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IARCO RESEARCH PROPOSAL

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Research Topic: Performing Authenticity: The Sociology of 'Realness' in post pandemic Influencer culture

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Research Problem

After COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a clear shift in social media influencer culture. It was highly organized, polished content and it promoted "authenticity" and "relatable" performances. This phenomenon is especially notable on social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram and Youtube; these were the places which influencers monetize their identities by performing versions of "realness". Sociologically, authenticity is not a fixed trait but it is indeed performed, constructed, and policed within platforms norms and audience expectations. The commodification of vulnerability such as mental health struggles and everyday life experiences raises questions regarding influencer-audience relationships and trust building in parasocial interactions. However, research is lacking on how these dynamics operate across platforms and how audiences negotiate in the context of monetization.

Existing Literature

There have been recent shifts in social media culture following the COVID-19 pandemic which has advanced a move from highly organized and polished influencer content toward

emphasizing "authenticity" and "relatability." Scholars often highlight that this authenticity is not structural but socially constructed and it is performed within platform norms and audience expectations. [1]Abidin explores how TikTok's platform affordances encourage spontaneous,

raw content like the "get ready with me"(#GRWM) trend, which often contrasts with Instagram's more polished "messy motherhood" and burnout portrayals analyzed and studied by[2] Senft and Baym. Another study done by [3]Banet-Weiser is who often address this as a commodification of vulnerability, such as showcasing mental health struggles and everyday life challenges by influencers; he always emphasizes the tension between genuine emotion and strategic identity performance for monetization. [4]Horton and Wohl conducted a study on parasocial interaction. It was first coined by them and this study showcases how to describe the relationship that develops between an actor on television and the audience due to the seemingly conversational nature of the content, especially if the actor specifically addresses the spectator. In [5]Erving Goffman's study of the presentation of self in everyday life explains the theory by using a dramaturgical (theater based) metaphor to explain social interaction, where individuals are "actors" managing "impressions" for an "audience" to control how others perceive them this can also be expanded by [6]Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital applied to digital economies. Sociologist [7]Archil Hochschild coined the term "emotional labour" in her book The Managed Heart, to describe the process of managing one's feeling to create a publicly observable display for a wage. And [8]Gill's work examines how neoliberalism shapes culture and subjectivity particularly, within academia. Despite growing scholarship, much of the analysis remains platform specific or theoretical, with limited empirical studies integrating audience and influencer perspectives post- pandemic. This study aims to address this gap by examining authenticity performance across platforms and audience trust negotiation in influencer culture's evolving landscape.

Research questions

How do social media influencers "perform" authenticity in the post-pandemic context, and what are the sociological dynamics and consequences for influencer culture, audience perception, and symbolic capital?

Methodology

This mixed-methods study adopts a multi-layered analytical approach:

- Content Analysis: Sample 200 influencer posts/videos across TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube from 2023-2025, coding for dimensions of performed authenticity, vulnerability, and emotional labor.

- In-Depth Interviews: Conduct interviews with 10 influencers and 20 followers to explore motivations, perceptions, and experiences of authenticity online.

- Audience Survey: Distribute online surveys to 100 followers to gauge perceptions of influencer authenticity and the impacts of "realness" performances on trust and engagement.

- Theoretical Framework: Use Goffman's dramaturgical analysis, Bourdieu's field and capital theory, and Hochschild's emotional labor model to interpret findings.

Research Significance

This research will provide fresh insights into how authenticity is constructed and commodified in digital spaces, highlighting the negotiation of boundaries between sincerity and strategic self-marketing. The study's sociological lens advances scholarly understanding and supports ethical influencer practices, guiding brands, marketers, and audiences toward more conscious engagement with "realness" in online cultures.

Quality of Writing

The language of this proposal is academically precise, clear, and appropriate for a multidisciplinary audience. Jargon is minimized, and the structure follows standard research norms. The proposal adheres to grammar, citation, and formatting guidelines strictly to meet IARCO standards.

References

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