

SOCIAL
MEDIA

‘In the fast-changing world of social media, it is imperative to have a text that changes with the times. With several new chapters covering Big Data, Trump, the challenge from China, platform capitalism and more, this thoroughly revised third edition of *Social Media* does just that, even as it retains a strong commitment to critical theory, democratic values, and digital activism.’

Vincent Mosco, author of *The Smart City in a Digital World*

CHRISTIAN FUCHS

*SOCIAL
MEDIA*

*A CRITICAL
INTRODUCTION*

THIRD EDITION

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B 1/1 1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area
Mathura Road
New Delhi 110 044

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte Ltd
3 Church Street
#10-04 Samsung Hub
Singapore 049483

Editor: Michael Ainsley
Editorial assistant: Ozlem Merakli
Production editor: Imogen Roome
Copyeditor: Sarah Bury
Proofreader: Leigh C. Smithson
Indexer: Adam Pozner
Marketing manager: Ben Sherwood
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7 INFLUENCER CAPITALISM: REIFIED CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE AGE OF INSTAGRAM, YOUTUBE, AND SNAPCHAT

KEY QUESTIONS

- What is a social media influencer?
 - How does influencer capitalism's political economy work on Instagram and YouTube?
 - Who are the winners and losers in influencer capitalism?
 - Why is influencer capitalism ideological?
 - What are the potentials of socialist influencers? How does socialist influencing differ from influencer capitalism?
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KEY CONCEPTS

Influencer

Influencer capitalism

Culture industry

Reified consciousness

Ideology

Socialist influencers

7.1 OVERVIEW

Footballer Cristiano Ronaldo, musician Ariana Grande, and professional wrestler Dwayne Johnson are among the individuals who have the highest number of followers on Instagram. They are well-known, prominent public figures. They are celebrities. But celebrities are undergoing changes in the age of digital capitalism and social media. In this chapter we are looking at some of these changes.

The emergence of celebrities as popular culture has to do with the capitalist culture industry that commodifies culture and with secularisation in modern societies where individuals are seeking worldly substitutes for worship (Rojek 2001, 13). We can add that fandom and celebrities are also enabled by individuals' search for happiness in an unhappy, alienated world. Celebrity is the expression of humans being happy and recognised in a world where there are inequalities of power and a lack of recognition. The celebrity phenomenon is fans' desire for social recognition.

Fandom and celebrities to a certain degree also have to do with sexual desire. Celebrities are older than the culture industry and capitalism. Rojek (30) argues that Alexander the Great (356 BC–323 BC) was one of the first celebrities. In the twentieth century, celebrity and fan culture took place in the context of mass media (film, recorded music, television, radio) and reality TV. In the twenty-first century we have seen the emergence of Internet celebrities, which includes both traditional celebrities who become famous outside the Internet and have a presence on social media as well as influencers whose fame is ascribed to online fan communities that turn certain users into celebrities. Influencers are a type of Internet celebrity. They are “vocational, sustained, and highly branded social media stars” who are able to “attract and maintain a sizable following on their social media platforms” (Abidin 2018, 71). Many influencers use multiple platforms such as Facebook's photo-sharing platform Instagram, Google/Alphabet's YouTube, Snapchat, live streaming platforms such as Twitch (Amazon) and Periscope (Twitter), crowdfunding platforms such as Patreon, Kickstarter or IndieGoGo, Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Pinterest, etc. What Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat, and Twitch – platforms that are particularly popular among influencers – have in common is that they are manifestations of what Leaver, Highfield, and Abidin (2020, 216) call visual social media cultures: “The attention economy is primarily visual today, and Instagram remains synonymous with the visual zeitgeist.”

What all of the different types of twentieth- and twenty-first-century celebrities have in common is that they are not self-made, but phenomena that exist in and through the capitalist culture industry. Most celebrities are supported, presented, mediated, and paid for by capitalist companies that sell entertainment, lifestyles, brands, or ads. The celebrity industry manufactures celebrities (Turner 2014). Celebrity “corresponds to the growth of capitalist relations of production and their implantation onto the sphere of cultural production” (Williamson 2016, 154) and is “a form of fame commensurate with capitalist society” (1). Celebrity is a cultural dimension of capitalism.

YouTube is the world's second most accessed Internet platform, and Instagram is the 28th most used one.¹ Google/Alphabet owns YouTube. Instagram is part of Facebook's empire. YouTube and Instagram are part of Google and Facebook's duopoly of online advertising. They make significant contributions to the profits of these two global Internet giants.

Snapchat is a multimedia app operated by the Californian company Snap Inc. It was founded in 2011. On Snapchat, one can share pictures and short videos that are up to ten seconds long with followers. These “snaps” are presented to them for a chosen time period, between one and ten seconds. A story is made up of a number of snaps. Any story disappears from a user profile after 24 hours. Snapchat lives through and practises the culture of speed,

1 <http://alexa.com/topsites>, Alexa Top 500 Sites on the Web, accessed on 6 October 2019.

superficiality, and ephemerality that is typical for contemporary capitalism. In 2017, Snap Inc. became a publicly traded company. As with most other social media platforms, targeted advertising is Snapchat's capital accumulation model. At the time of writing this chapter, Snapchat had not made any profits. Its total losses were US\$ 459 million in 2016, US\$ 3.4 billion in 2017, US\$ 1.3 billion in 2018, and US\$ 1.0 billion in 2019.² Platforms that design high speed and short attention span into their platforms have more problems generating ad profits than other platforms. The future will show when and whether Snapchat becomes profitable. Snapchat is popular among young people (eMarketer 2018; Pew Research Center 2019).

YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat are significant not just in terms of the appeal they have for young people but in another respect too. They are the paradigmatic platforms of influencer capitalism. In a 2019 survey, one-third of US and UK children aged between 8 and 12 answered that they wanted to become vloggers/YouTubers (Berger 2019). In the Future Shopper 2019 Survey, “[m]ore than half (55%) of our [...] survey participants [aged 6–16, N=4,003] told us they would want to purchase a product if they saw their favourite Instagram or YouTube star wearing or using it” (Cox 2019). In the age group of 12–15 year-old British YouTube users, 52 percent followed YouTube influencers in 2017 (Ofcom 2018, 6).

Influencer capitalism is not a type of capitalism but an ideology that claims that by being active on social media platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube there are great opportunities for becoming wealthy and famous. Influencer capitalism is the dream, fantasy, and desire of users to become celebrities that accumulate a wealth of social relations, money, influence, likes, positive comments, etc. Influencer capitalism is the online manifestation of the American Dream's ideological claim that in capitalism everyone has an equal opportunity to make a career, from a dishwasher to a billionaire, by having a good idea and believing in themselves. While the USA is often depicted as the “land of opportunities”, the gurus of neoliberal Internet individualism present Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube as the online spaces of opportunities.

This chapter provides an analysis of the foundations of influencer capitalism. It shows that becoming a famous influencer is not by chance, but due to the capitalist operations of talent agencies, media companies, venture capitalists, and advertisers. Section 7.2 discusses influencer capitalism's political economy. Section 7.3 analyses the ideology of influencer capitalism. Section 7.4 explores some of the problems associated with influencer capitalism. Section 7.5 asks whether or not there can be alternatives to capitalist influencers, namely socialist influencers. Section 7.6 draws conclusions.

7.2 INFLUENCER CAPITALISM'S POLITICAL ECONOMY

Instagram's and YouTube's Mainstream

Among the top 20 most followed Instagram accounts, we find companies (Instagram, National Geographic, Nike), footballers and sports stars (Cristiano Ronaldo, The Rock, Lionel Messi,

² Data source: Snap Inc., annual financial report for years 2018 and 2019, SEC filings form 10-K.

Neymar), musicians (Ariana Grande, Selena Gomez, Beyoncé, Taylor Swift, Justin Bieber, Nicki Minaj, Jennifer Lopez, Miley Cyrus, Katy Perry), and actors and reality TV starlets (Kim Kardashian, Kylie Jenner, Kendall Jenner, Khloé Kardashian).³ The Instagram fame of the top Instagram celebrities has to do with their work for sports companies (Juventus Football Club, WWE, FC Barcelona, Paris Saint-Germain FC) and media and entertainment corporations (Universal Music Group, NBCUniversal/Comcast, Sony Music). Some of the top Instagram profiles are themselves media or fashion corporations (Instagram, National Geographic, which is owned by the Walt Disney Company, Nike Inc.).

On YouTube, the 20 most followed profiles are maintained by record labels (T-Series, KondZilla Records, Universal Records/Vivendi, Zee Entertainment Enterprises, Warner Music Group, Monstercat Media), sports entertainment companies (WWE, Dude Perfect), and entertainment companies (Treasure Studio Inc., Channel Federator, Sony, Badabun Network).⁴

Behind Instagram and YouTube influencers stand large for-profit corporations that sell and profit from commodities such as music, sports events, advertisements, and fashion. Such companies invest capital into the online presences of particular artists and brands in order to accumulate capital online and offline.

Social Media Influencers

Among the top 20 most subscribed YouTube channels there are two profiles that are not owned and run by large corporations: PewDiePie and HolaSoyGerman/JuegaGerman. PewDiePie is Swedish YouTuber Felix Arvid Ulf Kjellberg, who features comedy, game-comments, and music on his channel. Germán Alejandro Garmendia Aranis is a Swedish YouTuber who maintains the two channels HolaSoyGerman and JuegaGerman, where he comments on games and presents comedy. YouTubers and Instagrammers did not become famous through music, movies, television, or sports, but on YouTube or Instagram. They are so-called “influencers”, online celebrities who create content that is distributed on digital platforms and who have a significantly sized fan community who feel emotionally attached to the influencers and follow and regularly engage with the latter’s content by liking, commenting, or purchasing branded commodities advertised on the influencers’ channels and pages. Influencers “have fame that is native to social media, such as the YouTube star or highly followed Twitter user, and exist within many interest groups and subcultures besides cult and genre fandom” (Marwick 2016, 338).

Influencers spend many hours a day creating online content, building and maintaining their online selves, and engaging with their Internet fan base. Influencing is not a status but a process and set of practices (Marwick 2016). Many online influencers are not just earning a living online, but are quite wealthy. They turn themselves into brands that are constantly marketed online. Other labels commonly used for “influencers” are “Internet celebs”, “micro-celebrities”, “creators”, “celebrity endorsers”, or “social media/Internet stars”. In influencer

3 Data source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_most-followed_Instagram_accounts, accessed on 6 October 2019,

4 Data source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_most-subscribed_YouTube_channels#cite_note-17, accessed on 5 May 2020.

capitalism, the accumulation of visibility, content, clicks, likes, followers, and comments translates into economic capital. The small number of those who are able to amass visibility and attention can become rich and famous, whereas many others who try or desire to be famous will fail and remain proletarianised platform workers and influencers trying to earn a living online but ending up as precarious freelancers.

Proletarian is another word for a member of the working class. The term became famous in Marx and Engels' battle-call "Proletarians of all Lands, Unite!" in the *Communist Manifesto*. In the age of Instagram, labour has changed. Internet workers try to earn a living online. Some of them do so by making use of Instagram, YouTube, and other platforms. But only a few of them become rich and famous celebrities. The majority of them remain rather unknown and have limited income. They are digital proletarians. Proletarian (want-to-be) influencers often promote or relate to brands for free, which means they conduct unpaid digital labour in order "to build up their portfolios and in the hope of being spotted by potential sponsors" (Leaver et al. 2020, 115).

As with traditional celebrities, there are network effects in the creation and growth of online influencer fan communities (Adler 2006; Budzinski and Gaenssle 2018). Fans like to be part of a large community of like-minded individuals with whom they share the same interests and with whom they can communicate about their joint interests. On social media platforms, there is, in comparison to traditional media such as television, radio, and magazines, an increased and almost constant visibility not just of stars but also of fans of each other.

Other YouTubers and Instagrammers who have millions of followers are, for example, Lele Pons (Instagram rank #50, YouTube rank #210), DanTDM (YT #95), Ryan ToysReview (YT #100), Logan Paul (I #218, YT #120) Jake Paul (I #349, YT #126), Dan Bilzerian (Instagram #81), Zach King (I #135, YT #1,929), Liza Koshy (I #188, YT #500), James Charles (I #233, YT #185), Nikkie de Jager (I #379, YT #379), Kayla Itsines (I #381, YT #52,052), Zoella (I #11,122, YT #357), Lilly Singh (I #662, YT #219), Negin Mirsalehi (I #1355), Julie Sariñana (I #1306), Andrea Russet (#1,696), and Lily Maymac (I #1,964).⁵ They are gamers, models, fashion artists, actors, dancers, singers, comedians, sportspersons, fitness gurus/trainers, cooks, etc. And above all they are not simply Internet celebrities, but advertising performers. In 2018, the YouTube stars with the highest earnings were toy unboxer Ryan (Ryan ToysReviews) with US\$ 22 million and Jake Paul with US\$ 21.5 million.⁶

PewDiePie

In 2018, PewDiePie earned US\$ 15.5 million via his YouTube channel.⁷ Kjellberg, born in 1989, started his YouTube channel in 2006. He started publishing video comments on games such as *Minecraft*. He was first signed to US entertainment company Machinima

5 Data sources: <https://socialblade.com/instagram/top/100/followers>, <https://socialblade.com/youtube/top/500>, accessed on 6 October 2019. See also <https://mediakix.com/blog/top-instagram-influencers/>.

6 Robehmed and Berg (2018).

7 Ibid.

Inc., a subsidiary of Warner Brothers. The company published videos about video games on machinima.com and on a YouTube channel.

In 2012, Kjellberg signed a contract with Maker Studios, a digital media company that represents talent across YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and Vine. (The deal that got Kjellberg out of the hot dog stand ended due to a ‘lack of communication’). His channel quickly grew from 100 million views per month to over 200 million, according to Maker’s former CEO Danny Zappin, who brought Kjellberg aboard. Maker set up an official PewDiePie website, app and online store to sell Bro Army merchandise. In return, Kjellberg helps promote Maker’s dedicated video gaming channel, Polaris, along with some of its other media interests, and gives the company a cut of his YouTube ad revenue. (Parker 2015)

In 2014, Walt Disney acquired Maker Studios. Kjellberg creates a positive mood about the games he presents. He was asked about games he does not like in an interview. “Interviewer: If a game is really bad, do you say so? Kjellberg: No, I try to keep everything relatively positive. I don’t want people to feel like shit because of me” (Lindh 2014). This positivist attitude is important because Kjellberg acts as a marketer who wants to attract clients who pay him. And advertisers don’t like risk and negative publicity.

Logan Paul and Jake Paul

Logan Paul, born in 1985, started his social media presence on the Twitter-owned video platform Vine. In 2013 he started his YouTube channel, where he presents comedy and short films. In 2018 he was worth US\$ 14.5 million, the 10th highest earning YouTuber.⁸ Paul makes money from YouTube ads, branded social media content uploaded to YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram, and his own clothing fashion brand Maverick (Bernucca 2018). He also earns money from acting in shows and films, such as *The Thinning* (YouTube Red), *Foursome* (YouTube Red), *Law & Order* (NBC), *Weird Loners* (Fox), *Stitchers* (ABC Family/Freeform), *Bizaardvark* (Disney Channel), and *Walk the Prank* (Disney XD) (Naibuzz 2019). In 2015, Paul signed an all-area representation contract with Creative Artists Agency (Brouwer 2015), a Californian talent agency created in 1975 that managed/manages artists such as The Jackson Five, Tom Cruise, Beyoncé, Lady Gaga, and Joe Biden.⁹

Logan’s brother Jake Paul also started on Vine in 2013 and in the same year shifted to YouTube. In 2015, he started acting in the Disney Channel series *Bizaardvark*. He was featured in the first two episodes. Like his brother Logan, Jake makes money from advertising, branded content, acting, and merchandise products. In 2017, Jake Paul signed a representation contract with talent agency WME (Weiss 2017). Besides Creative Artists Agency, ICM Partners, and United Talent Agency, WME is one of the big Hollywood talent agencies.

8 Ibid.

9 https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Creative_Artists_Agency_clients

In 2017, he started teen influencer marketing company Team 10 with support from the capital investment firms Danhua, Horizons Alpha, Vayner Capital, Sound Ventures & A-Grade Investments, and Adam Zeplain. Jake Paul describes Team 10 as a

social media incubator. [...] We created the first ever influencer venture capital fund. All of these celebrities go out and raise venture capital funds... these celebrities don't provide any value beyond their check [but] we can help with social strategy. We have this network of Team 10 that can push all of these products. [...] We'll put in money and then we can help grow your product across all of our talent's social pages. We believe our dealflow is going to be ridiculous. (Shieber 2017)

This discussion shows that agencies are powerful intermediaries that play a crucial role in influencer capitalism.

Zoe Elisabeth Sugg (Zoella)

Zoe Elisabeth Sugg, born in 1990 and also known as Zoella, launched her beauty and fashion vlog channel on YouTube in 2009. Zoella was part of a talent network run by US marketing company StyleHaul that was founded in 2011 and acquired by RTL Group in 2014. In 2013, Zoella signed a contract with talent agency Gleam Futures that was renewed in 2019 (Weiss 2019). In 2014, Zoella made a book deal with Penguin and released her debut novel *Girl Online*. Several other books followed.

Zoella became a brand selling beauty products, perfume, cosmetics, homeware products and the mobile app Filmm. In 2019, Zoella could earn up to US\$ 18,800 from one sponsored posting.¹⁰ In addition, she earns money from advertising on her website and on her YouTube channel. In 2019, her wealth was estimated to be around £2.5 million (Prasad 2019).

Ryan ToysReviews

Ryan ToysReviews is a YouTube channel directed at kids. It was founded in 2015. It features "kidfluencer" Ryan Kaji, born in 2011, and his twin sisters Emma and Kate. The videos show how Ryan and the girls unbox and play with toys. In 2018, Ryan was worth US\$ 22 million, the highest earning YouTuber.¹¹ Besides income from ads and sponsorship, Ryan also earns money from a Walmart toy line called "Ryan's World",¹² Ryan toothbrushes, and Ryan toothpaste. Ryan's parents have a marketing and merchandise contract with the children's media company PocketWatch (Spangler 2017). PocketWatch was founded with the help of venture capital from Third Wave Digital, Jon Landau, UTA Ventures, Downey Ventures, and WME. In 2018, the game app "Tag With Ryan", which is aimed at children, was released. PocketWatch produced the TV series "Ryan's Mystery Playdate" that premiered in April 2019 on Nick Jr., a children's pay television channel operated by Nickelodeon.

¹⁰ www.hopperhq.com/blog/instagram-rich-list/, accessed on 7 October 2019.

¹¹ Robehmed and Berg (2018).

¹² www.walmart.com/browse/toys/ryan-s-world-toys/4171_3438149_5568688.

Ryan ToysReview has been criticised. The basic criticism is that the channel tries to manipulate children into becoming consumer junkies who do not realise that they are constantly confronted with hidden ads while watching YouTube:

Can young viewers tell the difference between advertisements and product reviews on the popular YouTube channel Ryan ToysReview? The watchdog group Truth in Advertising says no. On Wednesday it filed a complaint with the Federal Trade Commission, accusing the channel's administrators of deceiving children through 'sponsored videos that often have the look and feel of organic content'. [...] Nearly 90 percent of the Ryan ToysReview videos have included at least one paid product recommendation aimed at preschoolers, a group too young to distinguish between a commercial and a review, Truth in Advertising argued in its complaint. The channel's sponsors have included Walmart, Hasbro, Netflix, Chuck E. Cheese and Nickelodeon, according to Truth in Advertising. Many children do not recognize advertising until they are 8 or 9 years old, said Josh Golin, the executive director of the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood. [...] Last month, several senators asked the commission to investigate Ryan ToysReview, which they said had posted two commercials for the fast-food chain Carl's Jr. without disclosing that they were ads. (Hsu 2019)

The example cases of Instagram and YouTube influencers show that Internet influencing is a capitalist business. Becoming a famous influencer is not chance but due to the capitalist operations of talent agencies, media companies, venture capitalists, and advertisers.

Virtual influencers are "CGI or virtual celebrities who do not have a physical form at all, but are created, crafted, narrated and managed to promote or sell a particular message or brand" (Leaver et al. 2020, 200). Lil Miquela is an example of a virtual Instagram influencer. Created in 2016, @lilmiquela had 1.8 million followers on Instagram in January 2020.¹³ Lil Miquela promoted brands such as Calvin Klein and Prada. She also has released music songs such as "Not Mine", "Automatic", "Money", and "Wasted" that have achieved millions of views on YouTube.

Snapchat Influencers

Snapchat does not release data on followers. Many popular YouTube and Instagram influencers have channels on Snapchat that users can subscribe to: Lele Pons, Logan Paul, Jake Paul, Dan Bilzerian, Liza Koshy, James Charles, Zoella, or Andrea Russet. Celebrities who achieved fame, not primarily on Snapchat, are among the most popular Snapchat users. Examples are Ariana Grande, Kim Karadashian, Chrissy Teigen, and Kylie Jenner. Users who are especially popular on Snapchat include, for example, Chino (@turbanchino), lifestyle blogger Naomi Davis (@love.taza, who also has a large number of followers on Instagram and a popular blog), and fitness coach Neghar Fonooni (@negharfonooni).

Snapchat is an important hub of influencer capitalism. There is a kind of division of labour between YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat: on YouTube, influencers focus on longer

13 www.instagram.com/lilmiquela/.

videos, on Snapchat on very short, catchy, attention-grabbing videos, and on Instagram on aesthetically appealing images, designs, and colours. Some influencers focus on one or two of these platforms but quite a lot of them are active on all three and achieve high numbers of followers on all three.

Talent Agencies and Product Placements

YouTubers, Snapchatters, and Instagrammers become famous because of their co-operations with talent agencies such as Creative Artists Agency, WME, ICM Partners, United Talent Agency, Team 10, or Gleam Futures, and deals with media and entertainment companies such as Maker Studios/Disney Digital Networks, NBC, Fox, ABC, Disney, RTL Group, Penguin, YouTube, or Walmart. On YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat, it is often hidden that videos and images are paid-for product placements or sponsored/branded content. A survey ($N = 57$) among YouTuber influencers showed that 65 percent had used product placement and that multichannel networks played an important role in the organisation of influencers' brand deals, which resulted in paid-for product placements (Gerhards 2019).

Famous YouTubers, Snapchatters, and Instagrammers often do not simply work for talent agencies, advertisers, and media companies, but act as capitalists themselves, developing and selling branded commodities such as cosmetics, jewellery, apps, fan merchandise, household products, apps, jewellery, toys, etc. These commodities sell because the social relations between influencers and their fans have created a culture of connectedness through which influencers accumulate reputation and emotional attachment with their audiences. This online reputation translates into brand names that allow influencers who have large communities of followers to sell commodities and accumulate capital.

According to *Forbes* magazine, the top ten YouTube stars in 2018 earned together US\$ 180.5 million (Robehmed and Berg 2018). Rich YouTubers, Instagrammers, and Snapchatters are not simply a digital worker aristocracy that commodifies itself by selling ads and being paid for promoting commodities in videos and on images. Many of them are also part of the digital industry's capitalist class. Jake Paul says about his status as capitalist:

A lot of the shit I do is business-driven. I am a marketer at the end of the day. [...] Being an entrepreneur is something I am super-passionate about. [...] One of my top two skills is business and just being innovative, coming up with shit, marketing it and making it appeal to a mass group of people, being able to drive sales and revenue.¹⁴

Visibility Labour

In a study of followers of Instagram influencers, the anthropologist and Internet researcher Crystal Abidin (2016, 89) coins the notion of “visibility labour” for “the free labour of followers”, which consist in the use of hashtags, @mentions, user-tags, comments, answering questions, tagging friends, participation in competitions, the regramming of postings,

¹⁴ www.youtube.com/watch?v=2d-z5zAvv5E, accessed on 7 October 2019.

responding with postings to specific content, or engaging with advertorials in order “to be noticed by prolific elite users” (90). As a consequence, followers “amplify content circulation” (87).

Followers of social media influencers view, click, share, like, comment, and engage in other ways with content such as videos and images, and thereby help to circulate that content and create attention for it. Influencers earn money by promoting sponsored commodities in their postings (product placement) that are either labelled as ads or not and/or by sharing ad revenues with the platform they operate on (such as the YouTube Partner Programme where users need to have at least 1,000 subscribers and 4,000 watch hours in the last 12 months in order to be able to join and earn 55 percent of the net ad revenue their content achieves¹⁵). In both cases, audiences produce attention, social relations, affects, and big data that helps to advance the sales of the advertised commodities. They perform visibility labour that markets commodities to themselves and other users. Such labour is also affective and aspirational labour because users engage in it because they have the desire, fantasy, and hope to be seen and recognised by others. In influencer capitalism, not just capitalist social media platforms but also profit-making influencers, who collaborate with platforms and brands, exploit everyday users. Some fans of influencers try to become influencers themselves, but are rather precarious freelancers. They try to earn a living on YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat but fail to do so. Other fans do not have a career interest in social media platforms but enjoy being fans and desire recognition as such.

Multichannel Networks

Further complicating influencer capitalism is the fact that many influencers work with talent agencies and multichannel networks (MCNs), such as Disney Digital Network (formerly Maker Studios), Fullscreen Media, the now defunct Style Haul and Machinima, Mediakraft Networks, Big Frame/AwesomenessTV, Kin Community, DanceOn, Brave Bison, ChannelFlip, Diagonal View, or Gleam Futures,. MCNs are often affiliated with YouTube and support influencers in promotion, management, sales, audience development, partner management, and ad organisation (Hou 2019). They typically receive a percentage share of the ad revenue influencers make (Cunningham and Craig 2019, 115). MNCs mediate between influencers, platforms, and advertisers. Influencers make profit from users’ support labour, which is affective, digital, visibility-generating, and aspirational in character. Given that it is users who create economic value, the profits that talent agencies and multichannel networks make stem from the exploitation of fan-users’ digital labour.

Influencers as Achieved and Attributed Celebrities

For Chris Rojek (2001, 18), “achieved celebrities” are celebrities because of “their artistic or sporting achievements”, whereas “attributed celebrities” are “the result of the concentrated representation of an individual as noteworthy or exceptional by cultural intermediaries”. Rojek does not separate these two types, but sees them as often taking on hybrid forms. Internet celebrities such as Lele Pons, PewDiePie, DanTDM, or Zoella are what Alice

15 See <https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/72851?hl=en-GB>, accessed on 8 October 2019.

Marwick (2013, 117) calls “achieved Internet celebrities”. They use social media as a tool for their “self-presentation strategy that includes creating a persona, sharing personal information about oneself, constructing intimate connections to create the illusion of friendship or closeness, acknowledging an audience and identifying them as fans, and strategically revealing information to increase or maintain this audience” (117).

Marwick argues that Internet celebrities commodify themselves (117). They are brands. Self-branding is “the strategic creation of an identity to be promoted and sold to others” (166). Internet influencers are not just achieved celebrities but also attributed celebrities. They would be nothing without the attention, likes, comments, and visibility that their fans and followers give them through their visibility-generating and aspirational digital labour.

Influencer Capitalism’s Commodity Logic

We need to deepen the analysis of what it exactly means to sell and brand yourself and your self. A commodity is a good that is sold on a market. The commodity is, as Marx (1867, 125) writes, capitalism’s “elementary form” or cell form. This means that in capitalism, for-profit corporations produce, distribute, and sell commodities in order to accumulate capital. The working class produces commodities and value that yield profit. The videos and images that influencers regularly upload to YouTube, Snapchat, and Instagram are not commodities. Users can access them without payment. When an influencer stars in a YouTube Red production, for which they are paid, or writes a novel published by a commercial publishing house, for which they are paid a lump sum and a certain share of the revenue, then they are wage workers who are exploited by capital. If an influencer creates fashion or other merchandise that they sell in their web shop in order to yield profit, then they are worker-capitalists, freelancers who accumulate capital and in doing so exploit themselves. It is a different matter if they operate as not-for-profit companies or form together with others a cultural co-operative, self-managed non-profit companies that are collectively owned and democratically controlled by the workers.

But what is the status of the commodity in the case of content that yields profit for an influencer through advertising revenue sharing or product placement? Without the video or images that the influencer uploads to YouTube, Snapchat, or Instagram, no profit could be made. But the content itself is not a commodity. It is what Marx (1885) calls fixed constant capital. Fixed constant capital is a means of production that “helps to fashion” commodities and “continues to perform the same function over a shorter or longer period, in a series of repeated labour processes” (237). “Examples of this are factory buildings, machines, etc. – in short, everything that we collect together under the description means of labour” (237). Fixed constant capital “never leave[s] the production sphere” (237). Influencers’ portfolios of content expand, but as a whole they constitute a profile of channel that stays fixed in the social media production process for a longer time in order to attract users who produce attention and engage with the content. Fixed capital transfers some value to the sold commodity but this transfer does not create new value. Influencers are creators of creative means of online production that their followers consume and use in order to create attention and engagement that is sold to advertisers. Ad and product placement are important sources of income for many Internet celebrities who have a large number of followers. Such influencers are capitalists who, together with platforms, exploit users. Users’ attention

is the commodity sold in aggregated form to advertisers. Influencers' content that is paired with ads or product placements and users' activities and the big data it generates act as fixed capital that enables the attention commodity. Influencers are branding their selves, which means that they practise strategies of presenting themselves as reputable consumer goods to the audience in order to attract the latter's desires, attention, support, likes, and engagement so that the audience can be sold as commodity to advertisers and purchase merchandising goods.

Influencer's Complex and Hybrid Class Status and the Influencer Industry as Culture Industry

Influencers often have a complex and hybrid class status. They are entrepreneurs of the self who brand their self in order to achieve income in a variety of ways. Potentially, they are capitalists, worker-capitalists (freelancers), and wage workers. What class status an influencer has depends on the mix of activities, strategies, and platforms they use.

In the famous chapter "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" of their book *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, critical theorists Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno (2002, 94–136) coined the notion of the "culture industry" for the subsumption of culture under the commodity form and the profit-making activities of capitalist corporations. In the light of the rise of twentieth-century consumer capitalism, ever more aspects of culture became subsumed under the logic of the commodity, capital, exchange value, and profit.

The culture industry is the process where "use value in the reception of cultural assets is being replaced by exchange value" (128). Corporations in the cultural sector that aim to accumulate profit do not care about individuals as humans and citizens; they merely see them and reduce them to their status as consumers, shoppers, and workers. "Industry is interested in human beings only as its customers and employees and has in fact reduced humanity as a whole, like each of its elements, to this exhaustive formula" (118).

The phenomena of social media influencers and influencer capitalism show that social media platforms such as YouTube, Snapchat, and Instagram that allow users to create, share, like, and comment on audio-visual content such as images and videos and to build communities of followers around such channels and profiles, are fully immersed into and are a constitutive part of twenty-first-century capitalism's culture industry. The influencer industry is the culture industry operating at the content level of social media platforms. Social media creators who want to earn a living and become famous and rich on Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube have a complex class status, often constituting hybrids of workers, freelancers, and capitalists. Only a few of them manage to create successful, highly profitable capitalist businesses that make them rich. Many of them perform unpaid, low-paid, or precarious brand and commodity promotion labour. Commodity logic in the form of the branding of the self, influencers' constant propagation of the logic of commodity consumption, fan audiences' attention as commodity, the constant presentation of hidden and visible advertisements in the form of product placement and targeted ads, and the promotion of a range of influencer commodities (books, training courses, toys, fashion, fan merchandise, etc.) constitute key aspects of influencer capitalism's culture industry.

The next section discusses the ideological aspects of influencer capitalism.

7.3 INFLUENCER CAPITALISM'S IDEOLOGY

The Idealisation of Influencer Capitalism

Stuart Cunningham and David Craig are two cultural analysts who, in the book *Social Media Entertainment* (2019), provide an analysis of the social media industry, for which they have interviewed many industry leaders. Cunningham and Craig (2019, 12) acknowledge that scholars such as Duffy (2017) and Abidin (2016) have shown that trying to earn a living as a YouTube, Snapchat, or Instagram influencer often means precarious creator labour, but they claim that “such conditions can still near favourable comparison with the average aspirant in Hollywood, an industry notorious for requiring years of underpaid dues paying and apprenticeship in toxic and demanding positions”. The problem is that it is cynical and it doesn't help proletarianised cultural workers to be told that precarity in one cultural industry sector is less alienating than precarity in another one. YouTube, Snapchat, and Instagram influencers, who have millions of followers, are not ordinary, common, everyday users, but part of a small social media elite that fully engages in and lives neoliberal digital culture.

By presenting a range of examples of social media creators' focus on cultural politics, Cunningham and Craig (2019, chapter 5) argue that influencers are not unpolitical. The problem is that the two authors restrict the discussion to identity politics without once mentioning the question of the possibilities and limits of critiques of corporations, class, and capitalism on Instagram, YouTube, and Snapchat. Identity politics, including the focus on green consumption, vegan lifestyle, and ethical/sustainable capitalism, encourage individuals to celebrate and market certain lifestyles and brands, which means that sponsors paying for product placement can be found. In contrast, anti-capitalist, socialist influencers would have problems attracting corporate sponsors and would betray their socialist values if they accepted money from those they are criticising. Socialist vlogging is likely to face limits on corporate social media because it does not fit into the scheme of the celebration of brands, individualism, consumerism, and neoliberalism. When Lauren Singer presents “zero waste skincare and makeup”¹⁶ on her YouTube channel “Trash is for Tossers”, she can certainly find sponsors who pay her for marketing their green commodities. Such videos are not a form of cultural politics but rather the promotion of a particular type of capitalist corporation, i.e. a celebration of capitalism.

Cunningham and Craig conducted 150 interviews, predominantly with managers but also with 33 creators. Although Cultural Studies sees culture as ordinary and everyday, and is interested in the analysis of ordinary life (Williams 1958), Cunningham and Craig focused almost exclusively on creators who have a high number of followers, such as Brent Rivera and Tati Westbrook, who have around 10 million followers on YouTube. The interviewed creators are what the authors call “enterprising creators” (11, 79), “creator entrepreneurs” (12), or “online creator entrepreneurs” (220). The problem is that ordinary users who try to earn a living on YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat, and are proletarianised creators, are missing. The focus of Cunningham and Craig is not on ordinary online culture but on uncommon, extraordinary individuals who make up the elite of YouTubers, Snapchatters, and Instagrammers, with an aura and appearance of everydayness that makes them appear to be just a girl or guy from

16 See: www.youtube.com/watch?v=W1XF1rK7488

next-door. Such accounts create the false impression that YouTube and Instagram are spaces of unlimited opportunities where everyone can become famous.

Can You Become Famous on Instagram and YouTube?

Let us have a look at some of the claims we can find in popular culture about how to become a famous Instagram or YouTube star.

Amber Venz Box, an influencer with 100,000 followers on Instagram and CEO of reward-Style, gives the following tips in *Cosmopolitan* to users who want to become Instagram-famous:

1. Create valuable content: [...] What's important is ensuring that you're creating something which is of interest to your followers and provides value to them. What can you teach them? 2. Post consistently [...] 3. Build a community [...] 4. Be open to change (and new platforms) [...] 5. [...] Be sure you are diversifying your business, working with multiple revenue streams and never become satisfied. (Baxter-Wright 2018)

In *Teen Vogue*, food Instagrammers Gloria Chin, Tiffany Lopinsky, Brittany DiCapua, and Jerrelle Guy shared tips on what "made them so successful":

Be passionate about your account. [...] Give your account individuality [...] Post the food you (and everyone) enjoy [...] Develop a 'brand': This goes along the lines of individuality. Make your account different than the others by making a logo or something that marks your content as your own [...] Stay engaged with your followers and other accounts [...] Post just the right amount. (Spoon U 2017)

Seventeen magazine featured a post about Instagrammer Jen Selter's tips of how to "get more followers on Instagram in no time". Selter has 13 million followers on Instagram.

Be True to Yourself. "You are only going to create a community of followers if you are posting about things you truly love and remain genuine", said Jen. [...] "Do what you love and share it with the world", she said. "Like-minded people will then follow!" [...] Post Every Day [...] Know Your Stuff. [...] Jen: "Make yourself an expert in your field! [...] Get creative!" [...] Stay Positive. (Twersky 2019)

All of these statements have to do with ideology. Let us briefly recount what ideology is all about (see also section 1.3 "What is Critical Theory?" in Chapter 1). An ideology is a claim that does not correspond to reality, and distorts, manipulates, or dissimulates reality in order to advance partial interests that benefit from exploitation and domination.

There are several reasons why such accounts are ideological and constitutive of influencer capitalism as ideology:

- Individualism:

These accounts advance the myth that everyone can become famous if s/he works hard enough and tirelessly. Individualism is present in formulations that want to motivate YouTube and Instagram users to work tirelessly and constantly on building their online identity as a brand. Such formulations include the interpellations “create valuable content”, “post consistently”, “build a community”, “diversify your business”, “be passionate”, “create individuality”, “develop a brand”, “make your account different”, “stay engaged”, “do and share what you love”, “be authentic”, “post every day”, etc. Such guidelines are ideological because they conceal that these efforts are time-intensive and that you either have to be rich or work precariously in order to afford the luxury of the huge amounts of time needed to create a large number of followers who constantly engage with your content.

- Denial and neglect of inequality and risks:

These accounts are ideological because they just speak of the business opportunities of social media and neglect pointing out influencer capitalism’s inequalities and risks. As in the ideology of the American Dream, Instagram and YouTube are presented as a land of millions of opportunities. It is not mentioned that only a very few individuals become rich and famous influencers whereas many others fail, conduct unpaid or low-paid and precarious labour, remain unknown, etc. Influencer capitalism presents influencers as ordinary, everyday individuals who are just like us. The problem is that they are famous and wealthy because they come from privileged backgrounds, were lucky, or fit perfectly into the dominant ideologies of capitalism, consumerism, and sexism.

- The invisibility and imperialist character of capitalist logic:

The discussed accounts of YouTube and Instagram influencers hide the importance of capitalist organisations such as advertisers, multichannel networks, talent agencies, YouTube’s partnership programme and targeted advertisements, etc. in the making of influencers. It remains unmentioned that influencing is a capitalist industry that is all about profit and advancing the sales of commodities in sophisticated ways. Product placement in YouTube videos and Instagram images, just like branded content that is disguised as news articles, blurs the boundaries between editorial and creative content and advertisements. Even if such content is in supporting text labelled as advertisement, there remain problems: labelling can be ignored; there are often no proper fines for concealing the status of ads; audiences can overlook ad labels; regulation is mostly national and regional whereas digital media corporations operate globally; branded content expands the spaces of life, culture, and communication that are shaped by commodity logic and advertisements and thereby displaces non-commodified, public, and commons-based spaces, practices, forms, content, relations, and structures. Influencer capitalism is a form of imperialism that tries to impose commodity logic on wide areas of culture and everyday life.

- Commodity ideology:

Influencer capitalism advances and normalises a lifestyle shaped by constant shopping and the consumption of commodities. It tries to totalise and universalise the

consumption of commodities in everyday life and thereby reduces individuals, viewers, audiences, users, and fans to the status of consumers. The ads and product placements in influencer videos appeal to users to consume, shop, buy, market, adopt brands as lifestyles, etc. But individuals are more than mere consumers. They are humans, friends, and citizens. Influencer capitalism's ideology of constant shopping tries to turn life into a huge shopping mall and thereby harms and colonises spaces of humanity, friendship, and democratic politics. We cannot achieve humanity, friendship and democracy through shopping and commodity consumption, but only through solidarity, social action, and political praxis.

- Sexist ideology:

Advertisers often choose influencers as their brand ambassadors because they represent stereotypical ideals and models of beauty, perfection, fitness, health, youth, fame, and recognition. In the process of becoming adults, teenagers need to create spaces that are autonomous from their parents, where they are recognised by others. Autonomous activity and recognition by others are key dimensions of becoming an adult. Teenagers in this process search for role models they can identify with. Given that many influencers represent sexist, homogeneous, unrealistic ideals of perfection and beauty, the brand-saturated and consumerist images and videos of dominant social media influencers advance ideals that teenagers imitate and strive for but that few of them achieve. As a consequence, influencer capitalism contributes to teenagers' feelings of insecurity about their appearance and mental health problems. By communicating one-dimensional norms and values of beauty and consumerism as the good life, influencer capitalism deeply alienates humans.

Reified Consciousness

Reification and reified consciousness are terms that the Marxist theorist Georg Lukács (1971) introduced in his classical work *History and Class Consciousness*. He builds on Marx's notion of alienation. For Marx, alienation means that humans are not in control of their lives and society because others dominate or exploit them. Lukács is interested in how alienation relates to consciousness. He argues that dominant groups use ideology in order to try to manipulate dominated groups' consciousness and justify capitalism, class, and domination. He terms consciousness that is uncritical of domination and exploitation "reified consciousness". This term also matters for studying social media and online influencing.

According to Lukács (1971), ideology is reified consciousness. Class consciousness is "the appropriate and rational reactions 'imputed'¹⁷ [*zugerechnet*] to a particular typical position in the process of production" (51). Imputed/ascribed/attributed class consciousness (*zugerechnetes Klassenbewußtsein*) is objective class consciousness (323). Objective class consciousness is defined by the subject's role in the production process. It is not simply empirical consciousness but an "objective possibility" of consciousness, the "thoughts and feelings which men would have in a particular situation if they were *able* to assess both it and the

17 Some translators and scholars argue that "*zugerechnetes Bewußtsein*" can be better translated into English as "ascribed" or "attributed" than "imputed" consciousness (e.g. see Löwy 1979, 175: footnote 21; Lukács 2000, 167).

interests arising from it in their impact on immediate action and on the whole structure of society” (51, original italics). Reified consciousness is consciousness that “by-passes the essence of the evolution of society and fails to pinpoint it and express it adequately” (50). Theodor W. Adorno (1970/2002, 252) argues that “ideology is socially false consciousness”. That ideology reifies consciousness means that it tries to present the world in a biased and static manner as an unchangeable thing without history. “[*I*]deology is justification” (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972, 189, original italics) – it justifies the interests of the ruling class.

Reified consciousness is the consciousness that is characteristic of the objective status of the capitalist class in capitalist society. It is consciousness that justifies, fetishises, idealises, and naturalises capitalism, capital, commodities, commodity consumption, money, markets, competition, exchange value, toil, class, inequality, domination, exploitation, etc. Ideology is a strategy that aims at creating reified consciousness. For Lukács, ideology is a necessary legitimating feature of capitalism. The “veil drawn over the nature of bourgeois society is indispensable to the bourgeoisie itself. [...] the need to deceive the other classes and to ensure that their class consciousness remains amorphous is inescapable for a bourgeois regime” (Lukács 1971, 66).

Reification and Influencer Capitalism

In her book (*Not*) *Getting Paid to do What You Love: Gender, Social Media, and Aspirational Work*, the communication researcher Brooke Erin Duffy (2017, 230) argues that the activities of content creators who want to earn a living on YouTube or Instagram are not “expressions of false consciousness” but “an attempt to contain the uncertainties of an employment market that rests upon quite shaky foundations”.

Most content creators who try to earn a living on platforms such as YouTube or Instagram are not capitalists or ideologues but proletarianised workers who struggle to make a living in neoliberal capitalism. YouTube and Instagram promise self-determined work and earning money by doing and sharing what you love and being creative. The creative dimension of creator work can be deeply satisfying and is an aspect of self-determination. The problem is the subsumption of these platforms under the logic of consumerism, capitalism, and advertising. The problem is not creators’ search for self-management and creative work, but how the capitalist culture industry spreads the ideology of individualism, unlimited opportunities and fame, commodity promotion and consumption, and sexism via social media.

The capitalist influencer industry’s interest is to promote commodity sales and thereby the logic of capital. The worldviews, goals, strategies, suggestions, policies, guidelines, statements, books, courses, consultancy methods, etc. advanced by the influencer industry’s representatives – i.e. the influencer industry’s dominant culture – have a highly ideological character and are therefore an expression of reified consciousness. Influencer capitalism is a form of reified consciousness because it is a social and cultural structure and system that does not aim at advancing humanity, love, solidarity, democracy, and wealth for all, but consumerism, competition, division, and the profits and wealth of few corporations. Influencer capitalism is the ideology of the 1 percent. It aims at advancing the wealth of the richest 1 percent and the precarity of the 99 percent. But this ideology takes on the aura of democracy by communicating through social media influencers the false claim that everyone can become famous in influencer capitalism and that capitalism is an egalitarian world.

Four Dimensions of Influencer Capitalism as Ideology

The ideological claims about influencers from *Cosmopolitan*, *Teen Vogue*, and *Seventeen* that were presented at the start of this section are characteristic of the ideology as reified consciousness that can typically be found among managers and gurus in the fashion industry, the advertising and public relations industry, and the digital tech industry.

Hearst Communication owns *Cosmopolitan* and a range of other media, such as *Elle*, *Esquire*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and *Marie Claire*. It also owns the teen magazine *Seventeen*. *Teen Vogue* is a teenage magazine owned by Condé Nast, a subsidiary of Advance Publications, which also owns *Vogue* and *Wired* and holds shares in Discovery Channel and Reddit. Magazines such as *Cosmopolitan*, *Teen Vogue*, and *Seventeen* try to sell the ideas of beauty, desire, success, and recognition to young women. Stories about how to become successful, desired, and recognised influencers by working on your own on social media fit well into the overall ideology of these media.

Media and other corporations focused on reaching young people have an interest in reaching this group on social media in order to sell and market commodities to them. There are several factors that influence how capitalist corporations propagate positive attitudes towards social media and social media influencers. A *first reason* is that young people are heavy users of social media, which means that companies can reach them on these platforms. In 2018, IPSOS (2018) conducted interviews with 500 young people each in 15 countries. It found that overall there was a wide use of social media platforms: 52 percent used Facebook, 50 percent used YouTube, 44 percent used WhatsApp, 39 percent were on Instagram, 25 percent on Snapchat, and 23 percent used Twitter.

A *second reason* is that celebrity culture is quite important for young people, which means that companies that sponsor celebrities on social media via influencer marketing, where influencers are paid for presenting commodities, can market their commodities to young people. In 2016–2017, National Citizen Service (2017) conducted a poll among 1,000 16- and 17-year-old English teenagers. It documented the importance of celebrity culture for young people. Of the teens interviewed, 59 percent said they are inspired by famous persons, 36 percent of boys and girls say famous people influence them because they encourage teenagers to want to be successful, and 31 percent say that celebrities are someone to look up to. A majority, 34 percent of boys and 26 percent of girls, see watching YouTube videos as a favourite weekend activity, 21 percent of boys and 31 percent of girls say meeting friends is the best weekend activity, 33 percent of girls and 15 percent of boys say their physical appearance is influenced by what celebrities look like, 53 percent of girls and 27 percent of boys say their appearance is influenced by what they see on social media, and 72 percent of girls and 39 percent of boys say they have felt insecure about their appearance. Many teenagers orient their appearance on celebrities, but at the same time the culture industry's branded content enforces beauty ideals on social media that can make young people feel insecure about their appearance.

A *third reason* why corporations want to advance positive attitudes of young people and audiences in general towards influencers and celebrities is that influencers have some influence on shopping decisions. A survey by Olapic (2016) of 4,578 social media users in the USA, the UK, France, Spain, Germany, and Sweden found that a quarter of the responding millennials said they bought a product after seeing it featured in user-generated content. "A significant 70% of

respondents in the U.S. and 53% in Europe indicate they would be more likely to buy a product after seeing a positive or relatable user-generated image of it online” (Olapic 2016).

A *fourth reason* why corporations are keen to foster a positive image of influencers is that many people see entrepreneurship as an important opportunity for young people. The World Economic Forum’s (2017) Global Shapers Survey conducted 40,506 interviews in 15 countries: 40 percent said that a start-up ecosystem fostering entrepreneurship was the most important factor empowering youth. It was significant that there were quite different attitudes in Europe, where the majority (42.2 percent) answered that a fair and just system is the most important factor empowering youth, and entrepreneurship was not among the top factors mentioned.

Sara Tasker’s “Me & Orla”

Sara Tasker’s Instagram account “Me & Orla” has more than 200,000 followers. Tasker’s (2019) book *Hashtag Authentic: Finding Creativity and Building a Community on Instagram and Beyond* is a best-seller. On 12 October 2019, it was ranked number 5,095 in the list of top-selling books on Amazon UK. In this book, she presents “the real recipe for success” on Instagram, which according to her helps users “build a really meaningful following” and “develop a business from that”: “1. Post brilliant content. [...] 2. Engage, engage, engage. [...] Spend more time, daily, exploring other people’s pages than you do on your own. Like, comment, share, discuss. [...] 3. Be persistently curious. [...] 4. Accept there’s no magic wand. [...] it’s the people with a unique voice, a clear and consistent message and a strong sense of self who really stand out and succeed” (Tasker 2019, 185).

This recipe for success is purely framed in terms of individual action, attitude, and belief, telling users: if you really want it and work hard on yourself and your profile, you can become a successful Instagram entrepreneur. There is no mention of advertisers and production promotion, agencies, working for and promoting brands and commodities for free, multichannel networks, disappointments and failures in not earning money, the hard, precarious labour consisting of thousands of unpaid hours to build a follower community on social media that is large enough to attract advertisers, etc. The reality of becoming a famous influencer is not as smooth and individualistic as Sara Tasker’s book suggests.

On her website, Sara Tasker offers Instagram coaching, advertises her blog, podcast, and presences on Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest, and YouTube to sponsors and advertisers: “With over 170k Instagram followers as well as strong audiences on Twitter, Pinterest and Youtube, Me & Orla has a combined social following of over 220k. Our latest venture, a weekly podcast for creatives, averages around 35k listeners each month. [...] From time to time we partner with select brands, stores and makers to offer giveaways, sponsored content, Instagram features and promotional work. Previous collaborations include IKEA, Canon, Land Rover and Garnier. If you think you’d be a good match to work with Me & Orla, then get in touch.”¹⁸ Branded content and product promotion are an aspect of Instagram “success” that is not mentioned in *Hashtag Authentic*. In an interview with Janet Murray (2016, 34:30–35:40), Sara Tasker mentions that she has agency representation and that an agency negotiates brand deals for her.

¹⁸ <https://meandorla.co.uk/sponsor/>

Influencer Capitalism's Reality: Precarious, Unpaid Labour

Blog Tyrant (2019) conducted a survey among 350 bloggers. Results revealed that 69.4 percent said they didn't make money from their blog, 22.6 percent made less than US\$ 10,000 per year, 2.5 percent made between US\$ 10,000 and US\$ 30,000, 1.5 percent made between US\$ 30,000 and US\$ 80,000, 2.2 percent made between US\$ 80,000 and US\$ 150,000, 1.2 percent made more than US\$ 150,000, and 0.6 percent made more than US\$ 1 million. The vast majority of bloggers do not make any money from their blogs or make so little that they could never live from blogging. Of those interviewed, 32.2 percent said they started their blog to make a full-time income and 37.1 percent said they started blogging in order to make a side income. This means that 69.3 percent of the respondents expected to live fully or partly from blogging, but only 5.5 percent earn more than US\$ 30,000 per year. The data confirm that the vast majority of those trying to sustain themselves from blogging are precarious workers. Only a very small group of those who want to earn a living as influencers on social media manage to make it from precarious workers into profit-earning entrepreneurs.

For her book *(Not) Getting Paid To Do What You Love: Gender, Social Media, and Aspirational Work*, the communication scholar Brooke Erin Duffy (2017) interviewed 55 social media creators who aspired to earn money by doing what they loved. There were a couple of interviewees who have several hundred thousand followers on their social media profiles, but more common were participants with thousands and tens of thousands of followers. In her interviews Duffy more focused on the average aspiring influencers, i.e. everyday users, whereas Cunningham and Craig (2019) mainly interviewed managers and Instagram superstars. These two studies are characteristic of critical research (Duffy) and administrative research (Cunningham and Craig) about social media and influencer capitalism. Remember that we learned in section 1.2 of Chapter 1 of this book that administrative research conducts analyses that affirms power whereas critical research produces knowledge that deconstructs and questions power.

The interviews showed that creating content and managing relationships with the follower community, other influencers, and potential sponsors is very time-intensive. Aspiring bloggers often feel compelled to promote brands without payment in order to develop their reputation and gather more followers. The study showed that “only as fraction of content creators rise above the din to achieve major success. For the rest, the ideal of *getting paid to do what you love* remains an unfulfilled promise” (Duffy 2017, 6, original italics). The finding was that influencers with high numbers of followers often came from privileged backgrounds, which allowed them to work for free and invest lots of time into building their profiles and audiences. “Celeb-bloggers and digital influencers are upheld in the popular imagination as individuals *just like us*; yet, the handful of pros who ‘make it’ really aren’t *just like* the legions of creative aspirants who don’t” (222, original italics).

Duffy characterises the labour that is typical for social media producers trying to earn a living online as aspirational labour, labour that is “a mode of (mostly) uncompensated, independent work that is propelled by the much-venerated ideal of *getting paid to do what you love* [...] aspirational laborers expect that they will *one day* be compensated for their productivity” (4, original italics). Aspirational labour is hopeful. It is based on the hope that they will one day be paid for some or all the time they have invested. It is hope labour,

“an ideological process” based on “un- or under-compensated work carried out in the present, often for experience or exposure, in the hope that future employment opportunities may follow” (Kuehn and Corrigan 2013, 10).

Brittany Hennessy is an influencer marketing expert. She worked for Hearst Magazines Digital Media as senior director of influencer strategy and talent partnerships. In her book *Influencer: Building Your Personal Brand in the Age of Social Media*, Hennessy (2018) provides some insights into the influencer industry. She argues that a social media creator’s social situation depends on the number of followers. She writes that those with up to 4,999 followers must work hard by using different hashtags. Those with a number of followers ranging between 5,000 and 9,999 should especially focus on engaging and liking postings by related influencers. Influencers with 25,000–49,999 followers should start collaborations with other creators. With 50,000 followers or more, influencers should approach brands and offer to promote their commodities, run contests or sweepstakes for them, etc. “More times than not, a brand will post your content on its social media channels and your content could be exposed to hundreds of thousands, if not millions of potentials followers” (61). Once an influencer has 100,000 followers, it is likely that people such as Hennessy, who decide on companies’ digital marketing campaigns, will contact them. With 100,000 followers, it is likely that social media creators make a transition from unpaid and precarious workers to entrepreneurs who work with agencies and brands in creating ad campaigns targeted at social media users.

An ideology is a claim that does not correspond to reality and distorts, manipulates, or dissimulates reality in order to advance partial interests that benefit from exploitation and domination. The inequality of influence and precarious, unpaid labour in influencer capitalism are realities that deconstruct the claims of influencer capitalism and show their ideological character.

Michelle Phan’s Deconstruction of Influencer Capitalism as Ideology

Michelle Phan is a beauty influencer who in late 2019 had 9 million followers on YouTube and more than 2 million followers on Instagram. Phan (2014) is the author of the book *Make Up: Your Life Guide to Beauty Style and Success – Online and Off*. In 2009, BuzzFeed featured her videos on how to style yourself to get Lady Gaga’s eyes, and this exposure boosted her number of followers on YouTube. French perfume and cosmetics company Lancôme, a subsidiary of L’Oréal, signed a brand deal with Phan after she had featured some of the company’s products for free in her videos. She started to share ad revenue with YouTube in the latter’s partnership programme. Phan founded the YouTube multichannel network FAWN, which was later rebranded as ICON. In late 2019, ICON had around 450,000 followers. Phan is the founder of the beauty subscription service Ipsy, which every month sends cosmetic samples to paying subscribers. Phan has her own beauty line. In 2014, Phan, together with Cutting Edge Group, started the music label Shift Music Group. Phan was first represented by Creative Artists Agency and has later been managed by United Talent Agency. In October 2019, Phan’s wealth amounted to an estimated £35 million.¹⁹

¹⁹ www.spearswms.com/michelle-phan-net-worth/, accessed on 12 October 2019.

On 1 June 2017, Michelle Phan posted the video “Why I Left” on YouTube, in which she explained why she would stop using the platform. After this posting, she disappeared. Two years later, in September 2019, she returned to YouTube. In “Why I Left”, Michelle Phan says:

I felt so fulfilled, creating these videos didn't feel like work it felt more like a dream [...] it wouldn't be for a long until I'd be swept away by opportunities and promises. I said my goodbyes and left my family's nest to pursue the American [...] Once I was a girl with dreams, who eventually became a product smiling, selling and selling. Who I was on camera and who I was in real life began to feel like strangers. Money can bring out the worse in people [...] My insecurities got the worse of me, I became imprisoned by my own vanity and was never satisfied with how I looked. The life I lead online was picture perfect but in reality I was carefully curating the image of a life I wanted, not had. [...] Staying busy was my only way I was able to cope with all the stress and anxiety. It helped to numb the pain. [...] Years would go by and I find myself becoming more isolated and disconnected [...] I felt so depressed and I didn't know why. [...] During one of my sleepless nights I found myself watching one of my earlier videos, I'd forgotten how genuine and full of life I once was. It was such an innocent time before the money – before the fame. I felt like somewhere along this journey I lost myself, was it because of money? [...] I spent my whole life chasing after success only to find myself running away from the very thing that mattered, myself, my true self. In the end, I wasn't fooling her, because deep down I wasn't happy. I've grown to learn how money can buy many things like peace of mind, comfort, status – anything but happiness.²⁰

Phan's video is an honest, courageous account that discusses that the reality of the social media world is often dark, but appears to be so shiny, glittery, and happy. Phan describes how she turned from a worker struggling to make ends meet into a digital entrepreneur and became rich, and how the immersion of her life into the commodity world of fashion brands, advertising, and promotion commodified her and deeply alienated her. A deep gap emerged between how she presented herself on YouTube and Instagram, driven by the urge to accumulate capital and be successful, and how she felt and was in reality. This digital schizophrenia was driven by the capitalist reality of brands, advertising, and neoliberal subjectivity. In advertising, commodity fetishism is at its height. Commodity fetishism veils the social reality of capitalism, the labour that creates commodity, from workers in the division of labour and from consumers. “The social relations of production embedded in goods are systematically hidden from our eyes. The real meaning of goods, in fact, is *emptied* out in capitalist production and consumption. [...] Production empties. Advertising fills” (Jhally 2006, 88, 89, original italics). Commodity fetishism and advertising create a gap between ideological/virtual reality and actual life. In the case of Michelle Phan, this schizophrenic character of capitalist

²⁰ www.youtube.com/watch?v=UuGpm01SPcA, accessed on 13 October 2019.

reality created the situation of her being constantly trapped in an ideological world of brands that alienated her from the rest of her life and from herself. Depression was the result.

Michelle Phan's account of her life as an influencer is different from the celebrations we often hear about from the neoliberal business press, management gurus, brand-worshipping advisors and researchers, and influencer millionaires. It might, however, not be the exception from the rule that when someone "becomes a product" with a curated image, s/he in the end feels like a stranger, depressed, stressed, anxious, and unhappy. Alienation is a subjective reality of influencer capitalism.

Phan's account also provides indications that influencer capitalism on the ideological level creates a false form of subjectivity and consciousness, where influencers live in a capitalist bubble and a virtual reality determined by brands and their ideology. The world of brands and advertising is an idealised, unreal world in which there is only false reality and false happiness. Living and acting constantly in this world of false happiness can make the actors unhappy. Capitalism is not as colourful as it often appears in the world of consumer culture and advertising. It has a hidden, dark underside.

In the next section, we will summarise some of the key problems of influencer capitalism.

7.4 INFLUENCER CAPITALISM'S PROBLEMS

Consumerist, Individualist, Uncritical, Unhappy Influencer Capitalism

Remember that in Chapter 1 we heard about the Frankfurt School, which traces a line of thinking focused on ideology critique that has been inspired by Marx and whose main classical representative are Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse (see section 1.4 in Chapter 1). The Frankfurt School's analysis of the culture industry allows us to formulate a contemporary critique of influencer capitalism.

Horkheimer and Adorno (2002, 126) point out that the culture industry commodifies beauty: "The highest-paid stars resemble advertisements for unnamed merchandise. Not for nothing are they often chosen from the ranks of commercial models. The dominant taste derives its ideal from the advertisement, from commodified beauty."

Influencer capitalism sets standards of beauty and fame that are shaped by commodity logic. Influencers have to advance consumerist and capitalist ideology by allowing product placements, in-video ads, and targeted online ads on their channels, profiles, and in their user-generated content.

"The stars and dignitaries are mere patterns for the ready-made world, and for the scissors of juridical and economic justice, which snip off the last loose ends" (196). Influencer capitalism's focus on stars presenting commodities distracts possibilities, time, and space from the focus on and engagement with issues having to do with social and economic justice. Influencer capitalism is like a pair of scissors that tries to cut off and block possibilities for critique and critical thought.

Horkheimer and Adorno (2002, 132) analysed product placement:

In the influential American magazines *Life* and *Fortune* the images and texts of advertisements are, at a cursory glance, hardly distinguishable from the

editorial section. The enthusiastic and unpaid picture story about the living habits and personal grooming of celebrities, which wins them new fans, is editorial, while the advertising pages rely on photographs and data so factual and lifelike that they represent the ideal of information to which the editorial section only aspires.

Influencer capitalism is a new stage in the development of advertisement, where the boundaries between advertisements, news content, and editorial content have become so fluid that it is often hard for audiences to distinguish what is and what is not an advertisement whose primary aim is to make them buy something. When the logic of advertisement enters news, information, education, and entertainment, then the democratic character of the public sphere is at risk.

The users' "imitative assimilation to commodity models" (Adorno 1991, 53) is influencer capitalism's goal. Social media influencers' names are labels of fame that disguise that they are paid commodity propagandists. In influencer capitalism, fame "has become wholly a function of paid propagandists and is measured in terms of the investment risked by the bearer of a name or the interests behind him" (Adorno 1951/2005, 100).

The example of Michelle Phan shows that famous and successful influencers can be quite unhappy. Capitalism makes neither celebrities nor fans happy. Adorno (100–101) stresses that "organized fame and remembrance lead ineluctably to nothingness, the foretaste of which is perceptible in the hectic doings of all celebrities. The famous are not happy in their lot. They become brand-name commodities, alien and incomprehensible to themselves, and, as their own living images, they are as if dead" (100–101).

Herbert Marcuse stresses that stardom and success in capitalism are often short-lived and that fandom and stardom are an ideological expression of class society's structures that constitute power differentials between masters and servants and between the capitalist class and the working class: "the stars and starlets of politics, television, and sports are highly fungible. [...] These star-leaders, together with the innumerable sub-leaders, are in turn functionaries of a higher authority which is no longer embodied in a person: the authority of the prevailing productive apparatus which, once set in motion and moving efficiently in the set direction, engulfs the leaders and the led – without however, eliminating the radical differences between them, that is, between the masters and servants" (Marcuse 1970, 53, 54). Social media influencers who promote commodity logic are capitalist consumer culture's contemporary cultural leaders who spread the norms of capitalism.

Positivist Influencer Capitalism

The media and communication scholar Jacob Johannsen (2019, 116) argues that social media platforms make an "excessive ideological demand to be authentic, real, and relatable". Dominant social media's design advances an affective positivism that fosters a culture of likes and likability and only expresses positive affects. These discourage posting about, talking about, portraying, and visualising aspects of the negativity, ugliness, horrors, disappointments, and fears of life and society.

Influencers tend to communicate content that aims to make their fans happy because positive emotional release is expected to create more attention time, to result in continued

returns to the channel and thereby more advertising clicks/revenues and potential sales of merchandising goods. Influencers can, however, also turn negative affects into a positivist, instrumental strategy. Bishop (2018b) analyses YouTuber beauty vloggers' anxiety videos which focus on issues such as anxiety, stress, depression, crisis, etc. In such videos, anxiety is often naturalised and "consumerism is suggested to be the cure for [...] anxiety. [...] Zoella cites specific brands of cosmetics, smoothies, bath products, and candles as having helped her to manage her stress and anxiety" (97). One can also speculate as to whether influencers from time to time want to shock their audiences and deliberately create a negative difference to the everyday content in order to positively maintain the audience's attention of loyalty.

Influencer capitalism advances a positivist logic that focuses on happiness and promotes consumption as the solution to unhappiness. It denies the existence of actual unhappiness in capitalism and deepens individuals' unhappiness by fostering consumption as the proclaimed solution to social and socio-psychological problems whose causes can only be overcome politically.

Patriarchal and Sexist Influencer Capitalism

Budzinski and Gaenssle (2018) analysed 200 top YouTuber channels. They found that channels in the realms of gaming and comedy are predominantly run by male YouTubers and fashion-, style-, how to-, and people-oriented channels are produced by female YouTubers. Influencer capitalism reproduces traditional gender divisions where women are constructed as beautiful, social, and learned and men as competitive, tech-oriented, and funny. Bishop (2018a) shows that dominant YouTubers tend to reproduce such patriarchal divisions. Whereas dominant male YouTubers often create videos that are tagged with terms such as "funny" or "muscle", women vloggers often produce videos that use tags such as "make-up", "beauty", or "fashion".

Bishop (2018a) provides indications that given that top women YouTube vlogs and videos tend to focus on fashion, beauty, cosmetics, and lifestyle, and YouTube's algorithms favour videos that viewers watch until the end in the organisation of visibility, "YouTube's algorithm ultimately rewards hegemonic and normative performances of femininity, in line with the desires and needs of brands and advertisers" (81) and "rewards those employing advertising speak" (80). "When a viewer begins their viewing session with a Zoella 'Lush Haul' video, YouTube's algorithms selects videos to automatically follow Zoella's. These videos are also Lush themed videos, mostly from other beauty vloggers" (76).

Racist Influencer Capitalism

Based on interviews with YouTubers, Bishop (2019) shows that the intransparent and secretive character of YouTube's algorithms is a topic among YouTubers, a phenomenon Bishop terms "algorithmic gossip". Influencers are unsure about what strategies are best to increase their audience and its level of engagement. YouTubers of colour argued in Bishop's interviews that they had the suspicion that YouTube's algorithms privilege the visibility of white vloggers, which is an example of what Safiya Noble (2018) terms "algorithmic oppression". An algorithm is an expression of oppression if it "biases information – toward largely stereotypic and decontextualized results, at least when it comes to certain

groups of people” (56). Such biases are often “buttressed by advertising profits” (116). “Black women and girls continue to have their image and representations assaulted in the new media environments that are not so unfamiliar or dissimilar to old, traditional media depictions. I intend to meaningfully articulate the ways that commercialization is the source of power that drives the consumption of Black women’s and girls’ representative identity on the web” (33).

According to influencers, there are indications that racist biases also exist in respect to the closed, profit-oriented algorithms that influencer platforms employ. The next section discusses socialist influencers.

7.5 SOCIALIST INFLUENCERS

What are Socialist Influencers?

Entertainment is as much a human need as information, education, communicating with others, and so on. Entertainment makes humans laugh, which is important for their mental, social, and cultural development. The problem with the culture industry is that it tries to make entertainment all-dominant, thus also dominating over and transforming information, education, news, debate, controversy, and arts in order to advance advertisements and commodity logic. Influencer capitalism has found new online ways of spreading entertainment, advertising, and commodity logic.

The alternatives to the culture industry and influencer capitalism do not have to abolish entertainment, but they can transform it and reduce its overall amount and its share of the content we consume and engage with. Socialist influencers are social media content creators who produce and spread content that tries to get the audience interested in socialism. They point audiences towards possibilities for further engagement with socialism in the form of books, theories, debates, talks, controversies, and other materials.

Liza Tsaliki (2016) analyses how celebrities tweet about the activist-interests regarding immigration reform, poverty, education policies, human rights, abortion rights, and gay rights. She found that “celebrities use Twitter in general, they scarcely use it to raise public awareness or mobilize people about the cause for which they serve as spokespersons” (245), and that it seems that “celebrities worry (too much) about inflicting self-harm as a result of being too political, and celebvocate tweeting can in fact be constructed in that way, as it exudes a notion of intimacy, immediacy and togetherness that is difficult to match” (252). It is decisive whether influencers are and act as socialists or not. Being rich stands in contradiction to being a socialist unless you regularly donate significant parts of your wealth to socialist causes.

Whereas capitalist influencers promote commodities and try to influence users’ purchases, socialist influencers promote socialism and try to influence users by pointing them towards ways of engaging more deeply with socialist ideas, which can set them on a path towards users becoming socialist activists.

Greta Thunberg and Fridays for Future

Greta Thunberg has inspired not only public debates about climate change, but also the global school strike movement for the climate that is also known under names such as Fridays for Future, Youth for Climate, or Climate Strike.

#FridaysForFuture is a movement that began in August 2018, after 15 years old Greta Thunberg sat in front of the Swedish parliament every schoolday for three weeks, to protest against the lack of action on the climate crisis. She posted what she was doing on Instagram and Twitter and it soon went viral. On the 8th of September, Greta decided to continue striking every Friday until the Swedish policies provided a safe pathway well under 2-degree C, i.e. in line with the Paris agreement. The hashtags #FridaysForFuture and #Climatestrike spread and many students and adults began to protest outside of their parliaments and local city halls all over the world.²¹

Greta Thunberg is an influencer who plays an important role in the political socialisation of young people and the development of a new global youth movement. She has millions of followers on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook. She explains her motivation: “We children are doing this because we want our hopes and dreams back. [...] Now we probably don’t even have a future any more. Because that future was sold so that a small number of people could make unimaginable amounts of money” (Thunberg 2019, 68, 58).

Socialism needs to be red-green, which means that social justice and environmental sustainability/justice have to be seen as interlinked themes and goals. But environmentalism is not automatically socialist. There are also bourgeois forms of environmentalism that want to create a green capitalism and ignore that there is an antagonism between capitalism and nature. The climate crisis is not the result of a generational conflict, but a socialist version of environmentalism is needed. The youth movement is of particular importance for advancing socialist environmentalism. Critical influencers can play a vital role in such a movement.

Breadtube

Breadtube is an example of a network of socialist influencers. Breadtube is “a loose association of independent online video makers and their surrounding communities that makes up a leftist response to alt-right use of digital media” (Kuznetsov and Ismangil 2020, 204). Breadtube is a community of YouTube vloggers creating and disseminating critical content that takes on artistic and popular formats that is appealing to a young audience. Breadtube.tv aggregates the videos of the community’s creators. Breadtube’s name is derived from anarchist communist Peter Kropotkin’s (1892/1995) book *The Conquest of Bread*, which describes a future communist-anarchist society where worker self-management governs the economy and there is wealth for all. Contrapoints, Philosophy Tube, Hbomberguy, and Shaun are among the most popular Breadtubers. In late 2019, their number of YouTube followers was respectively 750,000 (Contrapoints), 500,000 (Philosophy Tube), 500,000 (Hbomberguy), and 300,000 (Shaun). Contrapoints produced a two-part video titled “What’s Wrong with Capitalism?”, which in late 2019 together had over 2 million views and more than 14,000 user comments.²² In such videos, counter-arguments to socialist alternatives are often anticipated and dealt with, and

21 www.fridaysforfuture.org/about, accessed on 13 October 2019.

22 www.youtube.com/watch?v=gJW4-cOZt8A&t=237s, www.youtube.com/watch?v=AR7ryglw_IQ

references to socialist authors and books are made, which can steer watchers towards a deeper engagement with socialist ideas.

Kuznetsov and Ismangil (2020, 207) argue that Breadtube is a “gateway to socialist thinking” and that its videos debunk and deconstruct far-right and capitalist ideology by pointing out its contradictions and asking critical questions. Many Breadtubers do not accept advertising and sponsorship income but ask their followers to support them with monthly donations on platforms such as Patreon. Not being dependent on advertisers’ investments, Breadtubers have more freedom to be critical and advance critical content. Breadtube videos are anchor points that provide links to socialist works and debates that allow users to engage more deeply with leftist ideas.

One problem of Breadtube is that its influencers act purely individually. They have individual channels and produce content individually, which reproduces the individualism inherent in celebrity culture and the dominant “social” media platforms. A more collective approach of production where content is co-produced and a group of socialists maintains a channel is closer to both the idea of socialism and social media. *Jacobin* is an example of a collective socialist publishing project.

Jacobin

Jacobin is a socialist magazine based in New York (see www.jacobinmag.com/). Bhaskar Sunkara founded it in 2011. Sunkara (2019) is the author of *The Socialist Manifesto: The Case for Radical Politics in an Era of Extreme Inequality*. *Jacobin* publishes articles on current political topics inspired by Marxist theory and written in an accessible manner. It is funded by sales, subscriptions, and donations. Socialist publications have often been aesthetically unappealing, focusing on pure text and lacking images, critical images, critical data visualisations, info-graphics, satire, and colours. *Jacobin* combines all of these elements with printed text and an appealing layout. It is therefore not only politically and theoretically but also aesthetically appealing. *Jacobin* is a work of art, theory, and socialist politics. It also has a website where it features articles, a blog, a theory journal entitled *Catalyst: A Journal of Theory and Strategy*, podcasts (Jacobin Radio), a book series, reading groups, affiliate magazines and projects in various countries, and social media channels on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube. *Jacobin* especially appeals to the younger generation of socialists and young people interested in politics. It focuses on the future of socialism. Projects such as *Jacobin* and Novara Media blur the boundaries between influencer culture and alternative media. Young people’s interest in Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn has benefited awareness of such projects. Socialist influencing combines collectively produced alternative media projects with the activities of public intellectuals, opinion leaders, and critical journalists such as Bhaskar Sunkara, Owen Jones, Ash Sarkar, or Aaron Bastani.

7.6 CONCLUSION

The emergence of platforms such as YouTube and Instagram combined with the continued presence of the logic of neoliberalism in twenty-first-century society has created the phenomenon of influencers. This chapter has advanced the argument that social media influencing is a distinct ideology and capital accumulation model.

We can summarise this chapter's main results as follows:

- Social media influencing is a distinct form of twenty-first-century capitalism's culture industry. Social media creators who want to earn a living and become famous and rich on Instagram and YouTube have a complex class status, often constituting hybrids of workers, freelancers, and capitalists.
- Commodity logic in the form of the branding of the self, influencers' constant propagation of the logic of commodity consumption, fan audiences' attention as commodity, the constant presentation of hidden and visible advertisements in the form of product placement and targeted ads, and the promotion of a range of influencer commodities (books, training courses, toys, fashion, fan merchandise, etc.) constitute key aspects of influencer capitalism's culture industry.
- The influencer industry is the culture industry operating at the content level of social media platforms.
- Influencer capitalism has a highly ideological form. Influencer capitalism's culture industry tries to convince everyday users that via YouTube and Instagram everyone can become famous and rich. Such claims hide the realities of precarious labour, inequality, sexism, racism, capitalism, mental health problems, and alienation that shape the influencer industry. Influencer capitalism as ideology is shaped by individualism, the denial and neglect of inequality and risks, and the invisibility and imperialist character of capitalist logic, commodity ideology, and sexist ideology. Brands and cultural and digital corporations benefit and profit from spreading influencer ideology. Influencer capitalism is consumerist, individualist, uncritical, positivist, patriarchal, sexist, and racist. It is structure that makes humans objectively unhappy.
- We need socialist influencers. Whereas capitalist influencers promote commodities and try to influence users' purchases, socialist influencers promote socialism and try to influence users by pointing them towards ways of engaging more deeply with socialist ideas, which can set them on a path towards users becoming socialist activists. Socialist influencers use social media in creative, engaging, political, and entertaining manners. They are not out there on the Internet to make profits and advertise commodities, but to challenge the very logic of profits, advertising, and commodities. They take a more collective and political approach than capitalist influencers.

Only in a classless society will everyone be recognised. When everyone becomes a celebrity then there is no longer a need for the existence of celebrities. In a classless society, everyone is a celebrity. Only overcoming class can tackle the problems we face in influencer capitalism.

RECOMMENDED READINGS AND EXERCISES

Search on YouTube and Instagram for one very popular video and one very popular image posted by influencers who have a large number of followers (at least several hundred thousand). Focus on those images and videos that feature commodity placements and are therefore forms of advertisement.

(Continued)

Discuss:

- Why do you think the video and the image have achieved a large number of views?
 - In what respects are the video and the image expressions of influencer capitalism?
 - What positive and negative comments do users make about this video? Give examples and assess these comments from a critical theory perspective.
 - What are the problems of influencer capitalism?
 - What role does the analysed content play in respect to these problems?
-

Crystal Abidin is an anthropologist and Internet researcher. Brooke Erin Duffy is a communication scholar and Internet researcher. Both have conducted critical analyses of influencers. Read the following two texts:

Abidin, Crystal. 2016. Visibility labour: Engaging with influencers' fashion brands and #OOTD advertorial campaigns on Instagram. *Media International Australia* 16 (1): 86–100.

Duffy, Brooke Erin. 2017. *(Not) getting paid to do what you love: Gender, social media, and aspirational work*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. Chapter 1: Entrepreneurial Wishes and Career Dreams, and Chapter 2: The Aspirational Ethos: Gender, Consumerism, and Labor.

Discuss:

- What does Abidin understand by visibility labour?
 - And what does Duffy understand by aspirational labour?
-

Try to find concrete examples of visibility labour and aspirational labour on Instagram and YouTube. You can work alone or in groups. Search for examples of such labour on Instagram and YouTube.

- Explain how and why they relate to visibility labour and aspirational labour.
 - What are the commonalities and differences of visibility labour and aspirational labour?
-

Georg Lukács (1885–1971) was an influential Marxist-humanist intellectual. His book *History and Class Consciousness* is one of the most important critical theory books of the twentieth century. In it, he introduces the notion of reified consciousness. Read Lukács' chapter "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat":

Lukács, Georg. 1971. Reification and the consciousness of the proletariat. In *History and class consciousness*, 83–222. London: Merlin.

Discuss:

- What is reified consciousness?
 - What is the role of reified consciousness in influencer capitalism? Try to find example videos or postings from social media influencer pages that show the characteristics of reified consciousness.
-

First, read the “Culture Industry” chapter in Horkheimer and Adorno’s book *Dialectic of Enlightenment*:

Horkheimer, Max and Theodor W. Adorno. 1947/2002. The culture industry: Enlightenment as mass deception. In *Dialectic of enlightenment: Philosophical fragments*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Second, watch Michelle Phan’s video “Why I Left” on YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=UuGpm01SPcA.

Michelle Phan is one of the world’s most popular social media influencers. In 2017, she posted this video to announce that she was taking a break from social media. She formulates a critique of the structures of social media influencing.

Discuss:

- What points of criticism of social media influencing does Michelle Phan formulate?
 - What was her own experience of influencer capitalism?
 - In what respects does Michelle’s video reflect or not reflect aspects of Horkheimer and Adorno’s critique of the culture industry?
-

Search for three videos produced by socialist influencers. Try to focus the search on one specific political theme. Watch the videos.

Discuss:

- What are the commonalities and differences between these videos and mainstream influencer videos that advance consumer culture and advertise commodities?
- How do you assess socialist influencers and their content?
- What role should social media and influencers play in protest movements?