

# Influencers' Instagram imaginaries as a global phenomenon: Negotiating precarious interdependencies on followers, the platform environment, and commercial expectations

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## Abstract

Instagram has become a place of work for many content creators, including influencers; however, the inherent power imbalance between creator and platform dictating influencers' success, requires creators to negotiate user expectations and the platform environment for their potential (commercial) success. Therefore, this article proposes approaching the influencer industry from the framework of platform imaginaries by developing a mixed qualitative method approach to visualize the precarity of Instagram influencers through their Instagram imaginaries with a cross-national comparison of US, German, and Japanese influencers. The results reflect a constant renegotiation of their own positions in relation to platform features and algorithms, follower interaction, as well as commercial partners, within three main imaginaries around Instagram's use, namely, Instagram as a social space, Instagram as a workplace, and Instagram as a marketplace. The analysis highlights the interdependencies with and situatedness within Instagram's platform environment, which need to be considered to understand the precarious working conditions of influencers.

## Keywords

Instagram, platform imaginaries, influencer, cross-cultural comparison, precarity

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## Introduction

Influencers have become essential to Instagram and other social media platforms providing a considerable amount of well-curated content and acting as cultural tastemakers (Hutchinson, 2017). They are seen as micro-celebrities whose fame arises from their self-branding strategies on social media platforms, as opposed to celebrities from traditional entertainment industries (Abidin, 2018). With their rising importance, influencers have turned themselves into “platform complementors” (Poell et al., 2021) who depend on platforms’ algorithms, community guidelines, and economic affordances to produce content and generate visibility. Instagram sees influencers now as a profession to cater to as users can choose the category “influencer” under the “professional” account. Being acknowledged by the platform as essential complementors, influencers are offered tools and features tailored to content production and business management. Hence, Instagram has become a place of work for many content creators, especially influencers, referring to those who actively engage in extensive and positive disclosures of their personal lives to attract followers, sustain public visibilities, and gain an income that is equivalent to a full-time job (Leaver et al., 2020); however, the inherent power imbalance between creator and platform (Duffy, 2020, 2021), requires influencers to balance user expectations and the platform environment for their potential (commercial) success.

While advertising itself as a space to “connect with more people, build influence, and create compelling content that’s distinctly yours,” Instagram also states that “we bring you closer to the people and things you love” (Instagram, 2021). “We,” in this statement, arguably does not only stand for the platform but also refers to influencers. While this statement seemingly brings power to influencers, it also shifts the responsibility of producing content that Instagram users love to influencers. Indeed, social media platforms have expanded into platform conglomerates (Evans and Gawer, 2016), and act as multi-sided marketplaces (Nieborg and Poell, 2018) where influencers’ content plays an important role in keeping users on the platform and enabling influencers to become business intermediaries for brands. Within the last decade, marketing agencies and brands have recognized the effect of social influence and adapted their brand management to include digital-first marketing often mediated by influencer agencies (Abidin and Ots, 2016). While businesses see influencers as ideal partners to bridge the gap with consumers, users see influencers as relatable or inspirational individuals (Reinikainen et al., 2020). This discrepant perception can easily clash and needs to be carefully managed by influencers (Abidin and Ots, 2016).

Influencers’ layered relationships with their followers, agencies, and brands as business partners are mediated by platforms, shaping different platform complementors’ imaginations of platforms’ functionalities and values, ideal user groups on platforms, and different positionings of platform complementors themselves (Gillespie, 2010). While social media research has previously taken up different imaginary frameworks from other disciplines (Taylor, 2003; Jasanoff and Kim, 2015; Bucher, 2017; Arriagada and Bishop, 2021), van Es and Poell’s concept of platform imaginaries specifically acknowledges “[t]he ways in which social actors understand and organize their activities in relation to platform algorithms, interfaces, data infrastructures, moderation procedures, business models, user practices, and audiences” (2020, p. 3). Therefore, approaching the influencer industry from the framework of platform imaginaries offers a more complex lens on influencers’ reality of negotiating their public personas, work life, and business opportunities while being dependent on a platform environment they have little to no control over.

This research proposes a mixed qualitative method approach (O’Reilly et al., 2020) to visualize the aforementioned precarious positions of influencers within Instagram’s environment through the framework of platform imaginaries. In this article, we first open with a review of current debates on

Instagram imaginaries, in terms of how Instagram as a social media platform has been studied and made sense of from various perspectives. Contributing to the current debates, we propose a qualitative netnographic approach, which combines a walkthrough method with a critical discourse analysis of influencers' gossip on 13 selected top-ranking Instagram influencers' accounts from three countries, namely, the United States, Germany, and Japan. Subsequently, findings are presented to underline the conceptual framing with empirical evidence through exemplary case studies. These findings reflect a constant renegotiation of the influencers' positions within three main imaginaries around Instagram's use, namely, Instagram as a social space, Instagram as a workplace, and Instagram as a marketplace. Last, this article closes with a conclusion on the precarious working conditions of influencers brought forth by balancing these contested imaginaries.

## Instagram('s) imaginaries

The imaginary concept has been a conducive approach to understanding how people think about institutions, but more recently social media and technology adoption has moved into focus with their plethora of different communities. Imaginaries as institutionalized sets of rules around social interactions and common practices, which form boundaries for communities, are still malleable enough to allow changes over time but provide structural norms (Anderson, 1983; Taylor, 2003). Social media platforms (SMPs), such as Instagram, and imaginaries connected to them can be seen similarly, as Instagram users are following certain sets of rules that are in constant flux. This sociological tradition of work also set the foundation for current work on "sociotechnical imaginaries" (Jasanoff and Kim, 2015), "algorithmic imaginaries" (Bucher, 2017), "platform imaginaries" (Van Es and Poell, 2020), and most recently "influencer imaginaries" (Arriagada and Bishop, 2021). Coming from STS studies, Jasanoff and Kim's (2015) concept of "sociotechnical imaginaries" provides a framework to look at imaginaries surrounding technological advances. This bridges the gap towards seeing SMPs as an integral part of social life. Furthermore, the conceptualization acknowledges the collective creation of sociotechnical imaginaries recognizing the agencies of individuals within a community. Moving from macro to micro level, the framework of "algorithmic imaginaries" (Bucher, 2017) focuses on "ways of thinking about what algorithms are, what they should be, how they function, and what these imaginations, in turn, make possible" (p. 113).

According to these studies, sociotechnical and algorithmic imaginaries often underlie socio-technical aspects of SMPs showcasing how users' imagining of technical affordances influences platforms in turn. In this regard, Van Es and Poell's (2020) concept of "platform imaginaries" provides a more nuanced understanding of digital platforms as unique entities with complex characteristics. Considering "[t]he ways in which social actors understand and organize their activities in relation to platform algorithms, interfaces, data infrastructures, moderation procedures, business models, user practices, and audiences" (Van Es and Poell, 2020: p. 3) through the framework of platform imaginaries offers a nuanced perspective on seeing platforms as a complex entanglement of social space, workplaces, and marketplace for various actors.

The intertwining relations between influencers, general users, businesses, and agencies with the platform and among themselves showcase the variety of imaginaries around ideal uses possible for Instagram as a platform. Previous work (Arriagada and Bishop, 2021) has outlined influencers' imaginary of being an influencer delineating from previous tastemakers such as celebrities and their relationships with advertising agencies and audiences. However, how influencers are positioned within and restricted by specific platform environments seems to elude their attention. Therefore shifting the lens onto influencers' role in framing and supporting specific platform imaginaries

around Instagram provides a new entry to question their role in upholding Instagram's business model to sustain their career while acknowledging the active role of the platform environment in this negotiation process.

Although Instagram as a platform allows new ways of connecting different actors through its infrastructure of cooperation, it is simultaneously governed by its mother company Meta—a fact that hides behind Instagram's facade as a neutral mediator (Gorwa, 2019; Poell et al., 2021). While influencers use Instagram as business infrastructure, the image of a neutral space collapses as Meta's politics highlight Instagram's intransparency and intricate power structure. As Leaver, Highfield, and Abidin pointed out in their work *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures* (2020), Instagram as a platform is constantly changing in the competitive social media landscape. On the one hand, it has been integrated into Meta's (Facebook's) ecosystem and has been feeding user data into Meta's tremendous surveillance networks. On the other hand, it continuously introduces new features such as stories or reels due to competition with Snapchat or TikTok and to appeal to the market.

Although Instagram did not have a business model until 2013 after Facebook's acquisition in 2012, Instagram became home to a rather informal economy based on sponsored, promoted, and paid content delivered by influencers throughout the years (Leaver et al., 2020). Instagram also noticed influencers' close ties with commerce and tried to harness influencers' commercial success for benefiting the platform by tightening the rule of paid advertising and launching its "Paid Partnership" mechanism in 2017. Hutchinson (2017) describes these influencers as (cultural) intermediaries. According to Hutchinson (Hutchinson, 2019, p. 2), "in most instances, influencers promote commercial products for personal economic (financial) and social (fame) capital gains, continually developing their personal brands." In other words, by creating strong social ties with their audiences, influencers endorse sponsorships and commercialization. This phenomenon curates user feeds into catalogs of goods and experiences as "platform providers play a significant role in the popularization of commercially oriented content over that of public affairs" (Hutchinson, 2019: p. 2), pushing an ideal use of the platform as a commercial space. As a result, influencers face the challenge to navigate between official advertising and authentic personal sharing.

To function effectively within the commercialized platform environment, influencers need to establish themselves as experts in their field to provide users with an authentic experience and trustworthy person(a) to follow (Abidin and Ots, 2016; Van Driel and Dumitrica, 2021). The following and trust accrued become digital currency for commercial success by potentially translating their network into (social) capital gain. Businesses utilize this potential for social media marketing recognizing the power of influencers to create engagement with existing and potential customer markets (Reinikainen et al., 2020). Influencers have established themselves as ideal intermediaries between businesses and consumers as trust in traditional brands and marketing has declined (Reinikainen et al., 2020), a role previously taken by celebrities and supermodels (Hutchinson, 2017). This leads to an affective connection by endorsing feelings of intimacy (Reinikainen et al., 2020, Berryman and Kavka, 2017) helping businesses gain loyal customers. At the same time, it highlights the changing position of influencers within the multi-sided market of SMPs towards a new industry recognized in the media economy.

As the relationship between businesses and influencers is professionalizing, it has simultaneously become progressively mediated by influencer agencies. Agencies manage a variety of influencers, being able to recommend and establish a connection with fitting influencers by niche, follower size, and content type, dipping into a large pool of clients. However, similarly to traditional marketing agencies, they act as gatekeepers formalizing the relationship between businesses and influencers, exerting "some coercive pressures on the Influencers, defining their contractual relationships within each campaign and client brand" (Abidin and Ots, 2016: p. 156). Influencers are

aware of these shifts in SMPs actively trying to push their success and counteracting their precarious working conditions through platform gossip around features, algorithms, follower interaction, and even intervening through Instagram pods (Cotter, 2019; Duffy et al., 2021). The formalization and professionalization, however, do not directly translate into any security for creators, arguably the contrary.

While businesses see influencers as ideal partners to bridge the gap with consumers, users see influencers as relatable or inspirational individuals (Reinikainen et al., 2020). This discrepant perception can easily clash and needs to be carefully managed (Abidin and Ots, 2016). Influencers now have to balance various aspects of precarity regarding their audiences as essential for their success, the platform environment governing their work and potentially locking them in, as well as their commercial viability. Understanding and balancing the varying platform imaginaries of general users and brands, and staying in line with Instagram's business model, become essential in sustaining influencers' careers. The concept of platform imaginaries, therefore, provides a starting point to understand the complex dynamics of influencers on Instagram while questioning their precarious position in Instagram's platform environment.

## Methodology

Building on the concept of platform imaginaries as discussed, this article proposes a netnographic mixed qualitative methods approach (O'Reilly et al., 2020) that helps to investigate prevalent Instagram imaginaries, going beyond the traditional qualitative research based on interviews. To investigate Instagram imaginaries, it is necessary to situate influencers' practices within the platform's environment. These practices shed light on how platform features and algorithms, follower interaction, as well as commercial partners affect their sense-making processes. Hence, our proposed approach is constituted by (1) a walkthrough (Light et al., 2018) of Instagram adapted to an influencer's perspective, which focuses specifically on how influencers make use of the platform's affordances to communicate with their audiences and conduct promotional activities; (2) a critical discourse analysis (Wodak and Meyer, 2016) of influencers' gossip (Bishop, 2019; Cotter, 2019) on Instagram, based on materials on top-ranking influencers' Instagram accounts, personal websites, and public interviews.

The adapted walkthrough includes an analysis of the platforms' language, features, and interface design, which carry affective connotations for actors and can supersede the status of intermediaries becoming mediators (Light et al. 2018, 6). "[M]ediator characteristics [...] provide indications of how the app seeks to configure relations among actors, such as how it guides users to interact (or not) and how these actors construct or transfer meaning," according to Light et al. (Light et al., 2018, p. 11). Therefore, understanding the mediator characteristics of Instagram, such as the interface arrangement, features, textual content, and tone, gives insights into how it affects the forming of platform imaginaries. As an important part of data retrieval, the walkthrough is systematically documented in field notes with a focus on the everyday use of Instagram.

In order to account for the influencers' perspective, the walkthrough is combined with a critical discourse analysis (Wodak and Meyer, 2016) of influencers' gossip (Bishop, 2019; Cotter, 2019) on Instagram as a site of labor. The concept of gossip was used as a framework for data collection. Gossip as lay persons' communication about technical affordances and workings of platforms has proven a useful approach, as Bucher (2017) and Bishop (2019) demonstrated in their work on SMPs, to get insights into users' imagination of algorithms' and platforms' purpose and working. Gossip can provide a constructive way of knowledge production through communal exchange around the inner workings of a platform's black box. Such knowledge is especially important for

influencers as unknown platform changes impact creators' reach and, hence, financial stability. Additionally, influencers' gossip around their platform use gives insights into the affective connotations ascribed to a platform as part of the sense-making processes through their lived experiences with Instagram's environment. Sarah Ahmed (2010) described affect as "being what sticks" to an object and can become contagious as it is passed around, just as gossip is passed around the SMP. Using gossip as a framework can provide insights into different actors' perceptions of Instagram's ideal use and their platform imaginaries by serving as a valuable way of knowledge production for influencers exchanging expertise on Instagram's platform logics and algorithms.

As case studies, a total of 13 top-ranking influencers from the United States, Germany, and Japan (see Table 1) were selected seeing that their influence is setting a standard for other influencers and the attention they garner from commercial actors and SMPs alike. The selected influencers identify as beauty, fashion, and/or fitness influencers reflecting three of the 10 biggest influencer categories (Razo, 2021). Their prevalence in these three industrial sectors enabled the analysis to explore general similarities and/or differences across sectors. While US influencers have a global audience and, therefore, greater opportunities for gaining commercial partnerships with brands with a global market, German and Japanese influencers are more engaged with local audiences by posting content in local languages. Hereby, Germany and Japan have developed their own local socioculturally situated influencer markets. Comparing German and Japanese with the US influencers allows for an intriguing analysis of Instagram imaginaries as a platform-dependent articulation, which sees influencers' work on Instagram as common practices that are situated within geo-cultural contexts and localized marketing operations. Due to the limited scope of the case studies, the analysis does not make any claims about cultural specificity but is focused on outlining an emerging global phenomenon in the influencer industry.

For the analysis, the data—information from influencers' Instagram accounts, personal websites, and public interviews—was collected over 8 months from January to August 2022 with regular detailed observation of account activities and changes. The material was then manually coded as

**Table 1.** Detailed information of the selected influencers as of January 2022.

Name	Account	Followers	Country	Genre
<b>Japan</b>				
Naomi Watanabe	watanabenaomi703	9.6M	Japan	Fashion/lifestyle
Ayumi Seto	setoayumi	325K	Japan	Fashion
Yuko Sugamoto	yukos0520	502K	Japan	Beauty
Megumi Kanzaki	megumi_kanzaki	594K	Japan	Beauty
Miya Miyagawa	maya_m0901	320K	Japan	Fitness
<b>Germany</b>				
Bibi Claßen	@bibisbeautypalace	7.8M	Germany	Beauty
Stefanie Giesinger	@stefaniegiesinger	4.2M	Germany	Fashion
Caro Daur	@carodaur	3.3M	Germany	Fashion
Sophia Thiel	@sophia.thiel	1.3M	Germany	Fitness
Pamela Reif	@pamela_rf	8.2M	Germany	Fitness
<b>United States</b>				
Aimee Song	@aimeesong	6.1M	USA/Korea	Beauty/Fashion
Blair Eadie	@blaieadiebee	1.7M	USA	Fashion
Jen Selter	@jenselter	12.6M	USA	Fitness



productive gossip, finding common themes representing shared and institutionalized platform imaginaries based on (1) follower interaction, (2) Instagram as a space for work, and (3) commercial activities and/or expectations. The materials were also coded for user gossip on influencers' working conditions and their perception and communication of personal aspirations and precarity. Focusing on these general themes provides a broad understanding of the formation of Instagram imaginaries, which affect influencers' activities in different cultural settings and different sectors.

## **Instagram: From play to work**

Throughout the chosen case studies, it is notable that Instagram influencers' practices show similarities across sectors and geographic regions. The influencers' work is closely bound to Instagram's platform for their content and audience interaction as they are dependent on creating a sustainable following for their personal brand to translate their aspirational labor into financial capital (Duffy, 2017). Instagram prompts specific uses informing its platform purpose by restricting the number of characters per post, the format of images, and other forms of interaction on the platform. Instagram's data policy and terms of use need to be accepted as a prerequisite for use, thereby restricting users' and influencers' agency by having to agree or be left out. This platform environment shapes users' but also influencers' perception of Instagram and their actual working conditions. Therefore, Instagram influencers continuously adjust their imagined ideal use of the platform intending to merge their needed popularity among general users with commercial success through brand partnerships; however, their Instagram use is also informed by sociocultural contexts and localized markets. Their practices reflect a constant renegotiation of their positions within three main imaginaries around Instagram's use, namely, Instagram as a social space, Instagram as a workplace, and Instagram as a marketplace.

### *Instagram as a social space*

To start with, Instagram is imagined, following its ideal use, as a social space as its platform interface and affordances help influencers curate different intimate relationships with their followers through posting authentic and relatable content. For influencers, understanding how general users, as potential followers, imagine Instagram's purpose and ideal use is important because follower numbers represent influencers' capital. Meanwhile, their interactions with followers take place within Instagram's platform environment, where only certain activities of building relationships are enabled by given features. Therefore, influencers need to understand what their followers imagine the platform to be and what the platform environment offers. Their platform imaginaries, in turn, inform content production as following existing platform imaginaries around Instagram use seems a viable business model for influencers to form strong parasocial relationships—"imaginary relationships with media performers [...] that are characterized by perceived relational development with the performer and knowing the performer well" (Brown, 2015: p. 275). In this process, influencers often play into a specific ideal by representing an "inspirational expert," "community leader," or most often in some capacity a "friend" persona.

*Friend/Girl next door.* Users are looking for authentic content from relatable influencers (Abidin and Ots, 2016). Therefore, influencers are actively playing into existing imaginaries by attaining a friend personality that seems authentic and relatable for followers to connect to. It also easily blends in with the posts from users' actual friends and personal lifestyles. This imaginary of Instagram as a social platform falls into one of Instagram's own reiterated ideal uses with their former slogan: "sign

up to see photos and videos from your friends” (Instagram, 2019). The interface design puts this ideal into practice by pushing friends through features like tagging and the “close friends” function hereby recognizing the need for further distinction in social relations besides the choice of private and public accounts. Bibi Claßen, the biggest German beauty influencer, successfully bridges the gap between advertisement and “friend” persona by giving advice to her followers and providing aspirational but relatable content. In her content, she actively addresses her followers as her family and uses rhetorical questions such as “wie ihr auch wisst” (as you know as well), and “seht ihr das auch so?” (do you see this the same way?) to build an intimate rapport with followers linguistically.

Indeed, Instagram influencers actively create Q&A content to have direct interactions with followers and maintain intimate relationships. Using Instagram stories to gather questions from followers and answer them is a common practice for influencers across the three countries. However, the Q&A interaction is not restricted to influencers being asked for advice or showing their personal life, but also for advice. For instance, Maya Miyagawa, a popular Japanese fitness influencer, started with “みんなに質問があります (I have a question for all of you!)” in a post. She asked her followers if she produces sportswear, what should be the most important qualities to take into consideration. By doing so, Maya appeared to her followers as a close friend who sincerely asked them for advice, downplaying the extent of commercialization in her aspiration to launch a personal brand for sportswear. Two months later, Maya excitedly shared the news of launching a sportswear brand called “flamingo squat” on Instagram and her followers celebrated her success.

*Inspirational expertise.* Other users more clearly imagine Instagram as an inspirational platform coinciding with the platform’s commercial aim. Instagram encourages this as an ideal use of its platform with its slogan “bringing you closer to the people and things you love” (Instagram, 2021) pushing commercialization. Following this imaginary, influencers actively position themselves as inspirational and motivational by providing expertise on their personal niche to establish themselves as reliable sources for interested users. For instance, in her Instagram profile, Megumi Kanzaki identifies herself first as “biyo-ka (beautician),” second as an entrepreneur who owns a beauty salon, and last a 47-year-old mom of three boys. She prioritizes her expert identity in the field of cosmetics and beauty, while also maintaining an image of being a mother which is easier for followers to relate to, sometimes blending cosmetic product-testing and reports with family posts about making “bento (lunchbox)” for her boys. Following Japanese traditions, she never posts any photos of her sons on Instagram. Japanese influencers are careful not to post photos that involve their family members or personal friends, keeping a clear boundary between one’s personal life and their public-facing lifestyle. Bibi Claßen and Aimee Song adopt similar approaches, following a typical narrative of “this is just my life and I’ll share it with you” as if their commercial success has little to do with their lifestyle; they both post images of their family and children, making them part of their lifestyle and commercial aspirations. This rhetoric seems to make it easier to incorporate fitting sponsorships, brand deals, and self-branding within their business model also reflected in research on influencers’ credibility (Reinikainen et al., 2020).

*Community leadership.* Additionally, users can also become inspirational experts through advocacy for example for animal welfare, veganism, or environmental concerns using their Instagram as a political platform. The platform is seen as a form of support and community building where influencers can emerge and actively be built up within a community as leading voices. Becoming a community leader on Instagram is based on influencers acquiring, growing, and keeping an audience but this audience needs to be nurtured by a cohesive and shared goal not only a public persona. For instance, Sophia Thiel, a German fitness influencer, has established herself as a



community leader on (mental) health topics especially focused on her own journey to body positivity. While she also plays into “sharing my life with you” narratives, her partnerships, and content are selectively picked to fit her stance and are often represented as a “resource” for followers sharing her experiences as advice for conscious consumer choices. Her stance is also often politically motivated, which is not uncommon for German influencers falling into this category. US influencers’ politicality seems to be more situational, strongly dependent on their community, and seldom linked to party politics specifically. In contrast, Japanese influencers rarely see Instagram as a space for political statements, although some will use the platform to provoke discussion around “light” political topics. For instance, the famous comedian and influencer Naomi Watanabe also presents herself to be a spokeswoman for body positivity in the conventionally one-size-fits-all Japanese fashion market. She launched her own fashion brand called Punyus for fighting “the stereotype that people who are fat should wear this type of clothes or that” (Inagaki, 2018). As this content resonates strongly with niche audiences due to its personal and affective nature, the content is often employed to strengthen parasocial relationships through enacted intimacy and authenticity (Reinikainen et al., 2020), while downplaying its connected commercial interests. Disrupting the online persona by acknowledging this discrepancy might bring users to question the created imaginary of following an advocate and community leader who is just “sharing their expertise for the cause,” which leads to upholding this opacity.

Across the case studies, it is notable that Instagram’s platform affordances enable influencers to archive their personal life paths and reinforce a sense of sociality in their relationships with followers who are constantly witnessing and even participating in the professional growth and private life of influencers. While US influencers proactively create Instagram content that blurs the boundary between public and private, Japanese influencers keep a relatively professionalized public image on their Instagram accounts, reflecting Japan’s media and entertainment industry tradition of protecting public figures’ privacy (Nakanishi, 1987). The German influencers found a middle ground by asserting their right to privacy especially regarding family and personal information appealing to their followers’ sense of cultural boundaries. This reflects the general European cultural and legal discourse around privacy. However, the commonality among these case studies is that influencers combine different imaginaries, representing a “friend,” “inspiration expert,” or “community leader,” for a better performance of sociality in different social or cultural contexts. There is no distinct boundary between the three categories as their content can provide all three functions.

### *Instagram as a workplace*

Instagram’s acknowledgment of influencers as commercial content producers enhances an institutionalizing imaginary of Instagram as a workplace. Influencers’ gossip on the platforms’ governance and content distribution visualizes the strategizing and business logic involved in successful accounts, what Cotter (2019) has called “playing the visibility game.” Recognizing the interplay between corporate, technical, and human actors in the process of “playing the visibility game,” Cotter (2019) reveals how influencers organize tactics to instrumentalize the rules of Instagram’s algorithmic architecture for their benefit: (1) either for building authentic connectivity with followers to have a foundation to influence or (2) for boosting algorithmic recognizable signals of popularity to increase their social capital on the platform.

When Instagram added a creator account in 2019, the platform acknowledged creators as their own profession but required them to identify as a digital creator, influencer, or another creative industries’ persona. In this way, Instagram is pushing professionalization through self-identification

with a specific category. The account offers a variety of tools different from business accounts providing various statistics and a creator studio. Furthermore, Instagram acknowledged the precariousness of becoming a public persona to a certain extent by implementing additional security through separate communication and privacy options. Hereby, the business strategy of Instagram has reacted to changes in its platform use and incoming digital marketing revenue. Simultaneously, the platform has now been reimagined as a formalized workplace for influencers streamlining influencers' work through tools and features. In contrast to Instagram as a social space, communication around being a creator highlights three established imaginaries around Instagram as a workplace connected to business values such as personal branding, visibility metrics, and entrepreneurialism.

### *Public persona as a personal brand*

First and foremost, influencers imagine SMPs like Instagram as spaces for personal branding, creating a public persona that followers can identify with, not because of its business value but its social relatability and consistency (Duffy, 2020). Instagram pushes this imaginary through slogans like “connect with your audience and build your personal brand on Instagram” (2021). Influencers across the case studies have employed various strategies to keep up their public image, becoming their own brands eventually. Across the three countries, their brand-collaboration strategies foster an entrepreneurial mindset in the influencer community that requires expansion. Influencers like Aimee Song have established very consistent public personas, however, have been able to expand them over time as her shift to motherhood content showcases. The same can be seen across cultural markets, as Japanese influencer Ayumi and German influencer Bibi Claßen have also expanded their public persona over time.

In contrast, Sophia Thiel, a major German Fitness influencer, has publicly acknowledged that the need to keep up public appearances and quality of work over long periods can be mentally and physically exhausting (Schweie, 2021). Furthermore, Thiel reflected, similarly to other successful influencers, that she has struggled to keep up the public persona consistently as she felt she had developed beyond the image followers loved her for. She felt she could not move on as her audience publicly shamed her for not being true to said image. This has led to burnout symptoms and social media breaks to deal with mental health issues, which Thiel recently disclosed after her return to public life after 2 years (Schweie, 2021). While precarity as a creative industry buzzword (McRobbie, 2016) is often only correlated with financial insecurity considering missing income and job security (Kalleberg, 2009; Campell and Burgess, 2018), precarity can be conceptualized more broadly in this case. Precarious work is a complex problem impacting influencers' lives holistically considering their work–life balance, mental health, and live narratives (Morgan and Nelligan, 2018; Morini et al., 2014) as Thiel's example showcases. Considering that many influencers today start out in their teens, the persona that becomes publicly loved can never fully reflect the individual behind the camera and inherently evolves over time. While some influencers have successfully changed their image over the years or simply created new accounts, keeping up a public persona exemplifies the mental and physical precarity of influencers' role on Instagram today.

### *Playing the visibility game*

Influencers also imagine Instagram as a platform where their success is evaluated by data metrics. To make it, one does not only need a great public persona and engaging content but to actively play into Instagram's algorithm to win at what Cotter has termed “the visibility game” (2019). Influencers

have formed engagement pods: to help each other succeed by actively pushing metrics on each other's posts (Cotter, 2019; O'Meara, 2019). By employing constructive gossip, these pods are trying to hack algorithmic changes to sustain and grow their following. Hereby, influencers actively negotiate their career in line with platform governance through content production, platform interaction, and even "rythmedia," a concept proposed by Elinor Carmi (2020) that describes how Facebook algorithms take into account users' individual daily rhythms to improve engagement rates. By trying to game Instagram's algorithms, influencers arguably use rythmedia in the same way as the platform provides insights into influencers' following and their highest engagement times.

In our analysis, there was a general celebration of metrics such as follower numbers by influencers across different genres and cultures including Japanese influencers, who were otherwise not acknowledging platform metrics. In contrast, US and German influencers were much more vocal about their success regarding milestones but also the negative impacts of the platform and algorithmic precarity they experienced due to constant changes to their work environment. Although the issue of reaching audiences and changing engagement rates was regularly acknowledged in both countries, it is also worth noting that especially German influencers such as Claßen and Thiel repeatedly spoke out about their lack of work–life balance as everything seems potentially content. While successful influencers have emphasized their freedom to dictate their work hours and schedule, influencers arguably find themselves in a similar vicious cycle in the hopes of finding success, publicly and financially.

### *Entrepreneurialism as a mindset*

Last, the missing work–life balance is also correlated to needing an "entrepreneurial mindset" to succeed, which completely ignores the often inherent (financial) privilege many influencers had before becoming successful. Influencers negotiate their position and worth within a marketplace that does not pay for content initially but for their public visibility, if they are lucky (Duffy, 2017). Therefore, many influencers in the analysis have reiterated the ideal of turning their hobby into a successful career and being one's own boss; however, many successful influencers owe their Instagram success to external factors that made them public figures. For instance, Yuko Sugagamoto, a former member of the female idol group HKT48, claimed herself to be a "mote-kurieitā (popular creator)" who relies on SMPs such as Instagram to generate popularity and conduct marketing activities. Her success on Instagram and other SMPs, in turn, enabled her to create wider publicity by attending various brand-sponsored promotional events to share her experience in the field of digital marketing. In 2018, Yuko established her own marketing company called KOSm for which her public persona became the representative. Similarly, Stefanie Giesinger, a former Germany's Next Top Model winner, has established a successful career as an Instagram influencer through her public appearance on the show and reflects this ideal for many of her young, female followers. Just like other successful German and US influencers, she branched out through collaborations and brand ambassadorships and created her own skincare brand. She makes the life of an influencer seem prestigious despite being one of the very few successful influencers representing 0.27% of Instagram users (Mention, 2021). While Instagram endorses this imaginary by providing "tips, success stories and new features [to] help you build your brand and tell your story" (2021), it glosses over the fundamental financial precarity for creative industries and content creators specifically (Duffy, 2017).

Influencers regularly ascribed to these three platform imaginaries in the analysis, which seem to represent typical business logic, however, inherently play an important role in Instagram's and other SMPs' success through independent creators. They represent the obscured business logic of Instagram as a workplace, revealing influencers' dependence on the platform for success. It conceals the mental, physical, financial, and algorithmic precarity influencers constantly have to negotiate

even if they arguably “made it.” Numerous prominent influencers like Sophia Thiel and Stefanie Giesinger have called out Instagram’s and SMPs’ potential to harm influencers’ mental health besides the often-questioned mental health impact of general users with little consequence from the platform. Similarly to Instagram, prominent YouTubers like and Safiya have openly addressed these issues relating them to the perceived pressure as “well-known” influencers from their audiences but also to the pressure of the algorithm to fit the current but constantly changing platform standards. Hereby, they highlight the inherent complexities of precarious platform work that goes beyond financial insecurity while being closely intertwined with financial success.

### *Instagram as a marketplace*

Influencers often stay within this precarious platform environment in hopes of public recognition and financial success; however, both require further negotiation not only between influencers and followers but also potential business partners to establish Instagram content creation as a business model and not only provide aspirational labor (Duffy, 2017). While sponsorships and ambassadorships can be lucrative revenue streams, the wrong brand association can get influencers canceled (Abidin and Ots, 2016), therefore influencers have to carefully balance their commercial success with their audiences’ platform imaginaries to sustain and further their career. As businesses employ Instagram as a tool for digital-first marketing to heighten customer engagement and positive affective connotations with their brand, influencers play an important role in bridging the trust gap between brands and users. This understanding of Instagram as a marketing channel is particularly prominent in the cases of Japanese influencers. In Japan’s highly commercialized media system, celebrities’ use of SMPs has always been closely associated with the promotion and advertising of products or services—a phenomenon that is known as SNS (social networking services) marketing. Influencers’ authenticity gives them an advantage in reaching potential customers by acting as a “friend,” “expert,” or “community leader” depending on their public persona. However, when followers attach to the public persona that influencers are seen as online, they can easily turn on influencers if the image they have come to associate with is disturbed, or even shattered, by discrepant behavior. Therefore, influencers have established various strategies to reduce the risk of cancel culture and keep their public persona consistent.

### *Proof of authenticity*

Primarily, influencers regularly explain and showcase their connection to a brand they are promoting by referring to their use of products or services before sponsorships or describing their current use and positive experiences. Especially influencers buying into the image of “friend next door” seemingly need to justify their recommendations soundly as they represent a source of advice and often aspirational attachment. Influencers often portray partnerships as “exciting” opportunities pushing affective connections by asking followers to feel happy about their opportunities. Another proof of authentic sponsorships seems to be the “I would recommend this to my best friend and family” narrative keeping up their public persona often even mentioning friends by name. For instance, Bibi Claßen, a German beauty influencer, employs this strategy in her sponsorships regularly. Similarly, Ayumi, a Japanese fashion influencer, talked about her personal experience of suffering from menstrual cramps and taking contraceptive pills in an interview; such intimate, private matter is rarely discussed in public in Japanese culture, thus helping her to show proof of authenticity (although the interview is sponsored content of Fuji Pharma corporation). Fitness influencers such as Selter and Reif on the other hand frame their product or brand endorsements with

their topical expertise making it seem like valuable advice for users trying to emulate their lifestyle in line with their shared goal.

### *Exposing platform precarity*

While it is important for influencers to keep up their public image by acknowledging their connection to sponsored services or products openly for better credibility (Lee and Kim, 2020), other influencers manage follower expectations by exposing the precarity of their platform labor. Some influencers openly address their need for financial sponsorships to keep producing content or move to content creation full-time. Hereby, influencers like Sophia Thiel call for their followers to actively boost their algorithmic performance through interactions making their sponsorships part of their audience interaction by acknowledging them as their support system and by making them “game” the algorithm. Especially inspirational influencers seem to employ this narrative as their followers seem consciously aware of influencers’ aspirations of building or enhancing their careers, making this narrative credible. Sophia Thiel, for example, regularly shared her milestones and career successes with her followers openly discussing her aspirations and addressing her followers as instrumental to her success. Similarly, the US case studies all acknowledged the role their different platforms play in their success and referenced their different platforms and content to push traffic across their online presence. Questions after their content reach are not uncommon across the US and also German influencers trying to establish if their perception of missing reach for example is justified to determine if the platform might have made algorithmic changes impacting their accounts and content. Japanese influencers in contrast do not expose their platform precarity, which seems to be strongly tied to the fact that SMPs are seen as marketing channels and are acknowledged and accepted as such.

### *Paying it forward to their community*

Last, addressing their followers as a support system and “family” has become a useful narrative for friend or big sister personas like Bibi Claßen. As brand sponsors themselves normally include personalized discount codes for better direct translation from partnership to sales, influencers integrate these perks for followers in their sponsored posts or do giveaways that entice followers to high engagement rates by requesting a specific action to enter. These are then framed as “paying it forward” to their community for their loyalty and sharing their commercial success. Nonetheless, the sponsorship needs to be fitting the influencer to be positively perceived by followers. As influencers like Bibi Claßen also display their lifestyle through their Instagram presence as a big part of her public persona, she strategically employs this narrative to make followers feel included by sharing said lifestyle through products and discounts, financially lessening the burden to buy into her lifestyle. US accounts like Aimee Song employ very similar strategies also often including her brand in this affiliated content. Similarly, Maya Miyagawa has been frequently organizing online campaigns through Instagram when launching a new series of products, allowing her followers to have a preview of new products and purchase them with a discount. However, while German influencers seem to require a more subtle framing such as paying it forward, US influencers are more indirect in their approaches and Japanese influencers are direct in their commercial sharing of products as SMPs are culturally accepted as marketing channels.

While these strategies showcase some culturally significant differences, the overall approaches are rather consistent across the three case study countries as differences seem to be founded in the type of public persona influencers represent. While a friend persona such as Song or Claßen can

prove their authenticity potentially more easily, an expert like Maya might tie in their commercial activities through giveaways or acknowledge their role as an “entrepreneur” needing to beat the algorithm like Thiel; however, these strategies have their limits and influencers have constant concerns over being canceled for saying the wrong thing or needing to apologize for past co-operations. While sponsored content, influencer partnerships, and ambassadorships have become normalized over the last few years, influencers can pay a hefty price with the advent of cancel culture when followers perceive them as inauthentic or ethically concerning. At the same time, many influencers have become more conscientious about their public responsibility, directly taking a stance towards brands they would not work with. Many influencers have closely tied themselves to public values that they actively stand for, which then also translate into a believable, authentic public persona. At the same time, these shifts are only adding to the expectations from followers, brands, or agencies, enhancing mental, physical, and financial stress.

## Conclusion

In this research, we emphasize the complexity of platform work and address the need to acknowledge influencers’ ongoing negotiations with their followers, Instagram’s platform environment, and commercial expectations. By employing the framework of platform imaginaries through a mixed qualitative methods approach, the analysis highlights influencers’ interdependencies on and situatedness within Instagram’s platform environment. The multiplicity of relationships between influencers and followers, platform, and commercial partners is reflected in the three analyzed (and sometimes contesting) platform imaginaries, which articulate precarious working conditions in the influencer industry. The precarity goes beyond financial aspects but includes mental and physical health as well as temporal and spatial aspects that affect influencers’ work.

The selected cases of influencers from the United States, Germany, and Japan show similarities in their conscious negotiation of imaginaries between Instagram as a social space, Instagram as a workplace, and Instagram as a marketplace, to sustain and further their careers but also search to balance the precarious working conditions. Their common practices reflect the fact that Instagram’s platform imaginaries have become a global phenomenon in the influencer industry. As a majority of research is currently done on major influencers who represent the white or Western cultural market, this research opens up discussion on a nuanced understanding of influencers’ multidimensional experiences, as followers’ friends or aspirational experts, advocates, entrepreneurs, and business partners, manifested similarly across industrial sectors and in different geolocations. However, due to the limited scope of exemplary case studies, this research did not aim to identify and analyze any cultural difference or specificity to the formation of platform imaginaries. To make Instagram imaginaries a more conducive framework, there is a need for future research to go beyond this heteronormative, socioeconomically privileged demographic and investigate how influencers’ intersectional identities might affect their framing of Instagram imaginaries.

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