Journal of Gender, Culture and Society
ISSN: 2754-3293
DOI: 10.32996/jgcs
Journal Homepage: www.al-kindipublisher.com/index.php/jgcs

JGCS
AL-KINDI CENTER FOR RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Influencer Culture and the Commodification of Individuals in the Age of Social Media: A Qualitative Study on Communication Students

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| ABSTRACT

With the rise of digital media, the concept of opinion leadership has undergone a radical transformation, with forms of influence based on expertise and authority in traditional media environments giving way to a regime of influence based on visibility and emotional performance on social media platforms. This study aims to understand the perceptions, attitudes, and critiques of young individuals, particularly communication faculty students, towards social media influencers. Participants' relationship with influencer culture is evaluated not only as a career aspiration but also as a multi-layered practice of subjectification interwoven with economic opportunities, emotional fulfillment, identity construction, and the desire for visibility. The background section of the study discusses the historical and cultural origins of the influencer figure and examines how social media has created a new regime of opinion leadership by blurring the boundaries between mass and interpersonal communication. In the methodology section, thematic analysis was applied to 30 in-depth interviews conducted with final-year communication faculty students, and five main themes related to user experiences were identified: (1) The concept of influencer and its perceived boundaries, (2) the objectification of education and the normalization of pragmatism, (3) self-presentation and the commodification of the individual, (4) the commercialization of ındirect experience and (5) postmodern catharsis. Analyses based on these themes revealed that young people both admire and critically distance themselves from the influencer figure; influencer culture offers attractive privileges and opportunities on the one hand, while creating ethical flexibility, identity tension, and visibility pressure on the other. Consequently, the study argues that influencer culture is not merely an individual career choice but also a new form of social representation that internalizes the emotional, ethical, and ideological effects of neoliberal digital culture. The relationship participants establish with this form of representation points to a contradictory form of subjectification: it is both desired and questioned; both internalized and criticized. These findings offer important insights into understanding the digital identity strategies of the younger generation, the regime of visibility, and the ethical boundaries of the influencer ecosystem.

| KEYWORDS

Influencer, digital media, self-presentation, objectification of education, pragmatism

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 19 October 2025 **PUBLISHED:** 11 November 2025 **DOI:** 10.32996/jgcs.2025.5.4.1

1. Introduction

Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Elihu Katz (1955), classic theorists in communication science, made a significant contribution to communication studies by proposing the “two-step flow” model, which argues that the media's influence is not direct but indirect, mediated through *opinion leaders*. The assumed model asserts that individuals do not receive media messages directly, but rather through trusted individuals in their immediate environment—that is, opinion leaders. Beyond the authors' finding that the influence

of opinion leaders occurs through the transmission of messages, their interpretation that opinion leaders are decisive in the selection of messages to be transmitted and, in most cases, in the reinterpretation of these messages remains important (1955, p. 32). This interpretation suggests that opinion leadership is not only a process of information transfer but also a process of cultural and ideological filtering.

The functioning described in this model has undergone a fundamental transformation in the face of digital technologies and, in particular, the determining role of social media platforms in the dissemination of messages/content. Research conducted on the structure of traditional media concluded that the development of opinion leadership's influence was shaped around specific experts and statuses in a world where access to information was limited. However, social media, by facilitating and accelerating access to information and creating a platform where everyone can potentially be a content producer, appears to have flattened the position of opinion leadership. Moreover, these platforms have not only flattened the circulation of content, but also blurred the boundaries between interpersonal communication and mass communication, giving rise to a whole new media regime.

This new media regime, where visibility itself can be considered a form of power and capital, reduces content creation to a performance-based system that constantly compels content creators to produce more. In this context, content distribution is no longer limited to simply having an impact; it has become a multi-layered power relationship shaped by a person's lifestyle and emotional performance around their visibility. This regime of influence encourages individuals not only to produce content, but also to build themselves as a brand and engage in a constant visibility competition with performative identities.

The most striking manifestation of this transformation is embodied in the figure of the social media influencer. Today, it is not enough to view influencers, who guide their audience's emotions, preferences, consumption habits, and even value systems, as advertising faces promoting products; they are cultural intermediaries. However, an influencer's impact is often legitimized without question, framed around the concepts of "success" and "entrepreneurship"; the commodification of self represented by their presence is generally ignored. Yet this regime of influence shapes not only individuals' life practices but also their social values, ethical codes, and conception of the public sphere. This system, which views attention as an economic resource, encodes human relationships through indicators such as views and interactions, placing the individual in the position of a subject compelled to perform constantly.

Social media influencer culture is no longer just a profession or a digital practice; it has become a defining representation of our era's regime of emotion, identity construction strategies, and social relationships. The aim of this study is to question and critique this representation and to reveal the multi-layered relationship that young individuals establish with this form of representation. Understanding the relationship that young users have with this phenomenon is crucial in order to see their perceptions, critiques, and emotional reflections regarding influencer practices, as well as how individuals internalize this opinion leadership model in the digital universe. In this context, this study focuses on comprehending and analyzing communication faculty students' perceptions about social media influencers and the meanings they attribute to this figure. It is observed that being an influencer is conceptualized not only as an economic opportunity but also as an identity strategy and a social sphere of influence.

Theoretical Framework and Literature section of the study examines the historical development of the influencer figure and how it has been shaped as a model of opinion leadership in the digital environment; the cultural, economic, and ideological foundations of this transformation are discussed. The *methodology* section describes the qualitative research process based on in-depth interviews with communication faculty students; a thematic analysis of the data was conducted. In the *findings* section, the data obtained were analyzed and interpreted in detail along different categories: (1) the concept of influencer and its perceived boundaries, (2) the objectification of education and the normalization of pragmatism, (3) self-presentation and the commodification of the individual, (4) the commercialization of indirect experience, and (5) postmodern catharsis.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature

To understand the etymological origin of the term influencer, which means a person who influences others, we need to look at the English word influence, which means to have an effect. Records show that this word, derived from the Latin *fluere*, meaning "to flow," began to be used in astrology in the 13th and 14th centuries to express the effect (the supposed energy flow) that stars had on people, and in the 19th century, it began to be used in a sense that included the capacity to influence in an imperceptible or invisible way (Etymonline, 2023).

With the proliferation of social media, the term "influencer," which we frequently encounter in everyday life today, brings to mind individuals who can guide the attitudes and behaviors of their followers through social media accounts, both through sponsorship and original content. However, it is important to remember that the term "influencer" does not refer solely to a product promoter or social media phenomenon. It also refers to a figure who creates mass impact through digital platforms with their ideas, lifestyle, and consumption practices. Therefore, influencer status can be defined as an identity and economic form shaped around an individual's prominence in digital environments. Abidin (2016) interprets the influencer figure as an entrepreneurial actor of the digital age, who, although appearing to be part of everyday life, gains existence through a strategically structured regime of visibility (pp. 1-20, 39). Yallop (2021, p. 9) points out that, in the eyes of brands, influencers are functional and efficient

digital tools for reaching a screen-immersed generation. Bozkurt (2021, p. 93), on the other hand, defines influencers as individuals who can influence the attitudes and behaviors of their followers and guide their purchasing decisions. When attempting to define the concept of influencer, it is understandable to refer to concepts such as marketing, advertising, efficiency, and entrepreneurship, considering that the influencer industry, which operates on platforms like TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook, is projected to reach a volume of $21.1 billion by 2023 (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2024). It is possible to state that what has been conveyed so far reveals that influencer status is not merely a subjective media practice, but rather a comprehensive strategic structure with economic and ideological layers.

Influencer status signifies the emergence of a subject within digital culture who is both a producer and a consumer, typically as a figure who stages segments of everyday life. It is possible to state that platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, by transforming visibility into digital capital, point to a transformation that encourages the emergence of this figure as a new form of subjectivity. This transformation is not only a result of new media technologies but also a consequence of the reproduction of neoliberal ideology's individualistic subject model in the digital age.

Neoliberal ideology, centered on the myths of individual success, freedom, and self-realization, legitimizes the pressure of constantly developing oneself under market conditions, produce capital for the market, and perform in a marketable way through these myths. This situation reveals that the influencer figure is not only a product of the digital environment but also developed as part of the neoliberal subjectification regime. The practice of influincing others is also a digital manifestation of this regime; the individual, who appears to be free and creative, is actually subject to constant pressure to produce, expectations of interaction, and the need to conform to the demands of the audience and, consequently, to the subjectifying demands of the digital market.

In this context, Binkley (2011) states that neoliberalism's type of subject internalizes individual success narratives at a psychological level, forcing them to see themselves as a project to be performed and marketed, thereby unconsciously equating the concept of "freedom" with competition within the market (pp. 375-383). Thus, life, presented as a project shaped around the concepts of production, competition, and profit on digital platforms, becomes not only "lived" but also 'staged' and "accumulated" as an object of production. In this sense, influencers, whether they are aware of it or not, are not ordinary social media users; they are micro-entrepreneurs who commodify their bodies, lifestyles, and emotions and put them on the market. This new actor, emerging through digital platforms, has a different relationship and interaction structure than celebrities in the traditional sense. This difference manifests itself not only in communication forms but also in the sources of legitimacy and production processes of fame.

Thus, influencer status, which can be described as an aggressive entrepreneurial regime that reshapes the concept of fame, is not so much about producing content as it is about the "attention economy"[4]. David Marshall (2010) addresses this transformation of fame in the context of the democratization of cultural production along the axes of visuality and consumption in an era where digitalization has become dominant in the cultural sphere. In relation to this, the author proposes conceptualizing this situation, where individuals can brand themselves as micro-celebrities in new media, as a culture of presentation (pp. 38-43). That being the case, it is argued that cultural production and consumption based on the attention economy has become relatively democratized within the framework of the possibilities offered by digitalization; however, it is overlooked that this production and consumption takes place in a market where not everyone participates on equal terms. Essentially, this situation can be understood as the rise of a small number of figures to digital stardom, who gain an advantage in the visibility race determined by the algorithms of large global information and telecommunications companies.

On the other hand, influencers, unlike traditional celebrities, appear to be constructing a digital subjectivity that produces its own public sphere and strives to gain presence by constantly performing in order to sustain this production process. This performance, which constantly blurs the line between life and performance, is often shaped through the aestheticization of everyday life and the presentation of an "ideal self."

Within the ethos of neoliberal ideology, which has turned itself into an economic and ethical project, the individual becomes not only an actor in a market responsible for sustaining their life, but also an "entrepreneurial subject" who must constantly optimize all areas of their life—from their body to their career, from their social relationships to their emotions. Bröckling (2016) explains this situation, in which every area of life in the neoliberal era is subsumed by the norms of the business world, with the concept of the "entrepreneurial self," emphasizing that individuals must now "behave like investors in themselves," which requires constant performance, risk-taking, and competition (pp. 20-26). The influencer figure, who is subject to performance

[4] First discussed in 1971 by Herbert Simon, who pointed out that human attention had become a scarce resource in the face of increasing information and data abundance, the attention economy is a concept that focuses on explaining the competition over the distribution, sharing, and commercialization of attention as a resource and capital in information, content, and communication environments. For more detailed information, see: (Davenport, 2001; Terranova, 2012).

measurement based on visibility, interaction, and impact capacity and who presents a model that adapts to the measurable values of digital capitalism, is, in this sense, the representative subject of neoliberalism.

This type of subject encompasses not only an economic transformation but also a political vision. Brown (2015) points out that concepts such as freedom, which refer to politics and the public sphere within the neoliberal order, no longer point to an autonomous citizen who governs themselves; rather, they redefine the individual in the language of the market and construct the subject as an existence shaped by market rationality. Freedom is now the autonomy of the entrepreneur who takes risks and bears full responsibility for their failures (pp. 32-33). Influencers, who position themselves as architects of their own visibility and attribute their failures not to algorithms, competition, or lack of capital and unequal conditions, but to their personal inadequacies, fully reflect this understanding of freedom.

Lemke (2001), drawing on Foucault's concept of "biopolitics" points out that neoliberal governance not only manages individuals but also turns them into entities compelled to manage themselves, constructing the neoliberal subject as an entrepreneur who shapes their identity by optimizing it according to choices based on instrumental rationality (pp. 201-203). When evaluated in terms of their entrepreneurial position, this situation creates pressure for influencers to constantly review both their physical appearance and their digital production and make them suitable for the market.

Bauman (2000, pp. 17-53) relates this process to the concept of "liquid", noting that modern individuals no longer seek permanent identities or fixed affiliations, but rather constant change, flexibility, and personal brand building. In this regard, he points out that the effort to construct and constantly reconstruct one's identity has become the primary occupation of contemporary humans. In this sense, influencerism is the digital manifestation of a form of subjectification that can be defined precisely within the framework of Bauman's (2000) concept of "liquid modernity". Platforms compel users to constantly produce content, redefine themselves, and reshape their identities according to audience demands. Thus, visibility becomes not only social capital but also a condition of optimized digital existence.

Current research in the literature also supports these findings. For example, Duffy and Hund's (2019) ethnographic study on influencer culture reveals that content creators feel compelled to manage themselves like a brand and believe that success is possible not only through creativity but also through personal optimization (pp. 4985-4988). This finding represents one of the most concrete manifestations of neoliberal subjectification within influencer culture. Furthermore, participants interviewed in the same study stated that despite the pressure to create the perception of not appearing to work hard they spent almost the entire day planning content, analyzing algorithms, and forming collaborations.

As can be seen, within the framework of neoliberal ideology, which compels individuals not only to produce content but also to transform this production into a marketable performance, the influencer figure becomes both a product and a reproducer of this structure. Therefore, it is possible to state that influencer culture, which emerges as the visible face of the cultural situation mentioned above, is a digital performance regime based on the possibility of ordinary individuals standing out in the algorithmically encouraged attention economy.

Within this structure, which can be evaluated as a form of subjectification based on managing visibility, establishing direct relationships with the audience, and capitalizing on personal life, influencers are also in constant interaction. This interaction is both a prerequisite for maintaining visibility and the basis for establishing digital public legitimacy. However, the process of converting this construct into economic value operates through "emotional labor" as defined in the classical sense by Hochschild (1983, p. 7); in the context of influencers, this means not only managing emotions but also displaying and marketing them. Therefore, in influencer practice, visibility is not merely a result; it is also a goal that must be continuously reproduced. José van Dijck (2013) also points out that the visibility-focused architecture of social media platforms, which transforms users into entities that constantly display, update, and optimize themselves, directs users toward performative behaviors and aligns their self-presentations with the demands of the attention economy. This situation causes influencer status to become not just a profession but a life ideal, especially for young users. This lifestyle is intertwined not only with consumption but also with the presentation and display of the self in the marketplace.

The effects of the influencer figure on young users deserve to be evaluated in the context of identification, particularly in terms of visibility, self-presentation, and the promise of easy money/success and a comfortable life. There are noteworthy empirical studies in the literature that address these relationships. For example, in a study conducted by Djafarova and Trofimenko (2019) among young people aged 18–30, it was found that influencers are perceived as "lifestyle models" and that young users identify their self-presentation with these figures. The same study revealed that participants felt a sense of "sincerity" and "authenticity" about influencers' lives and perceived these figures not only as role models but also as friends. This perception clearly highlights the strategic bridge that influencer figures build between emotional closeness, identification, and the ideal self.

Similarly, the work of Hwang and Zhang (2018) shows that influencers reinforce the perception, especially among young users, that success is achieved through visibility, and that this shapes users' content creation practices. Based on this study, which

provides serious clues that influencers' content production is not only creative but also a strategic effort focused on visibility, it is possible to state that it motivates young people to view social media interactions as a career goal. This finding reveals that influencer practices are not merely a preference shaped by aesthetic perceptions within visual culture, but also a presentation of self that is compatible with market logic.

The pressure to be visible has become a prerequisite for many young people to exist in the digital environment, and in this process, content production has become a tool for self-construction, shaped by algorithmic incentives, directives, and guidance. Burgess and Green's (2018) comprehensive analysis of YouTube reveals that the vast majority of content creators optimize their content to be made visible by algorithmic structures, and that this process creates significant pressure on creative autonomy. This situation shows that for young users, content production has become a performance-based necessity rather than creativity. This necessity is the digital reflection of the neoliberal subjectification ethos that repeats the command to constantly produce, constantly present, constantly be seen!

On the other hand, following the rise of digitalization in capitalism, influencer culture has taken on a structure that reveals the transformation of labor regimes, moving beyond being merely an individual choice or a visual aesthetic practice. Closely linked to both emotions and appearance, influencer labor is not only mental or creative; it also points to a hybrid type of labor in which subjective, bodily, and emotional investment are intertwined. Duffy (2017), while examining influencers' performances, points out that there is a systematic structure that renders invisible and dismisses as non-labor the labor-intensive activities of influencers, particularly those in the fields of fashion, beauty, and lifestyle, such as the preparation, planning, brand meetings, and algorithmic strategy development behind content creation (pp. 78, 211). This invisibility is a reflection of the neoliberal system's form of domination, which it perpetuates under the guise of freedom, on the type of labor that takes shape in the digital sphere.

It is also necessary to mention the place of algorithms, which serve both as a control mechanism and a steering function, within this structure. Gillespie (2014) defines algorithms as tools that impose the value judgments of platforms on users through automated rules. Influencers must constantly adapt to this algorithmic structure in order to remain visible and maintain their audience. This situation causes the subject to become a “digital unit” that adapts to the functioning of the system rather than an individual who makes free decisions. The reflection of this structure in production relations points to a new form of domination centered on the platform-user relationship rather than the traditional worker-employer relationship. Algorithms emerge as invisible controllers that determine the rules of this market, where there is no visible employer.

On the other hand, this logic of platform capitalism transforms influencers not only into producers but also into subjects under “voluntary surveillance”. Updating Foucault's panopticon model to explain the structure of the digital age, Zuboff (2019) argues that with the concept of “surveillance capitalism” individuals are no longer merely watched; they are beings who know they are being watched, performatively use this information, and voluntarily expose themselves. The author points out that individuals no longer merely produce data but also commodify themselves knowing that this data will be produced (p. 236). In this context, influencerism is not only a presentation of self but also signifies data production, meta-production, and commodification.

Influencerism is presented to young people not only as a career option but also as a “possible and ideal way of life”; visibility, interaction, and the desire for validation are coded as the keys to this lifestyle. However, although this lifestyle appears accessible, it is shaped within a competitive regime determined by structural inequalities and platform policies. Low-income young people, due to their limited resources, lag behind in areas such as adapting to algorithm designs, content quality, or aesthetic production in this race and accept their individual inadequacies as the reason for their failure. Influencer culture, which transforms individuals into entrepreneurial, market-compliant subjects who must constantly optimize themselves and be visible, has become a dangerous mechanism of identification among young users. The illusion that anyone can become famous, successful, and easily attain wealth serves to obscure both digital labor exploitation and structural inequalities.

In light of all these assessments, the practice of influencerism must be approached as a structure in which the myth of individualism, the economy of visibility/attention, digital labor, and surveillance relations are intertwined. Within this structure, the neoliberal ideology's regime of subjectification reveals the existence of an illusion where structural inequalities are masked by individual effort, rather than the rise of the free individual.

In conclusion, it is possible to state that influencer culture is the digital mirror of the neoliberal era, reflecting not only ideal types and original content but also the illusion of freedom that masks relations of domination and exploitation. Therefore, it is important to remember that critical media studies focusing on the concept of influencer culture are responsible for exposing these reflections, dismantling the surface structure to reveal the underlying relationships, and seeking and proposing ways toward a more transparent digital future based on equality. In this regard, it is necessary to approach influencer culture with a critical perspective within a broader ideological, economic, and cultural framework of relationships, rather than limiting it to individual preferences in self-presentation styles or digital actions.

3. Method

The primary aim of this research is to examine the effects of social media influencer culture on young users within a critical theoretical framework, and to reveal, through a qualitative approach, the effects of neoliberal ideology's forms of subjectification, digital labor forms, and the economy of visibility regimes on young individuals' ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving. Specifically, the starting point of this study was to understand how influencer practices are intertwined with neoliberal values such as fame, consumption, success, and individualism through the experiences and perceptions of young people. In this regard, in-depth interviews were chosen as the method, aiming to reveal individuals' life worlds in a more profound way.

Qualitative research allows for the disclosure of the multi-layered structure of social phenomena and experiences, their meanings within context, and subjective interpretations (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2011, pp. 40-41). This method was adopted in this study to understand how a phenomenon such as influencer culture, which has cultural, economic, and ideological layers, is positioned in the meaning world of young individuals. The fundamental assumption of this study, shaped by a critical theoretical approach, is that influencer culture is not merely a form of media use based on personal preferences, but also a regime of subjectification shaped by structural inequalities, economic ethos, and relations of domination. Therefore, rather than quantitative measurement, in-depth interviews, in which participants could describe in their own words how they were involved in this regime and how they coped with it, were considered the data collection technique most compatible with the research objectives and methodology.

The research was conducted between August 15 and October 25, 2023, with undergraduate students studying at the Faculty of Communication at Marmara University in Istanbul. The selection of participants was based on the primary criteria of having primary or secondary experience with influencer culture and actively using social media. Starting with three initially identified volunteer participants, a total of 32 individuals were reached using the snowball sampling technique. The snowball sampling technique is particularly suitable for studies targeting individuals with specific cultural experiences that are rarely encountered, as it allows for reaching similar individuals in a chain-like manner through the social connections of the reached individual (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981, p. 141; Kılıç, 2013, p. 44).

The interviews, each lasting between 40 and 70 minutes, were mostly conducted face-to-face in quiet and comfortable environments around the university campus. The trust relationship established with the participants, who were informed about the purpose and scope of the study, its confidentiality and ethical aspects prior to the research and whose written consent was obtained, made it easier for them to express their feelings and thoughts more openly. The interviews, recorded with a voice recorder during the interview, were then transcribed word for word, and the data was prepared for a comprehensive analysis.

Descriptive analysis, commonly used in qualitative research, was used to analyze the compiled data. Descriptive analysis allows specific themes and patterns of meaning to be identified within qualitative data and these patterns to be related to a predetermined theoretical framework (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2011, p. 224). Within the scope of the study, the data were first coded thematically and then grouped under five main categories. These themes were developed based on both the participants' statements and the theoretical foundations of the research. In the presentation of the findings, direct quotations from the participants' views were included and subjected to descriptive analysis, supported by interpretive passages.

Another aspect considered in the analysis of the research data is that the content is related not only to individual aspects but also to structural and cultural contexts. In this study, influencer status was examined at different thematic levels, such as the individual's desire to be visible, strategies for achieving digital success, self-construction, education, and perception of social status. Therefore, descriptive analysis was applied based not only on "what was said" but also on the question of what types of structures determined these discourses. This made it possible not only to describe but also to analyze layers of meaning.

Throughout the coding process, concepts repeated by researchers, striking imagery, and cultural and ideological references were noted, and these notes were re-examined within the theoretical framework to structure the analysis steps. Structural questions such as how the phenomenon of influencer culture is culturally defined and how its social boundaries are established, how commercialized experience narratives are circulated at the individual level, how self-presentations are objectified or reified, and how strategies of instrumentalizing education and normalizing pragmatism have taken root in the minds of young people formed the backbone of the analysis. In this context, the data obtained has been classified under the following basic categories:

(i) The Concept of Influencer and Its Perceived Boundaries,

(ii) The Commercialization of Indirect Experience,

(iii) Self-Presentation and the Commodification of the Individual

(iv) The Objectification of Education and the Normalization of Pragmatism,

(v) Post-modern Catharsis.

These categories encompass both themes frequently expressed in the participants' views and areas of meaning that intersect with critical approaches to influencer culture in the literature. Under the category headings, excerpts from the participants' statements are provided; through these excerpts, an attempt is made to reveal how youth subjectify themselves in the digital age, how they are directed, and how they position themselves against these directions.

By examining influencer culture at both the level of individual experiences and collective representations, the research reveals that this phenomenon involves a deep construction of the subject, technological and social guidance, and ideological internalization beyond the surface practices of use and consumption. Thus, the study offers a critical and holistic perspective on young people's subjectification processes within the context of digital culture.

4. Findings

The Concept of Influencer and Its Perceived Boundaries

One of the key findings of this research is that the concept of *influencer* cannot be clearly defined among participants, and attempts to explain this concept contain contradictions. Many participants evaluated influencer concept not only as a profession or social media practice, but also as a cultural positioning intertwined with trust, sincerity, ethics, and visibility.

Participant 6 defined influencer as follows:

> *"For me, an influencer is someone who influences people to buy or use a product or something. Digital content creator and influencer are two concepts that are often confused. Influencer marketing actually leans towards advertising, while digital content creation is more like filmmaking. So, I think being an influencer is not that different from being an advertiser."*

This definition indicates that influencer status is not merely a matter of "influence" or "constructed authority," but also an intertwined, commercialized position within advertising practices. The participant positions content creation closer to an artistic field, while placing influencer status in a more pragmatic and marketing-oriented category.

Participant 3 questions the concept of "influencer" from both professional and ethical perspectives and takes a highly critical stance:

> *"I don't consider it a profession. It depends on where the influencer or phenomenon comes from. Influencers are already at a certain point, advertising and linking, etc. This is a bit more fixed, but phenomena are very complex... Unfortunately, influencer is still an unreliable concept for me."*

This statement points to the difficulties the concept of influencer faces in gaining social legitimacy, while also revealing the blurred lines between phenomenon and influencer. At the same time, credibility is assessed based on merit and content quality, with the influencer's "origin" emerging as an important criterion.

Some participants believe that influencer status is merely a label or "adjective." Participant 2's statement represents a very clear ideological position in this context:

> *"Influencer or phenomenon is just an adjective; I don't think it has a professional foundation. Frankly, I consider it an area that unqualified people who want to make easy money are drawn to these days."*

This view points to how the neoliberal narrative of success is spread through social media and to the resistance to it. The emphasis on "unqualified" in particular reflects criticism that influencers gain legitimacy through visibility and marketing strategies rather than knowledge, skills, or professional competence.

Participant 21, on the other hand, evaluates the concept of influencer in a historical context, drawing attention to the transformation the concept has undergone:

> "*The concept of influencer... has become a huge industry that transcends its original meaning with each passing day... Because we can't even compare these phenomena, whose influence has now globalized and who have become brands in their own right, with the 'old-school' influencers... In my view, the concept of influencer is the main subject (and sometimes the main object) of an industry that is constantly expanding.*"

This assessment indicates that influencer culture must be evaluated not only at the individual level but also within an economic and cultural sectorization process. This view also contains a critical emphasis on the fact that influencers are not only subjects but sometimes become "objectified" figures. How the subject is commercialized within the digital economy is clearly sensed here (Duffy, 2017; Zuboff, 2019).

Participant 19's definition of influencer, on the other hand, presents a rather pragmatic and simple framework:

"The concept of influencer refers to social media personalities who are famous on the internet and earn fame and money from this."

Such definitions represent a pragmatic perception of influencership defined by its economic returns. Similarly, Participant 24 defines influencer directly as a profession and points to the intertwining of content production and advertising:

"A profession where one earns money by advertising specific brands to their followers online."

Such views, which reveal that influencer culture is perceived as "a job," "a source of income," and "a career" in the process of legitimization, reflect the strategies of subjects of neoliberal economic culture to produce value through visibility (Brown, 2015; Han, 2020, 2022).

While some participants viewed influencer culture positively, associating it with financial gain and social approval, others drew attention to the internal contradictions and emotional costs of this status:

"I think I can say I'm a well-known person, but at some point, this can also become one of the negative aspects." - Participant 6

"It's possible to see some people humiliating themselves for fame and money or presenting themselves to others as objects." - Participant 1

Ultimately, the participants' assessments show that the concept of influencer is not a fixed, institutionalized, and professionally legitimate category, but rather a position that is still taking shape; one that is ambiguous, often contradictory, and open to criticism. Participants interpret influencer status as both attractive and suspicious, both liberating and exploitative, both an opportunity and an illusion. This situation shows that influencer status is still in a kind of crisis of meaning, both at the individual level and at the societal level.

The Commercialization of Indirect Experience

Influencer marketing is not merely about promoting products; it is also a representation economy in which individuals circulate their experiences, emotions, and lifestyles. Participant statements reveal that the most characteristic feature of this representation economy is the "commercialization of indirect experience." In other words, influencers present things they do not directly own or have only partially experienced, based on credibility gained through social capital; these representations become tools of persuasion, even commodities.

Participant 10's statement directly reflects the scope of this situation:

"*Being an influencer is like vouching for people. Recommending a brand, product, or place that is not your own, that you can only comment on based on your experience, brings great responsibility. An influencer can lose credibility as a result of promotions that fail to meet expectations; this creates a very negative situation. This situation damages both the person's career and their self-confidence.*"

This assessment reflects the perception that influencers function not only as content creators but also as "trust brokers." Here, trust is both a moral bond that defines the relationship between the audience and the influencer and an economizable symbolic capital that determines the sustainability of the influencer's collaborations with brands in the market. In this context, it is possible to say that influencers' presentations are not just their individual opinions; they are a reflection of the systematic marketing of indirect representations in commercial and cultural terms.

At the same time, it is understood from the statements of Participant 29 that this form of representation, which produces a regime of privilege and access, is positively received in certain social and economic areas:

"What affects me the most is their environment. The events they are invited to, the gifts they receive... They are the first to access many new media products. I think this is a very positive aspect."

What is at stake here is the opportunity for "first experience." This privileged position sets influencers apart from ordinary viewers and positions them as "those who see before others see," meaning they are the first to experience products before they are released to the market. As Han (2017) points out, these transparent, constantly displayed lifestyles reveal the new subject typology of the digital age: the subject who markets the experience without having lived it.

Similarly, Participant 30 frames influencer culture not merely as a promotion-focused activity, but as a sphere of social influence:

"As an influencer, brands will want to work with me because I have the power to reach their target audience; this means I can experience new products before anyone else. Whether it's raising awareness about an important issue or sharing your story to inspire others, you have the ability to make a difference."

In this discourse, being an infuencer appears as the idealized representation of the neoliberal individual: effective, transformative, visible, and accessible. However, this discourse of "inspiration" also brings with it the illusion that the influencer is conveying the product or lifestyle they represent to the audience as it is. Yet these experiences are often commercialized representations shaped by planned performance (Duffy, 2017; Zuboff, 2019).

Participant 10, who likens influencers to a kind of "virtual guru," also positions them as guiding figures who influence lifestyles and preferences:

> "*The concept of influencer defines the virtual gurus of our age. By influencing people's habits, lifestyles, and preferences, they promote and advertise the brands they have experienced themselves. In this way, they gain prestige and financial gain.*"

This assessment reveals how influencer culture has taken on the function of curating modern lifestyles and also highlights how experience is conceptualized. Here, experience is not only a process related to the individual's inner world, but also a refined object of consumption that is designed to be outward-looking and ready for circulation. In this sense, experience enters circulation through form rather than content, and visibility rather than truth (van Dijck, 2013).

Participant 15's comment, on the other hand, is an expression of an attempt to draw an ethical line in this process:

> *"I might give a brand whose products I like a certain amount of leeway."*

Such statements reflect the cautious position of young people who oscillate between ethical dilemmas when positioning influencer practices. The effort to integrate oneself into the visibility economy on the one hand, while striving to preserve the subjective integrity and authenticity of one's existence on the other, becomes a search for balance between digital entrepreneurial labor and ethics.

Ultimately, the findings presented under this category show that influencer experience is evaluated more through "representation" than through actual experience, and that this representation is largely commercialized. The influencer is becoming a subject who not only promotes products but also markets experiences, aestheticizes life, and attempts to establish credibility through this aesthetic representation. However, this transformation brings with it ethical uncertainties, crises of trust, and dilemmas of sincerity.

Self-Presentation and the Commodification of the Individual

Participants interviewed for this study believe that influencer culture is not merely a regime of visibility or content production; it is also a space of subjectification where material, symbolic, and emotional capital are concentrated. However, this subjectification often becomes a process based on performance and commodification, surrounded by the promise of economic success and recognition, rather than the construction of an emancipatory identity.

Participants idealize influencer culture primarily as a lifestyle that embodies desires such as high earnings, visibility, and independence. Participant 13 clearly expresses this view:

> *"They make a lot of money. They can get many things for free for advertising purposes. They are recognized in social life because they appeal to large audiences. I would also like to have these privileges."*

Similarly, Participant 9's statement shows that influencer culture is equated with a luxurious lifestyle that requires no effort and is easily obtained:

> *"Even though some influencers claim that they do 'much harder work than people think'... earning much more than a desk job is appealing enough."*

Such statements recall Han's (2022) concept of the "performance society." According to Han, individuals no longer live under a regime of discipline but within a performance regime based on voluntarism, where desires are equated with production and "producing" (pp. 9–13).

While some participants' assessments express the appealing aspects of influencers, they also suggest that they are driven to this conclusion not only by economic factors but also by an invisible social guidance operating at the psycho-social level. Participant 27's words reflect this situation:

> *"Sometimes—especially when I see my peers—I can't help but be tempted when they have a high source of income and their own homes, cars, prosperity, and independent lives at an early age."*

According to this assessment, influencer culture is perceived as both a job and career, as well as a legitimate and practical path to the dream of "early prosperity" marketed by late capitalism. This situation, in which young people tend to pursue quick

success, temporary visibility, and easy money rather than a stable profession or long-term career goal, brings to mind Bauman's (2000) concept of "liquid modernity."

However, influencer culture is not only the object of desire of the ideology, but also represents an institutionalized structure in which the self and the body are instrumentalized and objectified. Participant 22's observation on this subject is noteworthy:

> "*Some brands can pressure influencers they want to advertise for them by not allowing them to create original ads, forcing them to do it the way the brand wants. This can cause a rift between me and my followers by preventing me from sharing content that shows me as I am.*"

These statements show that influencers are positioned on digital platforms not as 'subjects' but as "distribution channels" or advertising faces. The tension between presenting the self and meeting the brand's expectations leads to the increasing objectification of the influencer figure. As Zuboff (2019) notes in the context of "surveillance capitalism," this situation results in individuals surrendering their privacy and uniqueness to algorithms and brand strategies.

Participant 2's assessment of the nature of influencer labor echoes widespread skepticism.

> *"Frankly, I see it as an area where unskilled people who want to make easy money are drawn to. It seems to me that income is generated without any effort."*

Such comments, which show that the influencer figure is perceived as "effortless labor" outside traditional labor norms, fail to recognize that digital labor consists of invisible layers such as emotional investment, aesthetic effort, and algorithmic strategy (Duffy, 2017; Terranova, 2012).

Some participants are enthusiastic about the idea of building their own brand through influencer marketing. Participant 21 expresses this as follows:

> *"For example, if we look at this work environment specifically in terms of 'journalism,' you may not have to start from scratch. Instead of writing and researching on behalf of someone else, you can brand yourself entirely under your own name."*

This statement is a classic example of neoliberal subjectification, where the individual is responsible for creating their own brand, audience, and content rather than being part of a corporate structure. However, this reveals that subjectification does not mean liberation; on the contrary, it means more self-control, performance pressure, and self-marketing (Bröckling, 2016).

However, the objectification of the individual is not solely due to external pressures but also suggests a pragmatic adoption. Indeed, some participants seem to have embraced the commodification of the self and the transformation of the body and life into objects of consumption as a necessity of influencer culture:

> *"Seeing yourself in ways you don't want to see yourself in order to market the product..."* - Participant 27

> *"For influencers, life is rosy and prosperous... but some of the things they do..."* - Participant 28

On the one hand, such statements reflect the desired lifestyle, while on the other hand, they also reveal concerns about alienation and the establishment of control over the self within this lifestyle.

Ultimately, underlying the appeal of influencer culture, which participants largely find attractive in terms of "income," "freedom," and "fame," lies a process in which the self is transformed into performance, brand, and commodity. Young individuals are as eager to be part of this structure as they are to maintain a distance from it, adopting a critical and sometimes inwardly resistant attitude. The practice of influencers seems to be transforming from a form of self-presentation into a new regime of digital objectification, where the individual converts their own existence and labor into capital.

The Objectification of Education and the Normalization of Pragmatism

Participant views indicate a general disappointment with the professional nature of university education. Students who believe that applied courses are not sufficiently included in the curriculum state that the theory-heavy course content does not align with working life, particularly with new media practices such as digital media and influencer marketing.

Participant 6's statements clearly illustrate this situation:

> "*Things they could teach at the faculty are filming, editing, Photoshop, Word, and Excel. But they don't teach these things. I took a bunch of theoretical courses, from Persuasion and Perception to Crisis Communication. If you ask me what I learned... I still can't persuade people, and I still don't know what to do in a crisis.*"

Education, here, ceases to be a path of development and becomes a "meta" that is expected to serve the individual's career strategy. This situation, where the university is reduced to an institution that provides a marketable skill set rather than developing the student's intellectual competence, brings to mind the Frankfurt School thinkers' criticism of the objectification of education in the culture industry of modern society (Adorno, 1998, p. 336; Horkheimer & Adorno 2002, p. xiv).

Participant 32's assessment sharply highlights this disappointment:

"Forget about becoming an influencer, this education doesn't even make us journalists."

While a significant portion of the participants emphasized that the education provided at the faculty is inadequate in terms of both content and method, Participant 3 expressed the failure of education to meet expectations as follows:

"Right now, I feel left alone, very free at the faculty. I expected them to take this a little more into their own hands."

These students, who feel lonely and directionless in an education system that fails to provide a guiding path for students and forces individuals to move forward by making important decisions on their own, are the reflection of the neoliberal subject model in education. Students are imagined as individuals who will nurture their entrepreneurial spirit, chart their own course, and create their own brand; in this process, the educational institution only plays an indirect role as a tool.

Within this landscape, which is also related to Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) concept of "cultural capital," university education not only fails to provide individuals with cultural capital but also falls short in providing the practical knowledge and skills required by the digital age. Education is expected to provide a "performance platform" suitable for the demands of the digital age, and when this expectation is not met, students turn to practical and visibility-focused platforms such as influencer marketing.

However, the majority of participants believe that a university degree is not necessary to be an influencer:

"There is no school requirement, you don't need to be a university graduate, anyone at any level of education can do it." - Participant 20

In an environment where education has been devalued and market-driven skills have become more important, these assessments reveal that neoliberal pragmatism is prioritized by individuals. As summarized by Participant 9, within this structure, education becomes a means rather than an end, and career goals are increasingly shaped around "earnings and visibility":

"I believe that people aiming for a career in content production should receive education in New Media and Digital Marketing and Advertising rather than the historical development of the media."

Here, in an environment where the individual's rapid integration into market conditions has become the primary goal, theoretical knowledge is perceived as a burden with no current relevance. This structure, in which the student is transformed into a utilitarian market actor who expects a direct return on their investment in education, a potential job-finishing entrepreneur, is the semantic equivalent of the concept of "homo economicus" defined by Wendy Brown (2018, pp. 24-45) as the educational counterpart of neoliberal reasoning.

The fact that most participants stated that their principles and preferences could be flexible in line with the material income or recognition they would obtain also leads to the relaxation of the ethical boundaries of pragmatism:

"It may vary depending on the money I will receive or the opportunities it provides." - Participant 25

"If I'm an influencer, I can allow certain interventions based on the income and benefits it provides me." - Participant 26

"I think I could come to an agreement with the brand. A plan could be made, and I could allow a 50% margin for flexibility." - Participant 28

Ethical concerns such as transparency in the relationship with followers, accuracy in advertising partnerships, and comprehensive and useful content are interpreted based on "benefit," negotiated when necessary, and their limits are flexed according to market logic.

The risks this situation can create and the awareness of these risks are evident in Participant 15's statement:

"For money, you can sometimes advertise a product you never use or a service you don't trust. This situation can sometimes inadvertently lead to fraud and other issues."

As a result, within neoliberal digital capitalism, where the individual is reduced to a subject solely pursuing visibility and profit, education ceases to be a sophisticated structure supporting individual development; it becomes a "prestige item" or "add-on" positioned within the logic of the digital market.

What participants say about university education clearly reveals how neoliberalism transforms education: Theoretical knowledge becomes disconnected from practice, ethical principles become flexible, and education is evaluated according to the speed of the individual's integration into the market. In this environment, pragmatism is not only becoming widespread but also normalized; ethical and pedagogical ideals are pushed into the background. Influencer culture, under these conditions, is not a goal but a necessity; not a choice but an inevitable escape, a strategy for survival.

Postmodern Catharsis

Participants' assessments of their influencer experience reveal how this field has been internalized not only as a career choice or entrepreneurial strategy, but also as a way of life. Within the context of most participants envisioning influencer culture as a "platform" for identity construction, a postmodern catharsis narrative takes shape around Baudrillard's simulation universe, Han's *transparent society*, and Bauman's *liquid modernity* concepts.

Participant 21 expresses the "controlled visibility" that influencer culture offers the individual as follows

> *"On top of all this, how you shape your image is entirely under your control. You don't need the content you put out that day to be shaped by your mood or for people to see you at your worst."*

This kind of assessment implies that the subject's capacity to manage their visibility also brings with it a departure from self-awareness, honesty, and truth. Influencer culture here transforms into a stage where the individual opens up to the world through a persona they rebuild every day, but this opening masks a deep internal alienation. Within this situation, the subject's experience of self is drawn into a plane where the line between representation and reality is blurred.

Again, Participant 21's statement reveals that this situation is seen as a struggle for the person's existence:

> *"From the moment you start, it's a journey where you have to constantly remind yourself who you are and what you don't want to become or cause."*

This need for reminder is actually an indicator of the individual's awareness that they no longer have a fixed identity and that they live in a performance space where their image is negotiated at every moment. Although the influencer experience seemingly offers an area of freedom of expression that individuals feel belongs to them, this freedom is essentially integrated into the market and limited by parameters such as follower count, brand deals, and algorithmic visibility.

Participant 16 similarly expresses this situation in a pragmatic tone:

> *"I think the simplest answer is the money factor. If you have a certain number of followers and can successfully influence them, the money factor can be the most positive aspect."*

This statement clarifies how the combination of visibility and monetary value leads to influencers being perceived not only as a job but also as a strategy for existence. It shows how the acquired influencer identity transforms into a field where the individual can measure their value and gauge their performance through social approval. This reveals the emotional tension created in the individual's psyche by the risk of being ignored if they are not visible, as expressed in David Lyon's (2010, 2003) striking observations about the surveillance society of the digital age.

Participant 19 strikingly expresses that influencer status is recognized as a form of "personal branding":

> *"It can be a great way to build your personal brand and make a name for yourself."*

Participant 30, on the other hand, evaluates this situation in relation to gaining power through the "early access" advantage:

> *"You have a direct line to some of the world's best products and services. As an influencer, brands want to work with you because you have the power to reach their target audience. This means you can try new products and experiences before anyone else."*

Such statements are indicative of how influencer culture offers a sense of privileged positioning and, consequently, a mechanism of satisfaction for the postmodern subject. This visibility-based lifestyle provides not only economic but also narcissistic gratification, which aligns with Han's (2019, p. 52) assessment of the "performance society." Individuals who become both the managers and marketers of their lives try to distance themselves from their internal conflicts by investing in an outward-facing, fictional self.

Focusing on the potential of influencer status to offer social privileges, Participant 29 expresses this situation as follows:

"So it seems that their living conditions are quite good. What affects me the most is the environment they have. The events they are invited to, the gifts they receive... They are the first to access many new media products (brand products, invitations to series platforms, galas, dinner invitations, etc.). I think this is a very, very positive aspect."

This comment shows that individuals define their satisfaction through "the social circle they belong to" and that influencer status is seen as a ticket to this privileged circle, thus directing the individual's search for meaning towards external objects, relationships, and experiences. This situation, in which the individual falls under the illusion that "possessing the external" will make them whole, rather than internal transformation, can be interpreted as a new form of the subject's alienation from desire in a psychoanalytic sense.

Consequently, while the practice of being an influencer promises the individual economic opportunities and visibility, it also transforms into a stage where their identity is shaped through illusions. The catharsis that occurs on this stage, where the individual becomes visible at the expense of renouncing internal experiences by providing temporary and external gratification, is not purification in the classical sense, but rather a pseudo-rational state of "release" and "extinction" in the postmodern sense. Therefore, for the individual in such a postmodern experience, where superficiality and fleeting moments of brilliance are strung together rather than genuine meaning production, influencer culture becomes both the means and the obstacle to identity construction.

Conclusion

Today's youth seem to be turning to being an influencer as a way of life rather than a profession due to the limited opportunities offered by the system. This trend is not only a result of economic opportunities or digital appeal, but also of the inadequacies of the education system, the loss of ethical compass, and the reduction of identity to performance. Young individuals now direct their search for meaning toward the screen rather than the educational process, desiring an updatable image rather than a permanent identity. Influencer culture both facilitates and mirrors this new situation.

This study examines communication faculty students' perceptions, motivations, and criticisms of influencer practices through data collected using in-depth interview techniques and qualitative research methods, attempting to reveal clues about the transforming forms of subjectivity and cultural codes of the digital age. In the participants' statements, influencer culture is interpreted not only as a professional career or digital representation space, but also as a multi-layered space of existence intertwined with identity construction, performance pressure, ethical uncertainty, and structural transformations in education imposed by neoliberalism.

The first finding of the study, "The Concept of Influencer and Its Perceived Boundaries" shows that students position influencers as both an attractive and problematic figure. In practical level living as an influencer is desired and glorified as a path to reaching large audiences, independence, and easy money; however, it is also met with critical distance due to ethical responsibilities, the publicization of private life, and the need for constantly updated identity performance. This contradictory stance reveals that young individuals' relationship with influencer culture is fraught with emotional, cultural, and ethical tensions.

Findings related to the title "The Commercialization of Indirect Experience" reveal that experience in influencer culture has become an object of circulation based on symbolic representation and commercial presentation rather than directly lived reality. It is noteworthy that participants are aware that influencers make recommendations based on "trustworthiness," but that these recommendations are mostly based on limited experience and brand expectations. Here, the influencer becomes a figure who markets both their experience and their followers.

The third finding, titled "Self-Presentation and the Commodification of the Individual" reveals that influencer practices are both an object of desire and a ground for alienation among young people. Influencers are equated by many participants with economic success, social prestige, and freedom; however, behind this idealization lies the commodification of the self, the transformation of emotions into content, and the subject's surrender to brand strategies. Consequently, the influencer figure ceases to be an individual subject and becomes a performative object.

The fourth finding, "The Objectification of Education and the Normalization of Pragmatism" contains striking criticisms questioning the impact of university education on students. Participants stated that educational institutions are unprepared for current media practices, overwhelmed by theoretical knowledge, and fail to create a suitable environment for students to shape themselves according to market demands. The fact that education has ceased to be a value and has become merely an "extra" on the path to digital success reveals how pragmatism has become normalized and developed into an institutional norm.

Finally, the data collected under the heading "Postmodern Catharsis" reveals that influencer culture has turned into a kind of existential simulation space. For participants, influencer culture is an experience that creates satisfaction through visibility, access, recognition, and social circles, but also involves emotional release parallel to a deep alienation. In this sense, influencer culture has become a process of digital persona production that provides temporary and external gratification but erodes internal integrity.

Overall, the study reveals that young individuals exhibit a complex stance toward influencer culture that is both desirous and critical, both participatory and distant, both pragmatic and existential. This complexity suggests that the forms of subjectification in the digital age must be analyzed not only in terms of economic or cultural dimensions, but also in terms of psychological, ethical, and pedagogical dimensions. The practice of influencers is shaped and positioned by both the opportunities offered by the neoliberal market and the obligations it imposes, and in these respects, it emerges as a new structure that shapes young people's existential orientations, career strategies, and identity imaginations.

This research received no external funding
The authors declare no conflict of interest.
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