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## Influencers, Cognitive Goods, and Labor Conditions in the Platform Economy: Delving into the Careers of Influencers in North America and South Asia

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Influencers, Cognitive Goods, and Labor Conditions in the Platform Economy:  
Delving into the Careers of Influencers in North America and South Asia

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**I. Abstract**

Social Media is one of the most significant agents of influence on minds, thus it is not surprising that many individuals are becoming entrepreneurial by becoming Influencers to monetize the seemingly easy job. I focus on the evolving labor conditions related to influencers while expanding on Maurizio Lazzarato's Marxist framework of immaterial labor to investigate connotations of the platform economy. I expand upon a concise literature review on the link between the acceleration of entrepreneurial endeavors and Social Media, the concepts of influencing as labor coined by Crystal Abidin, micro-celebrities, self-branding, and a discussion of immaterial labor to provide a framework for theoretical reference. I selected North America and South Asia for the case studies due to personal identification with both regions. The influential figures of Lilly Singh, Bethany Mota, Juhi Godambe, and Aashna Shroff are studied in depth because these are prolific individuals in this field of work. I conclude that female creators' utilization of Social Media as media entrepreneurs in a globalized world indicates the changing labor conditions and the types of currencies that are valued at large. However, hierarchical obstacles combined with the ethos of self-branding perpetuate a neoliberal economy's principles. This is an essential and relevant study because it is a large field of scholarship that has not been studied in which influencers are evaluated through the lens of entrepreneurs. Moreover, Social Media's pertinence in our lives will only intensify with time.

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### **III. Introduction**

The hybrid phenomenon of the global influencer market where users are able to explore their multifaceted identities online and leverage the monetization affordances is expected to grow to \$2.3 billion after 2020, with brand-sponsored influencer posts to surpass six billion (Newlands 167). This economic opportunity with low entry barriers for anyone willing to put in enough effort and time has become a desirable “career path” for many young people. In this paper, I deconstruct the notion of the aspirational Influencer in light of self-branding and immaterial labor. The concepts of self-branding and micro-celebrity are highlighted through popular media discourses on influencers. The thesis is organized around a comparison of North American and South Asian influencers that I have enjoyed consuming content from. I focus on the career choices and limitations of Lilly Singh, Bethany Mota, Juhi Godambe, and Aashna Shroff to address the question of current global labor conditions in the world amongst the platform economy. Considering each of these individuals’ work, I will be studying how they have capitalized on their following virtually and physically, traversing the digital and analog spheres. I attempt to unpack the use of self-branding concerning how affinity is leveraged, which offers critical insight into the evolving culture of digital media.

In crafting this essay, I employ insights from the work of various digital anthropologists and sociologists, especially those that focus on affective and cognitive labor. This allows me to contextualize the phenomenon within a broader neoliberal paradigm and thus consider some of the implications and nuanced findings that can otherwise be overlooked. For instance, I draw on the work of Crystal Abidin, especially her book *Internet Celebrity: Understanding Fame Online* (2018) to consider the Influencer phenomenon as an industry, as well as and Maurizio

Lazzarato's Marxist framework to understand how Influencer work might be a form of unremunerated, cognitive labor in a commodified and capitalist society.

To conduct this investigation, I mainly relied on personal accounts of these influencers and interviews with them published in news outlets, magazines, and other journalistic sources. I have chosen the basis of my case studies to be North America and South Asia since these have personal value, where I have followed these influencers since the age of 14 and have an affinity for them and their work. Current world events shape the applicability of my findings, as with COVID-19, the transition to remote work has become more apparent and even preferred, signaling my investigation to be timely and pertinent. The limitations of this study include the length of the project and the time span of the semester to complete this investigation. Additionally, the lack of direct access to conduct personal interviews created a limitation for the project.

#### **IV. Literature Review**

In the course of this research, I have examined various anthropological works regarding the platform economy and the relationship between entrepreneurship and content creation. This has allowed me to examine the influencers I have looked up to since childhood, as transcultural objects of study, and further explore the conditions of immaterial labor in the digital economy. Previous studies on influencers have focused on specific subculture groups such as bodybuilders, queer beauty gurus, or broad singular case studies on a single nation. Yet, geographical comparative case studies that simultaneously consider these influencers as entrepreneurs have been largely lacking. While a significant amount of research has been conducted on the new forms of work in the emerging sectors of the digital economy, there is minimal focus on the work and feedback of female entrepreneurs who have created a career out of the various platforms (Cesaroni 317). My topic will uniquely contribute to existing scholarship by looking at various female influencers' bodies of work, and contribute to the discourse on the platform economy and global labor conditions that induce people to partake in immaterial labor practices that often go unremunerated. In the following sections, I outline some of the major works that I draw on conceptually in my understanding of the global influencer industry phenomenon.

#### ***Interlink of Entrepreneurial Endeavors and Social Media***

Small & Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are an emerging sector in the economy that have utilized advancements in technology such as Social Media platforms that have transformed their enterprises' individuality into profitable brands (Kadam 3). In recent years, Social Media as a phenomenon has facilitated content sharing among people and created a thread to connect with



others regardless of geopolitical location. It has altered the structure, broadcasting, and availability of information to be within the reach of individuals which has given great power to laymen with access to the internet to be able to communicate with others (Constantinides & Fountain 1). Major researchers on this topic have argued that as people employ Social Media with increasingly intimate and personal ideas, the tool itself is accelerating the influence of the users on such platforms (Kadam 4). For entrepreneurs, it is agreed upon that Social Media is an essential instrument for keeping in touch with their customers, suppliers, contacts, recruiting employees, and promoting their overall brand to new customers (Kadam 4). In that sense, Social Media provides entrepreneurs a space for collaboration and a sharing of knowledge in a digital environment that was not possible before the creation of the internet (Kadam 4). Such leverage of unconventional advertising, “immediacy,” and “intimacy,” with people are what enables an entrepreneur to achieve greater success than those who do not use such platforms (Li and Bernoff 1). The intangible benefits of Social Media facilitate brand building and brand credibility with increasing interaction.

Vivakaran and Maraimali (2016) underscore the large gender gap that exists among entrepreneurs in India due to the lack of sufficient training among women entrepreneurs (Vivakaran and Maraimalai 689). They both proposed an innovative system that enables Facebook to help new Indian entrepreneurs to expand their businesses. The advantageous nature of a Social Media-run business is unmatched due to its minimal to no startup costs and ease of access. The low running costs and low start-up costs that are exhibited via only needing a smartphone to post images of handmade provides or online services are attractive to people (Cesaroni 323). Basic technological literacy provides a low barrier to entry to females in third

world countries who may not have that much time to generate a new income stream is a task they can easily achieve. Such reasons have been argued to illustrate how women have been encouraged to undertake entrepreneurial experiences, increasing female involvement in the labor force, which was quite limited (Alkowater 2016).

There is very little research in the existing body of literature on digital media, that specifically focuses on female entrepreneurs in the digital mediascape. There is no focus on women business owners who have utilized Social Media in developed countries. Moreover, while there have been previous papers written on the topic of Social Media, they do not directly link it to the impact on the rise of entrepreneurship in our world. With this paper, I intend to conduct a comparative study with female influencers in the creator economy to expand the literature on entrepreneurship studies in North America and South Asia. In doing so, this paper will serve to highlight the nuances of the agency of women who create digital content in society.

## V. **Theoretical Framework**

This section is aimed to unpack and discuss the key theoretical paradigms of seeing influence as labor, immaterial labor, and self-branding that I am utilizing in my thesis to help enrich the exploration. The most prominent scholars on digital anthropology and emerging economic frameworks have been employed in order to better understand my topic. My work is contributing to their theories with extended global research, as opposed to solely regional.

### *Crystal Abidin's Influencing as Labor*

Crystal Abidin, a digital anthropologist, and ethnographer of vernacular internet cultures illuminates the booming influencer commerce industry. She defines the industry vernacular term “Influencers” to be a form of microcelebrity, previously known as “bloggers,” to accumulate a following on Social Media through auditory and visual narrations of their everyday lives. It is through such that advertorials for goods and services are shared (Abidin 86). Influencers from this route of lifestyle blogging are primarily female between the ages of 15 and 35 years (Abidin 87). Her ethnographic fieldwork among Instagram Influencers in Singapore has established that these individuals are unfairly compensated where their work is creative but “exploitative” (Abidin 86, 87). Everyday users of Social Media platforms are following in suit of these Influencers to produce great volumes of advertising content that is usually publicly used without remuneration or little remuneration (Abidin 87). Her case studies explored that the attention economy has profited off their work which is unevenly reciprocal in nature. The Influencer industry has progressed to see these workers eventually dedicate professional web stores under

their belts, with dozens opening traditional brick-and-mortar institutions in Singapore and near the Southeast Asian region (Abidin 87).

Abidin further states that influencers have repurposed Instagram's original philosophy from mobile phone photography to commercial-driven interests or routes that eventually are commercialized (Abidin 88). Followers may be passive recipients of the circulated videos and images posted. However, there is an exchange of attention no matter how minimal. Abidin critiques the work of labor in this publicity platform as constituting a form of "affective labor" that is "corporeal" because these women produce social networks and biopower through conscious sharing of posture and curation of the self. She refers to Neff et al (2005:207) who define this category of work as a type of "entrepreneurial labor" (Abidin 88). She also mentions that consuming apparel is also an undercurrent among followers, where Influencers' visibility labor can be employed to strategically foster even a "million-dollar empire" (Abidin 97,98).

### ***Ease of Becoming a Microcelebrity and The Act of Self-Branding***

The alluring job title of an Influencer reminds one of the images depicting luxury lifestyles, endless gifts from brands, and exotic vacations (Newlands 168). It has been argued that the celebrity status gained from a rising online following parallels that of social and economic power (Newlands 168). Relatability is considered the central core of the attraction of these "micro-celebrities" (Newlands 169). Khamis, Ang, and Welling elaborate on the concept of self-branding to parallel the growth of Social Media embedded in the current climate of neoliberal order (Khamis, Ang, and Welling 1). Self-branding is described as a manipulation of

key branding philosophies that have alternate implications since the brand's usefulness lies on the premise of consistency and a charade of aspirational attribution (Khamis et al. 2, 3). It is further complicated by the fact that existing celebrities use the various platforms of YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, etc. to influence their audience in an alternative, unorthodox manner (3). This juxtaposition demonstrates that creating a brand based on oneself has become aspirational and holds the image of being effortlessly replicable. This is in contrast to the pre-digital age's rare experience of becoming an icon. Becoming an icon implied one achieved something remarkable. This title was reserved for elite sportspeople, politicians, or innovators (4, 5). Khamis et al. note that since Social Media plays to postmodern "notions of identity" and is designed for public consumption rather than personal reflection, the visible metrics of popularity skew the perceived benefits of its utilization (Khamis et al. 5). Microcelebrities must have an audience that they can tactically maintain through ongoing communication, where success is registered through the "bigger the audience, the stronger the brand" (7). But it also points to the growing agency of everyday people, and how their ordinariness deems them eligible for celebrity status, not despite it (7). Since the spotlight on the mundane is valued, the rites of passage of a woman growing up on the internet are valued just as much. This will be shown through the paper, where these women grow up sharing their experiences and curate videos around their life's narratives in order to appeal to a similar mundane audience. Khamis et al. mention traditional "gatekeepers" such as editors and producers which no longer are making involvement in media production difficult, its other metrics that one needs to take into account (Khamis et al. 8). With such an overwhelming number of users online, a false, materialistic grandiosity at the expense of "real" achievements of depth can be an issue (9). Moreover, it makes sense that

participants enhance what may be on brand or most appealing to audiences (Khamis et al. 10). Self-branding sits nicely within the dominant discourse of creative economics because the “creative amateurs” are encouraged to channel their autonomy and independence through such vehicles that can be monetized (10). The literature around self-branding exists synonymously with the most pertinent motif of American culture: the independent, resourceful individual (11). This neoliberal economic philosophy has manifested itself in an alternative, expected form with emerging technologies because it is the very root of the United States of America.

I will be looking at the cultural aspects of Social Media from the perspective of seeing the internet as a democratizing force and the internet as a nation itself that is able to permeate borders and provides a sense of opportunity to the individuals in North America and South Asia in this paper.

### ***Maurizio Lazzarato's Immaterial Labor***

The concept of immaterial labor is discussed by prominent Italian sociologist and philosopher In “*Immaterial Labor*” published as a contribution to *Radical Thought in Italy*, Maurizio Lazzarato underscores that this can be defined as labor that “produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity” (Lazzarato 1). This term was coined to describe the value produced by affective and cognitive activities. This is relevant to understanding the intangible benefits provided by those who work as influencers (Lazzarato 1). Such value can be commodified in our capitalist economies through various means. In the case of influencers, we could consider their display of comedic sketches, or sharing dialogue between

friends, or even showing their new purchases as products and forms of immaterial labor that would not traditionally be recognized as “work.” This can be expanded to include activities involved in defining and offering insight into the cultural and artistic realm, fashion, consumer behavior, public opinion, and so on (Lazzarato 1, 2). While it was once privileged to the bourgeoisie, the domain has expanded to be defined as “mass intellectuality” and open to those who wish to be a part of it. The dated dichotomy between mental and manual labor has now transcended and includes the worker’s subjective input in accomplishing work itself (Lazzarato 2). The post-Fordist model of society has restructured the worker where individuals’ personalities and decision-making capacities, force them to be “active subjects” in the production process, in contrast to simply being subjected to command (Lazzarato 2, 3). Nonetheless, they are still subject to the factory’s hierarchy, which is a paradox of the post-Fordist role of a worker (Lazzarato 2). Participatory management has become a means of power and the subjectivity of works cannot be confined solely to the tasks of execution. The worker nowadays needs to be competent in managing, communicating, and being creative whilst producing work in whatever capacity. There is a negative perceived correlation between autonomy and command in work because this new organization of work both mobilizes and clashes with the independent personality of the worker. While one has to express themselves, one also has to have the clarity of communication and coordination as if they were in executive command (Lazzarato 4, 5). It is no longer possible to relegate the scope of a worker and specify their job title rigidly. Rather all jobs now need cooperation and communication in some capacity (Lazzarato 5). “Immaterial” production has classically been recognized as audiovisual production, fashion, software creation, cultural activities, advertising (Lazzarato 7). The creation of these raises the question of the

classic definitions of work and workforce due to the combinatory nature of the cultural-information content that is produced. Manual, technical skills are necessary to channel imagination into an immaterial good. On the other hand, entrepreneurial skills are required for the management of social relationships and the structure of the network they are a part of (Lazzarato 5). Lazzarato underscores that the “independent, self-employed” worker is rather an “intellectual proletariat” where working life becomes indistinguishable from leisure and personal life. Life becomes infused with work to create “ideological products” (Lazzarato 9).

Immaterial labor serves to transform the person who utilizes it (Lazzarato 6). A social relationship involving innovation, production, and consumption is necessary to enable this production to have an economic value, and thus be successful (Lazzarato 6). In this arrangement, the worker must be capable of organizing both their own work and relations to business entities (Lazzarato 7). Lazzarato emphasizes that it is impossible to separate sociology and labor economics in an analysis of immaterial labor, whilst decisively establishing an “anthropo-sociology” perspective that is constitutive of all that it encapsulates (Lazzarato 7). The social synergies that are involved are a “polymorphous self-employed autonomous work” where the “intellectual worker” is himself the “entrepreneur” in a constantly changing market within networks that are possible to shift in time and space compose the production of “immaterial labor” (Lazzarato 8).

Lazzarato further articulates the shift of human resources in the immaterial goods sector. The more a product is characterized as an immaterial commodity, the distance between the traditional production and consumption model increases (Lazzarato 8). It becomes increasingly perplexing to define strict boundaries around the production of service and methods to measure



productivity (Lazzarato 8). The production value of immaterial goods is argued to be an instrument for social control where it lives as a paradox. It satisfies a demand while simultaneously establishing that demand. This illustrates how capitalist production has partly invaded our lives as consumers and the “social” has morphed into the “economic” (Lazzarato 9).

I will be employing Lazzarato’s work against the case studies of various influencers to shed light on how this social phenomenon of influencing has turned self-branding into a means of earning a livelihood.

## **VI. Historical Background**

In order to best situate oneself to understand the case studies and argument, one must grasp what is digital and how it has come to be a phenomenon in contemporary society alongside the topic of the internet's elusive identity and the Social Media's value sharing phenomenon.

### *Understanding the Digital*

Media scholar Tara McPherson suggests that “digital” refers to discrete elements (McPherson 1). The adjective “digital” alludes to the binary systems underlying computation. Digital computers are examples of digital systems that process data via bits, using binary code. In contrast to analog, the digital employs the discrete and modular (McPherson 2). As humans, our world experience is analogic in continuous gradations of taste, color, sound, etc. Digital computing is utilized for efficiency, greater storage capacity, and all-purpose machinery that help make work easier to produce (McPherson 1). With new forms of political organization post World War II which promoted different modes of economic models and market deregulation, the “digital” has become a pronounced standard culture (McPherson 1).

This “digital” landscape has democratized the once analog world of traditional gatekeepers such as higher education, and authority figures which prevented self-directed growth. As Social Media platforms survive on and utilize the digital landscape, the understanding of what constitutes “digital” will help us understand the case studies and their various material and immaterial production of labor. Therefore, one can hope that this knowledge will help us reevaluate and shape our futures for the better among the prevalent “digital.”

### ***Metamorphosis of the Internet and its Hierarchical Structure***

Evgeny Morozov, a prominent intellectual from Belarus who studies political and social implications of technology notes that the majority of activity on the “internet” can be boiled down to constitute social and political usage or implications of such (*The RSA*). The internet has democratized voices, work, and personal branding. It may further push democratic and western ideals onto people from China, Russia, and other non-democratic nations. The positive connotation associated with the internet can be said to come from cyber utopians. However, it is necessary to illustrate that it is a tool that may be used by authoritarian leaders and dictators to censor people, contrary to the massively believed notion that they fear the internet. In Saudi Arabia, users are encouraged to search for videos on YouTube that offend their national sensibilities (*The RSA*). This emphasizes how greatly influential Eastern sensibilities can be since YouTube will have to consider taking down the video if enough people complain. At the same time, young people are not as prone to revolution as their main activities on the internet involve downloading entertainment and communication with peers (*The RSA*). It is worth considering how the internet influences the hierarchy and needs to understand the impact of the internet on society at large.

### ***History of YouTube and the Digi-Gratis Economy of Social Media***

YouTube enables a newfound relationship between individuals and cultural artifacts by way of video sharing and creation. The phenomenon of audio-visual media interaction was simply not possible prior to the internet. YouTube is considered a younger, robust alternative to

television that will be the medium through which I explore power relations and the creation of micro-cultures through media with each creator's fanbase or audience. YouTube seems to be this ecosystem that manages to accommodate the heterogeneity of creators against the mass media preferences that have prevailed throughout history.

YouTube operates on the mechanism that media theorist Paul Booth has coined a "Digi-gratis media economy" where two parties exchange valuable goods and services in the digital landscape (Booth 1). This is apparent through YouTube because content creators rely on their audiences to make a living. If they primarily work for (or through) YouTube as their only source of income, relationships with viewers who have access to these videos for free, become highly significant. The Digi-gratis media economy is evident as it shows the non-monetary exchange of intangible goods and services. This is a new structure that emerges from the traditional concept of a market economy, where money is exchanged, with the "gift" economy model that with virtual infrastructure that pays the creator in the form of likes and reblogs, and if Google AdSense permits, then monetary payment from big conglomerates that advertise in between clips of their videos (*How to earn money on YouTube - YouTube help*). This permeation and merging of two economies is a byproduct of globalization, digital media, and people.

As this topic delves into the contemporary social climate, these are the key players in the context of my project which illustrate the relevance of research.

## VII. Case Studies

### *North American Case Study*

I have selected Lilly Singh and Bethany Mota as prolific influencers to study the success of a YouTuber turned entrepreneur as they are long-standing figures in the digital creator sphere who have achieved over 14 million and 9.6 million subscribers respectively. Their careers have spanned over a decade and they each have a great degree of media coverage nationally which is indicative of a career that can be properly assessed. I explore how their representation in the media has been facilitated by the platforms they have taken advantage of, and the nuances that come with a certain niche following. They have both capitalized on their following by creating merchandise that has been marketed and sold in traditional brick and mortar stores, traversing the spheres of the digital and analog.

Lilly Singh is a primary example of a YouTuber in North America. She has been able to create a profitable business out of her hobby of making comedy videos in her room. Singh is a Canadian-born entertainer who began her journey in 2010 with the alias “Superwoman” by posting rap sketches and parodies (Jain 1). Her video content would consist of daily rituals, social commentary on living life as a child of immigrant parents, and daily struggles and her relationship with growing up (Jain 1). Singh is often portraying her Punjabi parents, imitating them with an accent and wearing cultural garb (*YouTube*). Over time, she delved into shooting music videos and was able to collaborate with famous Hollywood and Bollywood celebrities in her sketches (*YouTube*). She has made major strides in her life by becoming an author to a *How to be a Bawse: A Guide to Conquering Life* which is a New York Times bestseller.

Singh has been able to capitalize on her fame and attraction to audiences by creating a line of merchandise that has supported her financially alongside revenue made through YouTube's Google Payments for enabling advertisements to run amongst the video (Singh). Her personal style had been taken into account when creating the line of clothing in order to sell pieces that were authentic to her grunge, tomboy preference of clothing (Singh). As a result, she initially had produced a black cap with the logo "SUPER" across the snapback in bold white embroidered lettering. Lilly Singh exemplifies the gradual becoming of a digital media entrepreneur who ventured into different assets of sales in order to build her online brand as "Superwoman."

The now 32-year-old "comedian, YouTube star, actor, author, and producer" holds another accolade of becoming the first woman LGBTQ+ Indian late-night host on television (Tailor). This creates a moment of emulsification between the contemporary digital sphere and the normative, quaint, broadcasting sphere of television (Tailor). She emphasizes the pressure that came with the exposure of the publicity around the great accomplishment stating, "It's historic to have a woman hosting late-night, and the headlines with "first Indian" or "first openly bisexual" are positive because a kid might go, "I relate to her!" She notes it came "with its own unique set of pressures" because she "had to do two jobs" while knowing that "a billion people are counting on you" (Tailor 1). This demonstrates the pressure Singh felt replacing NBC's *Last Call with Carson Daly*, rendering her the only female among the current generation of Caucasian, male late-night show hosts on major broadcasting networks (Tailor).

Bethany Mota is another embodiment of the early female entrepreneurs who began their journey through YouTube. Initial chatty videos about makeup and clothing have amassed her an

astonishing 10 million followers to her YouTube channel (*NY Times*). Her follower base has been the backbone of her customers for her demi-fine jewelry line Atom & Matter, with prices ranging from \$48 for stud earrings and \$239 for a bracelet (*NY Times*). While she has been able to capitalize on her hobby, Mota notes that with the pandemic and with her first young followers in college now or joining the workforce during a financial crisis, her celebrity status may not guarantee success (*NY Times*). Mota's name and image "help with awareness" of the brand, however, she is prepared for comments and potential criticism as the brand hits the market (*NY Times*). With a desire to reach people beyond her subscriber base, Mota emphasizes the creation of a sustainable, keepsake line of pieces of quality.

Beginning at age 13 and 12 years later holding the titles of a YouTube celebrity, author of autobiography *Make Your Mind Up: My Guide to Finding Your Own Style, Life, and Motivation!*, and most recently designer, she has been listed amongst *TIME's* Most Influential People on the Internet two years in a row, and named *Forbes' 30* under 20 list in 2017 (*Success*). She has landed partnerships with Forever 21 and JC Penny and eventually curated her own line with mall store Aeropostale (*Forbes*). On the other hand, her struggles growing up as an introvert and being bullied are glamorized to depict how a bona fide YouTube Star at 25 can emerge from such a character (*Success*). Mota comments that she knows her brand of the girl-next-door can be relegated if she alters her image, ultimately sacrificing her following (*Forbes*). There is an element of fabricating an image to sustain a niche follower base to ensure good viewership which translates into profit.

Both Singh and Mota have demonstrated the complexities and nuances of working as a creative in the digital landscape while trying to maintain their success with an evolving audience group and community amongst the transition to work in traditional labor settings.

### ***South Asian Case Study***

I have employed accounts by Juhi Godambe [alongside quotes of Masoom Minawala in the same interview] and Aashna Shroff in order to further investigate the tensions between the facility of growing a following base and retaining respect from traditional companies that want to intersect and work with the digital sphere to increase their commercial sales. These are female entrepreneurs who have started their base following from Social Media accounts such as YouTube and Instagram by way of posting regular content related to fashion, eventually constructing their own personal brands that generate revenue.

Another prominent female who has utilized her growing Social Media accounts on both YouTube and Instagram while emerging as an entrepreneur is Juhi Godambe from India. In an interview with *Vogue India*, a prestigious and well-versed fashion magazine in the industry, Godambe comments that “brands need to understand that we have to make a living as well, and if we have a huge following now, it is because we have been working for years to create a particular brand image. It serves as an investment by the brand, just like any other traditional form of advertising, as a single Instagram story can contribute to a significant increase in sales” (*Vogue India*). This suggests that while the creation of a democratic platform with minimal hindrance to starting is beneficial to all, the territory of such a seemingly glamorous career comes with its stereotypes. There is a prevailing misconception that people on such platforms do



not work as hard or should be afforded a fair degree of professionalism and respect (*Vogue India*). Her blogger colleague, Masoom Minawala, states that a common stereotype is one must “hail from a certain financial background or have a designer wardrobe at your disposal to be a successful blogger, but the truth is that it is your creative vision that truly sets you apart” (*Vogue India*). This is similar to other jobs that have been around for longer in which “long hours” are part and parcel of the package (*Vogue India*). And that when one is starting, the roles of “yourself...producer, director, shoot coordinator, spot boy, and model” are taken by the individual. Minawala adds that the inconspicuous nature of the job entails that even once “you’ve made it, the steady stream of newcomers means that you are replaceable” (*Vogue India*). Minawala makes it clear that she wants to promote her love for Indian designers despite moving base from Mumbai, India to Antwerp, Belgium (*Lifestyle Asia*). The renowned Cannes Film Festival red carpet invited her to join the list of big names who joined the event (*Lifestyle Asia*).

As one of the biggest names in the Indian Social Media influencing the market, she has been able to collaborate with some of the most prominent brands in the world which host some megastars such as Gigi Hadid and Alia Bhatt as their “brand ambassadors” (*Vanity Stardom*). Godambe’s work has been featured in elite, household brand name publications such as The Peacock magazine and was awarded Fashion Influencer of the Month by *Exhibit Magazine*, deemed a very popular influencer in India (*Entrepreneur India*). Mac Cosmetics, Estee Lauder, Aveda, and Clinique have worked with her (*Marketing Mind*). Such collaborations illustrate the popularity of her work and the great degree of success. Moreover, she has been able to launch her contemporary apparel brand Arabella. While Godambe is grateful for her prosperity in the field of fashion through the vehicle of Social Media, she points out that “since the industry is still

in its nascent stage, there are people who still believe that bloggers are only in it for the free goodies. But we need to pay our bills at the end of the month, just like everyone else” (*Vogue India*). The process of “creating...involves considerable effort” with “entire teams...on conceptualizing the content” and “there have been times...[when she has] scheduled international trips to create content” which she argues is more complex than what seems at face value (*Vogue India*). Additionally, Minawala discusses how being selective about the brands one feature on the page is immensely significant as one needs to ensure that they are “maintaining a strong balance between organic and paid content” in which the success of a blogger is reliant on “their ability to have a direct connection with the following they have amassed over the years, and you want to ensure that your audience can still relate to the person who inspired them to hit the follow button” initially (*Vogue India*).

Another Mumbai-based fashion and beauty influencer who began her blogging career to promote her e-commerce business “The Snob Shop” in November 2013 on Facebook is Aashna Shroff (*Republic World*). This e-commerce shop quickly morphed into a full-time occupation (*Lifestyle Asia*). The vegan shoe brand CAI has recently tied partnerships with Shroff to capture her strong design aesthetics (*Onmanorama*). Aashna garnered over 911,000 subscribers on YouTube as of December 1, 2021, and posts videos related to fashion, vlogs, and home decor for which she earns over 10 lakh rupees, an equivalent of approximately 13,330 United States Dollars (USD) per month (*Republic World*). As per Times of India reports, her net worth is approximated to be 37 crore Indian rupees or about 5 million USD. Shroff became the first Indian creator to be invited to walk on the eminent L’Oréal ramp in Paris for Paris Fashion Week in October 2021. She shared the stage with notable figures in traditional broadcasting networks

and movies such as Aishwarya Rai, Helen Mirren, Camila Cabello, among others (*Times of India*).

In India, the value of a social connection in a retail transaction holds great meaning with e-commerce on the rise (Vaidya 1). Influencers have become pivotal personnel in preserving that relationship. The e-commerce industry is bridging a wave of regional content creators who are building their image around their regional languages other than Hindi in tier-two and tier-three cities besides New Delhi and Mumbai which was previously unheard of (Vaidya 2). Large-cap companies such as Amazon and Myntra have rising interests in using them to accelerate business growth due to the increased authenticity they have to offer (Vaidya 1). To reach Indian shoppers outside of major cities, Amazon launched an Influencer Program, and its competitor Myntra created an app similar to Instagram called Flipkart for influencers to showcase and sell their products (Vaidya 2). A colossal, record-breaking \$3.4 billion in sales were reported within the first four days of the Diwali festival period where its influencers curated content in five languages, establishing their major impact on consumer purchasing habits (*Inc* 42).

The global Amazon Influencer Program (AIP) facilitated influencers to recommend products on Amazon and drive sales from their recommendations across various Social Media sites, for which they earn a commission (Vaidya 1). A custom AIP storefront and “vanity URL” are provided with the services for YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, with Amazon mentioning they look forward to “experiment” on upcoming platforms as well (Vaidya 1). Amazon has made a statement noting that “India is a content-driven” nation where “diverse market-video consumption is big, and we see strong uptake for both English and regional content” (Vaidya 1). Likewise, Abheek Singhi of Boston Consulting Group states that fashion

influencers are able to capture and package the essence of things that cannot be done by technology alone. He believes that there is a facet of “consumer behavior that is difficult to capture through click screens and cookie pathways” indicating the “magic ingredient” of sales created through collaborating with fashion influencers (Vaidya 2). Therefore, he concludes that while statistical data helps establish a pattern, in the world of fashion the anomalies are more significant than the pattern itself. The inclusion of fashion influencers is suggested to maximize visibility and unlock market selling potential that was not available on pre-Social Media platforms.

While Godambe and Shroff have been able to translate digital value into the conventional settings of celebrity-ship, numerous obstacles of doing such have been highlighted through their journeys and interactions with journalists. Both their journeys and work experiences highlight the undercurrent of what it means to be an immaterial laborer and the result of that has been shown in this case study.

**VIII. Analysis**

The prolific influencers Lilly Singh, Bethany Mota, Juhi Godambe, and Aashna Shroff are mobilizing various modes of intimate labor to produce commercial and interactive material on Social Media platforms. This remains true to Abidin's realizations where she notes that affective labor is not without tension and obstacles. Followers of these Influencers feel a sense of closeness, and that manifests through real sales as they purchase recommended products from influencers. The directive power that influencers utilize to conduct sales of physical goods such as books or clothing demonstrates the return to traditional routes of making a living. Lilly Singh, Bethany Mota, Juhi Godambe, and Aashna Shroff all capitalized on their following by creating merchandise of some capacity that have been marketed and sold in traditional brick and mortar stores. This highlights how influencers have been able to traverse the spheres of the analog and digital. Singh's capitalization of her fame and attraction to audiences originated from a deeply intimate space of offering social commentary on living life as a child of immigrant parents. Affective labor has produced profitability for her, however only to a certain extent because of the backlash she faced when publicly expressing her bisexuality. Making such a controversial statement on a traditional broadcasting network that caters to older, conservative audiences is not considered to induce a positive return on media revenue. This held true and partially contributed to the show not being received well from audiences. Thus, the niche audience that was built on Social Media platforms does not translate well onto traditional media. Viewership holds moderate value in traditional media because the fickle nature of the job allows people to work as hosts for the length of the contract, and they will be laid off if the numbers of watchers are not up to par. While traditional broadcasting networks will pay her regardless of whether or not the

show does well-until her contract expires-her acceptance and reception changes the value of her immaterial labor on YouTube. YouTube's algorithm registers certain types of content more valuable than others and it is ultimately up to the viewer to decide whether their immaterial labor is worth spending time to watch or not. Additionally, there are limitations of what can be shown and conducted that render television unhelpful in producing the immaterial labor that helped Singh gain her initial following. The jump cuts, editing color, and additional music are exclusive to homemade films that made Singh unique. Based on her career, it has been shown that the value of her immaterial labor is greater when she is not bound by traditional media outlets and creates her own videos. This does mean she is bound to the initial immaterial labor of creating videos that connote amateur films and speak to a younger version of herself. However, this also speaks to the labor conditions of influencers needing to sustain a certain image of their work in order to make a living or find a way to stay relevant.

Mota is aware of the oscillating nature of her initial followers, who are now older and in college, many joining the workforce during a financial crisis, that may not produce desired results in revenue from her new jewelry line. Her new venture that was possible because of her immaterial labor on YouTube did help with awareness of her brand and enabled it to be profitable regardless. This shows that regardless of the socio-economic situation in society, the followers of influencers are loyal customers which interact. I suggest that the very transaction between the two parties is a result of feeling indebted to the person who has provided intimate labor in some capacity through being there in one's growing years. Influencers essentially imbibe the character of role models and the awe and admiration are converted into profitable sales, despite the type of venture.

Godambe and Shroff demonstrate how the discrete nature of producing immaterial labor can cause one to be replaceable. The job can also be a creative hindrance to influencers if they do not serve the followers with the prevailing brand image which has been curated for years. Godambe's remark on the nascent stage of the influencer industry establishes that people do not have a complete understanding of how and if at all bloggers get paid. Such discourse around the field of their immaterial labor is reflective of the treatment that many of these influencers face from the general public. Additionally, many influencers being under remunerated or not remunerated at all for their services highlight the duality in their field of work where it is expected that fame will bring affluence. In Godambe's interview, there is a discussion about how influencers need to be selective about the brands they choose to work with to maintain a strong balance between organic and paid content in order to be fair to the audience that provides them a metric of relatability and admiration.

Shroff's net worth of 5 million USD illuminates the great valuation of immaterial labor if it is recognized and channeled properly. Her e-commerce shop, vegan shoe brand, and various other additional income-generating businesses that feed off her following on Social Media elucidate cognitive and affective labor's reach and great power in an age where goods can be manufactured easily and at a cheap rate. Art and unique labor hold more value and assign influencers appreciable potential for monetary success and fame.

To a great extent, the value of a social connection in a retail transaction is expected to convert into profitable returns with e-commerce rising. Large-cap companies recognize this dynamic and attempt to accelerate their business growth as seen with Amazon and Myntra's collaborations with influencers. The global Amazon Influencer Program (AIP) further

emphasizes that influencers are able to drive sales in an organic, immediate manner that would otherwise be unavailable. Influencers expedite a market selling potential that has never been available pre-Social Media, affirming the increasingly heightened value of immaterial labor. The labor of influencers creating their own brand and then cooperating with traditional brands where they are often slowly remunerated or under remunerated speaks to the great disparity between the traditional gatekeepers of business and media success in the current Digi-gratis economy.

There is an irony at play here when influencers are curating a close relationship between the audience and themselves while being motivated by commercial interest. The visibility labor that Abidin writes about is closely related to such work, as all these influencers curate their self-image in order to be noticeable and positively received by their prospective followers, or employers in the form of big capital companies that may collaborate with them (Abidin 88). Their visibility labor is affiliated with analogous affective labor. This duality of work is present when I try to grasp how content can seem effortlessly produced when encountered on the app interface or website, yet involves a complex and laborious production process.

It makes sense that users enhance the most lucrative or most appealing aspects of their identity and underplay those that do not help further their branding goals as noted by Khamis et. al (2016). So perhaps the actualization of these followers into customers via traditional business routes of selling books, fashion accessories and clothing is telling of the awareness of the fleeting nature of Social Media. With new trends frequently arising to take over the spotlight, the more necessary it is to rebuild oneself and reframe oneself in the platform economy. Juxtaposed with the rise of global capitalism and the increase of communication technologies, these influencers seem to be attempting to retain a sense of self and stability in times of ambiguity and



vulnerability through their choice of work. As Khamis, Ang, and Welling note, this class of creatives harmonize the neoliberal ideologies of autonomy and resourcefulness through self-directed immaterial labor. This renders their self-branding to be a tactical response to dynamic market movements. Nevertheless, individuals are still subject to the political and economic priorities of the time. Therefore, self-branding can be seen as an instrument to establish one's place in fluid labor markets where individuals are ultimately left to create a name for themselves and thus their own success. The branded self is a tool to grant self-agency in a fluid marketplace of social, economic, and political dynamics when things are uncertain. Examples are found when influencers follow trends and popular topics to maximize audience exposure and the economy of attention is very much relevant here. Khamis et. al's work on the commodification of the self in the most intimate aspects and settings of life underscores the insecurity that is further perpetuated through the platform economy that individuals wish to resolve. The transition from relying on immaterial labor to creating physical goods in the traditional sense such as clothing brands, selling books, and being on television are all attempts to bandage the markets' inconsistencies. Self-branding works within the free-market ideology in that the economy's uncertainty is not one to be refined and adapted to suit its people, but rather individuals must harness greater "creative agility" to combat the increasing laissez-faire economy. These case studies show that contemporary Social Media enabling one to reach the level of a micro-celebrity is a trade-off on selling authenticity through insights into the practitioner's private life, being accessible and personal. Additionally, there is a hierarchy present with the existence of brands, sponsorships, larger followed accounts, and big companies

remaining in a higher power while individuals need to learn how to communicate and deal with them, as seen with Godambe's issue of being paid on time.

According to Lazzarato's definition of immaterial labor, ideological products that are created by these influencers in the form of YouTube videos are commodities themselves that are addressed to a certain audience and thus pose the issue of "meaning." Meaning, whether they are suggested through the mannerisms of characters, dressing sense, or verbal opinions shared through the "immaterial" nature of cultural products such as videos, and their production process that also involves material and immaterial labor. Reception of the videos, from this lens, is a creative action and interactional portion of the product. By this token, one can say that creators in the digital economy manifesting ideological products via the internet are distorting the form of life they are displaying in some sense. The entrepreneur may do this through editing or speaking from a curated script, resulting in an altered image. It poses a problem in determining the degree of authenticity for capitalist production. This forces one to question the integrated nature of innovation through immaterial labor and its vast interlinked processes by which it survives. There are no clear boundaries when determining who is being influenced and whether or not the influenced truly follows the given suggestions on Social Media sites. Many consume their content for entertainment purposes and do not translate their connection into being a consumer of their physical goods. There exists a paradoxical existence of their authenticity since their image is manifested through self-branding. Once celebrity distinction is secured in the mediascape by themselves, many convert their internet fame into "traditional" and proper fame as Khamis et al. expand on. Evidently, the absence of qualifications doesn't hamper these women's Social Media ascent, but their maintenance is somewhat reliant upon it.

The comparison of the case studies reveals insight into the broader topic of labor conditions in the platform economy. While there are different industries of work and given access to Social Media, it seems as though anyone can be an influencer and the transition from an orthodox job to such is seamless, this is not as simple. Both old and new media have gatekeepers, but all these industries can be a stepping-stone to others, remaining hierarchical in nature with a set of boundaries and limitations of their own. The labor of influencers creating their own brand, the idea of using oneself as an inherent brand of currency, is under remunerated or remunerated, which speaks to the great disparity between the ultra-influential and micro-influential in the current Digi-gratis economy. Compared to my expectations of seeing racism, sexism, or even some extreme form of equality, my findings have shown to provide a middle ground with a subtle form of power relations. This speaks to labor conditions entailing bureaucratic processes and limitations despite the seemingly independent work. Working on Social Media still holds the implication that one is working through a medium. This symbiotic relationship also manifests through the usage of brands to grow a bigger fan base. Lag time before publication is present as well when one thinks of the curation and the posting schedules that many of these influencers utilize. Thus, influencer labor conditions are not entirely different from traditional systems of work. Moreover, this research reveals an alternative perspective on the use of self-branding in Social Media. Social media can be seen as a relevant vehicle with varying methodologies that manifest in different forms. Such variations are introduced in order to accommodate the economy's changing nature which is implied via the new forms of work available.

**IX. Conclusion**

In the course of this paper, I have employed the examples of Influencers Lilly Singh, Bethany Mota, Juhi Godambe, and Aashna Shroff to explore the attempt of individuals to create a sense of stability for themselves and agency in an increasingly neoliberal economy, where the marketplace is fluctuating and fluid. No longer are the roles of celebrities inaccessible. However, by leveraging technological advancements these micro-celebrities have made the intimate home space, which has usually been the setting for their initial content creation, their workplace. I have explored the duality of these influencers' careers through a comparative study highlighting how each navigated their varying circumstances as the trajectory and acceptance of their careers differed. All of these influencers have attempted to create a sense of reliability in the ambiguous-natured neoliberal economy, while they are still subject to the same dynamic of the marketplace acceptance by audience members, thus establishing that they are not truly free.

Additionally, these influencers return to traditional techniques of selling tangible goods such as books, fashion accessories, clothing, and jewelry, which further emphasizes the dichotomy of their actions. On one hand, these influencers are able to achieve fame and monetary gain without the obstacles of success—producing managers, hiring managers—yet they are subject to the same dynamics of marketplace acceptance. Their perceived freedom parallels a concealed, intimate, less formal race. The argument that the platform economy is inclusive and accessible to all people is reductionist, as the landscape of labor and success in the digital landscape is far more complex. People face difficulties at every level of the job, like a traditional workplace environment.

Given the exponential growth of the platform economy in the coming years, it raises the question of whether or not the unwatched and undocumented life is invalid or not of value, and to what degree. Pointing to the ethical and philosophical questions at play, this can be explored in a forthcoming paper. For further investigation, the scale of impact on people's behavior through influencer marketing can be determined through economic analysis of followers that convert to actual sales.

My initial expectations of finding a pattern of sexism or unveiling an easy career path have been proven false within my paper. Rather, I have provided an alternative perspective on the realities of the labor conditions in this ecosystem to be one that enables individuals to actualize an identity and consistently perform such in the medium of videos and photos in order to make a living. What seems like straightforward, aspirational work bears more complexity as intimate labor inevitability causes creators' sustenance of a certain image to be capitalized upon. While creators rely so heavily on their audience for support, a structured contingent hierarchy is still embedded within the system that seems to be a one-person show. Such hierarchies involve gatekeepers such as the algorithm of Social Media sites, being bound to a certain image in order to sustain followership, lack of brand professionalism during collaboration, and obstacles in trying to convert audience acceptance in traditional broadcasting networks. These are present in place of traditional gatekeepers such as business capital, specialized degree, producers, and editors.

With Social Media's prominence only growing in the foreseeable future, it is worth understanding the social and cultural factors that shape careers in the digital sphere. It was not too long ago that I did not know whether or not pursuing Social Media would classify as

legitimate employment, but that thought has been challenged with the rise of people like Lilly Singh or Aashna Shroff. With some of the most popular pop-culture icons tracing roots back to Social Media fame, this phenomenon reinforces the evolving nature of the economy and is of interest to people who will look for creative jobs and will navigate life alongside the existence of the internet. Monetary incentives that come with being an influencer are of interest to large firms who want to utilize the cost-effective face value of people portraying their lives online. The ability to target specific niche audiences is another point of interest for large corporations that want to leverage influencer-based marketing. The rise of Social Media influencers is heavily entwined with digital marketing strategies that traditional firms are starting to use as the alternative forms of work are becoming more prominent. Also, it is worth noting that the rise of influencers suggests negative effects on body image, morphed identity, and the presence of tension between intimate spaces operating as work and living environments. With the rise of influencers in society, my paper serves to illustrate the various nuances that come with their immaterial labor through a cultural lens.

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