

Analysis of the Formation and Distribution Logic of Influencer Economic Value Based on the Attention Economy

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Abstract. With the deep integration of social media and mobile internet technologies, the influencer economy has evolved into an emerging economic paradigm centered on content creators, supported by platforms as infrastructure, and driven by traffic monetization. In the context of the influencer economy, the construction of digital identity has transcended mere self-presentation, evolving into a strategic resource that intertwines emotional identification, commercial monetization, and cultural practice. This paper focuses on the construction of digital identity and the power dynamics between creators and platforms within the influencer economy. Employing a literature-based methodology, it explores how content creators utilize visual symbols and emotional narratives to craft a "performative authenticity," and how platform algorithms influence traffic distribution and the redistribution of value. The study finds that creators engage in emotional labor to build trust with their audiences, while platforms leverage algorithmic advantages to reinforce head effects, leading to the marginalization of small and mid-tier creators. These dynamics reveal the dual nature of digital identity as both economic and cultural capital. This review offers theoretical insights into the operational mechanisms of the influencer economy and contributes to discussions on platform governance reform.

Keywords: Influencer economy, digital identity, emotional labor, platform algorithms, attention economy

1. Introduction

The rapid development of the digital platform economy has catalyzed the rise of the influencer economy, where creators construct distinctive digital identities through visual symbolism and emotional storytelling to attract followers and achieve commercial monetization. Existing studies highlight that digital identity serves as both economic and cultural capital, positioning it as a critical resource in new media competition.

Marwick and colleagues argue that influencers engage in "micro-celebrity practices" to cultivate a form of performative authenticity [1]. For instance, case studies of influencers such as Friesz, Goodridge, and Lim illustrate varying levels of engagement in micro-celebrity practices to boost their popularity on Instagram. Each of them embodies a distinct personal brand—ranging from the quintessential American teenager to the provocatively dressed celebrity and the affluent fashionista. Through Instagram, they invite interested spectators into curated lives that align with these personas.

Senft explores how camgirls build emotional connections with their audiences through “pseudo-intimacy” [2], while Djafarova and Bowes find that influencer content can trigger instant consumption behaviors among Generation Z [3]. Their research indicates that influencer content on platforms such as Instagram—ranging from fashion recommendations and unboxing videos to lifestyle showcases—can spark immediate consumer desire among younger audiences. Influencers’ social capital and perceived authenticity play key roles in this process: users are more inclined to trust those perceived as “authentic” and aligned with their own lifestyles, making purchasing decisions based on this perceived trust.

These studies provide a theoretical foundation for understanding how platform algorithms influence the influencer economy through traffic allocation and revenue-sharing mechanisms.

Against the backdrop of the structural transformation of the digital platform economy, this paper adopts a literature review method and an interdisciplinary theoretical lens to systematically examine the practical logic of digital identity construction within the influencer economy, as well as its interaction with platform power structures. By integrating perspectives from communication studies and political economy, the research reveals how emotional labor and algorithmic governance jointly shape the value chain of the digital economy. This study contributes a dynamic analytical framework to the field of digital labor, offering insights for optimizing platform governance and protecting creators’ rights, thereby supporting the sustainable development of the digital economy ecosystem.

2. Literature review

2.1. The attention economy and value creation in the influencer economy

One of the core driving forces behind the influencer economy is the attention economy. In an era of information overload, attention has become a scarce resource and a key factor propelling the development of the digital platform economy [4]. Social media platforms, through algorithmic optimization and data-driven mechanisms, have not only redefined how user attention is allocated but also accelerated the commodification and capitalization of attention. This shift has laid a crucial foundation for the emergence and growth of the influencer economy [5].

Within this system, social media platforms serve as vital spaces for capturing attention and generating profit. Influencers are not merely creators of visually appealing content but act as interactive brands and identities that evoke audience identification and engagement [6]. These platforms offer individuals unique opportunities to merge personal identity with collective experiences in social networks, thereby forming powerful mechanisms for attracting and sustaining attention [1].

In the influencer economy, value creation lies not only in content production and audience interaction but also in the influencer's self-branding and diversified business models. Through carefully crafted self-branding strategies, influencers present themselves as consumable “micro-celebrities.” This process involves not only content aesthetics and personality expression but also the communication of values and the cultivation of social influence [6]. Social media platforms provide a field for such branding practices, enabling influencers to bypass traditional media and establish direct, loyal relationships with their audience, thereby enhancing brand stickiness.

While influencers rely on platforms for traffic and monetization opportunities, platforms retain dominant power in algorithmic recommendations, traffic distribution, and revenue sharing. Despite self-branding being a central strategy for value creation, influencers’ development is heavily constrained by structural forces such as algorithmic logic, traffic allocation mechanisms, and user profiling [7]. As monopolistic entities in the digital economy, platforms manipulate attention

distribution through algorithms and extract maximum value from data, advertising, and transactions [8]. Even though influencers and users generate most of the content, platforms ultimately capture the majority of value [7].

In this context, platforms not only determine which content gains exposure but also shape commercialization paths through "invisible rules." For example, they may restrict monetization channels for specific content or enforce "shadow banning"—a form of hidden moderation in which a user's content visibility or engagement is algorithmically limited without explicit notification [9].

Terranova's theory of "free labor" sheds light on the exploitative nature of such practices, where user-generated data fuels algorithmic optimization without directly benefiting creators [10]. This imbalance in value distribution places influencers in precarious positions within the platform economy, where many must engage in unpaid labor over extended periods just to gain limited commercial opportunities.

2.2. Identity construction

Identity construction has long been a central concern in sociology and communication studies. Goffman's dramaturgical perspective emphasizes the individual as a performer presenting the self during social interactions [11], while Foucault's analysis of power and discipline reveals how subjectivity is shaped through social norms and surveillance mechanisms [12]. With the rise of social media, these theories have extended into digital spaces, forming a discourse of "digital identity construction" that highlights how individuals curate and maintain perceptible self-images through mediated practices.

In the context of the influencer economy, digital identity is not merely a representation of the self in online spaces but also a commodified entity. Its construction is deeply embedded in platform logics and attention mechanisms. Marwick's study of the "Instafame" phenomenon reveals that digital identity on social media is a highly curated visual cultural practice. Through aestheticized selfies, displays of luxury consumption, and emotional management, individuals craft a celebrity-like persona that is amplified by platforms and resonates with followers [1]. Such digital identities are not organically formed but are instead the product of iterative experimentation with platform rules, audience preferences, and market feedback—a reflection of the structural pursuit of visibility in the attention economy.

Echoing this, Senft's research on camgirls emphasizes that digital identity construction is a "continuous performance," wherein individuals adjust and refine their self-presentation daily to maintain audience attention and recognition [2]. This micro-celebrity process illustrates that digital identity is not merely a form of self-expression, but also a response to platform algorithms, fan culture, and economic expectations. Particularly in the influencer economy, this performative identity assumes a dual role: it serves both as a media persona that captures attention and as a branded image in commercial partnerships.

3. Value distribution and platform power

3.1. Platform-dominated mechanisms of value distribution

Although influencers rely on platforms to gain visibility and monetize their content, platforms maintain dominant control over algorithmic recommendations, traffic distribution, and advertising revenue allocation [7,9]. Platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and Douyin employ complex recommendation algorithms to determine which content is shown to more users, and they extract

profits through advertising-based revenue-sharing models. YouTube's "yellow-tag" (demonetization) system and Xiaohongshu's "shadow suppression" mechanisms demonstrate how shifts in platform rules can directly diminish creators' earnings [13].

On Xiaohongshu, influencers often encounter issues of "traffic suppression", where content from certain accounts suddenly becomes difficult to recommend. These traffic control practices within the platform's commercialization strategy offer a concrete example of algorithmic opacity [13]. Xiaohongshu's recommendation mechanisms are neither transparent nor predictable; creators and brands alike cannot reliably determine how to secure consistent traffic. Some users experience reduced exposure for posting content that diverges from mainstream trends, directly affecting their commercial potential [13]. Since the algorithm governs content visibility, influencers' ability to monetize attention is fundamentally shaped by the platform's logic. As a result, even when creators generate value, they remain dependent on platform structures and lack control over the final distribution of that value.

3.2. Algorithm-driven superstar effects and imbalanced value distribution

In the attention-driven digital economy, the distribution of benefits among brands, influencers, and platforms is markedly unequal. Brands tend to prioritize partnerships with influencers already promoted by platform algorithms rather than those who are truly innovative yet less visible, leading to a pronounced "superstar effect" in revenue distribution [7,9]. On platforms such as Douyin, Kuaishou, and Instagram, algorithmic recommendations are typically driven by user engagement metrics—likes, comments, shares—which favor content and creators who have already achieved significant visibility [14].

Take the case of Li Ziqi, for instance. Her brand has evolved into a personalized IP (intellectual property) symbol with both legal copyright and commercial connotations, making it easier for audiences to establish trust and engage in consumer conversion [15]. The successful shaping of the Li Ziqi brand reduces the informational barrier between product and audience, facilitates trust, and lowers customer acquisition costs. This brand effect, in turn, enhances the commercial value of associated enterprises.

Such mechanisms allow top-tier influencers with large followings to gain more exposure and sustained brand collaborations, while smaller creators—despite their creative potential—struggle to break through the algorithmic margins [9].

3.3. The non-neutrality of platforms and their role as gatekeepers

In the digital platform economy, while influencers gain opportunities for visibility and monetization, platforms retain decisive control over the key processes of algorithmic recommendation, traffic distribution, and advertising revenue. In reality, platforms determine which content can attain widespread exposure. This structure compels influencers to continuously align themselves with platform rules and adapt to algorithmic shifts in order to maintain their commercial viability. Platforms are not neutral intermediaries of information; rather, they act as powerful gatekeepers with substantial political and economic influence [9].

4. Conclusion

This study examines the construction of digital identity and the dynamics of platform power within the context of the influencer economy. It explores how content creators use visual symbols and

emotional narratives to craft a “performative authenticity,” and analyzes how platform algorithms, traffic bias, and revenue-sharing mechanisms influence both value creation and distribution. The findings reveal that influencers leverage emotional labor to attract followers and facilitate the transformation from attention to trust and ultimately to consumption. Meanwhile, platforms maintain dominance through algorithmic control, leading to a “superstar effect” and the marginalization of small- and mid-tier creators. This dynamic underscores the dual nature of digital identity as both economic and cultural capital, offering critical insights into the mechanisms of the influencer economy.

However, this study has several limitations. It relies primarily on case studies of top-tier influencers, uses secondary sources to analyze algorithmic processes, and lacks in-depth consideration of cross-cultural differences. Future research could incorporate platform API data and interviews with creators to better interrogate the algorithmic black box and explore creator agency from a critical technological perspective. Looking ahead, the influencer economy is likely to experience three major trends: technology-driven content innovation, transformation of value distribution mechanisms, and increasing emphasis on social responsibility. Building an ecosystem that simultaneously promotes “algorithmic transparency” and “creator rights protection” will become a central focus for sustainable development.

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