UNFREE; INDENTURED; INFLUENCER

Elisha Lim
York University

Unfree Migrant Labour In Singapore

In Singapore, Foreign Domestic Workers (FDWs) experience conditions of unfree indenture and intersecting marginalization. These workers lack safe and restful working conditions, decent wages, privacy, and labor rights protection against over-surveillance and workplace violence. Erasure from civil society representation adds to the group's invisibility. Since 2020 I have collaborated with Satveer Kaur-Gill and Krittiya Kantachote to study how foreign domestic workers use TikTok to balance visibility and expressions of sexuality as a political strategy despite its hypervisibility and potentially increased surveillance. Despite the many oppressive limitations faced by this group, our study shows that they are nevertheless active on the platform as a group of aspiring influencers.

This paper considers how the reality of "influencers" who are "unfree" challenges social media studies' assumptions about what, and who, is a "content creator" or "influencer." I conduct a walkthrough of the TikTok advertising interface, in order to understand how FDWs adapt to the platform's environment of expected use (Light et al, 2018).

What *really* is an Influencer?

Like all social media platforms, TikTok's revenue model sets the standards for exactly how aspiring influencers must behave and discipline their forms of expression, in order to gain visibility on the platform. TikTok revenue comes from showing ads to people based on their specific tastes. Advertisers look at an interface called Ads Manager, where the platform offers categories of user tastes based on the kinds of videos that they tend to watch, and thus the kinds of ads they might be susceptible to.

TikTok's 28 categories of potential tastes in ads are based on what kind of creators users follow uploaded content, and how users interact with them, for example, how long they watch or repeat or like or share videos. For You Page recommendations are designed to confirm these categories; not content that is popular, but content that confirms or updates its 28 ad customer categories. In this way, TikTok advertising sets the standards for exactly how aspiring influencers must behave and discipline their forms of expression in order to be promoted.

Because these ad categories are the platform's source of revenue, this is its priority. For example if a user sees a lot of videos about "Home Improvement," it's not because these videos are the most popular or authoritative or feature the most attractive creators; it's because these are the videos that most accurately confirm potential customers for ads about Home Improvement (Chun, 2021; Lim, 2020).

However 28 categories are very few categories compared to competitors, for example, Facebook or Instagram which have over 9 million categories designed to narrow down customer tastes. For example, Instagram users could be targeted by subjects that they or their friends have shown interest in, as specific as, for example "credit cards / credit finance / credit history," once an advertiser selects that as a user interest, they are offered even more refined suggestions like Loans or Personal Finance or Line of Credit. That option will drill down to an even more specific suggestion like refinancing / pre-qualification (lending)" / etc). Meanwhile on TikTok, the targeting remains relatively broad. For example the most specific that an advertiser can target is an umbrella category called "finance services which drills down to credit bureaus,"

Tiktok ads manager does not offer any further suggestions, there is no drill down menu. Instead there are only 28 rather broad categories. TikTok's recommender algorithms serve up much less specific targeting and less controversial content. This might explain why users often describe the eerie way that TikTok seems to guess their tastes. TikTok content is much less targeted and exposes users to broader options, while Instagram serves a repetition of the same razor sharp interests based on past selections and friends' selections.

Also unlike Instagram or Twitter, TikTok does NOT allow politics. Ads Manager includes a warning against Special Ad Categories. Quote "Declare if your ads are related to credit, employment or housing, or about social issues, elections or politics. Requirements differ by country." TikTok's specific Ad policies differ by region. For the FDWs that we studied for example, like any Southeast Asian users, would not be allowed to post content related to beauty and cosmetic services, or weight loss, or contraceptives, or religion – as just some examples – this content would be removed by moderators. TikTok users may not be aware of these policies but avid users intuit which content is promoted, or not, or removed altogether.

In other words, to be visible on any social media platform, users learn to create posts that align with the platforms' revenue models and rules. On Tiktok, these revenue models fall into relatively broad marketing categories.

For the aspiring influencers that we studied, TikTok is thus an easier platform for entry, but on the other hand presents some stricter limitations. It is easier entry for 3 reasons: 1) content only needs to consistently appeal to one of the 28 broad categories of user interests. 2) TikTok influence does not require large friend networks because unlike facebook, posts are not promoted based on friend tastes; 3) in order to harness algorithmic traction, content does not compete with material related to politics, economy, civil or social rights issues, which FDW would rarely be able to post about anyways given their oppressive conditions.

On the other hand, these "advantages" promote marketable behavior, but exacerbate the very problems these FDWs face, giving them little chance of sustaining platform influence if they attempted to draw attention to the extreme exploitation they face. Like all aspiring influencers, they must align their content with strictly marketable material.

Our study reveals a world of aspiring influencers that raises questions about the current conceptualization of culture in communication studies. The FDWs that we studied in Southeast Asia are subject to soft violence that always stifles their enactments of cultural freedom. This includes limits of how they can access mobile phones and when they can, they are subject to time limitations; and sometimes its also screened by their employers. These FDWs are denied human rights, free speech, personal privacy, legal recourse or any other requirements for building or retaining social capital. However in communication studies these qualities are often taken for granted as a given that all users have and deserve to protect.

We have studied a subaltern group that, despite their lack of freedom or personal privacy, nevertheless aspires to influence. This paradox confronts the underlying assumptions of influence itself. We are not concerned with inclusion as charity. We are concerned with a more accurate picture of the social media landscape than the field of commnications currently depicts. We offer our research so that this picture can avoid narrow hegemonic formations.

The study of these unfree laborers on TikTok reveals some of the unconscious bias in the field around the presumed subject position of a 'creative' or 'cultural producer'. How do Western scholars manifest an ideal user? How does this naturalize ideologies of individuated social capital? What are scholarly preconceptions of social media "activism" and "social justice"? To conclude with a quote by Gayatri Spivak: what does the study of subalternity represent about ourselves? How can our analysis confront the ""artificial" to begin with-"economic conditions of existence that separate their mode of life" (p.277)?

References

"Ads Manager" Facebook website.

"Ads Manager" Tiktok website.

Chun, W. H. K. (2021). Discriminating data: Correlation, neighborhoods, and the new politics of recognition. MIT press.

Light, B., Burgess, J., & Duguay, S. (2018). The walkthrough method: An approach to the study of apps. New media & society, 20(3), 881-900.

Lim, E. (2021). Personal identity economics: Facebook and the distortion of identity politics. Social Media + Society, 7(2), 20563051211017492.

Parreñas, R. S. and K. Kantachote. 2021. "Negotiating indenture: migrant domestic work and temporary labor migration in Singapore." In Precarity and Belonging,pp. 145-160. Rutgers University Press.

"Privacy Policy" TikTok website. https://www.tiktok.com/legal/page/row/privacy-policy/en

Spivak, G. C. (2023). Can the subaltern speak?. In Imperialism (pp. 171-219). Routledge.

Yeoh B and Annadhurai K (2008) Civil society action and the creation of 'transformative' spaces for migrant domestic workers in Singapore. Women's Studies 37(5): 548–569