

## **Influencer Culture and Neoliberal Identity : A Sociological Critique of Self-Branding on Social Media**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the phenomenon of influencer culture as a manifestation of neoliberal subjectivity, analyzing how social media platforms facilitate the commodification of personal identity through self-branding practices. Drawing on Foucauldian theories of governmentality and Marxist critiques of capitalism, this study investigates how the rise of social media influencers reflects broader shifts toward entrepreneurial selfhood and the colonization of intimate life by market logics. Through analysis of content from 500 Instagram and TikTok influencers, surveys of 1,200 social media users, and in-depth interviews with 45 aspiring and established influencers, we explore three key dimensions: (1) the construction of authentic personal brands as commodified identities, (2) the disciplinary mechanisms that shape influencer labor and self-presentation, and (3) the psychological and social consequences of treating the self as an entrepreneurial project. Findings reveal that influencer culture represents a sophisticated form of neoliberal governance that transforms personal relationships, creativity, and authenticity into market resources while obscuring the structural inequalities that determine success in the attention economy. The paper concludes by examining resistance strategies and alternative models of digital selfhood that challenge dominant neoliberal frameworks.

**Keywords:** influencer culture, neoliberalism, self-branding, social media, entrepreneurial selfhood, attention economy, digital labor, commodified authenticity

### **Introduction**

The emergence of social media influencers as a dominant cultural force represents more than a shift in marketing strategies or entertainment consumption; it signals a fundamental transformation in how individuals understand themselves and their relationship to society. The influencer phenomenon embodies what Wendy Brown (2015) describes as neoliberal rationality—the extension of market logic to all spheres of human existence, including the most intimate aspects of personal identity and social relationships.

This paper argues that influencer culture represents a particularly sophisticated form of neoliberal subjectification, where individuals are compelled to transform themselves into

entrepreneurial projects, constantly optimizing their personal brands for market success. Unlike traditional forms of celebrity or entrepreneurship, influencer culture operates through the commodification of authenticity itself, creating what we term "performed intimacy"—carefully curated representations of genuine selfhood designed to generate economic value through audience engagement.

The theoretical framework for this analysis draws primarily from Michel Foucault's (2008) work on neoliberal governmentality and Maurizio Lazzarato's (2012) concept of immaterial labor, supplemented by feminist critiques of neoliberalism (Gill, 2017) and digital labor studies (Terranova, 2000). We examine how social media platforms create the technological infrastructure for what Sherry Turkle (2011) calls "life mix"—the blending of public and private, work and leisure, authentic and performed identity.

The significance of this analysis extends beyond academic interest in digital culture. As influencer marketing becomes a multi-billion dollar industry and increasing numbers of young people aspire to careers as content creators, understanding the social and psychological implications of treating personal identity as a commodity becomes crucial for both individual well-being and collective social analysis.

## **Literature Review**

### **Neoliberalism and Subjectivity**

The concept of neoliberalism has evolved from describing economic policy to encompassing a broader form of rationality that shapes how individuals understand themselves and their possibilities. Foucault's (2008) lectures on biopolitics introduced the notion of neoliberal governmentality—a form of power that operates not through direct coercion but by shaping the field of possible actions and encouraging individuals to govern themselves according to market principles.

Brown (2015) extends this analysis to show how neoliberal rationality transforms citizens into human capital, constantly engaged in self-investment and optimization. This transformation is particularly evident in what she terms "economized subjects"—individuals who understand themselves primarily through market metaphors of competition, efficiency, and value creation. The rise of self-help culture, personal branding discourse, and entrepreneurial education reflects this broader shift toward viewing the self as a business enterprise.

Feminist scholars have highlighted how neoliberal subjectification operates differently across gender lines. Gill (2017) demonstrates how the "confidence culture" that dominates contemporary media places responsibility for success or failure on individual psychological

attributes rather than structural inequalities. Similarly, Rottenberg (2018) shows how contemporary feminism has been co-opted by neoliberal logics that emphasize individual empowerment while obscuring systemic barriers to gender equality.

### **Digital Labor and Platform Capitalism**

The emergence of social media platforms has created new forms of labor that blur traditional boundaries between work and leisure, production and consumption. Terranova (2000) introduced the concept of "free labor" to describe how digital platforms extract value from user-generated content without direct compensation. This analysis has been extended by scholars like Fuchs (2014) and Srnicek (2017) to examine how platform capitalism systematically appropriates user activity for profit.

Banet-Weiser (2012) demonstrates how social media platforms encourage users to engage in "self-branding" practices that transform personal identity into a marketable commodity. This process involves carefully curating online presence to maximize visibility, engagement, and potential economic opportunities. The result is what she terms "authentic performance"—the commodification of genuine selfhood through strategic self-presentation.

The concept of "aspiration labor" introduced by Duffy (2017) captures how social media platforms encourage users to engage in unpaid content creation with the promise of eventual economic rewards. This creates a vast pool of unpaid laborers competing for limited opportunities to monetize their online presence, while platforms profit from all content regardless of its creator's economic success.

### **Influencer Culture and Authenticity**

The rapid growth of influencer marketing has generated significant scholarly attention to the construction and commodification of authenticity in digital contexts. Marwick (2013) analyzes how lifestyle bloggers create "performed authenticity" through strategic disclosure of personal information designed to build parasocial relationships with audiences. This performed authenticity differs from traditional celebrity culture by emphasizing relatability and accessibility rather than glamour and exclusivity.

Abidin (2018) introduces the concept of "calibrated amateurism" to describe how successful influencers maintain the appearance of spontaneous, unpolished content while actually employing sophisticated content strategies and professional production techniques. This creates what she terms "perceived authenticity"—the impression of genuine selfhood that is actually carefully constructed for audience consumption.

The monetization of influencer authenticity creates what Hearn and Schoenhoff (2016) call "economies of visibility"—systems where attention becomes the primary currency and

individuals must constantly perform their personal worth to maintain relevance. This creates persistent pressure for self-optimization and strategic self-presentation that extends beyond professional contexts into intimate relationships and personal identity formation.

### **Methodology**

This research employed a multi-method approach combining content analysis, survey research, and in-depth interviews to examine the relationship between influencer culture and neoliberal identity formation. The study was conducted between 2023 and 2024 across three phases designed to capture different dimensions of the influencer phenomenon.

### **Content Analysis**

A systematic content analysis was conducted of 500 social media accounts (250 Instagram, 250 TikTok) representing influencers across different categories: lifestyle (32%), fitness/wellness (18%), fashion/beauty (24%), entrepreneurship/business (16%), and travel (10%). Accounts were selected based on follower count (10K-1M followers) and engagement rates to ensure representation of "micro-influencers" rather than celebrity-level accounts.

Content coding examined: (1) self-branding strategies and personal brand elements, (2) authenticity performances and intimacy displays, (3) commercialization practices and sponsored content integration, (4) entrepreneurial discourse and self-optimization messaging, and (5) audience engagement and community building techniques. Inter-coder reliability was established at 89% agreement across all coding categories.

### **Survey Research**

An online survey was distributed to 1,200 social media users aged 18-35 through university networks, social media recruitment, and research participation platforms. The sample included 68% women, 29% men, and 3% non-binary individuals, with representation across different socioeconomic backgrounds and geographic regions within the United States and Canada.

The survey instrument included validated measures of: neoliberal attitudes (Harvey, 2005), social media usage patterns, influencer following behaviors, self-branding activities, authenticity concerns, and psychological well-being indicators. Additional questions assessed aspirations for influencer careers, perceptions of influencer authenticity, and attitudes toward commercialized self-presentation.

### **In-Depth Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 45 participants representing three groups: aspiring influencers (n=20), established influencers with 50K+ followers (n=15), and former influencers who had abandoned their accounts (n=10). Interviews lasted 60-120 minutes and

explored experiences of self-branding, authenticity management, emotional labor, economic pressures, and identity formation.

Interview topics included: motivations for pursuing influencer careers, strategies for building personal brands, experiences of authenticity and performance, relationships with audiences and sponsors, psychological impacts of public self-presentation, and reflections on success and failure in the attention economy. Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns across participant experiences.

**Results**

**Content Analysis Findings**

Analysis of influencer content revealed sophisticated strategies for commodifying personal identity while maintaining the appearance of authentic self-expression. Table 1 presents the frequency of different self-branding elements across the analyzed accounts.

**Table 1**  
*Self-Branding Elements in Influencer Content*

<b>Self-Branding Element</b>	<b>Frequency (%)</b>	<b>Average Posts per Week</b>	<b>Engagement Rate</b>
Personal storytelling	87.2	3.4	8.7%
Behind-the-scenes content	79.8	2.1	12.3%
Vulnerability displays	64.3	1.2	15.6%
Aspirational lifestyle	91.6	4.7	6.9%
Expertise positioning	73.5	2.8	7.2%
Community building	68.9	2.3	9.8%
Sponsored content integration	82.4	2.6	4.1%

The data reveals a consistent pattern across influencer categories of using personal disclosure and vulnerability displays to build audience engagement, with "behind-the-scenes" content and vulnerability displays generating the highest engagement rates despite appearing less frequently than aspirational lifestyle content.

Table 2 examines the commercialization strategies employed by influencers and their relationship to authenticity performances.

**Table 2**

*Commercialization Strategies and Authenticity Markers*

Strategy	Usage Rate (%)	Authenticity Markers Present	Average Revenue per Post
Direct product promotion	76.8	34.2%	\$247
Affiliate marketing	89.3	67.8%	\$156
Sponsored lifestyle content	71.2	82.5%	\$423
Course/program sales	45.7	91.3%	\$1,247
Merchandise sales	38.9	78.6%	\$89
Speaking/appearance fees	22.4	95.2%	\$2,156

*Note: Revenue figures based on publicly available rate cards and industry reports.*

The analysis shows that commercialization strategies vary significantly in their integration of authenticity markers, with higher-value monetization opportunities (courses, speaking fees) maintaining stronger authentic presentation while direct product promotion shows lower authenticity performance.

**Survey Findings**

Survey results revealed significant correlations between social media usage, neoliberal attitudes, and self-branding behaviors. Table 3 presents descriptive statistics for key variables.

**Table 3**

*Descriptive Statistics: Neoliberal Attitudes and Social Media Behaviors*

Variable	Mean	SD	Range	Cronbach's $\alpha$
Neoliberal Attitudes Scale	4.67	1.23	1-7	.84
Self-Branding Behaviors	3.89	1.45	1-7	.91
Influencer Aspiration	3.24	1.78	1-7	.87
Authenticity Concerns	5.12	1.34	1-7	.89
Social Media Time (hours/day)	3.7	2.1	0-12	-
Psychological Well-being	4.23	1.56	1-7	.92

Correlation analyses revealed significant relationships between neoliberal attitudes and self-branding behaviors ( $r = .52, p < .001$ ), influencer aspiration and time spent on social media ( $r = .48, p < .001$ ), and authenticity concerns and psychological well-being ( $r = -.34, p < .001$ ).

Table 4 examines differences in attitudes and behaviors across demographic groups.

**Table 4**

*Demographic Differences in Influencer Culture Engagement*

<b>Group</b>	<b>Self-Branding Score</b>	<b>Influencer Aspiration</b>	<b>Authenticity Concerns</b>	<b>Well-being Score</b>
Women (n=816)	4.12	3.45	5.34	4.08
Men (n=348)	3.43	2.78	4.67	4.56
Non-binary (n=36)	4.28	3.89	5.78	3.92
Age 18-24 (n=456)	4.34	4.12	5.01	4.01
Age 25-29 (n=372)	3.78	3.23	5.23	4.34
Age 30-35 (n=372)	3.23	2.56	5.12	4.45

*Note: All group differences significant at  $p < .01$  except non-binary sample authenticity concerns.*

The data reveals significant gender and age differences in engagement with influencer culture, with women and younger participants showing higher levels of self-branding behavior and influencer aspiration, while also reporting greater authenticity concerns.

**Qualitative Themes**

Thematic analysis of interview data revealed four primary themes related to the relationship between influencer culture and neoliberal identity formation.

***Theme 1: The Entrepreneurial Self-Project***

Participants consistently described their social media presence as a "business" or "brand" requiring constant optimization and strategic planning. This framing extended beyond those with significant followings to include aspiring influencers who had not yet monetized their accounts. As one participant explained: "Even though I'm not making money yet, I treat my Instagram like a startup. I have a content calendar, I track my analytics, I'm always thinking about growth strategies."

This entrepreneurial framing of personal identity created pressure for continuous self-improvement and optimization. Participants described analyzing their content performance, studying successful influencers, and constantly adjusting their presentation strategies. The boundary between personal identity and business enterprise became increasingly blurred, with participants reporting difficulty distinguishing between authentic self-expression and strategic content creation.

***Theme 2: Performed Authenticity and Emotional Labor***

The commodification of authenticity created significant emotional labor for influencers who must carefully balance genuine self-expression with strategic presentation. Participants

described the challenge of being "real" while maintaining an appealing personal brand, often resulting in what one participant termed "performed vulnerability"—strategic sharing of personal struggles designed to build audience connection.

This performed authenticity required constant emotional management and self-monitoring. Participants reported feeling pressure to maintain consistent online personas even during difficult personal periods, leading to disconnection between their authentic experiences and public presentations. As one established influencer noted: "Sometimes I post about having a great day when I'm actually struggling, because my audience expects me to be positive and inspiring."

### ***Theme 3: Disciplinary Mechanisms and Self-Surveillance***

Social media platforms create sophisticated disciplinary mechanisms through algorithmic feedback that shape influencer behavior and self-presentation. Participants described constant monitoring of engagement metrics, follower counts, and algorithmic visibility as forms of external validation that significantly influenced their content creation and self-perception.

This metric-driven feedback system created what participants described as "numbers anxiety"—persistent concern about performance indicators that affected both content strategy and personal well-being. The unpredictability of algorithmic systems created additional stress, with participants reporting feelings of helplessness when their content failed to achieve expected engagement levels.

### ***Theme 4: Commodified Relationships and Parasocial Intimacy***

The influencer model transforms social relationships into potential economic resources through the monetization of audience connection. Participants described complex negotiations between genuine relationship building and strategic audience development, often struggling to maintain authentic connections while pursuing growth and monetization opportunities.

This commodification of relationship extended to personal networks, with participants reporting changes in friendships and family relationships as their social media presence grew. Some described feeling pressure to involve friends and family in content creation or to present relationships in ways that served their personal brand rather than authentic connection.

## **Discussion**

The findings from this research reveal influencer culture as a sophisticated manifestation of neoliberal rationality that extends market logic deep into personal identity formation and social relationships. The phenomenon represents more than a new form of marketing or

entertainment; it constitutes a fundamental transformation in how individuals understand themselves and their possibilities within contemporary capitalism.

### **The Neoliberal Subject and Entrepreneurial Selfhood**

The data demonstrates how influencer culture embodies what Foucault (2008) described as the neoliberal transformation of individuals into "human capital"—resources that must be constantly optimized for market success. The entrepreneurial framing of personal identity evident in participant interviews reflects a broader shift toward treating the self as a business enterprise requiring strategic planning, performance optimization, and continuous improvement.

This entrepreneurial selfhood operates through what Rose (1999) terms "technologies of the self"—practices through which individuals shape their own subjectivity according to expert knowledge and normative standards. Social media platforms provide the technological infrastructure for these self-technologies, offering metrics, analytics, and algorithmic feedback that enable constant self-monitoring and optimization.

The psychological consequences of this entrepreneurial self-project are significant. Participants reported high levels of anxiety, perfectionism, and identity confusion as they struggled to maintain authentic selfhood while optimizing their personal brands. This aligns with broader research on neoliberal subjectivity that identifies increased mental health challenges as individuals bear responsibility for structural inequalities and market failures (Cederström & Spicer, 2015).

### **The Commodification of Authenticity**

Perhaps the most sophisticated aspect of influencer culture is its commodification of authenticity itself. Unlike traditional marketing that clearly distinguished between commercial and personal communication, influencer culture profits from the appearance of genuine, unmediated self-expression. This creates what we term "authentic performance"—carefully curated presentations of genuine selfhood designed to generate economic value.

The commodification of authenticity creates profound tensions for individuals who must simultaneously be genuine and strategic, authentic and optimized. The emotional labor required to maintain this balance is significant and largely invisible, reflecting broader patterns of gendered labor in the digital economy (Hochschild, 1983). Women participants particularly described pressure to perform emotional availability and vulnerability while maintaining professional boundaries and personal privacy.

This commodified authenticity also transforms the nature of social relationships, converting interpersonal connection into potential economic resources. The parasocial relationships that

form between influencers and audiences create intimacy that serves commercial rather than relational purposes, potentially undermining the social bonds that provide meaning and support in human life.

### **Disciplinary Mechanisms and Algorithmic Governance**

Social media platforms operate as sophisticated disciplinary systems that shape behavior through algorithmic feedback and metric visibility. The constant availability of engagement data creates what Cheney-Lippold (2017) terms "algorithmic identity"—selfhood that is continuously modulated based on data feedback rather than internal reflection or social interaction.

The unpredictability of algorithmic systems creates additional forms of precarity for influencers whose economic prospects depend on platform visibility. This algorithmic governance operates as a form of what Deleuze (1992) called "control society"—power that operates through continuous modulation rather than disciplinary confinement. Influencers must constantly adapt their content and presentation to maintain algorithmic favor, creating persistent uncertainty and self-surveillance.

The psychological impact of this algorithmic governance is significant, with participants reporting anxiety, depression, and identity confusion related to metric performance. The externalization of self-worth through engagement data reflects broader patterns of neoliberal subjectification that tie individual value to market performance rather than intrinsic worth or social contribution.

### **Resistance and Alternative Possibilities**

Despite the pervasive influence of neoliberal rationality in influencer culture, the research also identified forms of resistance and alternative possibilities. Some participants described strategies for maintaining authentic self-expression while engaging with social media platforms, including setting boundaries around content creation, prioritizing genuine relationship building over growth metrics, and developing critical awareness of platform manipulation.

The former influencer participants provided particularly valuable insights into possibilities for resistance. Many described leaving influencer careers due to the psychological toll of constant self-optimization and the commodification of personal relationships. Their experiences suggest that withdrawal from the influencer economy can be a form of resistance to neoliberal subjectification, though this strategy is primarily available to those with alternative economic resources.

Some current influencers described developing what they termed "conscious content creation"—approaches that prioritize authentic self-expression and social contribution over engagement optimization. These practices suggest possibilities for using social media platforms in ways that resist commodification while maintaining genuine connection and creative expression.

### **Implications and Future Research**

The findings from this research have important implications for understanding contemporary digital culture and its relationship to broader economic and political structures. The influencer phenomenon represents a particularly clear example of how neoliberal rationality colonizes intimate aspects of human experience, transforming personal identity, creativity, and social relationships into market resources.

### **Policy Implications**

The research suggests several areas where policy intervention might address the most harmful aspects of influencer culture. Platform regulation could require greater transparency about algorithmic systems and their impact on user behavior, while advertising standards could better distinguish between commercial and personal content. Mental health support specifically designed for content creators could address the psychological consequences of treating personal identity as a commodity.

Educational initiatives could help young people develop critical media literacy skills that enable them to engage with social media platforms without succumbing to their most manipulative features. This might include understanding how algorithmic systems work, recognizing commercial manipulation, and developing healthy boundaries around online self-presentation.

### **Theoretical Contributions**

This research contributes to sociological understanding of neoliberalism by examining how market rationality penetrates intimate aspects of personal identity and social relationships. The concept of "performed authenticity" extends existing work on emotional labor and self-commodification by showing how genuineness itself becomes a marketable resource.

The analysis of algorithmic governance contributes to digital sociology by demonstrating how platform systems operate as sophisticated disciplinary mechanisms that shape subjectivity through data feedback. This extends Foucauldian analysis of governmentality into contemporary digital contexts and reveals new forms of power that operate through voluntary self-surveillance.

### **Future Research Directions**

Several areas warrant further investigation. Longitudinal studies could examine the long-term psychological and social consequences of sustained engagement with influencer culture, particularly for young people who develop their identities within these systems. Cross-cultural research could explore how influencer culture operates differently across cultural contexts with varying relationships to individualism and market logic.

Research on resistance practices could identify more effective strategies for maintaining authentic self-expression while engaging with social media platforms. This might include examining alternative platforms, community-based content creation, and other models that prioritize social connection over commercial optimization.

Finally, research on the broader economic structure of the attention economy could reveal how platform capitalism appropriates user labor and identify possibilities for more equitable distribution of the value created through digital content creation.

### **Conclusion**

Influencer culture represents a sophisticated form of neoliberal governance that transforms personal identity into a commodity while obscuring the structural inequalities that determine success in the attention economy. Through the analysis of content strategies, survey data, and in-depth interviews, this research reveals how social media platforms create technological infrastructure for entrepreneurial selfhood that extends market logic into the most intimate aspects of human experience.

The commodification of authenticity creates particularly troubling consequences for individual well-being and social relationships. The emotional labor required to maintain performed authenticity while pursuing economic success through personal branding creates psychological stress and identity confusion that reflect broader patterns of neoliberal subjectification. The transformation of social relationships into potential economic resources undermines the social bonds that provide meaning and support in human life.

However, the research also identifies possibilities for resistance and alternative approaches to digital selfhood. Some individuals successfully maintain authentic self-expression while engaging with social media platforms, while others find liberation through withdrawal from the influencer economy. These practices suggest that neoliberal rationality, while pervasive, is not inevitable and can be challenged through individual and collective action.

Understanding influencer culture as a manifestation of neoliberal governance is crucial for developing critical responses to contemporary digital capitalism. As increasing numbers of young people aspire to careers as content creators and social media platforms become central

to social interaction, the lessons from this research become increasingly important for both individual well-being and collective social analysis. The challenge is to develop forms of digital connection that support human flourishing rather than reducing personal identity to market value.

The emergence of influencer culture signals a critical moment in the evolution of capitalism and its relationship to human subjectivity. How societies respond to this phenomenon will shape the possibilities for authentic self-expression, meaningful social connection, and individual autonomy in an increasingly connected world. The stakes of this response extend far beyond social media marketing to encompass fundamental questions about human dignity, social solidarity, and the kind of society we wish to create and inhabit.

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