Under Pressure: A Netnographic Study of Threats to Influencer and Creator Mental Health

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Abstract

Media reports on toxic influencer culture and creator burnout are growing, but academic literature on influencer and creator mental health challenges remains scarce. The precarity of their work and their need to engage in visibility labor cast long shadows on what is often portrayed as a dream job. This study explores sources of pressure perceived by influencers and creators and threats to their psychological and emotional well-being. By conducting a netnography, the research explores the issue across a wide range of influencers and creators while capturing their emic perspectives. The findings provide a nuanced view on perceived mental health threats and reveal multiple sources of pressure across and beyond the influencer and creator ecosystem. It therefore expands existing literature on influencer and creator vulnerabilities and illustrates the importance of netnographic research for understanding technocultural phenomena.

Keywords: influencers, mental health, visibility labor, vulnerability, netnography.

1. Introduction

Social media influencers and creators are not only a cultural phenomenon but have become important drivers of content creation and user engagement on social media platforms. They sit at the center of an expanding business ecosystem that takes advantage of their ability to drive consumer opinions and purchasing decisions (Kozinets, Gretzel & Gambetti, 2023). Although popular culture still largely portrays them as frivolous and vain (Abidin, 2016a), there is increasing recognition of their value as communicators and their social media activities as work (Timbol, 2022).

Like other gig economy workers, their labor is precarious (Montgomery & Baglioni, 2021). The 'visibility labor' (Abidin, 2021) influencers need to perform is receiving increased attention in the literature, and so is their vulnerability because of their platform-dependence and heightened reliance on and scrutiny by metrics and algorithms (Duffy, 2020). Recent media reports on influencer burnout (Tanner, 2023; Carter, 2022; Diaz, 2022; Lorenz, 2021) suggest that influencers and creators are struggling with mental health issues because of their social media-based work. In response (and in recognition of the central role influencers and creators play for platforms), YouTube (2023) has added mental health resources to its Creator Safety Center, and Instagram (2023) has issued a mental health guide for creators, while Facebook Gaming offers mental health workshops for streamers (Morrow, 2021), and Pinterest (2022) offers mindfulness resources through its partnership with Headspace. These efforts by platforms further underline the seriousness of the issue.

While mental health implications for influencers are regularly implied in academic literature (Bishop, 2018), they are rarely specifically explored (Timbol, 2022), and a comprehensive account of threats to the psychological and emotional well-being of influencers and creators is currently missing from the literature. Methodological challenges in the exploration of influencer and creator-related phenomena are also apparent in the literature, with papers often referring to 'broader ethnographic projects' without providing further details, data being gathered without systematic methodological guidance, or research being restricted to specific platforms.

Given the need for a broad and nuanced understanding of influencer and creator well-being and threats to their mental health, this paper applied netnography (Kozinets, 2020) to systematically gather rich data from a wide spectrum of influencers and creators. Its aim was to explore threats to influencer and creator mental health. Based on existing conceptualizations of the demands placed on influencers as part of their work and their resulting vulnerability, we specifically ask what mental health issues they face and what sources of pressure they experience. To inform our research, we use Barta, Pyle and Andalibi (2023)'s Feminist Social Media Vulnerability Taxonomy as our theoretical lens and adopt an ecosystem perspective that places influencers at the center of a complex web of relationships and exchanges.

URI: https://hdl.handle.net/10125/106718
978-0-9981331-7-1
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2. Literature Review

Many definitions of influencers exist in the literature, but most have become outdated or are too narrow because they were derived with a focus on specific phenomena like social media fame (Abidin, 2018). We adopt a recent definition by Kozinets, Gretzel, and Gambetti (2023), who define influencers as “personal brands that build relationships with an engaged audience through a regular flow of consistent, authentic, and distinctive content posted on at least one social media platform” (p.10). Although the term ‘creator’ is often used interchangeably with ‘influencer’ in the industry, we also follow Kozinets et al. (2023) in distinguishing creators as individuals who produce professional, unique, high-quality content that they either post on their own channels or license to others. While creators might be less exposed to some threats common for influencers, like sexual harassment (Takano et al., 2022) because their personal identities are not foregrounded in their work, they are still subject to content creation pressures and other negative aspects related to gig economy work. While there are other types of influencers like pet influencers and virtual influencers, we focus our attention on human influencers because of our interest in mental health.

2.2. The Influencer and Creator Ecosystem

An ecosystem perspective allows for the holistic investigation of a complex phenomenon as a system of systems, with each part interacting with and affecting the others. Influencers and creators operate within an increasingly sophisticated media and business ecosystem that includes various individual, organizational, and sociotechnical actors and feeds on attracting content-hungry but attention-starved audiences. At the core of this ecosystem lies the relationship between influencers/creators and their audiences, which is mediated by social media platforms. Brands have long recognized the value in reaching these audiences through influencers and creators. For businesses, influencers and creators are third-party actors that can effectively produce and distribute product-related contents (Borchers, 2019).

Many influencers and creators take advantage of brand collaborations and deals to monetize their content beyond revenue they might create through the social media platform (e.g., virtual gifts or advertising revenue). Countless intermediaries have emerged in the influencer and creator ecosystem that support either the influencers/creators and the brands and organizations who want to work with them, or both. They provide talent scouting, deal brokering, data management, business support, creative services, tools, and many other offerings that facilitate influencer and creator collaborations. The emergence of these intermediaries suggests increasing professionalization within the influencer and creator ecosystem (Stoldt et al., 2019); however, this does not necessarily mean less vulnerability and precarity for influencers and creators.

2.2. Influencer and Creator Vulnerability

As influencers and creators move from casual social media users to professional service providers (Stoldt et al., 2019), their activities turn into work. However, vis-à-vis their loyal audience, they still have to maintain their authenticity performances to stay relevant and popular, which creates a lot of tension (Van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021). As they become more dependent on monetization, influencers and creators have to increasingly engage in visibility labor (Cotter, 2019; Abidin, 2021).

Visibility work encompasses dedication to continuous creation of content that resonates with the target audience and is favored by platform algorithms, investing significant efforts in crafting and maintaining the personal brand, providing added value to audiences through conversation and interaction, staying on top of platform changes and demands, networking and collaborations with other influencers and desirable brands, and maintaining a positive online presence by engaging in emotional labor. Visibility labor in relation to platforms and their algorithms has been especially highlighted in recent research on influencers and creators (Duffy, 2020; Bishop, 2021). Importantly, visibility is intricately linked with intensification of influencer and creator work and is tied to instability in relation to platforms dynamics and changes within the business ecosystem (Duffy et al., 2021). Glatt (2022) provides a recent account of the lived realities of influencers and creators and illustrates how emotionally taxing visibility labor can be. She concludes: “The quest for visibility is never fulfilled, the promise of having “made it” always deferred, with the only satisfactory option being a constant state of growth.” (Glatt, 2022: 3865). Thus, visibility labor increases influencer and creator vulnerability.

Vulnerability emerging from the use of social media is an increasingly pressing concern and encompasses a variety of issues (Buglass et al., 2017). Barta et al. (2023:3) define vulnerability as a “condition of openness to affecting/being affected by other actors”. Their Feminist Social Media Vulnerability Taxonomy distinguishes among vulnerability valence, state, and sources. Given the mental health context, it is undesired vulnerability in terms of valence that is of primary interest. Regarding state, both networked vulnerability (the perpetual state of awareness, preparation, and

mitigation of vulnerability on social media) and occurrent (directly experienced) vulnerability are applicable. However, the focus of this research is on sources of vulnerability. Barta et al. (2023:4) refer to sources of vulnerability as “entities that give rise to an individual’s experiences of vulnerability”. We conceptualize the vulnerabilities arising from these sources as evoking various mental health threats.

2.3. Social Media and Influencer and Creator Mental Health

The World Health Organization (2022: n.p.) defines mental health as “a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community.” Social media can have many positive effects on mental health but can also increase exposure to harmful interactions and risks (Naslund et al., 2020). The latest buzzword in relation to social media and their potential negative impact on mental health is ‘toxic positivity’. Influencers and creators have been identified as contributing to it and simultaneously suffering from its consequences (Petersen, 2023). Together with hustle culture, toxic positivity creates social comparison effects and fear-of-missing-out and instills an atmosphere of heightened competitiveness (Kozinets et al., 2023). The pressures are especially high for female influencers (Drenten, Gurrieri & Tyler, 2020) and not all influencers are able to cope with the toxic influencer culture (Timbol, 2022).

In order to avoid complete mental breakdowns, influencers increasingly engage in digital detox practices (Syvertsen & Enli, 2020). They also more often speak out about their mental health issues. While for some influencers showing such vulnerability is beneficial, and for others it is simply part of their authenticity performance (Banet-Weiser, 2021), the experience of vulnerability is often connected with negative affect, anxiety, and stress. Models of how vulnerability and various dependencies within the influencer and creator ecosystem combine to trigger mental health threats are currently missing from the literature. The specifics of influencer and creator mental health challenges thus remain largely unknown.

3. Methodology

Influencers and creators are a difficult-to-reach population for research purposes because of their often nomadic lifestyle, their hectic content creation schedules, and their (or their business team’s) careful management of their accessibility. Netnography provides an ideal research method for this context because it collects data on social media, where influencers and creators naturally express their opinions. Further, according to Addeo et al. (2019), in contrast to traditional ethnography, netnography can be used to expand the geographical scope of the research field. Thus, dispersed, scattered communities around the world can be analyzed and access to relevant populations can be expanded. This is particularly relevant in the context of influencers and creators, who constitute a global phenomenon. Netnography has been applied to research influencers and creators in the past for these reasons (e.g., by Patterson & Ashman, 2021 and Femenia-Serra, Gretzel & Alzua-Sorzabal, 2022).

Mental health is a sensitive topic that requires special care. Netnography is ideally suited to studying mental health topics because it allows for unintrusive participant observation while also providing strict ethical guidelines for researchers (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2023). It has a long history as a method for studying health and health concerns discussed online (Grothaus, Köcher, Köcher, & Dieterle, 2023; Salzmann-Erikson & Eriksson, 2023; Schuman, Lawrence, & Pope, 2019) and has been applied to study the negative impacts of social media on health and well-being (Humayun, Von Richthofen, & Golf-Papez, 2021; He, Liu, & Zhou, 2019).

Importantly, netnography provides contextual understandings. The researcher serves as an important instrument for analysis and interpretation (Kozinets, 2020). Platforms and their algorithms constitute complex contexts. The affective and performative visibility labor of influencers and creators (Abidin, 2016b) requires an intricate understanding of the various dimensions of influencer culture, including the socio-technological ecosystem in which influencers and creators operate, as well as influencer and creator practices. Grasping the toxicity within this influencer culture requires first-hand experience of social media and influencer content, as well as empathy. Through its cocktail of methods that allows the researcher to deep-dive into data and connect different data types, netnography is able to deliver the necessary basis for a technocultural understanding of phenomena (Gambetti & Kozinets, 2022).

3.1. Data Collection

Netnography is a pragmatic approach with a set of specific but flexible procedures, or so-called movements (Kozinets, 2020). All netnographies require an ‘Immersion’ phase, which involves the personal, intellectual, and emotional engagement of the research team in the research context. The goals of immersion are to cast a wide net across the Internet, to follow interesting traces, and to understand where in this digital

environment relevant discussions are happening (Caliandro & Gandini, 2017). During a four-month period in 2022, the researchers immersed themselves in the research context by following influencers and consuming their contents. The primary researcher at least partially watched over 400 YouTube videos and established a research account on Instagram to specifically curate content from influencers who posted about their mental health issues. She also kept an immersion journal in which personal observations were recorded and initial searches to scout data were mapped out. The netnographic immersion journal is the equivalent of ethnographic field notes and forms an important base for data analysis and interpretation (Kozinets, 2020).

In relation to data collection, netnography also offers two additional, optional data collection movements, namely 'Investigation' and 'Interaction'. For this study, the Immersion movement was primarily combined with an Investigation movement. During the Investigation movement, general Google, DuckDuckGo, Yahoo!, Ecosia and Bing searches were conducted using variations of search terms related to influencer and creator mental health concerns, mental breakdowns, burnouts, and digital wellbeing routines. Searches on Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, TikTok and Reddit were conducted using hashtags that were identified during the Immersion movement as emic formulations and as particularly relevant for discussions of influencer and creator mental health (e.g., #creatorburnout, #digitalwellbeing, #digitaldetox, #break, #offline). The posts also pointed to blogs and podcasts, which were subsequently investigated for relevant data. Data collection occurred during an 8-month period in 2022. The initial data set was narrowed based on netnography's RAIDR (relevance, activity, interactivity, diversity, richness) criteria. According to Kozinets (2020), the goal is to limit the amount of data to balance out a comprehensive understanding of the underlying phenomenon and the researcher's ability to look deep enough into a specific amount of data. One of the relevance criteria applied to the data was that the contents were directly connected to mental health issues and perceived pressures stemming from their activities as influencers rather than from personal problems or existing mental health conditions.

Combining different data collection movements allows for data and method triangulation and increases the credibility of the research (Shenton, 2004). For this study, the Interaction movement served mostly as a member check to clarify insights derived from the Immersion and Investigation movements and to add an emic perspective. Interviews with a European gaming micro-influencer (13.2k followers on Instagram, 39.3k on Twitch, 10.8k on YouTube) who had temporarily suspended her Twitch activities because of burnout and a North American holistic health and wellness nano-influencer (2k followers on Instagram) were conducted via MicrosoftTeams by the primary researcher and were recorded and automatically transcribed. Both interviewees were female to highlight the specific vulnerability of female influencers (Drenten, et al., 2020) and to add a gender-specific focus to our data.

Data triangulation also helped us obtain more "unfiltered" perspectives beyond the emotional and visibility labor performed for audiences. Including data from videos, blogs and podcasts targeted at other influencers rather than followers and verifying our interpretations during the interviews added credibility to our results.

All three data collection movements followed the ethics guidelines established for netnographic research (Kozinets, 2020). Table 1 provides a summary of the final netnographic data set derived from the data collection movements.

Table 1. Summary of Netnographic Data.

Data Site / Platform *(Movement)*	**Type & Amount of Data**
Immersion Journal *(Immersion)*	digitally and hand-written notes & drawings
Blogs *(Investigation)*	8 articles from different influencers, *11,688 words*
Podcasts *(Investigation)*	transcripts of 5 podcast episodes, *25,418 words*
Instagram *(Investigation)*	211 screenshots, screen recordings & digitally-saved posts by 62 different influencers (including visuals, text and comments); *5,256 words*
YouTube *(Investigation)*	transcripts of 20 videos & selected comments; *56,465 words*
Interviews *(Interaction)*	transcripts of 2 interviews 60 mins each, *14,537 words*

3.2. Data Analysis

The data from the Immersion and Investigation movements were analyzed together following an inductive and heuristic approach. The qualitative analysis tool Quirkos was used to organize and code the data. The data were coded by the primary researcher. Initial codes were combined into higher-level themes. The research team met frequently to discuss the emerging coding scheme. The preliminary results were then discussed with the two female influencers during

the Interaction movement. The additional data from the interviews were integrated into a final data set. The interviews confirmed the overall coding structure but added details that informed the interpretation.

4. Findings

4.1. Influencer and Creator Mental Well-being

Burnout is a very visible issue among influencers and creators (because their social media accounts often go dark as a result) and is widely discussed in blogs, YouTube videos, and podcasts:

"When I sign onto Instagram and feel flustered, overwhelmed, and not sure what to say or post, I typically know I'm in a burnout. I've been through many of these burnouts in the past five to six years." (Blog post)

While burnout is a prominent threat to mental health, the data gathered from the netnographic immersion, investigation and interaction phases paint a much more nuanced picture of the many mental health issues faced by these individuals. Mental health impairments mentioned by influencers and creators as triggered by their work include depression, panic attacks, anxiety, imposter syndrome, and identity crises. One influencer explains how feeling lost quickly spiraled her into an existential crisis:

"'Who am I?' That's what it sort of felt like a bit so I just became really lost. I had a proper existential crisis." (Podcast).

Moreover, pre-existing conditions like attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder are often made worse by their need to continuously be on social media. Influencers and creators report several feelings and emotions that represent important warning signs as far as their well-being is concerned. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of these challenges to well-being reported by influencers and creators. They range from self-doubt and guilt to feeling mentally drained and overwhelmed. For example, one of the influencers describes her feelings of being stressed and overwhelmed as follows:

"...feeling particularly stressed about not doing enough in terms of content or audience interaction is a frequent thing. I can get overwhelmed by unopened messages in my DMs or in feed post comments." (Blog post)

Another voices her frustration with herself and her mounting levels of demotivation:

"It was a real spiral of thoughts that led to me taking on more and more work and then it didn't work again but I had actually invested a lot of time. This was frustrating and demotivating. I was really demotivated." (Interview data)

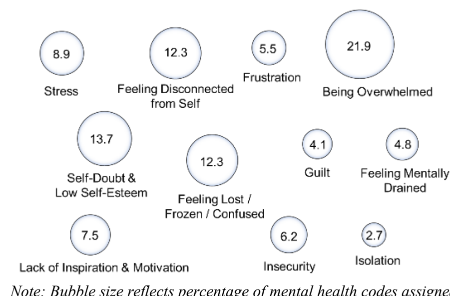

Figure 1. Threats to Mental Well-being Reported by Influencers and Creators.

The findings further show that threats to influencer and creator mental well-being are the result of pressures (Vaag, Giæver & Bjerkeset, 2014) that come from different sources of vulnerability within and outside the influencer and creator ecosystem. Six broad groups of sources were identified.

4.2. Pressure from Platforms

Platform related pressures are most prominently discussed by influencers and creators and comprise of several dimensions. The first refers to the algorithmic labor already widely identified as a burden for creative workers (Cotter, 2019; Duffy, 2020). This algorithmic labor not only involves being an expert on platform-specific algorithms but also dealing with frequent changes to algorithms and trying to overcome their perceived arbitrariness or bias. Influencers and creators refer to algorithmic work as especially draining because of their unexpectedness and their lack of control over them. They feel "*worn down by social media's shenanigans*" (Blog post) and report confusion "*when algorithms suddenly change, and your content is not shown to your audience anymore and you don't know why*" (YouTube video). According to Stallings et al. (1997), this unexpectedness creates a much greater threat to well-being than anticipated pressures.

Influencers and creators need to invest considerable time and effort in understanding platform dynamics, optimizing their content for visibility, and adapting to new features or functionalities. This is labor for which they are not compensated. Related to algorithmic labor is anticipating platform censorship and adjusting content accordingly, which leads to a perceived threat to their creative freedom and a lot of effort put into self-censorship:

"There's a lot of terms and things that I probably use that I think get flagged... I used to tag functional medicine or certain terms that seem to maybe get flagged. So, I have tried to run a sponsored ad and it just doesn't get [posted]...they don't inform me of

anything. They just, like, I don't know, I guess they don't approve it because it never ends up running. (Interview)

Algorithmic labor as part of the overall visibility labor required of influencers and creators generates significant performance pressures. Terms like "*hamster wheel*", "*spiral*", "*carousel*", or "*centrifugal force*" are often used by influencers and creators to describe how platforms affect their work. These pressures are amplified by the increased reliance on performance metrics often directly built into the platforms or captured through influencer management tools (Bishop, 2021). Many of the influencer posts talk about the need to create content 24/7, the heavy reliance on metrics, and the looming algorithmic punishments if they take a break:

"These platforms want you to consistently create content so that they can continue to keep the audience's attention." (Podcast)

"That dang algorithm makes you a slave to it." (YouTube comment)

"You're only focused on this dashboard from YouTube, which shows you: what are your last ten videos and how did they perform and then there's a ranking. And if you upload a video, for example, and then after three hours it shows you tenth place out of ten, your mood is completely down." (YouTube video)

They also complain about the many direct messages and comments, as well as the different content formats and requirements they need to keep up with.

Specific platform affordances (or the lack thereof) are also mentioned in relation to mental health threats. For example, some platforms at least allow for the filtering of negative comments while others seem to do very little to protect influencers and creators from hateful comments:

"Twitter: It's particularly known for being a troublesome platform and sadly, the tools it provides are pretty weak when it comes to online abuse. However, you can use a feature called advanced muting to remove tweets that contain certain words from appearing on your timeline." (Blog post)

There is a general sentiment that, while platforms are making progress in terms of protecting the mental health of average users, they are still not doing enough to protect influencers and creators.

Influencers and creators also experience pressures from being on social media as users. Distractions, information overload, the pressure of keeping up with trends, envy, and being overwhelmed by posts about cruelty and disasters were mentioned by many.

4.3. Pressure from Other Influencers

The second most prominently discussed source of pressure was surprisingly 'other influencers and creators'. Influencers and creators complain about unfair practices like purchasing fake-followers, not adhering to disclosure rules, and organizing unethical competitions or prize drawings that create unrealistic expectations regarding follower counts and engagement rates and, thus, affect the earning potentials of those who are sticking to the rules. They further mention competition among influencers and feelings of jealousy over brand deals or the picture-perfect lives of other influencers as factors that negatively affect them. While recent research finds that social comparison on social media can serve as inspiration and that envy can be benign (Meier & Johnson, 2022), it seems to be mostly a source of negative affect for influencers. Having to literally 'keep up with the Kardashians' creates a lot of anxiety among influencers and creators:

"In content creation, we are constantly comparing ourselves to others, and that can raise self-doubt." (Blog post)

I started making thoughts in my own head about my fellow influencers and what they were doing and why they were doing it instead of just minding the business that pays me. I started letting that get in my head… (YouTube video)

"How do [the other influencers] manage to always be so happy, always produce so much and great content, and always look perfect? That always made me feel like a failure." (YouTube video)

4.4. Pressure from Social Media Audiences

The third group of ecosystem stakeholders that seems to have a significant impact on influencer and creator well-being is the social media audience. Themes related to pressures from this group largely reflect what has been extensively discussed in the literature as the 'visibility labor' influencers and creators perform. This includes stress experienced because of content creation, audience engagement, personal branding, and networking demands placed on the influencer. It also refers to emotional labor, including dealing with online harassment and trolls, negative comments, constant scrutiny, and the threat of being canceled, as well as the need for performativity, the portrayal of intimacy, and the necessary management of accessibility (Kozinets et al., 2023). There is little work-life balance in this job, and they are constantly being criticized:

"The pressure to be constantly creating and to always look perfect in the eyes of your viewers/readers can be enough to create some very serious and damaging problems." (Blog post)

"As nice as many people imagine this job to be, the less they realize how much this job can take it out of you, because in this job you really never get off work, because you have followers who want to see and hear

from you every day and who want to get added value." (Podcast)

"When so many thousands of people have suggestions for improving your life, then you're already putting yourself under enormous pressure." (YouTube video)

Influencers also complain that their social media audience often forgets the human behind the content. They not only feel de-humanized by this but also stuck because there is little room to evolve when the audience expects them "*to always be that version of yourself*" (YouTube video). While existing literature has focused on effects of parasocial relationships with influencers on audiences (Farivar, Wang & Turel, 2022), this suggests that potential negative effects of these relationships on influencers also warrant exploration.

4.5. Pressure from Business Team and Collaboration Partners

Additional pressures come from collaboration partners. This stands in stark contrast to the supporting relationships depicted in the literature (Nascimento, Campos & Suarez, 2020). Collaboration partners demand a lot from influencers and creators in terms of content creation (with large greater amounts and more sophisticated content needing to be delivered on time and posts often having to go through several rounds of revisions before they are approved), in regard to availability, but also in terms of having reach and extensive cross-platform presence:

"It's not enough just YouTube alone, do you do Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok...Oh God, it never stops! And we don't know what else will be added in the future." (YouTube video)

Especially female influencers also experience pressure when negotiating collaborations as they often have to deal with low-ball offers:

"I'm tired of looking at this every day, putting so much heart and soul into this app every day and then having potential collaborators tell me that they don't want to compensate me accordingly for my work because I don't have enough reach for them…" (Blog post).

Only one data point hinted at pressure coming from the manager. It specifically referred to exploitation when the influencer was still a child. Consequently, this stakeholder group should be considered an important source of pressure and a significant potential threat to well-being despite the scarcity of data.

4.6. Pressure from the Self

Influencers and creators also discuss pressures they put on themselves. These pressures result from their passion for their work and their felt responsibility towards their followers. In this case, the passion that usually energizes them and supports their entrepreneurial pursuits (McFarlane, Hamilton, & Hewer, 2022) makes them stand in their own way. Self-made pressures can also be the result of ambition and perfectionism:

"I felt like I had to create 24/7 and I had to do all these reels and I had to have catchy hooks and I was constantly just berated with what I needed to do all the time in order to excel." (YouTube video)

In addition, pressures experienced from other sources often become internalized:

"A lot of the time I put more pressure on myself, than other people are putting on" (YouTube video)

"How many people are following me now? How many people like my video? It's just become so important to me, just way too important" (YouTube video).

They also put enormous pressure on themselves to be creative and to be true to themselves, which is often not possible when 'playing the visibility game' (Cotter, 2019). Vaag et al. (2014) refer to this kind of pressure as "identity pressure":

Lately I've been feeling a disconnect with myself as a creative. I've been dealing with questions like: "Is what I'm creating aligning with my values and principles?" "Am I creating the things I want to create?" "What's important to me?" And "Where do I want to take things?" (YouTube video)

Conflicts between the creative dimension of their work and the need to monetize their contents add another layer of stress. Such mental health vulnerability is common for creative professions (Kyaga et al., 2013). Matters are made worse by the precarity of their work and the constant existential threats they experience:

"Sometimes, I have nothing new, relevant, or creative to add" (Blog post)

"I want to be a full-time content creator, but I don't want to be a salesperson" (YouTube video)

"Influencers know that no matter what platform they're on and producing content, eventually the fame will fade. And that happens faster than you think." (YouTube video)

4.7. Pressure from External Sources

Pressures from outside the influencer ecosystem relate to two different sources: family and friends and society in general. Comments related to family and friends were sparse and mostly referred to pressures to find 'a real job'. This differs from the family/work conflicts reported in existing literature (Vaag et al., 2014). Pressures from society at large encompass two different dimensions: misconceptions about influencers

and their work as well as mental-health stigma that leads influencers to think that they cannot openly discuss mental health issues when they face them.

"The first thing that always hits you are all these clichés, like, 'oh, come on, that's not really work at all.'" (YouTube video)

"A lot of people think that I don't really do much there because you only ever see the end product, the video, or Instagram Story, or the photo but that there's just a lot of work behind it, you don't see that." (YouTube Video)

"She has that fitness body so she cannot feel bad about herself. People think that because you have such a huge following and such a perfect life on Instagram, perfect house, perfect car… that you cannot feel or you're not allowed to feel something bad because you have those things." (YouTube video)

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Influencers and creators are gig economy workers that engage in 'platformized labor' (Glatt, 2022). This research builds on existing literature that has highlighted the precarity of their work and their vulnerabilities in relation to the demands of social media audiences, platforms, and brands (Abidin, 2021; Bishop, 2021; Cotter, 2019; Duffy, 2020). What it adds is an expanded, ecosystem-view of sources of vulnerability and new details in terms of the way in which these varied sources instill negative feelings in influencers and creators that potentially curb their passion and enthusiasm for social media content creation, or worse, trigger a mental health crisis. Specifically, the findings show that harmful pressures emerge from within the influencer self, from various sources within the influencer ecosystem, and from external sources. This three-layer model of sources of vulnerability is illustrated in Figure 2.

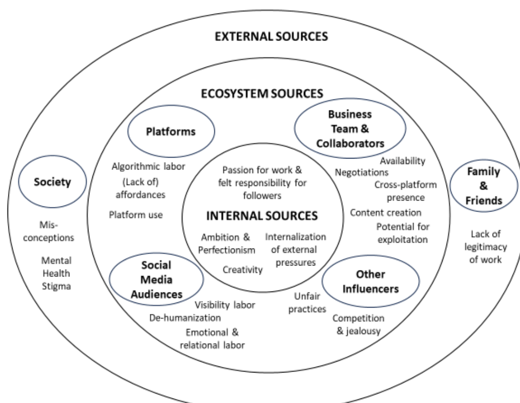

Figure 2. Three-Layer Model of Sources of Influencer and Creator Vulnerability.

While much blame has been put on platforms for exploiting content creators, the findings illustrate that threats to influencer and creator mental health can emerge from every corner of the complex influencer and creator ecosystem. Interestingly, no data was found regarding pressures from regulatory agencies. Since influencer regulation has either not been in place or not been enforced until very recently, it could be indeed less salient as a threat. However, this might change in the near future as many countries (for example, France), have recently stepped up regulatory demands on the industry. An alternative explanation is that this threat is seen as coming from the collaboration partners, who are liable and therefore increasingly demand content compliance as part of their overall content specifications.

The research also mapped out the many different mental health impairments and emotional well-being challenges influencers and creators reported on. As such, the research contributes to the nascent literature on influencer and creator burnout (Thorne, 2023; Timbol, 2022) but adds a more nuanced view on threats to influencer mental well-being by listing a wide range of emotions and mental health issues that can lead to burnout but also negatively affect those who continue.

Adopting a vulnerability lens and an ecosystem perspective allowed us to demonstrate the complexity of influencer and creator mental health challenges. What is needed is more research on how influencers and creators can successfully cope with the many negative emotions their work and prominent presence on social media brings about. Specific perspectives on female, minority, disabled, and child influencers and creators are necessary given their disadvantaged position in the 'visibility game'. This would also have important practical implications as many of the current resources provided by the platforms are very generic. At least there seems to be more recognition by platforms of the fact that influencers and creators need support. This is not necessarily the case for the other actors in the influencer and creator ecosystem, who either exacerbate platform pressures or create additional threats to influencer and creator mental health.

Much of the work on influencers and creators as gig economy workers comes from cultural studies and sociology. A system sciences perspective is urgently needed to understand the phenomenon from a socio-technological perspective. For example, work on technostress (Fieseler et al., 2014), especially in the context of platformized work (Cram et al., 2022), and research on mental health challenges and burnout in the gaming community (Anderson & Orme, 2022) could add valuable theoretical perspectives to future research on the topic.

Netnographic research can contribute to building such a system sciences understanding. The research illustrates several advantages of netnography as a research technique to explore phenomena that are being discussed online. Gaining access to hard-to-reach populations, obtaining emic perspectives, and ensuring that ethical considerations are taken into account are the main advantages netnography provides for such research. Importantly, the central tenet of researcher immersion ensures that empathy can be built.

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