THE INTIMACY TRIPLE BIND: STRUCTURAL INEQUALITIES AND RELATIONAL LABOUR IN THE INFLUENCER INDUSTRY

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Introduction

The work of content creators, or influencers, bears many of the hallmarks of creative labour that have been identified by researchers of the Creative and Cultural Industries going back three decades. And yet, their work is also shaped by novel formations, concerns, and challenges, which require critical scrutiny. Not confronted with the usual gatekeepers of legacy industries determining their suitability for opportunities and setting the disciplinary boundaries of their labour—line managers, commissioning editors, executive producers, directors—the careers of content creators in the influencer industry instead live or die by their ability to directly cultivate and maintain an invested audience-community. To this end, as many scholars have noted, they are encouraged to commodify their personalities, lives and tastes, building 'authentic' self-brands, appealing on-screen personas, and intimacy with audiences (for example, Abidin, 2015; Baym, 2018; Bishop, 2018; Cunningham and Craig, 2017; Duffy, 2017; Duguay, 2019; Glatt and Banet-Weiser, 2021; Raun, 2018). Nancy Baym develops the concept of *relational labour* to describe this phenomenon in the context of musicians and their fans, defined as the 'ongoing, interactive, affective, material, and cognitive work of communicating with people over time to create structures that can support continued work' (2018: 19). Any analysis of relational labour must be also understood in terms of the relational boundaries that creators put in place, as they attempt to strike a balance between closeness and distance, and between work and life (Baym, 2018).

Whilst it is well established in the literature that content creators are required to practice relational labour, there is a lack of attention paid to the unequal distribution of the tolls that managing these audience relationships can take. Drawing on a longitudinal ethnographic study of the London influencer industry (2017-2023), this paper examines relational labour through an intersectional feminist lens, foregrounding the ways in which structural inequalities shape relationships between creators and their audiences. Situating this article within the broader context of the structural inequalities that mark labour in the influencer industry, this article seeks builds a dialogue between two

seemingly disparate bodies of work: influencers' relational labour, on the one hand, and the proliferation of what has variously been termed "toxic technocultures" (Massanari, 2017), "misogynoir" (Bailey, 2010), and "networked misogyny" (Banet-Weiser and Miltner, 2016), on the other. I suggest that the imperative of relational labour and the flourishing of hate and harassment towards marginalised groups can—and indeed should—be thought together productively in the context of the influencer industry, as both concern the ways in which affect, pleasurable and painful, circulates between content creators and their audiences.

Methods

This research is ethnographically grounded. The data presented stems from a six-year research project interrogating precarity and inequality for London-based content creators working in the influencer industry (2017-2023), with the wider aim to address the platformisation of creative labour. This involved a number of complimentary methods: (1) offline participant observation at key industry events (VidCon London and L.A., Summer in the City), as well as formal and informal content creator meet-ups and events; (2) online participant observation of content creator/influencer culture across a wide range of social media platforms (YouTube, TikTok, Twitch, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, personal blogs, and so on); (3) in-depth semi-structured interviews with 30 London-based content creators; and (4) autoethnographic research in the form of becoming a YouTube creator myself, with the aim of gaining first-hand experiential insights into the nature of content creator labour.

The research has encompassed a wide spectrum of entrepreneurial creators, from attending London Small YouTubers meetings, a community organization for small creators (<20,000 subscribers) carrying out seemingly endless free "aspirational labour" (Duffy, 2017: x), to "deep hanging out" (Geertz, 1998) in various green rooms and highly secured hotel bars at major industry events with elite A-list influencers. Interviewees represented diverse identity categories (in terms of gender, race, sexuality, class and ability), worked across a wide variety of prominent and niche genres, and encompassed both full-time and hobbyist creators, ranging from a single solitary subscriber (myself) to 2.2 million.

Findings

I found that creators from historically marginalised groups, as well as those in content verticals less commensurate with neoliberal "advertiser friendly" culture, face complex systemic technological, sociocultural and commercial exclusions that result in a greater reliance on crowdfunding for financial support. These creators thus find themselves stuck in what I call the *intimacy triple bind*: already at higher risk of trolling and harassment, yet under increased pressure to perform relational labour, which adversely opens them up to further harms. Thus, this article dovetails with recent scholarship that strives to understand the relationship between the requisite career visibility and the resultant public scrutiny, hate and harassment that is par for the course for influencers, "all of which are exacerbated for women, communities of color, and the LGBTQIA community" (Duffy, Miltner and Wahlstedt, 2022: 1661).

The analysis identifies four key practices that marginalised creators employ in their attempts to manage relational boundaries with both friendly and hostile audiences: (1) leaning into *making* rather than *being* content; (2) (dis)engagement with anti-fans through *silence*; (3) retreating into *private community spaces*, away from the exposure of public platforms; and, in parallel, (4) *turning off public comments*.

Findings highlight the individualisation of risk and harm as a structural norm in the influencer industry, raising serious questions about the lack of accountability and responsibility that platforms show towards the creators who generate profit for them. Through studying practices of relational labour and boundary setting, it became clear that despite the "visibility mandate" (Duffy and Hund, 2019) that structures the influencer industry, many of the tactics that marginalised creators employ involve some sort of *retreat*: away from confrontation, away from virality, away from the public Internet, or away from audiences altogether.

The influencer industry, far from being the bastion of diversity and meritocracy where "anyone can make it" as a creator if they just have enough talent, determination, and an entrepreneurial spirit, is often an incredibly hostile environment for these creators, especially those who make content less commensurate with the interests of advertisers, as they are hit from all sides by economic, emotional and technological hurdles.

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