influencer embodies motivations and beliefs that resonate with cultural and creative workers driven by passion, where work is conflated with identity (Gill & Pratt, 2008; Neff et al., 2005), as evidenced by the anticipated relationship with metrics. Critically, the call to "do what you love" and the aspiration for remuneration (Duffy, 2017) are mediated by the "right" motivation that serves their community's interests. This reconfiguration does not exclude monetization practices from the influencer identity; however, it insists that wealth is neither the aim nor the driving force, which I suggest is a response to public perceptions of influencers as overpaid, money-hungry, and self-indulgent.

Professional Entrepreneur. While coaches encourage influencers to focus on community purposes and ensure they create valuable content, they also utilize the language of entrepreneurship and business. Coaches present the ideal influencer as someone who earns revenue by assisting their audience rather than selling to them. This approach softens the commercial aspect of the influencer identity. However, by also advocating for the influencer as entrepreneur and building a business, it pushes back against the gendered critique of the industry as non-work. Tess consistently refers to audiences as "entrepreneur girlies," which is identified in one TikTok as one of the identities that "you want to become," calling for her (imagined) audience of influencers to "give yourself permission to step into who you want to become." Tess is not alone in espousing postfeminist rhetoric (Gill, 2017) that gestures toward the figure of the "girlboss" (Chen & Zeng, 2024; Lukan & Appleton, 2024) and interpellates young women as influencers. Influencers are coached toward what Lukan and Appleton (2024) refer to as the girlboss sexual contract, wherein the monetization of the self and business ownership is portrayed as providing purpose, enhancing self-esteem, and securing financial stability. The thread of confident empowerment and feminized entrepreneurship that permeates much of the influencer coach content thus perpetuates postfeminist sensibility (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2017), even when the influencer subject is not explicitly gendered as "girlie," as Tess is.

Coaches offer advice concerning how to monetize and the different strands of income. For example, "5 ways to start making money" appears as overlay text in a video of a smiling Millie filming herself with her front camera as she swivels on her chair around the office. The caption of the Instagram reel expands on each monetization type: affiliate marketing, creating a digital product, offering a service, platform monetization and coaching. Tess also produces content that addresses the diversity of revenue streams along with specific, practical steps for navigating one form of monetization. She presents rate cards through the green screen feature to discuss pricing for brand deals. As part of her advice to include examples of previous partnerships, she acknowledges that this may not always be feasible. Her suggestion to highlight how brands can be incorporated into content and "aspirational labour" to create a portfolio evidencing brand suitability reinforces a commercial focus. By framing this as part of her "mission to help you build the content creation business and brand of your dreams," it aligns with the strategic identity and professionalism required of an influencer. Furthermore, her breakdown of add-on rates in influencer marketing also serves to upskill influencers, equipping them to navigate with other businesses and not "gatekeep" financial knowledge.

The construction of an influencer as a professional entrepreneur emerges from such "upskilling" content. Across the dataset, topics include invoicing, taxes, late payments, and legal compliance, which are positioned as part of the influencer's worker identity and skillset. Central to Alice's brand identity, is her focus on disclosure requirements and the obligation that influencers must follow the (legal) rules when producing branded content. One of her series involves calling out well-known influencers who do not disclose their branded content. Using the green screen to display screenshots, she unpacks why she suspects a commercial relationship between the influencer and the brand, underscoring how the lack of disclosure is misleading. Alice's critique regulates the identified influencer as falling outside of a normative framework of professionalism that she constructs through her discussions of disclosure and legal compliance.

Part of the construction of the ideal influencer is an orientation toward financial gain, which, although not the central goal as previously discussed, is embraced as part of the worker identity. The ideal influencer is a professional because of their monetization for the "right" reasons and their skilful, strategic performances that combine their commercial endeavors with their authenticity, relatability, and community cultivation. This smooths out any tensions and contradictions from the construction of the ideal, unlike the lived experiences of influencers (Arriagada & Bishop, 2021) and refashions the subsumption of subjectivity to economic value (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2015) by integrating commercial interests into the conceptualization of the influencer. The emphasis on the professional behavior and by extension worker-identities of influencers by coaches also speaks to their vested interests and active contributions to such development.

Coaches as Invested Experts. Influencer coaches present themselves as experts in the influencer industry. To do this, they demonstrate their own success as influencers, drawing on personal experiences and displaying rate rates and screenshots from monetization programs to engender credibility. Monetization traces in their content through "paid partnerships" (see Figure 5) and affiliate marketing, for example, and the external links included in their bios and

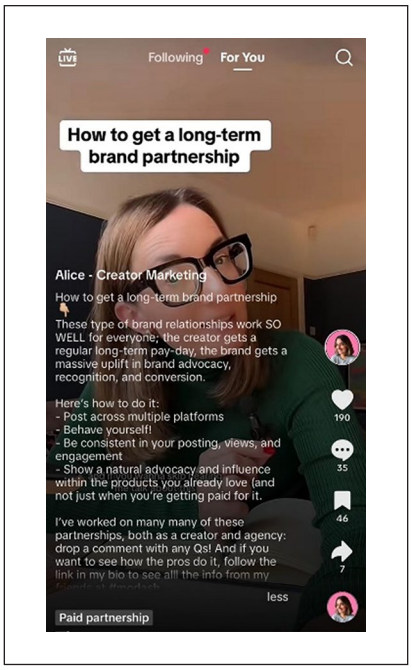

Figure 5. Still from @aliceisgratified's TikTok video (shared 9 February 2024) on long-term brand deals, which is branded content as indicated by the paid partnership tag.

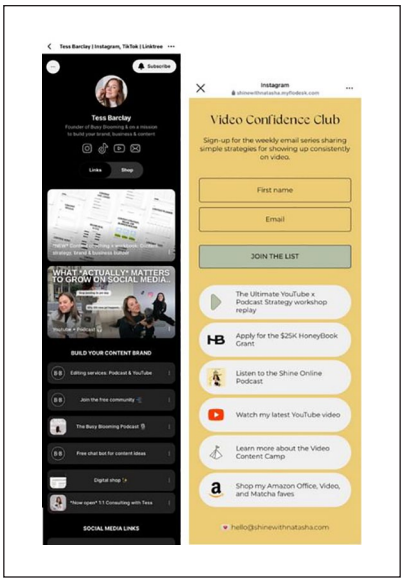

Figure 6. Screenshot of linktrees of @shinewithnatasha and @tessbarclay which provide an overview of their portfolio of revenue streams, social media profiles, and online activities.

linktrees serve as visible reminders of their financial success (see Figure 6), and thereby expertise in translating their influencer identity into economic gain. In addition, coaches assert their credibility by listing their credentials (such as the number of years they have worked in the industry or influencers they have coached) and integrating success stories from clients they have worked with.

The value of their expertise is, at times, highlighted through a tendency to critique other advice circulating on platforms and debunking commonly held theories of content creation. For example, while sipping on a smoothie, Julia unpacks three pieces of "absurd advice" including copying and pasting captions from the notes app, which negatively impacts engagement (see Figure 7). She closes by displaying an image of her "social media posting cadence" from her school, thus reminding her audience of her knowledge as an expert and her business. Julie, thus, exemplifies how coaches weave the promotion of their own services and business into their content, indicating the blurriness between their "organic" advice and self-promotion.

Coaches blend the legitimization of their expertise and professionalism with friendliness and relatability. Many coaches organize their "advice," "tips," and "'steps" into numbered items. This "knowledge" for success is positioned as insider information due to their credibility in the industry, which has often been gatekept or obscured. At times, it may be labeled as "secrets," with adverbs like "actually" used to emphasize how the coach provides access to the influencer world that would otherwise be unobtainable or out of reach. This, for some, pairs nicely with a postfeminist friendliness and the infusion of a gendered authenticity and ordinariness into their professional identity, exemplified in videos where they share advice while GWRM. An assertive and authoritative tone, often directly addressing what "you should" do and what outcomes "you will" see, allows the open and accessible content to be imbued with confidence. Collectively, these styles and techniques of self-presentation contribute to the construction of the influencer identity as open to all and achievable, yet they require strategy and tactics as part of their justification for coaching content and their underlying business models. In other words, it is not only that coaches mediate in the creator economy, akin to research examining cultural intermediaries (see Matthews & Smith Maguire, 2014; Siciliano, 2023), but their content also makes visible and explicit their identity and role as intermediaries.

Platformization of the Ideal Influencer

This section shifts to analyzing how TikTok and Instagram construct the influencer as embodying the "ideal." First, I demonstrate how the influencer is positioned as a skilled creator. This acknowledges specialist skills while remaining distanced from entrepreneurialism and business purposes. Second, I unpack how the influencer is portrayed as authentically engaging, which I argue reflects an understanding of what constitutes "good" content. Third, I address how both platforms present the influencer as responsibly compliant, consequently shifting responsibility onto influencers. I argue that the governance of practices and monetization possibilities

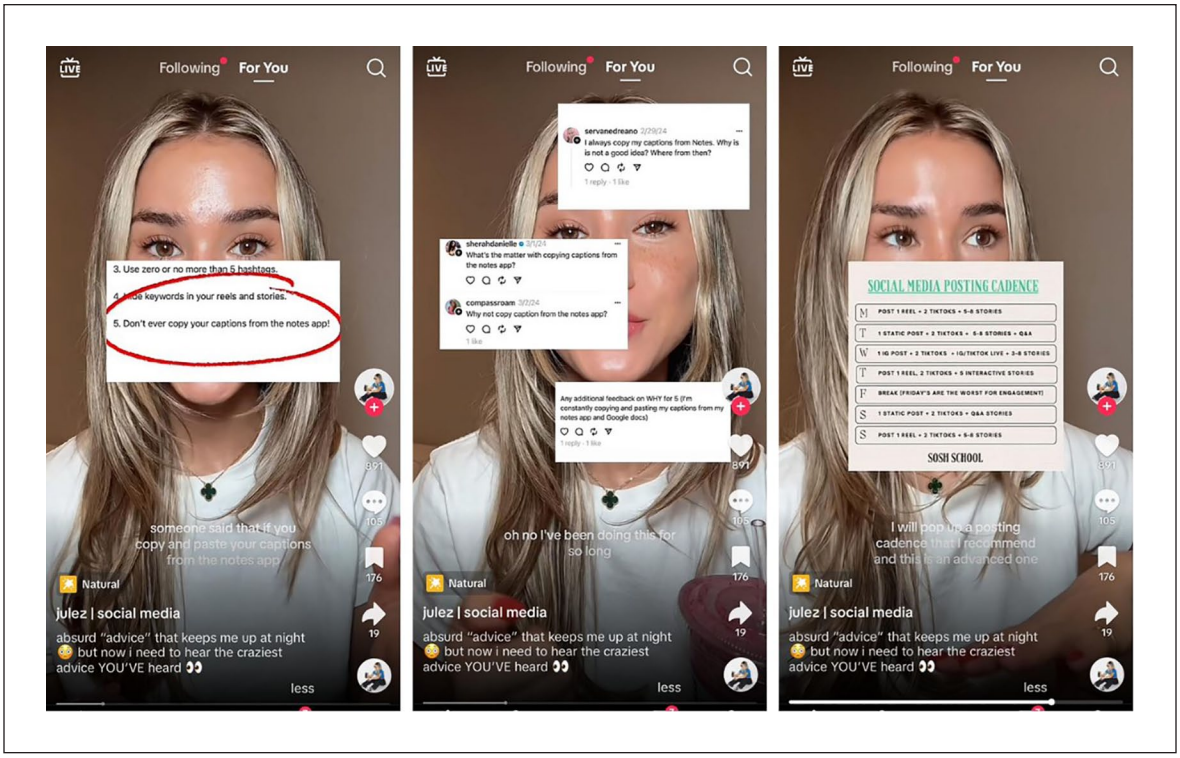

Figure 7. Stills of @juliabroome's (Julez social media) TikTok video (shared 14 March 2024) debunking influencer advice in which screenshots of "absurd" advice are displayed as evidence and her "social media posting cadence" card is presented as solution.

shape the influencer and its intended use of the platform in ways that become ideal for the platform.

Skilful Creator. The first finding concerns the tension between the influencer as a passionate amateur and a professional worker. I argue that an understanding of the influencer as a skilful creator exists at the intersection with each platform steering the influencer toward analytics and (a hierarchy) of monetization possibilities while repudiating the influencer as a platform worker and minimizing economic incentives for pursuing content creation.

On TikTok, influencers are required to use a personal account rather than a business to access monetization programs and features. TikTok's Terms of Service clarify that the Business Terms apply to the use of the platform for "purposes within your trade, business, craft or profession," but within these terms, there is an assumption that the influencer is a consumer. The circumstance in which a creator may not be a "consumer" and instead is acting within their "trade, business, craft or profession" as a trader is not addressed. Furthermore, this conflation of influencers with "consumers" obfuscates their potential legal qualification in the European Union as a trader (Goanta & Ranchordás, 2020) and critically undermines their professional identity.

The distancing of the influencer from a professional identity is also evident in the three ways monetization is framed in documentation. Monetization is positioned as (1) an expression of support and appreciation from users to influencers, (2) a reward from the platform recognizing "good" content, which is measured through popularity and assumed to equate to quality, and (3) payment in a few instances where eligibility determines access to the programs. Unifying these different frames, I propose, is the expectation that income from content creation is viewed as a "bonus" for a side hustle or passion project due to its instability. This is echoed through TikTok's policies that assert declaratively the relationship between platform and influencer is not that of worker–employee, but of independent contractors. While this removes any ambiguity, it is distinctive in how the legal language and formal tone of such clauses differ from the descriptive language used to refer to payment.

However, TikTok and Instagram also position the influencer as a skilled specialist within the social media economy. Instagram explicitly recognizes the professional identity of influencers as indicated by their terminology in the process of converting a personal account into a creator account, although this remains separate from business and is infused with a whimsical, fun aesthetic. The influencer has access to a "professional dashboard" where they can view analytics, labeled "insights," pertaining to the number of accounts reached, engaged, and followers. TikTok also offers access to "creator tools," which display metrics, including post views, likes, and follower counts. The design of these interfaces reveals platform values about influencers. Influencers are

expected to monitor their engagement and reach. As part of these tools, monetization is also made visible, implying a connection between metrics and payment, which is quantified through some programs. Influencers are steered to diversify their income through participation in programs and cued to see their eligibility, monetization status and progress through Instagram's "monetisation activity" and "payouts" and TikTok's "estimated rewards."

The influencer is transformed into an ideal platform user rather than a worker through their approach to the governance of monetization. Thus, the platforms serve as spaces of "work," yet the influencer does not assume the role of a "worker." Although, as Bishop (2021b) has noted, the use of the term "creator" by platforms is a discursive strategy that plays on the creative identities of influencers while downplaying their commercial orientation, I suggest that TikTok and Instagram, nevertheless, incorporate monetization into their construction. The connotations of "creator" also discursively elevate the influencer above the ordinary "user," while suggesting that their cultural production transcends "work" and, accordingly, the identity of "worker." The interface acknowledges and facilitates industry-specific skilled labor and highlights "monetisation" and "payment," contributing to the strategic positioning of value. But, payments are ultimately framed as opportunities and possibilities rather than stable income streams, reflecting the precarity in the industry (Duffy et al., 2021; Glatt, 2023).

Authentically Engaging. Second, TikTok and Instagram present the influencer as authentically engaging. Metrics emerge through interface and documentation as the way to understand and assess how "engaging" an influencer is. Within the tiered governance (Caplan & Gillespie, 2020) of both platforms' monetization types, some revenue streams are only open to influencers based on eligibility criteria. Influencers as holding "influence" is implied through minimum levels of follower count and reach articulated. For instance, a minimum of 500 followers is needed for Instagram Gifts, 1,000 followers for TikTok Gifts, 10,000 for Instagram Badges and Subscriptions, 10,000 followers and 1,000 video views for TikTok Creativity Marketplace, 10,000 followers and 1,000,000 total video views for TikTok Creativity Program Beta and Creativity Fund, and 100,000 followers for TikTok Tips. Within their policies, TikTok and Instagram are inconsistent regarding their inclusion of defined metrics; at times, the documentation directs influencers to requirements on webpages or the app instead of outlining the eligibility criteria in detail.

The "authenticity" of this engagement is constructed through TikTok's references to "authentic followers" and "authentic views," as well as Instagram's concept of "engagement bait," identified as a prohibitive behavior in monetization policies. In other words, influencers must achieve popularity and reach without artificially inflating their metrics or incentivising engagement. The mobilization of authenticity situates the performance of authenticity through self-presentation (Abidin, 2016b; Banet-Weiser, 2012; Duffy, 2017) within the discussion of the "right" type of engagement. Platforms, through their policies, thus propose the "ideal" motivations for influencers. When influencers attempt to foster engagement and boost metrics "artificially," they are positioned as deceptive and not true to the "organic" nature of relationship-building. In doing so, the distinction between an influencer as a professional worker and a positive, upbeat creator not seeking to monetize is once again blurred.

I argue that the influencer as "authentically engaging" is evident not only in the display of "ideal metrics" but also in the content assessed as "authentically engaging." Specifically, the community guidelines establish what falls outside the boundaries of the platform for all users, including influencers, and different monetization policies further regulate what content can be shared and monetized through programs. This ranges from illegal content, such as hate speech or violence, to what is deemed inappropriate for civic purposes, such as misinformation and false news, as well as content that contradicts platform values, such as sexual content or political messaging. The separation of political and commercial elements is emphasized through TikTok's branded content policy, which prohibits the integration of political messaging into commercial content, and prevents politicians from accessing monetization features. Here, we observe the concept of brand safety emerge (Griffin, 2023). The focus on commercial suitability is most clearly articulated through TikTok Creator Marketplace documentation, which requires influencer content to align with advertisers. I argue that these stipulations regarding content characteristics reveal assumptions about the identity and self-presentation of the "ideal" influencer, as this is utilized to calculate metrics and serves as a representation of authentic engagement.

Responsibly Compliant. The third theme I identify is how platforms assert that influencers must be compliant and fulfill their obligations across different forms of regulation. Private governance is the most visible regulatory framework across both platforms' policies and interfaces. TikTok and Instagram require influencers to be in good standing with platform policies to use the platform in general and meet the eligibility criteria of monetization programs and features. The latter is exemplified by the landing page for TikTok gifts, where eligibility is regulated by compliance with Community Guidelines, Terms of Service, Privacy Policy, and Rewards Policy (see Figure 8). The documents in bold are hyperlinks facilitating access to the rules and requirements. The identification and hyperlinking in the interface and policies hint at but do not constitute the range of rules and policies that regulate influencers.

Monitoring compliance through "safety moderation" is indicated by the second item in the checklist, although it is

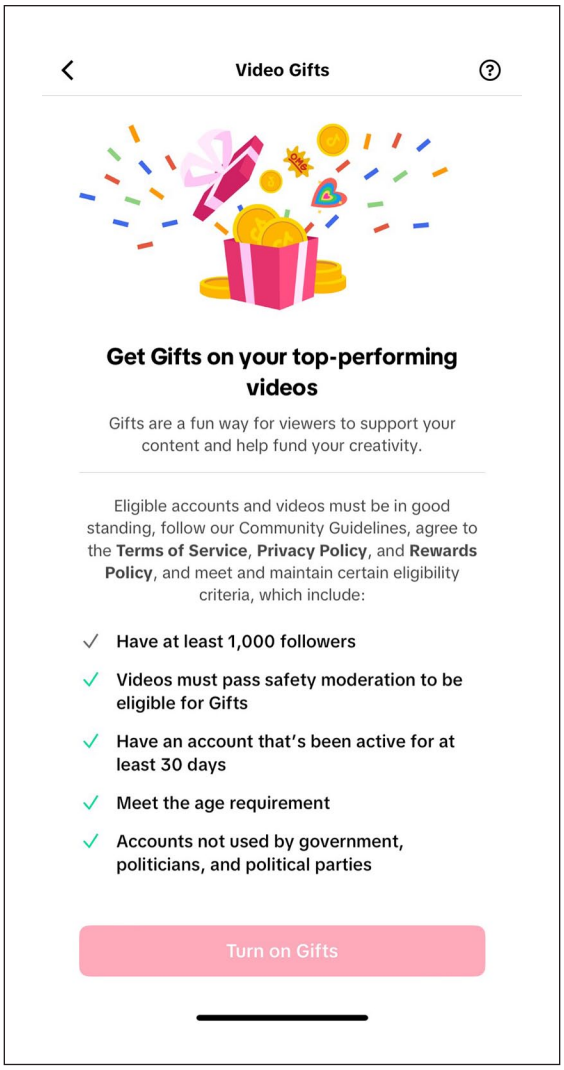

Figure 8. Landing page of video gifts on TikTok displaying eligibility criteria for TikTok Gifts.

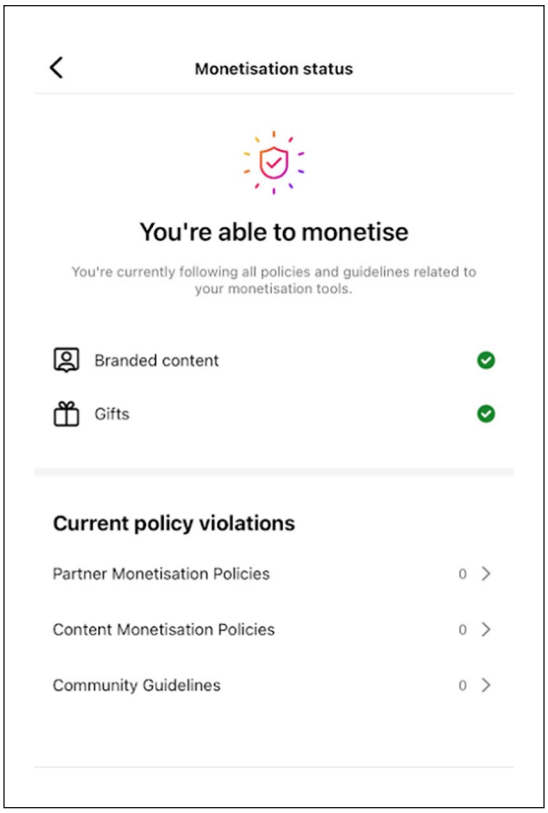

Figure 9. Landing page of monetization status on Instagram displaying eligibility for different monetization tools and policy violations.

less clear in documentation whether the moderation is restricted to violations of Community Guidelines. On Instagram, influencers can access violations of policies specific to monetization in greater depth through the monetization status page, with green ticks also being used to affirm compliance (see Figure 9) visibly.

Within documentation, platforms assign responsibility to comply with legal duties to the influencer. The platform positions itself as helping but not informing influencers about what this might entail, particularly regarding advertising disclosure, which is facilitated through branded content tools. It is mandatory on TikTok and Instagram to use their tools to disclose, indicating how governance by platforms incorporates the governance of platforms (Annabell et al., 2024). Not only is this outlined in the branded content policies, but the obligation to disclose commercial content is also flagged in Instagram's Terms of Use, TikTok's Terms of Service, and TikTok Community Guidelines. Instagram allows influencers to set a minimum age, minimum age by country, and location restrictions for their branded content to prevent violations of policies. Although TikTok similarly stipulates that branded content for specific products or services needs to be aged-gated and country-restricted, only Instagram facilitates this.

The reluctance to view the practices of the influencer as worthy of payment and minimize their professional identity discussed earlier is reconfigured by assigning responsibility to the influencer to comply with their duties, indicating how they are not merely amateurs or ordinary users. The private governance of platforms means they hold the power to determine what is "authentically engaging" and the extent to which platform features and tools will facilitate the labor practices of influencers, which means the ideal influencer is constructed to align with the business models of the platform.

Conclusion

In keeping with the scholarly critique of inequalities in the creator economy (Bishop, 2021a; Christin & Lu, 2023; Duffy et al., 2021; Duffy & Meisner, 2023; Glatt, 2022, 2023), this article has explored how ideals animate construction(s) of

the influencer, which challenges rhetoric that positions the worker–subject as open and accessible to all. I present the concept of the ideal influencer as a means for scholars to reflect on the normative model that underpins and regulates how influencer practices ought to be enacted. I have sought to demonstrate that the ideal influencer is not a static, fixed construct but is tied to the interests and values of different actors in the influencer ecology, prompting us to consider for whom the influencer is ideal.

In this article, I have examined the characteristics of the ideal influencer according to influencer coaches and platform design and policies. Given the dependency that influencers have on platforms for visibility and compensation (Caplan & Gillespie, 2020; Glatt, 2023) and on intermediaries for navigating the precarity of the industry and processes of professionalization (Abidin & Ots, 2015; Bishop, 2021a; Edwards, 2022; Stoldt et al., 2019), their constructions of the influencer constitute different layers of platform governance, interpellating the ideal influencer. Coaches leverage their experience and expertise to confidently advise and inform influencers on how to successfully become an influencer, develop a career over time, and engage in monetization practices, thereby constructing a vision of what the ideal looks like. While platform companies develop policies and design interfaces to steer influencers toward certain ideals.

In the analysis, I have outlined how coaches present the influencer as a strategic actor who provides value to their community and embraces their identity as a professional entrepreneur. In platform documentation and interface design, Instagram and TikTok construct the influencer as a skilled creator who engages their audiences in the "right" ways and assumes responsibility for adhering to regulations. I argue that these constructions critically converge in how they position influencers as possessing specialist skills that align with the interests of their audiences. On one hand, this counters stereotypes of influencers as vain, self-absorbed, and motivated by commercial incentives (Abidin, 2016a), which is advantageous for coaches looking to convert followers into coaching clients and for platforms aiming to retain influencers as users on their platform.

However, it also obfuscates structural barriers in the industry (Duffy et al., 2021; Glatt, 2022, 2023) implying that the influencer worker–subject is accessible to any creator and reduces issues to access to the asymmetries in knowledge. While I do not wish to dismiss the latter, this individualizes responsibility and, in the case of the platform, minimizes any obligation they may have to facilitate a work environment for influencers. Furthermore, both actors offer solutions to clearly defined problems. For coaches, overcoming centers on developing tactics and strategies that embrace business purposes, which they can facilitate through their content and coaching, and platforms that direct influencers toward analytics that offer limited visibility on attracting and retaining the audience.

There are also important distinctions in how metrics are presented as indicators of success and how economic incentives are integrated into identity. The tensions between the differing perspectives have implications for what influencers are encouraged to prioritize: using data or personal brands to shape content development and pursuing monetization both on and off platforms. Although coaches urge influencers to see themselves as entrepreneurs, monetization is still portrayed as a by-product, which is ultimately advantageous for the platform, as monetization practices are reframed through the language of reward. This suggests that the ideal influencer aims to monetize for the "right" reasons, which shifts the discourse around compensation for labor. I argue that the characteristics influencers are coached toward align in many ways with the conceptualization of influencers by TikTok and Instagram. Given that platforms play a critical role in the influencer ecosystem, such compatibility with platform governance is to be expected. However, it also disciplines influencers toward a worker subjectivity that is favorable for the platform, linking the construction of influencers as users rather than workers who should be rewarded but not compensated for their labor to the professionalization of the industry.

Furthermore, the analysis raises questions regarding who can embody such an ideal. Among coaches, gender emerges as the sole social category invoked through the infusion of postfeminist rhetoric in the ideal influencer and the imagined audience directly addressed as "girlies." While there is a critical reflection on how the gendering of the influencer industry undermines their expertise in certain content, the "girlboss" feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Chen & Zeng, 2024; Lukan & Appleton, 2024) is oriented toward empowerment and entrepreneurship, lacking an intersectional perspective. The ethos of monetization for the right reasons, which I argue is a central thread throughout constructions of the ideal influencer, extends the aspiration for remuneration through "doing what you love" (Duffy, 2017) by externalizing motivation and situating the influencer's value in fulfilling the needs and interests of their community. Such a maneuver benefits platforms' approach to payment but renders the ideal influencer as inherently classed, as monetization becomes a by-product of the passion project of being an influencer sought indirectly. The creep of influencer practices beyond the creator economy into creative industries like craft (Bishop, 2023) might also signify the configuration of subjectivity, self-presentation, and economic value through the aspiration of the "ideal influencer" and the ethos to monetize for the "right reasons," which, entrenched in platform capitalism, may extend into other entrepreneurial spaces.

The exploration of the ideal influencer in this article is limited to two sites of articulation, necessitating future research across different platforms, actors including advertisers and audiences, and regions and languages to understand how the ideal influencer is configured. Moreover,

additional qualitative methods, such as interviews and workshops with influencers that explore how the ideal influencer is imagined and how influencers respond to expectations, would offer vital insight into the lived experiences of the ideal to complement this study. Research into how influencers embody ideals and navigate assertions of the ideal influencer, therefore, constitutes future lines of inquiry, which may further examine how constructions of the ideal influencer intersect with the regulation and governance of influencers by intermediaries and actors in the influencer ecology.

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