"So-called influencers": Stancetaking and (de)legitimation in mediatized discourse about social media influencers

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ABSTRACT

As contemporary wordsmiths and new-generation copywriters, Social Media Influencers (henceforth SMIs) are inherently germane to critical sociolinguistics. Interested in wider cultural discourses about contemporary forms of 'independent' language work, this paper examines English-language news media representations of SMIs. The empirical focus of my analysis is a dataset of 143 news stories collected from major 'broadsheet' newspapers and LexisNexis. Specifically, I identify two contradictory stances – celebration and derision – by which SMIs are popularly framed. It is in this way, and following van Leeuwen (2007), that their cultural status and work is (de)legitimized. Using the legitimation tactics of *theoretical rationalisation* and *mythopoesis*, celebratory stances in my data construct SMIs as a perfect fit for today's ideal of entrepreneurial success – as ambitious, self-optimizing and risk-taking individuals – ultimately contributing to the recasting of independent and sometimes precarious employment as aspirational 'entrepreneurship'. Conversely, derisory stances built on the legitimation tactics of *moral evaluation* and *authorisation* lament their lack of work ethic as well as their interloping into industries that do not want them. Thus, the news media appear to both applaud SMIs for their entrepreneurial careers and be vested in sanctioning them for foregoing gatekeepers by not following traditional career paths to stable employment. Ironically, and perhaps even hypocritically, the latter are precisely the kind of employment that are increasingly difficult for many young people to access while the former still prerequisite considerable privilege to be able to pursue.

1. Introduction social media influencers as wordsmiths

When LEGO sponsored a global survey conducted among children aged 8 to 12, about a third of children in the USA and UK said they wanted to become a YouTuber or vlogger when they grew up[2]. It seems that young people are aspiring to a new generation of online careers over more traditional professions. While their perceptions about work are surely influenced by their own social media use, many adults are left with the news media for helping them make sense of these substantial cultural shifts. It is against this backdrop that my study examines what is arguably the most high-profile instantiation of the "new" work order (Gee, Hull and Lankshear 1996): social media influencers. In this case, I am concerned precisely with the way their work is framed in the news media; I am thus interested in the cultural discourses and social meanings which underpin the following question asked by one famous news outlet: *Is Being A Social Media Influencer A Real Career?*[3]

What makes SMIs particularly germane for sociocultural linguists is that their work depends centrally (but not exclusively) on the crafting of language. In this regard, SMIs have emerged as a contemporary form of copywriters in a far wider political economy of people depending on language (and communication) not only as a vehicle for their work but also as the primary outcome of their work. The semioticisation or textualisation of work has been a central topic of interest in both critical discourse studies and critical sociolinguistics (e.g. Cameron, 2000; Fairclough, 1996; Heller, 2011). Much of this work has been focused on relatively low- status language work, such as call centres where language and languages are heavily regulated, stylised and often exploited (e.g. Duchêne, 2009). More recently, however, Thurlow and his

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colleagues (e.g. Thurlow 2020; Thurlow and Britain, 2020) have been seeking to shift attention to relatively privileged or high-end language workers; examples here include movie dialect coaches, advertising copywriters and political speech writers. Ultimately, this turn to "wordsmiths" is made in an effort to better map the wider political economy of language work and to consider how it is shaped by structures of privilege/inequality and by discourses of status and professionalism.

Also commonly called content creators, SMIs are "micro-celebrities" (Senft, 2008) who shape audience attitudes – and consumption practices – on various social media platforms and in other electronic word-of-mouth formats (cf. Kelly-Holmes, 2016). Following Abidin (2018), it is possible to think of SMIs' status and work as being "native" to the internet; by this it is meant that they started out as (arguably) relatively ordinary users whose enduring online practices resulted in increased digital attention which was subsequently "monetised". SMIs are certainly nowadays a big deal in both cultural terms but also in raw monetary terms. According to one commercial market analyst[4], the SMI industry was worth some $14 billion in 2021. To be sure, SMIs' source of income is often varied and not exclusively reliant on advertising. They can, for example, diversify their income stream with a mix of affiliate link revenue, brand sponsorships, and also pay-per-view income from YouTube. It is also possible for SMIs to generate income more directly from viewers through a membership platform like Patreon, as well as from selling merchandise, books and or digital products (e.g. photography or website tumbler themes); they may also offer their services as instructors teaching, for example, others how to become SMIs. It is important to recognize that only very few SMIs are able to rise above the precarity of working in a gig-like economy (cf. Taylor et al., 2017); many also struggle to advance or retain their visibility (and thus opportunities) in the face of the ever-changing algorithms of digital media platforms (Duffy et al., 2021). Regardless, and relative to many other contemporary language workers, SMIs enjoy a considerable amount of creative freedom in their (linguistic) productions, as long as they do not infringe on platform guidelines or produce content which is likely to be demonetised for not being advertiser friendly (Glatt and Banet-Weiser, 2021). Notwithstanding, there are more and more people who do get a foothold and who evidently manage to make a living as an SMI.

It is the apparent and/or relative success of SMIs that has made them something of a threat to the "legacy" media who often cast SMIs as interlopers. Indeed, Cunningham and Craig (2019) argue that the social media entertainment SMIs produce is a legitimate competitor to legacy screen media. In a similar vein, Eldridge (2018) posits that bloggers (a sub-category of SMIs) were seen early on as a disruptive force to the journalistic field. In response to such new journalistic actors working in the periphery, journalists have since doubled down on so-called "boundary work" (Carlson, 2015; cf. Gieryn, 1983), the discursive construction of what journalism is (or is not). This kind of structural and symbolic tension between old- and new-generation media has inevitably been something taken up in the news media.

It is this mediatized discourse which sits at the heart of the current paper. It is here that the dominant social meanings of, or about SMIs are surfaced – i.e., how wider publics are making sense of SMIs; this is also where we witness the way SMIs are evidently challenging wider cultural discourses about the nature of ("proper") work. To this end, I focus on the kinds of stances commonly taken up in news media reports about SMIs and consider how their status and work is thereby legitimized and/or delegitimized. Before I turn to my data and the analysis, however, I would like to establish the key concepts which underpin the study.

2. Conceptual framing: mediatisation, stance, legitimation

In turning to news media representations of SMIs, I follow Jaworski & Thurlow (2017) who approach mediatisation as the intensification of mediated communication (cf. Krotz, 2009) and as one of the most transformative processes in high modernity along with globalisation, urbanisation, secularisation, and individualisation (cf. Hjarvard, 2013). The transformative power of mediatization lies in its widespread distribution of ideologies, most especially hegemonic discourses of 'new' capitalism, as exemplified by Gray's analysis of the construction of work in ELT textbooks (Gray, 2010). These processes are intensified by the pervasiveness of digital media in people's day-to-day lives, personal relations, and institutional work all of which means that their daily communication is increasingly also mediatized. In this context, news media discourse is arguably even more powerful in shaping how people make sense of themselves and their social worlds. Importantly, however, these cultural formations are not simply top-down processes, where 'the media' imposes its point of view (Androutsopoulos 2014). Mediatised discourses are taken up in varying, not always predictable ways; they are also consistently reshaped, recycled and recontextualised in these moments of uptake. Thus, newspaper articles – such as those at the centre of the current study – should be understood as one link in a long chain of meaning-making activities. It is also important to acknowledge how readers or consumers are not necessarily or neatly persuaded by newsmakers. Notwithstanding, the news media – in its traditionally circulated and digitally aggregated forms – continues to be influential in shaping people's understanding of the world around them (cf. Beckers et al., 2021), for instance by embedding stances in their reporting.

In their research, Jaworski and Thurlow (2009; 2017) take up the sociolinguistic notion of stancetaking for pin-pointing how dominant but sometimes contradictory social meanings emerge in mediatized discourse. In this regard, stancetaking involves the ways that speakers/writers (often implicitly) express an epistemic (i.e., true or false) or evaluative (i.e. good or bad) judgement vis-à-vis the topic under discussion (DuBois, 2007; see also Jaffe, 2009, for an extensive overview). These micro-linguistic actions colour the discourse using specific punctuation, modalities, discourse markers, hedges, and lexical items, among other linguistic meaning-making resources, to express the speakers' position towards their own discursive action (epistemic stance) and towards their stance object (evaluative stance). Importantly, and as Jaffe (2009) explains, stance connects a person's *positionality* to wider systems of belief; in other words, cultural beliefs and social values are built into the smallest acts of communication as people commit themselves or distance themselves from certain objects, topics or people. As Jaworski and Thurlow (2009) further note, the constant repetition of these otherwise fleeting, singular acts of stancetaking invariably accumulate and solidify into normative discourses or ideologies. In this paper, I approach authors of newspaper articles (journalists) as the first subject in Du Bois' (2007) triangle. However, they do not always necessarily just report their own words: journalists often embed utterances of a second subject – individuals who were interviewed prior to the creation of the text – in their articles. The reported speech is thereby extracted and objectified for evaluation. In this constellation, journalists are more influential meaning makers than their interviewees as they are the final editors of the exchange who construct the dialogues (Tannen, 2011) present in the articles. In light of this framing, several stance laminations (cf. Goffman, 1974) or layers can be gleaned in this configuration: The interviewee's stance towards SMIs, the journalist's stance towards the interviewee and the journalist's stance towards the interviewees' utterance.

Beyond purely analysing the stancetaking of journalists and the people they cite in media discourse discussions of SMIs' work, I

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additionally want to make a conceptual contribution by linking legitimation tactics to stancetaking. To a certain extent, stance and legitimation have already been connected in the work of scholars in sociocultural linguistics. Bucholtz and Hall (2005) identify stance and illegitimation as different principles fundamental to the study of identity; Jaffe (2009) discusses how teachers at a bilingual school in Corsica displayed a set of stance orientations that imbued Corsican (a minority language) with equal authority and legitimacy as French (the majority language); and, finally, Vandergriff (2012) engages with metastase as a legitimation strategy used by Hitler in his speeches to discredit opponents of Nazi ideology. None of these, however, operationalise these concepts as a framework that can be applied to the analysis of stance in discourse. One aim of this paper is to do just that by mapping Van Leeuwen's (2007) discourses of legitimation onto journalists' stances and exemplifying how these discourses can become legitimation tactics that justify stance subjects' evaluation of stance objects. In doing so, I follow van Djik's definition of legitimation as a discourse that gives "good reasons, grounds or acceptable motivations for past or present action" (1998, p.255) and propose it can thus be used to justify a stance act of alignment. De-legitimation, in contrast, shows just cause for disalignment on the grounds of something or someone being morally wrong, irrational, or 'other' (cf. Cap 2008). More specifically, in my data I identify how journalists' stances fall into van Leeuwen's (2007) four categories of (de)legitimation: *authorization* (reference to the authority of tradition, and persons with institutional authority), *moral evaluation* (reference to discourses of value), *rationalisation* (reference to goals and uses of institutionalized social action and 'the natural order of things') and finally *mythopoesis* (construal of narratives whose outcomes reward legitimate actions and punish non-legitimate actions) (Van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 92). I see these four categories of discourses acting as (de) legitimation tactics that justify journalists in the taking of certain stances towards their stance objects, in this case SMIs and their work. And so, generally I ask: what dominant 'social meanings' of SMIs surface in news media and how can SMIs be considered a foil for wider cultural discourses about "proper" work? And more specifically, how are legitimation tactics put to use in legitimating journalist's stances and in (de) legitimating SMIs and their work? My analysis in Section 4 illustrates how such a framework can be applied and used to answer these questions, but first, I introduce my data.

3. The data: Social media influencers in the news

My data for this case study was gathered from various sources. First, I[5] compiled a dataset of English-language newspaper articles about SMIs and their work using the Lexis Nexis database, a 'treasure trove' for linguists (Wodak and Meyer, 2016). Using "social media influencer", "Instagramers" and "Youtubers" (pivotal influencer marketing platforms at the time) as search terms, I proceeded to collect articles – including editorials, features, and opinion pieces – from 2018 to 2019. Only articles that pertained to SMIs as part of their main story were selected, while those that were specifically about traditional celebrity influencers in Hollywood or the music industry such as Kim Kardashian, whose fame is not "native" to the internet (see Abidin, 2018), were excluded. Furthermore, articles targeted at business-to-business consumption were not collected, as my interest lies more in widely circulated, popular discourses aimed at a general readership. In total, this led to a corpus of 90 international, English-language news articles specifically about SMIs.

As this search yielded very few 'newspapers of record' with an international reach, the dataset was then bolstered with a collection of 53

articles from the *New York Times* and the *Guardian*[6]. These constitute the entirety of articles published about SMIs in the set time frame by these two newspapers. For the data collection I used the same selection process described above. The choice of these newspapers was made for adding a pool of articles from relatively reliable newspapers with a broad reach in the English-speaking world[7], since many of the newspapers archived in LexisNexis data are more local and/or less mainstream. All told, therefore, my overall corpus comprised 143 articles from around the world published between 2018 and 2019, all of which had SMIs and their work as the main subject. While I understand this sample is not comprehensive nor representative, I believe it still allows me insights into typical instances of news media commentary about SMIs.

Following the lead of other critical discourse analysts (cf. Fairclough, 1989, Thurlow and Aiello, 2007, Mapes, 2021), organised my analysis of the dataset in three strands: I began with a loose content analysis (descriptive mapping of the data focussing on general trends and themes), then moved on to a discourse analysis (interpretative move aimed at discussing the reasons behind those trends), and finished up with a critical discussion of the power relations entangled in the different stances present in the data. The loose, descriptive content analysis (cf. Bauer, 2000) consisted of reading through the data repeatedly, taking notes on recurrent topics or threads of discourse and coding them. While the specific results of the content analysis are not the focus of this paper, this first strand of analysis mapped the patterns in my data, which I was then able to examine more closely. From this, in a discourse analysis I determined two contradictory stances of journalists towards SMIs and their work: a celebratory and a derisory stance, which are enacted through (de)legitimation tactics. Contradictory stances in news media are in no way extraordinary, as public opinion about specific topics can vary greatly. However, I argue that the examination of contradictory stances about certain types of people have a way of shedding light on and give researchers analytical access to wider, contemporary cultural tensions. Finally, by interrogating my findings and tying them to their larger societal ramifications, I uncover the sociocultural implications of news media coverage of SMIs and their work. I question how the examined stances are constructed and what they reveal about common understandings of what constitutes legitimate (language) work and who is allowed to claim professional legitimacy. In this way, as a final critical move in my analysis, I address the way mediatized discourse about SMIs reinscribes wider structures of (class) privilege/inequality.

4. Analysis: Contradictory stancetaking and (de)legitimation

In my analysis, I follow Jaworski and Thurlow (2017) in identifying two opposing stances in my data – celebration and derision. As explained in section 2, I parse the two stances according to different tactics of, respectively, legitimation and delegitimation – two tactics for each stance – and demonstrate how these are used to justify the taking of opposing stances. Extracts used in the analysis are typical (rather than representative) of the ways these often are deployed in news media

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commentary.

4.1. Celebration: Legitimizing an entrepreneurial spirit

SMIs, at least established ones who can make a living from their online practices, fit current aspirations of entrepreneurial self-employment (Duffy and Wissinger, 2017) and self-made fortunes. From their 'ordinary' origins they have risen to fame in a young, previously uncharted industry, and have created a space where they monetize snippets of their lifestyle for others to see and consume. In light of notions of contemporary success, it is not surprising that a celebratory stance arises from the news media articles at hand. This stance, however, is linked to very specific facets of their work and success, as will be shown in the following analysis.

4.1.1. The theoretical rationality of numbers and metrics

In the economy of visibility (Banet-Weiser, 2018) attention is a scarce commodity and SMIs have to find ways to garner it. Success is thus measured in views, impressions, subscriber counts and engagement rates (cf. Christin and Lewis, 2021). This becomes quite obvious when we consider the number of metrics and analytics that YouTube, for example, provides monetised YouTubers in order to track and optimise their own 'numbers'. YouTubers not only have access to information about how many subscribers and viewers they have and how fast that audience is growing (subscriber growth), but also how many views come from subscribers, from people to whom their video has been recommended or from users who have come across their video through YouTube's search engine (traffic sources). They can see if people watch an entire video or, if not, at which point viewers leave (audience retention)[8]. Being relevant on the platform is thus measured in numbers (subscribers, views, likes, comments), and revenue – both of YouTube and its SMIs – is equally dependent on these numbers. An SMI's work therefore includes a close monitoring of content performance statistics to find ways to optimise their visibility. Unsurprisingly, then, descriptions of SMIs' success in my data often include metrics. This, I argue, constitutes a sub-category of van Leeuwen's (2007) legitimisation discourse of *theoretical rationality*, where legitimation is grounded in whether it is "founded on some kind of truth, on 'the way things are'" (p. 103). Van Djik (1988) suggests that mentioning numbers – the 'numbers game' as he calls it – can be a rhetorical device for suggesting factuality and add to the credibility of the writer. I thus identify their use in these articles as a tactic to 'rationally' construct SMIs as legitimate for garnering 'enough' online attention to be newsworthy to a public which might not know who the particular SMI is. The numbers game as a rhetorical device is probably the most recurrent tactic in the dataset and is quite apparent in the following extract. Consider how the Guardian writes about a YouTuber whose main content revolves around sex education. Extract 1

1	Witton [SMI], who is 26 and British, is incredibly popular, with
2	430,000 subscribers to her YouTube channel and videos racking
3	up millions of views. Why Having Big Boobs Sucks! has received
4	3.5 m views; 10 Masturbation Hacks has had 1.2 m.

The extract is located at the beginning of the article when introducing the SMI and her potential to reach young people who do not have access to sex education at school. The SMI's expertise on the subject or possible credentials are not mentioned. Instead, the first thing we are told is that this is a young woman, 26 years of age, and her relevance is legitimised through her reach. In terms of stance, intensifiers such as "incredibly" (line1) and expressive verbs such as "racking up" (lines 2–3) underline the suggested impressiveness of her 'numbers', 430,000

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[8] Google Support (2021). YouTube analytics basics. Retrieved from https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/9002587?hl=en

subscribers and 3.5 million and 1.2 million views (lines 2, 4), forming a celebratory stance towards the SMI. When scanning her YouTube channel, it becomes clear that the two videos mentioned were chosen because they are her highest grossing videos (in terms of views) of that year by far, which in and of itself constitutes an act of stancetaking. As Thurlow demonstrates, the "taste for excessive, quantitative detail" (2006, p.675) in news articles is often used to sensationalise what is being discussed. This focus on metrics, the automatic mention of an SMI's following or highest view counts when introducing them, both sensationalises SMIs reach and iconises (cf. Irvine and Gal, 2000) these numbers as the defining feature of their success. This indicates how metrics are often considered to be the core of SMIs' value and newsworthiness as well as how high numbers are inevitably presumed to be worth celebrating. In this manner, SMIs become quantified and quantifiable, workers – like many others in late capitalism – who are assessed by their computable 'objective' productivity, with the notable difference that their metrics are out for everyone to see and review. Ultimately, the mediatisation of these types of legitimation discourses thus reiterates contemporary obsessions with perpetual measurable growth, a dominant ideology of neoliberal capitalism.

4.1.2. A "rags to riches" mythopoesis

Another way SMIs are celebrated in my data is through countless narratives of upward mobility. These are narrated in the form of *rags to riches* stories which have long been appreciated for their aspirational "hard work pays off" messaging. Following van Leeuwen (2007) I consider such narratives instances of *mythopoesis*, that is, "legitimation conveyed through narratives whose outcomes reward legitimate actions and punish non-legitimate actions" (p. 92). Hence, the online practices of SMIs, and thus their work, is constructed as legitimate by virtue of the stories that can be told about their success, thereby justifying SMIs' celebration.

These narratives are further marked by the rhetorical strategy "pioneer spirit" which Mapes describes as emphasising tropes of "do-it-yourself innovation and adventurousness" (2018, p.278). This discourse comes to the fore in the following local news article of the Vancouver Sun, which introduces an SMI's path to success. Extract 2

1	Justin Tse [SMI] is living the dream. The 22-year-old produces
2	videos and reviews the hottest tech products, […] jets around the
3	world […] and says he earns a cool "high six figures" doing it. Last
4	year, he dropped out of the University of Victoria's business
5	program, hired his first full-time staffer, incorporated his own
6	media company and is now expanding into travel, lifestyle and
7	fashion. It's a far cry from when, as a 13-year-old, he had to
8	borrow a camera to shoot his first YouTube video, […] and
9	spend every waking moment outside of school filming and editing
10	videos.

This text constructs the success story of a hustling entrepreneur. The description of him "living the dream", the adjective "cool" and the superlative "hottest" construct a reverent stance towards his current professional position. This is intensified with mentions of his international mobility which is a signifier of prestige (e.g. Khan, 2014). The pioneer spirit discourse is laced into the narrative in various ways. His starting to film at a very young age while using borrowed gear (lines 7–10) exemplifies the do-it-yourself spirit. In this way, the SMI is described as having transcended his material obstacles as well as his lack of experience by working "every waking moment outside of school" (line 9, note the probable exaggeration), and by learning-by-doing instead of being taught (in school) or guided through the process. The second element of pioneer spirit, adventurousness, is present here too. The SMI 'sacrificing' the end of his education in order to start his own business introduces an element of risk-taking and thus adventure to the reporting of this story. By constructing a narrative of a hard-working do-it-yourself and adventurous entrepreneur, the newspaper taps into neoliberal ideals of individualistic success and thus legitimises the SMI. Much in the same

way that Mapes (2018) identified how the pioneer spirit rhetorical strategy obscured the privileged circumstances of restaurant owners in Brooklyn's foodie scene, here it is SMIs' backgrounds that are being glossed over. The narratives of neoliberal success identified in my data – where independent creativity equals professional, social, and financial gain – conceal the privileged social, economic, and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) SMIs need to have access to in to be adventurous and sustain a career that takes years of unremunerated labour before maybe starting to pay the bills (cf. Duffy, 2017).

This sort of obscuring is further reinforced in another recurrent trope in the dataset: the relatively humble provenance of protagonists. In the following section, I want to showcase how stance can be constructed even in seemingly neutral reporting through what is in- and excluded in the story. Take, for example, the following extract from the South China Morning Post (a 'newspaper of record' based in Hong Kong), which describes an SMI's personal journey and rise to financial success. The SMI had been uploading Pilates videos from her college dorm room for years before trade-marking her own version of the sport. In the extract, the newspaper mentions her parents' immigrant background by quoting the SMIs own words.Extract 3

1	Ho [SMI] was born in Woodland Hills, a neighbourhood in Los
2	Angeles, to Vietnamese immigrants. "My mother escaped from
3	Vietnam on a boat, getting first to Malaysia then Canada and
4	finally the US. She was on that boat for a week without food or
5	water. Both my parents left Vietnam midway through college.
6	They had to stop and start over and learn a new language."

There is very little explicit stance arising from this article in the lifestyle section of the newspaper's website. The journalist seems to neutrally relay the SMI's account of her life and career trajectory. However, as Jaffe (2009, p.3) states, "neutrality is itself a stance". Here, an editorial choice was made in the keeping of the parent's background story in the article. The SMI's fame arose from her digital practices and has thus little to do with having immigrant parents. Rhetorically, however, it is a useful fact to mention because it creates contrast with the position the SMI is in now. It is this contrast that creates the "rags to riches" narrative, where despite hardships the SMI was able to achieve success. Additionally, in the rest of the article, the journalist chose not to expand on information given by the SMI, such as the neighbourhood in which she was born. Woodland Hills is a mostly white neighbourhood with an average household income which is both high for the country and Los Angeles itself, according to the Los Angeles Times' 2008 "Mapping L.A." project. This makes us consider how her own privilege might have been quite different from her parents', at least in terms of financial security. However, by relaying this story without critical reflection on the SMI's claims to 'humble' beginnings, the journalist both sanctions her success story and reinforces the overall narrative of SMIs as self-made entrepreneurs. The mediatisation of such narratives reiterates ideologies of the American Dream, meritocracy (cf. Sternheimer, 2011) and profound idealization of entrepreneurial careers (cf. Duffy and Wissinger, 2017), where everyone, even those coming from disadvantaged families, can find success if they work hard enough. Through the recurrent use of legitimation by mythopoesis and celebratory stance in these narratives, combined with a disregard for the privileged positions of its protagonists, mediatised discourses can conceal the realities of a digital marketplace which often demands much and gives very little for a long time, thus constituting an endeavour which few can afford to embark on.

4.2. Derisory stance: Deligitimising peripheral actors

As expected, news discourse does not produce an exclusively celebratory stance vis-à-vis SMIs and their work; indeed, newsmakers can be unapologetically dismissive and critical. This is certainly what Smith (2021) points to in his study of tourists' use of social media; in this case,

we witness journalists enacting a kind of moral prescriptivism about influencers' deleterious impact on tourism. In much the same way, and in alignment with my previous procedure, I characterize typical derisory stances vis-à-vis discourses of (de)legitimation (van Leeuwen, 2007). Accordingly, I find a negative moral evaluation with a special focus on questionable work ethic and entitlement, as well as de-legitimisation through lack of authorization, i.e. absence of institutional backing.

4.2.1. Moralising ("proper") work

Negative moral evaluations are not explicitly imposed by some type of authority-figure, rather, they de-legitimise based on moral values (van Leeuwen, 2007). By triggering abstract moral concepts, they reference 'generalized motives', which are "widely used to ensure mass loyalty" (Habermas, 1976, p. 36). In my data, I see SMIs' negative moral evaluations constructed specifically withing a questioning of their work ethic and the values attached to such ethic: reliability, dedication, productivity, integrity, discipline, etc. As an example of this, I chose an extract from the tabloid MailOnline, one of the most widely read online newspapers of the UK. The Daily Mail (the physical newspaper) is of course notorious for its less-than flattering depictions of women, such as victim-blaming (Meyer, 2010) and slut-shaming (Simkin, 2016). The present article reports on an Australian SMI's interview on the Los Angeles podcast No Jumper. During the podcast the SMI compares her experience as an SMI in Perth, Australia and in LA (a 'hub' for SMIs). This extract is the title of the article and, as is to be expected from a tabloid, it is ripe with ideological commentary.Extract 4

1	Curvy Instagram 'influencer' moans her 'profession' isn't
2	respected and she's 'laughed at' in Australia - as she boasts
3	she earns $30,000-A-DAY doing little more than bouncing
4	around in bikinis

The heavy use of scare quotes in this extract indicates to the reader that the journalist is very much challenging the SMIs' assertions. Thus, the scare quotes around "influencer" and "profession" (line 1) specifically call into question whether being an influencer is actually 'a thing' and whether it can legitimately be called a profession. Furthermore, the choice of verbs such as "moans" (line 1) and "boasts" (line 2) indicate a negative moral evaluation of her character as she recounts the reception of her work. Finally, the extract concludes with the journalist's evaluation of her professional practices as "little more" (line 3) than "bouncing around in bikinis" (line 3–4). "Little more" reduces the scope of her work to one exercise, while "bouncing around" implies that the practice is done at random, without much thought and therefore without strategy. What is implied here is that the SMI is easily replaceable, overpaid, but still finds things to "moan" about. The SMI is also sexualized and objectified, with lexical choices such as "curvy" (line 1) or the expression "bouncing around in bikinis" (line 3–4) which casts her as an object of desire rather than a professional. This altogether mocking stance portrays her as entitled, superficial, possibly not very intelligent or talented, and as having a poor work ethic. Afterall, she demands recognition on top of being well-remunerated, though she is, according to the passage, too idle to offer much in return. This somewhat mirrors Deller and Murphy's (2020) findings on the media coverage of YouTube celebrities, who have found that mediatised discourses portray SMIs' careers as monetised hobbies, a waste of time, and YouTubers themselves as untalented and undeserving of the attention they receive. I would argue that it is these aspects of SMIs' work – the notion of monetised hobbies which complicates distinction between amateur and professional – that give onlookers pause, cause for concern and, in some instances, derision. In the present extract, of course, sexism also plays a part, as a woman is shamed for capitalising on her looks.

However, what such discourses fail to address is how the work of an SMI does not just happen on screen but also behind the scenes, where they may take care of pre- and postproduction, public relations, analytics, accounting, and managing contracts with brands, with some

turning their SMI career into a full-fledged business (cf. Banet-Weiser, 2012). Ironically, then, and as exemplified by Abidin's (2016) study of SMIs selfie-taking practices, a considerable amount of the work fuelling visibility stays invisible. Thus, a derisory stance legitimised through negative moral evaluations of SMIs' work ethic often simplify what it means to be and work as an SMI, only considering the glossy projections SMIs often brand themselves by.

4.2.2. Sign-posting non-institutionality

Finally, the aforementioned discourse of professional inadequacy can also be detected in references to SMIs' *lack of institutional legitimation*. This falls under the category of personal authorisation identified by van Leeuwen (2007) by which legitimation is granted on the basis of one's attachment to an established institution. SMIs write advertisement online, but they are not part of a copywriting agency; they write about current affairs, but they are not connected to any acclaimed newspaper; they review restaurants, beauty products or holiday destinations, but they do not work for any editorial magazine. These are but a few examples of the ways SMIs fall between the cracks when it comes to claiming institutional authority. By pointing out these missing affiliations or contrasting their work with the work and workers employed by established institutions, the journalists in my data (or the people that they chose to voice) justify their derisory stance by delegitimising SMIs' work. This is the case in the following passage from a news article in the Tech section of the Guardian. It contains a testimony by an eminent restaurant food critic for The Australian, who explains why he reposts his and restaurant owners' correspondence on Instagram with SMIs. Extract 5

1	Lethlean [food critic], whose restaurant reviews are published
2	weekly in the Australian newspaper, told the Guardian he didn't
3	republish influencer correspondence to endear himself to the
4	restaurant industry. "I do it mainly because I am so offended
5	by the way a lot of these so-called influencers blur the lines
6	between editorial purity and commercial message." This
7	dilution of purity includes influencers offering to review a
8	restaurant in exchange for a free meal.

The food critic's stance emerges through his affective positioning indicated by the use of "offended" (line 4) and the questioning of SMIs' legitimacy by labelling them with "so-called" (line 5), which works in much the same way as scare quotes. It casts doubt on whether SMIs are rightfully named as such, whether they truly have influence, and thus calls into question their position in the marketplace of restaurant reviews. Furthermore, he displays a strong epistemic stance (degree of commitment to one's own propositions) with the lexical choice of "purity" (line 6) to describe his type of editorial writing that has no apparent commercial ties to restaurants, compared to the necessarily 'impure' productions of SMIs, since they muddy the waters by dabbling both in editorial and commercial content creation. In this discourse, a good versus bad dichotomy is constructed where editorials are necessarily better, as the opinions expressed in them are not tainted by commercial agendas; and reviews or mentions on social media are unquestionably biased, because restaurant owners are the ones paying for the review by means of a meal. While claiming a moral high ground over SMIs, the food critic is disregarding his own privileged position as a weekly columnist at an established newspaper. By virtue of his fixed employment – which is harder and harder to come by in 'creative industries' where "intermittent, irregular, and informal" work is increasingly common (Shorthose and Strange, 2004. p.47; cf. Gershon, 2017) – he does not need to pay for his meals at restaurants he is reviewing. The journalist at the origin of the article, by not problematising this stance and by describing SMIs' meals as "free" (line 8), is aligning with the food critic's stance, as the potential exchange between the restaurant owner and SMIs is portrayed as charitable. Thus, de-legitimation here happens on the grounds of SMIs' lack of institutional backing which is evident in their need to ask for "free" meals that undermine their claim to objective reviews.

The food critic's concerns over the loss of distinction between commercial and editorial writing brought about by advertising that "takes the specific form and appearance of editorial content of the publisher itself" (Wojdynski and Evans, 2016, p.157) is shared by many scholars. Svensson (2016), for instance, examines the way Swedish legislation and self-regulating bodies are trying to counteract the increased merging of 'independent' journalism with commercial messages, while Piety (2016, p.101) argues that this merger is "destructive to both the advertisers' aims and of the integrity of journalism". The food critic is therefore voicing concerns which have also captured the attention of academia. In this instance again, it is SMIs' blurring of entities that are expected to be separate – here commercial and editorial writing, previously the distinction between professional and amateur– that seems to be at the centre of passages containing a derisory stance. Moreover, when surveying the types of influencers which feature in these extracts, a trend emerges: the more 'professional' (giving sex education vs. posing in bikinis) and 'established' (having a broad reach) an SMI is perceived to be, the more likely they are to be evaluated positively. This begins to unearth insights into ideologies around professionalism.

5. Discussion and conclusion: "so-called influencers"

Research in critical sociolinguistics and critical discourse studies has, for some time, been examining how different types of language work are valued (or not) as a way to understand the wider political economies of language (see Thurlow, 2020 for an overview). As new-generation copywriters, social media influencers are relatively recent actors entering this marketplace; they also do so as largely independent and relatively privileged language workers – in Thurlow's (ibid.) terms, as *wordsmiths*. In documenting how their work is framed in the news media, it is sometimes hard to determine if it is SMIs' specific working practices which is being evaluated or whether these valuations are directed at the fact that SMIs potentially subvert long-standing institutionalized conventions of work. At the start of my paper, I offered a case in point: a Forbes magazine article headlined, *Is Being A Social Media Influencer A Real Career?* Simply asking the question implies that the answer is in doubt; it also reinscribes a value-laden distinction between career as proper "professional" work and all other (lesser) types of work – or, indeed, non-work.

People's professions are often symbols of personal values and thus, individuals of all walks of life are invested in the notion of what counts as respectable work. Over the last 30 years the 'employment contract' and what it means to be a worker has changed. Considering the self as a business, creating a self-brand, as well as becoming a flexible jack-of-all-trades responsive to market demands instead of a craftsperson that hones one specific skill over an extended period of time (Gershon, 2017), are all factors that play into the changed political economy of work in neoliberal capitalism. SMIs – as independent contract workers selling advertising which is filmed, enacted, edited and distributed by them to target audiences – are emblematic of that change. My study has considered how news media articles frame and evaluate this contemporary form of labour. In this regard, the news media appears invested in defining what types of work are considered respectable or worthy (or not). While this probably does not apply to all emergent professions, the tendency is to favour traditional and formally institutionalised forms of work. Ironically, and perhaps even hypocritically, these are precisely the kinds of jobs that are increasingly difficult for many young people to access (Shorthose and Strange, 2004; cf. ILO, 2015), even within academic circles (Rojo and Del Percio, 2019).

In my data, these evaluations were analysed by examining news-media's stancetaking which I parsed into four different (de)legitimation tactics. In passages marked by celebratory stances, a focus on metrics reduces digital careers to a numbers game and paints SMI career trajectories as a 'happy ending', foregoing the precarity of these careers once fame is attained (see Bishop, 2019, Duffy et al., 2021). Celebratory

stances also take the form of narratives of upward mobility imbued with a 'pioneer spirit' (Mapes, 2018). These work to legitimise SMIs' risk-taking on pursuing a uncertain career by showing how 'it all paid off in the end'. Such narratives reiterate myths of meritocracy (cf. Marwick, 2018), while obscuring the very privileged positions SMIs need to be in before seeing any return on investment, if such return ever comes to pass (see Duffy, 2017). Indeed, these success stories ideologically position the influencer industry as being somehow 'post-class' (cf. Thurlow 2016), where structural barriers to success have been overcome by the participatory, many-to-many models of communication of 'new' media, presumably void of traditional gate keepers. However, many scholars point out the ways broader social inequalities have seeped into the political economies of digital media. As Marwick argues, contrary to its ideological claims "social media facilitates many types of content production that are not necessarily 'democratic' or 'egalitarian'" (2013, p.438). Indeed, online fame is not equally attainable for all. The endeavour of creating and uploading content for years, interacting with audiences and paying for whatever is consumed on camera as well as the gear needed off-camera prerequisites specific resources: free time and disposable income (cf. Epstein and Kalleberg, 2004). In this regard, many of the SMIs in the news articles I analysed come from relatively well-off or at least middle-class families, where young people have the luxury of working long hours on a hobby that is characterised by high expenses and low returns. By and large, what emerges from these celebratory stances is that SMIs are a perfect fit for today's ideal of entrepreneurial success – as ambitious, self-optimizing and risk-taking individuals – ultimately contributing to the recasting of independent and sometimes precarious employment as aspirational "entrepreneurship" accessible to any hard worker.

Conversely, a derisory stance emerged in the context of de-legitimation tactics of negative moral evaluation as well as a lack of institutional authorisation. These discourses lament their lack of work ethic as well as their interloping into industries that do not want them. In that sense, they are the Uber drivers of the taxi industry, or the Airbnb landlords of the tourism industry: gig workers who disrupt market prices and norms of professionalisation. SMIs' interstitial positioning, neither amateur nor professionally accredited, affiliated but not employed and neither quite social nor exclusively commercial, seems to be at the root of what makes them unnerving. These anxieties are likely anchored – at least in part – in broader discussions about the separation of our social and commercial lifeworlds (Habermas, 1976; Fairclough, 1993) the emergence of social media entertainment as a competitor to legacy media (cf. Cunningham and Craig, 2019), and changing understandings of what is understood to be – and is accessible as – a 'real job' nowadays (Gershon, 2017).

In the end, this study has explored the dominant social meanings that emerge in news media discourse about SMIs and their work. It appears that SMIs are a foil for cultural discourses about work, and more specifically independent endeavours by young entrepreneurs/interlopers who have found alternative ways to labour in the "new" work order (Gee, Hull and Lankshear 1996). Arguably, young people today are in a double-bind when it comes to legitimation in the face of digital careers. News media appear to both applaud SMIs for their entrepreneurial trajectories and be vested in sanctioning them for foregoing gatekeepers by not following traditional career paths to stable employment. SMIs are certainly kept on their toes, as they left to guess what side of the discourse – derisory or celebratory – they will find themselves on. In such instances, portrayals of work and workers are highly political, both providing social control and reproducing status quo.

Declaration of Competing Interest

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