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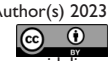

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Influencer creep: How artists strategically navigate the platformisation of art worlds

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Abstract

This article uses qualitative empirical research to explore the ways that Instagram has shaped both artistic labour and artistic practice. I draw from sociological perspectives on art worlds, critical platformisation literature and feminist cultural studies to argue that influencer cultures have originated key social practices that now animate creative labour more broadly. This process is defined as influencer creep. Influencer creep has the following three key tenets – self-branding, optimisation and authenticity. The article shows how artists draw from self-branding techniques rooted within influencer cultures, take up strategic techniques of algorithmic optimisation and share more of their authentic (yet highly stylised) selves online. I conclude that influencer creep has generated accelerated demands to consistently perform and maintain an artistic identity across social media platforms, which deepens well-documented existing inequalities in cultural and creative work.

Keywords

Algorithms, art worlds, authenticity, creative labour, social media platforms

This article examines the growing role that Instagram plays within contemporary art worlds. Art worlds are defined as spaces of joint activity, which collectively facilitate artistic production, support audience development and enable the cultivation of income (Becker, 2008). The actors and institutions involved in art worlds shape the art objects that are produced, and the works assigned aesthetic value. In short, 'art works always

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bear the marks of the system that distributes them' (Becker, 2008: 94). Historically, the study of art worlds has included intermediaries such as galleries, art dealers and critics (e.g. Bourdieu, 1985; DiMaggio, 1987; Gerber, 2017; Menger, 2014). Building on these valuable works, I argue that attention to intermediaries should be expanded outwards to reflect changes wrought by the 'platformisation' of creative economies – namely the 'penetration of digital platforms' economic, infrastructural, and government extensions into the cultural industries' (Poell et al., 2022: 5). Attention to forms of platformisation counters the ways that social media platforms have long been lauded as opportunities for democratic participation (Gillespie, 2010). Instead, platformisation captures the way in which platforms shape institutional logics, cultural production and creative practices.

Instagram was founded in 2010 and purchased by Facebook (now Meta) in 2012. Launched as a photo-sharing app, Instagram originally enabled users to share their mobile phone snaps, tinged with a retro-photography style filter. In the decade since, Instagram has become a platform for interaction, communication and culture with its own aesthetics and practices (Leaver et al., 2020). While Instagram remains primarily a photography platform, its norms hinge on the personal – the documentation of the self. These norms are underscored by the archetypal Instagram user – the influencer (Abidin, 2013; Leaver et al., 2020). Influencers are defined as ostensibly ordinary platform users who accrue followings on social media via 'authentic' (yet stylised) coverage of their everyday lives. In part due to influencer culture's association with commerciality, 'influencer' is a gendered term invoking the feminine (Hund, 2023) – influencers are 'dismissed as frivolous because they use self-representations in part to sell products' (Bishop, 2021: 1).

In this article, I argue that influencer cultures have originated key social and cultural practices within creative labour – a process I define as influencer creep. The phrase mission creep describes how a campaign's objectives gradually expand until they entail unanticipated and boundless commitment beyond its original objectives and scope. We might likewise call the expansion of microcelebrity promotional practices influencer creep, both for how influencing creeps into more forms of work and for how it creeps further into the lives of workers. Norms and practices that have been established within influencer culture have 'crept' out into art worlds, and creative work, more broadly. Attending to influencer culture is particularly instructive as success in these markets is contingent on social media visibility (Cotter, 2019; Duffy and Hund, 2019). Influencers have developed and formalised strategies for garnering visibility on social media platforms, which are a taken up by artists, and likely by workers more broadly.

Influencer creep has the following three key tenets – self-branding, optimisation and a performance of authenticity. Attending to self-branding reveals the introduction of promotional norms and practices into artwork that are rooted in influencer cultures. Specifically, this includes the inclusion of the self in promotional content, and maintaining a consistently upbeat emotional performance across social media platforms. Second, as platform users par excellence, influencers have set standards related to optimisation. Through their daily negotiation of social media platforms, influencers develop a body of expertise in how to successfully work within this 'opaque' ecosystem (Bishop, 2019; Cotter, 2019; Duffy and Meisner, 2023). Artists have also taken up these tests, trials and techniques to anticipate and maintain platform visibility. Finally, a closer study of

influencer work can support an understanding of the cultural expectations for artists to share more and more of their 'authentic' selves on social media platforms. Content must be aspirational and commercially viable, while also conveying a convincing emotional performance that it comes from within an influencers' genuine self. Considering these tenets of influencer creep, the expectation to maintain visibility creates and sustains a pervasive atmosphere of anxiety for influencers, artists and beyond.

In defining artists, I have focussed on those who engage in the 'construction and maintenance of an artistic identity' (Bain, 2005: 34) within a range of artistic practices, including ceramics, illustration, metalwork and textiles. I have not distinguished between those engaged in 'art' or 'craft' occupations. Instead, I align myself with Becker's (1978) useful heuristic of art and craft as 'folk categories' that are used contextually, with their own 'ambiguities and contradictions' (p. 863). Similarly, I have not attempted to interrogate messy lines between 'commercial' and 'fine' art (Becker, 1978). Self-identification as an artist is often contingent on embeddedness within artistic networks – these are highly classed, raced and gendered (Lena and Lindemann, 2014). With these reflections in mind, I recruited my participants based on the criteria that they garnered income from selling art objects, and maintained a social media presence related to these activities.

This project arose from my wider study of women and non-binary artists' experiences of navigating social media platforms, which is informed long-standing feminist works on gendered inequality in creative work (Brook et al., 2020; McRobbie, 2015; Scharff, 2018) and studies of feminised digital entrepreneurship (Naudin and Patel, 2019; Sobande, 2020). Social media platforms impel women towards entrepreneurial opportunity. For example, the 'craft' ecommerce company Etsy published a report in 2020 describing the platform as an 'on-ramp to female entrepreneurship' (Etsy, 2020) in which 83% of sellers are women. However, the platform-sponsored discourse extolling successful female entrepreneurship is countered by a sobering backdrop of research documenting inequalities in creative entrepreneurship, as women are less able to claim artistic identities (Bain, 2004, 2005; Gill, 2010). In art worlds, women struggle to make their creative processes, skill and expertise visible (Naudin and Patel, 2019; Patel, 2022). In this vein, I argue that the stakes of influencer creep are higher for women as the influencer industry epitomises 'longstanding tropes' that 'women are primarily consumers and that using social media is for fun and not work' (Hund, 2023: 32). In its association with the frivolous and the personal influencer creep corrodes valuations of expertise and craft that are crucial to art worlds – valuations which are particularly struggled over by women.

In this article, I draw attention to the novel role that Instagram plays in facilitating the distribution and promotion of art works, in addition to networking and career advancement. I first outline my method and approach to the study. I then review the three tenets of influencer creep: self-branding, optimisation and authenticity. In each section, I draw on the sociology of art worlds, critical literature on platformisation and feminist cultural studies. I synthesise these valuable works with analysis of data collected from a digital ethnography of UK art worlds and interviews with 25 female and non-binary artists conducted between 2020 and 2022. In doing so, I argue that influencer creep into art worlds materially shapes art work, production and distribution for artists. Moreover, influencer creep has generated accelerated demands to consistently perform and maintain an artistic

identity across social media platforms, which may well contribute to and deepen well-documented existing inequalities in cultural and creative work.

Method

I began fieldwork for the project by engaging in a digital ethnography of UK art worlds on Instagram. I followed 100 UK artists and makers who had a public social media profile and participated in commercial art activities such as selling work through an online store, participating in art markets or inviting commissions. Artistic practices included ceramics, illustration, metal work and textile art. While my research questions focus on the experience of women and non-binary people, it was impractical to assess the gender of artists from their Instagram presence. Thus, in my digital ethnography, I followed artists of all genders. To research the political economic context of art worlds, I also followed upwards of 50 intermediary organisations on Instagram such as galleries, markets and art stores. I took detailed field notes related to my research questions, in addition to screen grabs of posts and ephemeral content for a period of 1 year.

Following algorithmic recommendations on social media platforms replicates the gender and race biases exacerbated by these socio-technical systems (Noble, 2018) and makes it challenging to find individuals who are 'below the radar', who are more likely to be from historically marginalised identities (Abidin, 2021). I sought to build a more holistic representation of UK art worlds by looking beyond my top algorithmic recommendations. I scrutinised the artists supported by galleries, stocked in shops and markets, and were followed by other artists in my sample. I did not maintain criteria for follower numbers. My ethnography supported an overall understanding of how UK art worlds function on social media platforms. This work 'ethnographically informed' (Abidin, 2017) the following interview stage, by supporting a clearer understanding 'colloquial terminology', 'social norms' and to identify the nuanced operations of UK art worlds on Instagram (Abidin, 2013: 3).

In the second stage of data collection, I contacted artists to invite them to interview. In total, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 25 UK-based artists who self-identified as either non-binary or female, all over Zoom. Interviews focused on artistic practice, promotional strategies, and experiences of Instagram. I did not ask artists to identify their race or class position, although participants did frequently discuss these themes in interviews. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were recorded and fully transcribed. I read the transcripts several times to identify and refine themes – in this sense, 'analysis and interpretation became part of the process of research' (Gray, 2002: 133).

Following digital ethnographers Postill and Pink (2012), my approach'[engaged] with internet practices and content directly, but not exclusively' (p. 3) – my ethnographic research and interview data came together within a 'messy web' of online and offline ethnographic research sites. In this sense, I drew from a corpus of ethnographic field notes, screen grabs and interview transcripts to identify themes important to my research – examples included 'backstage', 'expertise' or 'algorithms'. I also investigated Instagram posts as images with their own forms 'story-telling and meaning-making', bearing in mind the particular contextual information enlightened by platform features

and affordances – for example, image captions and temporary images (Highfield and Leaver, 2016: 53). I analysed collected content against an informed backdrop of literature related to self-branding, optimisation and authenticity.

Influencer creep and self-branding

Each of my research participants engaged in self-branding practices, defined as the 'self-conscious construction of a meta-narrative and meta-image of the self' (Hearn, 2008: 198). Early work on self-branding emphasises these practices as an integral self-presentation strategy for 'all areas of human life', particularly in trends towards entrepreneurial workplace cultures within 'global flexible capital' (Hearn, 2008: 213). Self-branding practices include developing a unique selling point, the savvy negotiation of opportunities for exposure, and consistent promotion of oneself and ones work (Khamis et al., 2017). The concept of self-branding dovetailed with the growth of 'microcelebrity' practices – in which users '[amp up] their popularity over the web' (Senft, 2008: 25) and present 'oneself as a celebrity regardless of who is paying attention' (Marwick, 2013: 114). Over time, microcelebrity practices have become formalised and professionalised within influencer economies (Hearn and Schoenhoff, 2015). Influencers have thus become self-branders par excellence, as their work involves pastiching visual and textual cues online to build a consistent brand. Creative workers have also long been impelled to build coherent persona to promote their work. Artists may use consistent visual language within their work, and augment this within interviews, artists' talks and published text (Schroeder, 2005). Such requirements have been deepened by entrepreneurial turn wrought by global declines in arts funding (Sjöholm and Pasquinelli, 2014). Adding to these pressures, I argue that two specific self-branding practices have been developed and sharpened within influencer economies; inclusion of the self in promotional content and a consistently upbeat emotional performance.

First, artists felt a mounting pressure to include images of themselves in their visual online promotion. Self-portraiture ('selfies') was a key theme in interviews, framed as an important audience growth strategy. Maye, a silversmith said, 'I've found that ones that have nothing to do with my jewellery get loads of engagement, if they have my face in them. And I hate showing my face . . . I just don't like it'. Similarly, Klara, a textile artist, said, 'I've also modelled my own stuff a bit more lately because that gets a lot more engagement . . . I think, I have to force myself to be there, more present'. Annie, also a silversmith, echoed this sentiment 'consistently I find if I share posts with myself wearing something [I get more engagement] which is something I was quite averse to do initially because I just don't like necessarily being on camera'. Artists described frustration with (what they saw) as a need to include images of themselves in their content strategy.

Scholars of creative industries have shown that self-promotion in women is often perceived more negatively than similar entrepreneurial activities for men (Duffy, 2017; Scharff, 2018). It is unsurprising, then, that female artists felt frustrated with a drive towards diverting their time towards engaging with self-branding practices stereotypically associated with influencers. As Lucilla noted,

> I'm quite a private person, so I don't like the whole, 'hi, guys', do you know what I mean? I'm going to be 42 next year. And it makes me feel a bit like I have to be someone I'm not.

Lucilla's caustic use of the quote 'hi guys' is a nod towards the peppy greeting used by (often female) content creators, as they welcome their audiences back to their channels. She felt 'behind' as she felt she came to Instagram 'later' than her peers. Yet, Lucilla felt unable to withdraw from the mandate to share herself in her social media strategy – including her face on Instagram was one of the only ways to directly reach an audience and avoid selling her work through other stockists (who take a commission). For many artists, Instagram offered an essential pathway to income generation and a sustainable career.

The stakes of self-branding within influencer creep are particularly high for female artists who have historically been discounted as 'real artists', instead being frequently stereotyped as hobbyists (Bain, 2005: 33). Research shows that 'judgments of aesthetic quality by critics, peers, audiences, and support workers systematically devalue women' (Miller, 2016: 119). Importantly, valuations of artistic practice also 'focus disproportionately on women's appearance and sexuality' (Miller, 2016: 125). Indeed, feminist critics have found that women's artistic value can be augmented or undermined by a performance of hegemonic beauty, rather than skill or talent. Sharing themselves on Instagram augmented and deepened artists' connection with the personal, competing with the ability to communicate expertise, legitimacy and technical skill.

In these ways, influencer creep has accelerated and deepened existing pressures for creatives to hitch *themselves* even more closely to practice, which can unravel forms of legitimisation, and open opportunities for bias. This is particularly salient for marginalised artists when social media platforms have been found to propagate racial discrimination (Benjamin, 2019; Noble, 2018). For example, Ava discussed her experiences as a Black artist sharing her portraiture of Black women on Instagram

> This is going to sound really bad. When I post light-skinned Black girls the response is better. Yes . . . [Laughter] . . . But I try to put all the different shades and post . . . But even if you go through my posts you are going to see the ones who have more likes are the ones that are light-skinned.

While this relates to images of women in her work, such experiences shaped Ava's understanding of Instagram's regimes of racialised visibility. The increased visibility of images of lighter skinned women is likely a product of the algorithmic amplification of existing racism and colourism that are referred to as 'technological microaggressions' (Epps-Darling, 2020). Such systems facilitate the discrimination of women of colour through automated forms of (mis)identification and overzealous moderation that, together, reduces their visibility.

Research has shown the unequal platformed visibility contributes to inequality in influencer industries. When the ability to be seen is unevenly shaped by social media platforms, this leads to unequal opportunities for paid work. As Christin and Lu (2023) point out, 'influencers of color are less likely than white influencers to receive monetary compensation, they are more likely to do unpaid work' (p. 18). As creative workers

inherit the social media practices of influencers, it is likely they also assume the opportunities for discrimination within influencer industries – which dovetail with long-standing bias within UK creative industries (Patel, 2022; Sobande, 2020). Ava, for example, linked the uneven visibility of her work on Instagram to her experience of being a Black artist in the United Kingdom 'if you do not feel like you will be seen or listened to [you do not] even try, you know?' Ava's platformised experiences redoubled feelings of alienation and otherness that originated from her wider experiences of UK art worlds.

Self-branding is an affective practice – as Duffy (2017) points out there is a strong mandate towards maintaining a positive and upbeat persona within influencer economies, whatever challenges and risks are being faced. This point brings us to the second aspect of self-branding within influencer creep – building and maintaining positive emotional relationships with audiences. Scholars have drawn attention to the specifically feminised pressure to convey a sense of emotional authenticity within the highly commercial spaces of social media platforms (Banet-Weiser, 2021; Duffy and Hund, 2019). These works often emphasise the 'deep acting' (Hochschild, 2012) that influencers must engage in, in order to maintain upbeat, convincing, emotional performances – orientated towards followers, potential clients and the wider publics.

My research participants described the positive reaction they received from audiences when displaying public emotion. Participants described receiving the highest Instagram engagement when they discussed emotive topics such as anxiety, grief or unemployment. Dominique (a visual artist) told me that '[Instagram] rewards you for being quite emotionally slutty'. Dominique felt exigent pressure to perform for followers – she said,

> You feel like you get so caught up on it, having to turn up everyday and give this really lengthy, emotional speech about why you're doing what you doing and why you love it so much and the downs and the ups and the highs and the lows. And I found it, in the end, very emotionally draining.

As Sarah Banet-Weiser (2021) points out, authenticity labour requires maintaining commercial professionalism, in addition to 'failure, pressure, depression, tears, vulnerability' (p. 143). Importantly, and offering up a distinct challenge, such a performance must be crossed with consistency (Duffy, 2017). Some emotion is never enough; artists were required to offer up their affect convincingly and frequently.

Lily – who curates found art objects – offers a compelling example of the promises and limits of authenticity labour. She told me she posted about her experiences of redundancy, and how they led to the development of her business. Her upbeat (in her own words 'inspirational') post about her being laid off from her job was then picked by a women's style magazine, leading to inclusion in a list of 'pandemic entrepreneurs' – promoting her business to their readers. In the interview, Lily described the pressure of keeping up with her more successful posts, consistently performing convincing emotion in a way that would get attention:

> I have to constantly think about how to make things go viral, because that seems to be how I get more followers. I have to [do something different] to what I've done before – how am I going to make it pretty special?

Under the banner of influencer creep, pressures to self-brand are exacerbated by the always-on nature of social media and the growing number of platforms that must be engaged with. Not only do platform logics and cultures impel users to show include themselves in their content, artists become enrolled in the regimes of self-branding and visibility labour that were first developed by influencers to navigate similar platformised pressures towards visibility and legibility. Such pressures are compounded by a (paradoxical) drive towards maintain authenticity, which is discussed in the final section of this article.

Influencer cultures and optimisation

Optimisation strategies are not new to creative industries. Cultural production has long been shaped by the relationships between markets, economies and technological development (Peterson, 2013) and underscored by drives to maximise efficiency, minimise risk and ensure consistency (Saha, 2018). Specifically, standardisation in art worlds '[results] from what the system finds convenient to handle rather than from any independent choice made by the maker of an art work' (Becker, 2008: 128). Through the construction of stable genres, intermediaries support the 'routinisation and institutionalisation' of culture, and contribute to ensuring the 'potentially dynamic and provisional is made static and permanent' (Negus, 1999: 28). Optimising their work to sit comfortably within the boundaries of established genres thus becomes important for artists, as this offers important sense making for both consumers, and institutions affording the distribution of art (DiMaggio, 1987). Researchers have noted that optimisation in cultural industries involves engaging 'specific techniques, forms of legitimation, and subjectivities' (McKelvey and Neves, 2021: 79) including making content more 'searchable, discoverable, usable, and valuable' (Morris et al., 2021: 162). Creating the kinds of content that is (perceived to be) popular on Instagram may end up shaping artistic practice.

Many of the artists I interviewed compared their work to an ideal that would 'do well' on Instagram. Aoife, an illustrator, suggested that her particular style worked because it is 'very visual and colourful, and usually quite bold . . . [good for] the quick scrolling people do . . . It's not an intricate piece of jewellery'. Appropriately, jewellers remained more despondent about their experiences on Instagram, particularly in communicating fine work or the use of expensive materials. Cara, a weaver, described how the slow nature of her practice meant that she could not generate a repository of content to match her promotional strategy. She said, 'the rhythm [is an issue] . . . In order to make something you need a lot of time, which means it's not so attractive to like make videos or many new products easily'. To mitigate this, Cara mixed her posts with images she thought her audience would like, but she acknowledged this kind of content 'did worse' than the representation of her artistic practice.

Platform demands and cultures shape the embodied nature of artistic production. Herein, I focus on the example of one kind of content – 'time lapse videos' – namely, speeded up videos showing their artistic process as part of their online content strategy. Such videos were particularly popular for illustrators I interviewed, who can show how they build up a complex sketch in a single pithy Instagram post. This kind of content demanded a specific technological setup. Chloe used a camera attached to mechanical

'arm' to film her sketches, limiting how she was able to position her body when working. Celina, also an illustrator, described the specific challenges of this practice – 'I was doing a lot of time lapse, because of the kind of interaction and reach that they get. But it gets really difficult to draw. There is a camera on your head'. As platforms provide access to audiences, ensuring content fits their demands is essential for platform users – in this vein, illustrators believed that compelling content showing their artistic process would garner visibility on Instagram (Abidin, 2017; Duffy and Meisner, 2023). Balancing camera on ones' head has a material effect on movement and the way one sees the world. It alters the artistic process. Reflecting on this example, we can see that content creation practices shape art worlds in material ways. Thus, influencer creep can help us understand how cultural practices change in light of the pursuit of social media visibility.

Influencer creep folds a supplementary demand into pressures to optimise – the strategic negotiation of platforms which deliberately or practically obscure how their policies and coded architectures work publicly. The parlance of platforms as the 'black box' (Pasquale, 2015) reveals stark inequalities between social media companies and their users. Indeed, platforms may capriciously accelerate or limit the reach of individuals' content without disclosing why (Duffy and Meisner, 2023; Glatt, 2022). Indeed, as influencers' livelihoods are tied up in their platform engagement and audiences, they have been brought to the fore as proto-optimisers. Influencers were some of the first to experience the frustrations of platform opacity, and have responded by developing diverse approaches to negotiate it. Examples of influencer optimisation practices often entail understanding of the kinds of content that work well on social media platforms, and then creating content to meet these needs. They conduct research into the way algorithms work through strategic trials and tests (Cotter, 2019), develop theories and strategies about how to beat algorithms (Bishop, 2019) and attend a wide range of events dedicated to the topics of algorithmic recipes, and content optimisation (Bishop, 2020). Influencers have long 'encountered and work around' arrangements of platform 'labor, compensation and governance' in ways that foreshadow the experiences of creative practitioners more broadly (Caplan and Gillespie, 2020: 4).

Artists also engaged in algorithmic tests comparable to those developed by content creators, for example, to measure their algorithmic reach and audience engagement. Dani, a screen printer, conducted tests based on whether her Instagram account was registered as a 'personal' or 'business' account. Instagram business accounts are explicitly designed for use by commercial organisations and include features like post scheduling, audience analytics and shoppable links. While these features are beneficial, several research participants also cited drawbacks. Dani believed Meta hoped that commercial businesses would pay to reach audiences, and therefore reduced their 'free' algorithmic reach on business accounts. She had tested this theory – 'I would sign into Instagram from my personal account, even though I follow my business account nothing was showing'. After switching the account to a personal one, Dani realised that her growing screen-printing business did require some of the features that were exclusive to the business account (e.g. shopping functions), and switched back. Despite making the switch, she told me 'anecdotally we were getting more engagement' when using a personal account.

Algorithmic tests can be risky, as platforms frequently endeavour to punish those whose optimisation strategies they believe are 'cheating' or 'spam' (Petre et al., 2019).

Engaging in tests like the one outlined earlier led to anxiety and stress about the possibility of losing account access and the following artists had painstakingly built. For example, Lucilla (a ceramicist) told me that Instagram had deleted her business account shortly before our interview. She told me, 'they've changed some rules, some legal stuff. And because it didn't have a personal account connected to me [my business account] just disappeared. I tried to find help but there's no help on Instagram'. Lucilla's observations echo widespread complaints from influencers about the lack of support they receive from Instagram; platforms maintain complicated systems of governance that are complex and inscrutable to users.

Research participants relied on Instagram as a distributor within art worlds; access to their account was integral to their livelihood. Instagram represented networks with audiences (potential customers and income) in addition to potential visibility for 'traditional' creative intermediaries who may facilitate career advancement. For example, Klara (a textile artist) orientated her Instagram towards everyday audiences and the 'fashion promotion sphere'; Cara (a weaver) wanted to reach both audiences and top-tier interior designers and Chloe (an illustrator) oriented herself towards visibility for everyday audiences and commissioning editors. Managing an Instagram presence that both appealed to everyday clients and creative intermediaries brought challenges of 'context collapse' in which artists were impelled to navigate disparate audiences within a single online presence (Marwick and boyd, 2011). Thus, the centrality of Instagram also signposts towards the platformised creep of opportunities within art worlds more broadly.

Because of the central function of Instagram in selling directly to audiences, in addition to reaching professional intermediaries, the risks of losing access to the platform were acute. Chloe, an illustrator, said,

> quite a few friends of mine have had their Instagram deleted for no apparent reason . . . so I feel like if you're going to put all your eggs in one basket. In that way it can be quite distressing if that happens.

Chloe's quotes directly echoes the points raised in Glatt's (2022) ethnography of the YouTube creator industry in which framing platform dependency as putting all of your 'eggs in one basket' represents a 'deep-seated anxiety that a platform appears to be a pillar of the social media ecology can disappear overnight'(p. 12). Although artists are not platform-native creators, they are arguably just as platform-dependant for income generation as professional influencers are.

The atmosphere of anxiety about doing something wrong and jeopardising ones' position on social media – without explanation – represents a distinct layer of platform governance (Duffy and Meisner, 2023). In this sense, (like influencers) artists labour within what Bucher (2018) frames as a permanent 'threat of invisibility' (p. 66) – in which social media platforms maintain power through the capricious ways they architect what should and should not be seen. Lena (a knitwear designer) ended up not going through with the launch of a promotional campaign that she had worked hard (and paid significant upfront costs) to create, due to an error message when she tried to post it on Instagram. She said, 'I tried and then I got really worried my account was going to be deleted'. The risk of being in bad standing with Instagram could jeopardise the account

that artists worked hard to grow. The tandem features of platform dependency and platform opacity prompt a highly affective self-governing response.

Against a backdrop of platformised uncertainty, artists sought to create content oriented towards social media visibility – although they also complained that optimisation strategies made Instagram feel standardised and stagnant. Lucilla (a ceramicist) said, 'if you scroll fast enough it all blends into one. It's just got this structure that everyone is trying to tick the boxes'. Similarly Chloe (an illustrator) positioned her own practice in direct opposition to the activities of individuals that she described as – 'Instagram artists'. For Chloe, these individuals ostensibly had a totally different motivation to work; 'their whole practice is all about Instagram and creating work for Instagram'. Chloe believed what separated from these individuals was her lack of intentional engagement with social media platforms. Although she had 50,000 followers on Instagram at the time of the interview, (she was one of the most followed artists I interviewed) she told me was not explicitly trying to accrue followers. Chloe's distancing from optimisation strategies exemplifies the powerful lore of authenticity outlined in the following section and signals the juxtapositions located at the heart of influencer creep. Artists must *self-brand* as professional artists and craftspeople while garnering visibility on social media by engaging with influencer practices – practices negatively stereotyped as outside of the bounds of art and craft. Artists must consider and optimise work towards Instagram visibility while maintaining a practice and a reputation as an authentic artist.

Influencer cultures and authenticity

Authenticity remains a powerful social and cultural construct; although what is considered to be 'authentic' is often contextual, slippery and inextricable from areas of economic and cultural exchange (Banet-Weiser, 2012). In this vein, performances and perceptions of 'authentic culture' are mutable and contextual. Within influencer culture, the 'authenticity ideal' is specifically underscored by ordinariness (Duffy and Hund, 2019) and lack of ties to professional industries (Cunningham and Craig, 2018). Ordinariness is also underpinned by the requirement to be emotionally real; influencers must 'toe the line between visibility and vulnerability' (Duffy and Hund, 2019: 4985; Marwick and boyd, 2011). At its heart, influencer content is subject to an uncomfortable contradiction. Content must be aspirational and commercially viable, while also conveying a convincing emotional performance that it comes from within an influencers' genuine self.

The practical components of the authenticity ideal in art worlds diverge from the influencer authenticity framework outlined above. Within influencer culture, audiences are concerned that the creator in question is *really* ordinary and relatable. Within art worlds, there are additional concerns that a particular artist really its authentic creator. Benjamin (2008) argued that perceptions of authenticity in art are influenced by the conditions in which an object was made, the trajectories of ownership and its 'presence in time and space' (p. 3), observing a persistent fixation on authenticity and aura (the unique atmosphere of an object or text) in art worlds. The importance of aura stems from arts' origins in ritual and ceremony. Ultimately, what we know about an artist, and how the work was made, contributes to the aura of an art object. Artists draw from their personal

spaces of 'creation' (e.g. the studio), alongside the public gallery shows and exhibitions, to build a holistic brand identity (Sjjntit and Pasquinelli, 2014). In a competitive setting, artists' brands 'need to make sense immediately' (Gerber, 2017: 117). My participants strove to communicate their authentic connection to the artworks that they produced through publicly documenting their artistic process on Instagram. Influencer creep demands that workers build an original, yet consistent, identity performance across platforms, contexts and throughout the life course.

In interviews, artists cited the challenges of convincingly conveying the complexities of production, their training and their technical skills. For example, Chloe (an illustrator) noted that 'I think people don't even really know how I make my work, which is crazy because I spend so much time doing lino cutting which is so arduous'. Dani made a similar point: 'we screen print by hand . . . there's a tactical quality, and just a different quality to the way it looks in real life. That is sometimes a challenge to get across'. Both Chloe and Dani are impelled to present their work as digital images on Instagram. Documentation of artistic process had become a cornerstone of many of my participants' Instagram content. Patel (2020) describes this practice as 'staging the work', which allows artists to 'provide evidence of their creative knowledge and skills and demonstrate [their] creative process as work comes together' (p. 62). The constant drive to evidence the artistic process recalls Becker's (2008) argument that 'artists reputations are sum of the values we assign to the works that they have produced' (p. 23). The arguments above coalesce around the role of the artist authentically creating an 'original' artwork under 'authentic' artistic conditions. Handmade goods ultimately offer an opportunity for buyers to engage with the 'authentic' in an 'inauthentic world'; such objects offer a 'connection to the maker through the skill and learning apparent in their production' (Luckman, 2013: 254). Lena, a knitwear designer, told me that she created content of her making process to represent the technical skills and training that go into her work. She said, 'it's impossible to show the quality of a garment online. But you can obviously show that you're serious'.

Due to influencer creep, artists also felt compounded to post everyday content frequently and document highly personal snapshots from their backstage everyday life. Drawing from Goffman (1990: 19), scholars have identified the 'common techniques' used by influencers to 'project a definition of the situation' as originating from their authentic lives. For example, influencers offset fashion-focussed aspects of their everyday life with 'filler content' of housework or trips to the grocery store (Abidin, 2017). Artists I talked to also engaged in similar efforts to appear relatable. Fern (a ceramicist) noted, 'I try and make it a mixture of lovely lifestyle images, and something silly . . . I don't want it to seem like I live this constructed lifestyle'.

Within influencer creep, participants felt a pressure to build a convincing picture of their identity as an artist through the affordances of Instagram. To many, this meant representing their personal lives and their homes. One of my participants, Mary, is a weaver who had recently renovated her rural home, building a workshop designed to host talks and courses. Mary's practice involves a handloom – a portable machine designed to be used in the home with strong connotations of tradition (Patel, 2022). Hand looms also make the weaving process visually interesting, or even beautiful. Because of the aesthetic nature of her practice, Mary's home and practice have been featured in numerous

craft magazines and films. She said, 'the response I get from people about them and about all of that is, oh, I want a little bit of your life or, oh, your life looks so perfect'. Indeed – in its bohemian presentation, her studio represents aspirational example of living an artistic life (Bain, 2004). Mary's celebrated choice to return to glacial-placed practice of hand weaving is arguably underpinned by her whiteness. This reveals tensions between the production of craft in Europe and in the Global South where ' [hand weaving] is production technology that at best offers a precarious livelihood' (Mamidipudi, 2019: 242). The inequalities here shine attention onto a unique ability of some artists to *choose* to *represent* their craft in an aesthetic manner on social media and beyond.

Of course, not all artists had access to an aspirational backstage. There are deepened and renewed challenges in patchworking together an 'authentic' artistic identity when you do not (like Mary) have a linen-clad family located in a hand-built cottage-cum-studio within acres of pastoral countryside. As Fern put it:

> [there is a] reluctance to show that you are in Leicester on a ring road surrounded by pollution and rubbish. The reality of where we are all situated and the working standards that the kind of studio and building that we work with.

It is in this sense that artists' experiences of social media become highly uneven – communicating an aspirational identity negates resources and start-up costs that require financial, cultural and social capital. Pressures to convincingly portray a convincing and authentic depiction of the 'ideal type' artist shore intersecting inequalities in art worlds (Miller, 2016). The 'ideal' artist prioritises total commitment to their artistic endeavours, focuses on a highly developed single skill, and requires networking skills and self-confidence (Miller, 2016). These requirements become unsustainable in the face of caring responsibilities, a need to take on odd-jobs to support oneself and a lack of existing networks (Brook et al., 2020; Gill, 2011). Access to space as an artist – most importantly a studio – is also entwined with classed and geographic barriers (Bain, 2004).

While it is apparently a choice to include more of one's personal life in social media representation, the impact of influencer creep means that it is invariably a choice that has the promise of more social media engagement and thus greater financial reward and career sustainability. Like influencers, artists must develop and sustain boundaries with audiences – allowing them to feel close, while minimising personal vulnerability (Baym, 2018; Poell et al., 2022). To illustrate this point, we can turn to Celia (an illustrator), who described a recent interaction with an Instagram commenter:

> Someone commented on my last piece that I just did . . . where women are eating around a tile on the floor. And this lady commented . . . 'Oh, this is such an amazing custom found in the Bohri Indian community'. And I was like, 'I'm part of that community'. And she was like, 'Oh, my God'. I was like, 'I really don't want to talk about this on my comments, on Instagram'.

Celia found it challenging to navigate the promotion of her artwork (which is informed by her culture) while simultaneously dealing with audiences' (as she put) 'fascination' with this culture. Her experiences, and ambivalence, can be viewed as a product of the way that the political economy of cultural industries can reward the racialised

commodification of art works. Art worlds have 'racial logics structured into them that ensure that race is made in a consistent, reductive and homogenous fashion' (Saha, 2018: 128). This form of race-making can also be found within influencer culture, in which influencers of colour can be branded and niched according to their race, while whiteness is considered mainstream and invisible (Christin and Lu, 2023; Duffy, 2017; Sobande, 2020). The affordances of Instagram bake mandates towards authenticity into creative culture – influencer creep demands a deeper inclusion of the personal into promotion. Celia reflected on ambivalence of these pressures; 'I want people to be interested in the culture that I come from . . . I also want to keep my own privacy and I don't really want to be like a social media person with my face on every post'. As artists are impelled to share their 'backstage' platform economies fuse together the gaps between artists' practice and their personal lives leaving artists to re-draw and navigate boundaries related to their work hours, everyday lives and personal privacy.

Discussion and conclusion

This article has drawn attention to the growing role that Instagram plays as an intermediary within contemporary art worlds, and offers emerging observations of how this may shape artists' experiences and working practices. I have defined this process as influencer creep to highlight both the cultural dimensions of platformisation, and the specific role that professional platform users have played in shaping the cultural practices engaged in more broadly within creative and artistic work. I have outlined three cultural practices originating in influencer cultures which have been taken up by artists in the artistic labour and practice – self-branding, optimisation and authenticity.

The pressures that artists feel to self-brand and show the individual behind artistic practice on Instagram can be traced back to both platform affordances and cultural practices. Participants informed me they needed to include images of their face in their Instagram content, or document their highly emotional moments for two reasons. First, because it was what their audience wanted to see, but second, they were what they perceived the Instagram algorithm wanted them to do. Influencer creep shows that cultural practices are ultimately entangled with technical ones. The culture of platforms such as Instagram are launched by engineers and designers, but finessed and furthered by platform power users (Leaver et al., 2020). Influencers have made sense of the demands that the new platformed organisation of work place on creative workers and have provided a kind of playbook for how to keep up. Through a deepened mandate to include the self in social media content, influencer creep can deepen the inequalities that, particularly women of colour, have long experience in art worlds and creative industries.

Artists measure their practice against perceptions of what social media platforms 'want'. They engage in productive optimisation strategies that were originated within communities of professional platform users – artists conduct algorithmic tests, collaborate with colleagues and undertake research on competitors' strategies. Inspired by strategies launched and finessed by influencers, artists produce content because they perceive it will do 'well' on Instagram, even when this materially shapes their artistic practice. In this vein, optimisation for social media visibility ultimately influences 'offline' art worlds. Through the myriad optimisation practices engaged in by artists, we can see that

Instagram presence is crucial for the sustainability of artist business models. Artists are worried about losing access to their account, or risks of algorithmic punishment. These concerns reveal a highly uneven power relationship between artists and the monopoly social media platforms they must work within.

Finally, influencer creep adds an additional pressure to present one's authentic self on Instagram. Artists must document their authentic artistic process, while also performing an 'authentic' artistic identity. Artists felt pressure to represent their 'backstage' studio environment, technical skills and lifestyle. We may ask – who has the time, resources and means to forge and consistently perform an artistic identity across social media platforms? Charges of pervasive inequality are true of creative industries more broadly, and particularly of cultural work and art worlds. Recent work has shown the class origins earnings gaps in elite cultural work, shielding the economically privileged from precarity and occupational uncertainties (Brook et al., 2020). Influencer creep into art work means accelerated and relentless demands to consistently perform and maintain an artistic identity across social media platforms, which may well contribute to and deepen well-documented existing inequalities in cultural and creative work.

My data collection for this project took place during the economic downturn and mass unemployment prompted by COVID-19 (between 2020 and 2022). I witnessed a take up of entrepreneurial artistic creativity, against a backdrop of depended personal risk for my participants. McRobbie (2015) argues that the deposit if driving the growth of creative work means 'novel job creation' (p. 34) is promoted at times of unemployment. Creative work is attractive for policymakers as it is 'self-invented work' that can take place without 'interference from the state' (McRobbie, 2015: 61). In closing, I suggest that the role of social media platforms take up some of the new governmentality that McRobbie identifies as promoting precarity and vulnerability. Platforms directly extend cultural calls to be creative, in addition to indirectly restructuring and reshaping artistic markets, value and practice. Similarly, Gerber (2017) describes the stubborn nature of inequalities within art worlds; arguing 'accounts of value that lack the support of traditional imaginaries are difficult to sustain' (p. 81). In this sense, influencer creep adds important pressures and anxieties to art worlds, which researchers have documented remain subject to persistent inequalities that are worthy of attention and continued exploration.

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