

The Professionalization of Social Media Influencing: Addressing Challenges, Building Support, and Establishing Legitimacy

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ABSTRACT

Social media influencing has gained attention as a viable, and even lucrative, career path, particularly among Generation Z (Gen Z). Despite its growth, the influencer industry faces significant challenges, including lack of standardized practices, unequal pay, and psychological strains. Through qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews and focus groups, this study explores the career motivations, trajectories, and experiences of both professional and aspiring influencers. By examining how influencers perceive and define careers in social media, the study provides a rich understanding of the factors that contribute to career pursuits while highlighting the business, emotional, and educational demands associated with influencer work. Findings also underscore the need for ethical standards, educational frameworks, mentorship, and professional support to strengthen influencer career development. Ultimately, the findings inform the creation of formal frameworks, ethical guidelines, and educational resources that may contribute to greater legitimacy, preparation, and long-term sustainability within the evolving influencer profession and creator economy.

KEYWORDS: Social Media Influencing, Professionalization, Influencer Education, Entrepreneurial Identity, Creator Economy, and Qualitative Research

For Gen Z, growing up in the digital age has significantly shaped the desire to pursue social media influencing as a professional pathway. A 2022 report found that 1 in 4 Gen Zers aspire to become social media influencers, a significant rise from previous generations (Melillo, 2022). Similarly, a CBS News study revealed that 86% of young Americans are open to trying influencing as a career, with 12% already considering themselves influencers (Min, 2019). This transformation highlights the rapid evolution of the influencer industry, which is projected to reach \$32.55 billion by the end of 2025 (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2025). This career trend not only reflects the growing popularity of social media influencing but has also prompted greater scholarly and industry interest in the professionalization of the field.

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The evolution of social media influencing from a casual hobby to a progressively structured occupation has redefined how creators generate income and manage personal brands. Influencers now operate as entrepreneurs, balancing content creation, marketing and community management while navigating a complex and evolving business landscape. This entrepreneurial load has instigated exploration around standardized frameworks intended to support long-term growth and professional credibility (Cheng et al., 2024), while also highlighting substantial challenges faced by social media influencers. Hund (2024) characterizes the influencer industry as a "ramshackle start-up" due to its limited professional cohesion and inconsistent protections for creators. She argues that the industry's lack of regulatory and professional guardrails creates opportunities for exploitation and calls for clearer expectations, standardized compensation, ethical guidelines, and greater protections for creators to promote a more sustainable and credible industry. These challenges are further reflected in documented inequities within the creator economy. For example, a report by the UK Parliament's Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS) committee found that Black influencers earn 35% less than their white counterparts in similar roles, highlighting persistent disparities in compensation (MSL Group, 2021).

In addition to financial disparities, influencers are heavily influenced by social media algorithms, which determine their visibility and engagement. Cotter (2019) explains that influencers are often forced to "play a game of visibility" to remain relevant and avoid being overshadowed by platform changes. This constant pressure can lead to burnout, anxiety and depression as influencers struggle to balance their personal and professional lives.

Similarly, scholars have discussed the role of ethical practices and professional guidelines to support and encourage best practice across the industry. Compared with more established professions, social media influencing currently operates with fewer formal oversight mechanisms. Acquaviva et al. (2020) suggest that formal recognition and standardized approaches may provide one avenue for acknowledging influencers' contributions in professional contexts. Similarly, Marchán Sanz et al. (2025) describe micro-influencing as an emerging profession that continues to develop without widely accepted professional norms or preparation pathways, pointing to ongoing discussion surrounding how creators can be better supported as the industry evolves.

While the creator economy offers tremendous career opportunities, its largely unregulated nature has also prompted growing conversations among scholars and industry leaders regarding professional support, creator protections, ethical practices, and educational preparation (Abidin & Hong-Phuc, 2023; Hund, 2024; Kovalainen & Poutanen, 2023; Stoldt et al., 2019). Within these conversations, researchers have examined how industry intermediaries, educational initiatives, certifications, and other forms of professional support may help creators navigate a complex business environment (Cowley et al., 2021; Liang & Ji, 2024; Kovalainen & Poutanen, 2023). At the same time, emerging scholarship suggests that professionalization is an ongoing process rather than a universally accepted endpoint, with continued discussion surrounding how greater structure can be balanced with the autonomy and creativity that characterize influencer work (Annabell, 2025; Marchán Sanz et al., 2025).

This study examines both the lived and perceived realities of a career in social media influencing to identify the challenges and opportunities present across the profession. Ultimately, this study seeks to better understand how aspiring and established influencers construct understandings of professional preparation, legitimacy, and support within an emerging occupation and to inform future research, industry practice, and educational approaches related to the evolving professionalization of influencer careers.

Literature Review

The phenomenon of social media influencing has surged in recent years, captivating the attention of both youthful audiences and industry professionals alike. This trend reflects a significant change in how careers are perceived in the digital age, where personal branding and online presence can translate into lucrative opportunities. Evolving social media platforms have made the influencer landscape more nuanced. Key debates within the field include the need for established professional standards, the impact of financial disparities among influencers, and the psychological burden of navigating an unregulated environment. This review examines these debates through two interconnected lenses: the arc of the creator career as an emerging entrepreneurial pathway, and the ongoing efforts to professionalize and institutionalize that pathway.

Arc of the Creator Career

Growth in the creator economy has coincided with a closer association between influencers and entrepreneurs. Recent scholarship positions social media influencing as a distinct form of entrepreneurial practice, offering insight into how individuals develop both entrepreneurial identity and strategic business approaches within this space. At the earliest stage of this trajectory, research highlights the growing appeal of influencing as a career aspiration. For example, Fetter et al. (2023) explored the influencing ambitions of young Canadians, revealing that a significant majority are drawn to the profession for its perceived financial rewards and enjoyment. Their findings suggest that frequent interaction with influencers not only increases the desire to emulate them but may also shift perceptions of traditional education, as some aspiring creators prioritize immediate, platform-based success over formal academic pathways.

Building on this foundation of aspiration, other scholars examine how the creator economy is structured and sustained. Edeling and Wies (2024) map the projected growth of the creator economy and categorize creators into distinct venture models based on engagement and monetization strategies. Their work introduces the concept of the ‘creatpreneur,’ emphasizing that successful creators must navigate a complex interplay of environmental conditions and individual capabilities to sustain entrepreneurial success.

Researchers have begun to classify the varying pathways individuals take as the field becomes more defined. Heine (2020), for instance, identifies three types of influencers—amateurs, opportunists, and entrepreneurs—highlighting a spectrum of commitment, strategy, and professionalization. This typology underscores the diversity of experiences within the influencer ecosystem and reinforces the idea that not all creator careers follow the same trajectory.

Extending this work, Cheng et al. (2024) offer a process-oriented perspective by outlining a five-stage influencer-entrepreneurship model, which traces the progression from recognizing influence potential to achieving tangible rewards. This staged framework emphasizes the dynamic and evolving nature of creator careers, illustrating the need for adaptability as individuals move from casual participation to strategic enterprise. Importantly, this model contributes to the broader legitimization of influencing by formalizing it as a structured professional pathway.

Finally, research also highlights the varied entry points into influencer entrepreneurship. Guíñez-Cabrera and Aqueveque (2022) distinguish between “entrepreneurial influencers,” who evolve from content creators into business-oriented professionals, and “influential entrepreneurs,” who leverage pre-existing ventures to build a digital presence. Their findings further reveal the

complex mix of push factors (e.g., job dissatisfaction) and pull factors (e.g., brand partnerships) that motivate individuals to pursue influencer careers.

Collectively, this literature positions influencing as an entrepreneurial pathway requiring strategic, business, and communication skills.

Professionalization of Influencer Careers

The evolving landscape of social media influencing reveals a potential disconnect between idealized perceptions of influencer careers and the realities of the digital labor and emotional demands faced by influencers. This disconnect reveals how narratives celebrating creativity and fulfillment often obscure the systemic barriers and hard work required for success. The profession's lack of formal educational pathways compounds these challenges, leaving aspiring influencers without the necessary frameworks and training to navigate their careers effectively. This absence perpetuates a culture of uncertainty, misleading newcomers about the true nature of the industry while emphasizing the urgent need for educational resources and industry training that could provide essential support and guidance (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017).

Kovalainen and Poutanen (2023) explore the emergence of influencers as a distinct profession and, in doing so, uncover the unique challenges influencers face in establishing professional identities in a market-driven framework that lacks traditional educational pathways. The authors also suggest that the influencer profession is marked by instability, with income often volatile and heavily reliant on audience engagement and brand collaborations (Kovalainen & Poutanen, 2023), illustrating a precarious form of digital labor that warrants clearer professional standards and structured support for those pursuing influencer careers.

These concerns about instability and precarity are not isolated to individual creators but reflect industry-level structural failures. For instance, the exponential growth of social media has outstripped regulatory development, motivating broad consensus among scholars and industry practitioners regarding the need for more formalized and coherent safeguards. Abidin and Hong-Phuc (2023) cite a critical need for structural accountability within influencer economies; they posit that the lack of standardization leaves creators vulnerable to inconsistent pay, unclear expectations and exploitation. These concerns parallel Hund's (2024) argument that the industry must adopt professional norms, from pay equity to ethical standards, to protect both influencers and audiences.

In response to growing interest in social media influencing as a career and calls for educational training and certification to support the field's professional development, universities have begun incorporating specialized programs and courses tailored to the creator economy. For instance, institutions such as Cornell University and the University of Southern California have launched courses focused on personal branding and content creation. At Cornell, a graduate seminar titled *Platforms, Power, and Precarity in the Creator Economy* explores issues such as audience intimacy, algorithms, inequality, and labor resistance within the influencer industry (Haberman, 2024). Washington State University offers a course titled *Personal Branding for Athletes, Influencers, and Creators*, designed to teach students about navigating the NIL (Name, Image, and Likeness) space, with particular attention to personal branding strategies for athletes and content creators (Haberman, 2024). Other institutions, including The Pennsylvania State University and The University of Alabama, offer programs such as the *Creator Accelerator Digital Test Lab*, which provide hands-on experience with content creation, campaign strategies, and influencer partnerships (Haberman, 2024). By addressing the technical, business, and creative dimensions of influencer work, these educational initiatives demonstrate higher education's

emerging role in preparing students for careers within the creator economy. Yet, while these programs signal meaningful progress, they remain isolated efforts rather than components of a coordinated, industry-wide framework, underscoring the lack of standardization that scholars and practitioners have identified as central to the professionalization of the field.

Taken together, this literature also exposes key tensions within the development of influencer careers. While the creator economy offers new opportunities for professionalization, it remains characterized by instability, limited institutional support, and an absence of standardized pathways for skill development and ethical practice. Emerging educational initiatives suggest a shift toward legitimizing this field; however, these efforts remain fragmented and underexamined.

As such, a critical gap persists in understanding how higher education and industry stakeholders can collaboratively support the preparation of aspiring influencers. These gaps are particularly consequential given that a growing share of young people, including the 1 in 4 Gen Zers who aspire to become influencers, are entering this space without adequate preparation or institutional support. The disconnect between that ambition and the realities of an unregulated, under-resourced industry makes the following research question both timely and necessary:

RQ: How do current and aspiring social media influencers construct understandings of professional preparation and labor within emerging influencer careers?

Methodology

This study employed an exploratory qualitative research design to examine how current and aspiring influencers construct understandings of professional preparation and labor within emerging influencer careers. An interpretive approach was used to capture participants' perspectives and meaning-making processes, with data collected through semi-structured interviews with established influencers and focus groups with aspiring influencers. This design enabled both in-depth individual accounts and interactive group discussions, providing understanding across different stages of influencer career development.

A qualitative approach was well-suited given the study's focus on participants' lived experiences, motivations and perceptions within an evolving and relatively underdefined career field. This approach allowed the research team to explore how individuals talk about influencer work, navigate its demands, and understand the skills and expectations associated with professionalization.

Sampling Strategy and Participant Selection

This study employed purposive, criterion-based sampling to identify participants who could provide rich insight into influencer labor and professionalization. For the professional influencer sample, inclusion criteria required participants to be nano- or micro-influencers who derived consistent income from social media content creation and engaged in sustained posting and audience engagement practices. More specifically, nano-influencers were required to have between 1K–10K followers, while micro-influencers between 10K–100K followers (West, 2025). Professional influencers received invitations to participate in the study sent through direct messaging on their primary social media channels.

In addition to interviews, focus groups also used purposive, criterion-based sampling to gather insights from aspiring influencers, or individuals that viewed social media influencing as a

potential career path but have not yet achieved the professional status of career influencers. Focus groups explored the motivations, interests, aspirations and perceptions of those seeking to build careers in the influencer industry. The focus group discussions allowed for interaction between participants, enabling them to share their thoughts and experiences, as well as gain insight from others in similar situations. Focus group participants were recruited from a university-based network, targeting students who self-identified as having an interest in a social media influencing career. Recruitment was conducted through flyers posted on online groups and university channels offering breakfast and/or afternoon snacks as an incentive for participation.

Participant recruitment for both interviews and focus groups continued until the research team determined the dataset had reached sufficient conceptual depth, with additional interviews and focus groups consistently reinforcing existing patterns rather than generating substantively new insights related to influencer labor, professional preparation, and perceptions of professionalization. Saturation was assessed through ongoing analysis of transcripts during data collection, with the research team reviewing emerging codes following each interview and each focus group and comparing new data with previously identified concepts. Recruitment concluded when additional participant accounts no longer contributed new higher-order themes relevant to the research question, providing sufficient depth and variation to address the study's analytic aims.

Data Collection

To examine the realities of influencer professionalism, this study analyzed qualitative data from in-depth interviews with eight established influencers and five focus groups with 24 aspiring influencers.

In-depth interviews were conducted on Zoom and lasted approximately 60 to 80 minutes. All interview participants identified as female. Established influencers represented a range of niches, including food, lifestyle, travel, fashion, and podcasting. Many were self-described entrepreneurs managing multiple brand partnerships or operating a variety of business ventures. Interviewees were located across the United States, including Washington, DC; Charleston, South Carolina; and Los Angeles, California. On average, established influencers reported spending 7 to 8 hours per day on influencer-related work, balancing content creation with brand management, audience engagement, analytics, and administrative tasks.

Focus groups with aspiring influencers were held on campus at a mid-sized university in the Southeastern region of the US. Each session lasted approximately 70 to 90 minutes with discussions moderated by trained members of the research team. Focus groups can facilitate interaction among participants, allowing researchers to capture perspectives that emerge through group discussion (Greenspan et al., 2021). Of the focus group participants, 20 identified as female and 4 identified as male. Participants were primarily university students or recent graduates between the ages of 18 and 24, most of whom were studying or had studied communication and marketing-related disciplines, though a few represented other academic backgrounds. On average, aspiring influencers reported spending 5 to 6 hours per day on social media, with a focus on content creation, personal branding, and entertainment.

Upon scheduling both interviews and focus groups, participants were asked to complete a participant screening form to gather information on their background and interest in the study topic. Moderators started each discussion by walking research participants through the informed consent process [IRB Approval #2025-02-005] and then working through a semi-structured conversation on social media influencing. More specifically, topics discussed included the participants' career

aspirations, thoughts on the influencer industry, risks versus rewards of the job, and the perceived skills necessary to succeed as an influencer. Discussions were recorded with participants' consent, and the recordings were transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2022) reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) approach. The analysis was primarily inductive, allowing patterns of meaning to be generated from participants' accounts rather than applying predetermined coding frameworks. The analysis remained attentive to the study's interpretive focus on how individuals construct understandings of professional preparation and labor within influencer careers.

Data analysis began with a phase of data familiarization, during which transcripts were read multiple times to develop an in-depth understanding of participants' narratives, tone, and context. Initial observations and analytic reflections were documented throughout this process. The first phase of coding involved a close, line-by-line engagement with the data to generate initial codes capturing salient features of participants' experiences, perceptions, and meaning-making processes. These codes remained flexible and evolving, reflecting the interpretive nature of the analysis. Early codes included, for example, career inspiration, creative freedom, business management, financial uncertainty, platform pressure, burnout, authenticity, educational preparation, and mentorship. Coding was conducted iteratively across the dataset, with ongoing movement between transcripts and developing codes. Codes were then organized into broader patterns of meaning, forming the basis for themes. Throughout this process, the research team examined both commonalities and points of divergence across aspiring and established influencers, attending to how different experiences shaped understandings of influencer work.

Theme development involved multiple rounds of review and refinement, during which themes were evaluated in relation to the full dataset, the research question, and their internal coherence. Consistent with a reflexive thematic approach, themes were developed based on their conceptual significance and explanatory power rather than frequency alone. The final thematic structure consisted of four overarching themes:

- (1) "It Just... Happened": From Hobby to Identity.
- (2) "More Than a Pretty Post": Influencing as a Business.
- (3) "This Is Work Too": The Emotional Labor of Being Online.
- (4) "Why Weren't We Taught This?": The Education Gap, each with corresponding subthemes.

To enhance the rigor and transparency of the analysis, the research team engaged in ongoing reflexive practice, including revisiting coded data, interrogating assumptions, and considering alternative interpretations. An audit trail documenting coding decisions and theme development was maintained throughout. Particular attention was given to researcher positionality, including the primary researcher's experience as an influencer, with reflexive engagement used to enhance transparency and deepen analytic insight.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to the ethical guidelines outlined by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the mid-sized university in the Southeastern United States. The study protocol was reviewed by the IRB and verified as exempt under 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) for tests, surveys, and

interviews (IRB #2025-02-005). All participants completed a consent form indicating their voluntary participation in the study. They were informed about the nature of the research, the confidentiality of their responses, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time. To protect participants' identities, a descriptive reference relating to their career role was assigned; more specifically, an AI# was assigned to aspiring influencers that participated via focus group and a PI# was assigned to professional influencers that participated via in-depth interview. This ensured that personal details were kept confidential while still capturing the diversity of perspectives within the influencer community. The research team maintained confidentiality through these measures:

- 1) Protecting all information gathered and storing all confidential, participant information in locked digital files
- 2) Assigning pseudonyms to all participants to remove any identifying information throughout the reporting process.

Results

From the data, four core themes emerged that speak to the intersections of identity, labor, legitimacy, and the need for professional support. Each theme is supported by a series of subthemes.

[Theme] “It Just...Happened”: From Hobby to Identity

Many participants, both aspiring and established, shared that they entered influencing unintentionally. What began as a creative outlet—posting travel photos, food recommendations, or makeup tutorials—gradually transformed into a more serious pursuit. AI15 explained,

I was always taking pictures of my food, and my friends were like, why aren't you posting this? So, I started, and now people ask me for food recommendations all the time...it made me realize people actually care about what I make.

Similarly, PI3 shared,

It started out purely as a hobby...I didn't love my corporate job...is there a niche I can break into?

This pattern of unexpected growth appeared frequently. PI2 reflected,

I started it kind of my senior year in college because all my classes were like super sciency and I needed some kind of creative outlet.

PI1 offered a similar story:

I wasn't even really trying to...be an influencer...it was more like I just had this silly food page that it kind of evolved into something much bigger.

Over time, many participants began to view influencing as more than a casual hobby. PI7 noted,

It's something that I'm very passionate about...it's really nice to be able to focus on something that allows you to be so creative.

These reflections suggest that the path to becoming an influencer is often nonlinear. Rather than entering the field with a defined plan, participants found themselves adapting to new opportunities as their audiences grew. This organic evolution could help explain the blurred standards of professionalism in the influencer space with most influencers entering the career with lack of intentionality, and therefore, formalized training.

[Subtheme] Dual Identity & Evolving Purpose

As influencing shifted from hobby to career, participants grappled with defining their evolving roles. Some identified more as educators, entertainers or side hustlers rather than full-time influencers, while others embraced their evolving identities as entrepreneurs or content strategists. This theme reflects the identity shifts that come with professional evolution in the digital space, especially as personal content becomes a public brand.

AI9 illustrated this transition, saying,

I've gotten like likes on some TikTok videos...one video I got a million likes on and I was like, wait, I can do this for like money...I kind of looked back at it and I was like, wait, I should have ran with that.

Similarly, PI6 shared,

I think of myself as an educator more than an influencer...I use my platform to share information that I think will help people improve their lives.

This response suggests that some participants actively resisted the influencer label, preferring identities that emphasized expertise, service, or entrepreneurship. Such distinctions show that influencer identity is continuously negotiated. Other participants embraced the side-hustle nature of their content, like PI7, who expressed,

I do like having it as a side project...I don't like to put out too much pressure on myself.

However, many found it challenging to distinguish their personal experiences from their online personas. PI1 captured this blur, saying,

So much of what I do in my personal life is like tied back to what I do for content creation...sometimes it can be hard cause it's like when do I turn off?

[Theme] "More Than a Pretty Post": Influencing as a Business

Participants emphasized that influencing requires sustained entrepreneurial effort. While outsiders may see curated photos and free products, both aspiring influencers and influencers revealed the operational workloads akin to a 9-to-5 job: negotiating contracts, understanding taxes, pricing content, and managing multiple brand identities. However, while established influencers described these responsibilities with clarity and specificity, many aspiring influencers acknowledged the content creation demands but were less familiar with the full range of business skills required to sustain a long-term career. This gap suggests that visibility into the influencer profession often omits operational and technical realities, leaving those entering the field unprepared for the legal, financial and logistical complexities of the job.

One full-time influencer (PI2) described her demanding schedule:

Now though, I pretty much I work Monday through Sunday with my agency and also with my content creation...it's also the side of things which is administrative emails and all, and then scripts...it's a long process of writing the scripts, filming it, then reshoots, then it going live, and then analytics, etc.

The business aspect was also clear to aspiring influencers. As AI1 reflected,

You're paying taxes on yourself...the money that you make isn't just, like, fun money, it's your real income, and you do have to, like, invest in yourself...you could lose a ton of followers because of one bad partnership.

These accounts demonstrate that influencer labor is more complex than just visible content production.

For some, treating their personal brands as full enterprises was the only way to stay organized and afloat. PI4 explained,

It's a business still...I have to file taxes. I have to pull paperwork. I have 1099 employees,

while PI2 added a layer of financial planning:

I have two accounts. I have a Roth IRA. I have a Sep IRA. I got a financial advisor and they help me make those.

Yet despite the growing legitimacy of influencing, participants expressed frustration with how often their work is dismissed or misunderstood. Several influencers shared that, even as their platforms and partnerships grew, skepticism about the validity of their careers persisted. PI1 emphasized the persistent stigma:

So, there's definitely people that would look at [influencers] and they're just like, oh, this girl's just doing this, that and the other...acting like she has a job, but she doesn't. But it's like no, like you have no idea how much of an impact she's making for this restaurant and this tourism board.

PI8 built on this point, explaining that mainstream misunderstanding often stems from limited exposure to the industry's business side:

I think there's still a lot of, unfortunately, a lot of skepticism about influencers, especially if you have no idea about social media or marketing or business in general...people still think influencers are vain and silly and stupid.

Even the day-to-day labor of content creation was frequently minimized. As PI7 noted, I think that people are just really wary of the idea of influencers...they have a hard time conceptualizing what they could fill their day with.

This generational divide became even more evident when participants reflected on reactions from family members and older acquaintances. Many noted that older generations, in particular, struggled to accept influencing as a real profession. PI5 recalled,

My dad was really confused when I first started. Then he saw the taxes, and he was like, "oh, ok, cool,"

suggesting that only tangible financial evidence shifted perceptions. Similarly, PI4 shared the challenges of overcoming societal expectations tied to traditional career markers:

People really don't see it as a job...even with podcasting...no, it doesn't matter. They don't care. It's not a real job if you don't have health insurance and a 401K. I've been featured in *People* magazine—and even then, it's like, to them, it's not legitimate.

Participants described how deeply these biases ran, often facing disbelief regardless of their professional achievements. PI3 noted the skepticism from older individuals bluntly:

[People in their] 50s or older are just like, what the heck are you doing?

Meanwhile, PI2 summarized the broader misconception with frustration:

A big misconception about the influencer industry is that you're not smart or that you don't know how to handle things." Looking toward the future,

however, some participants expressed hope that evolving generational experiences with digital life would slowly erode these outdated views. As PI6 reflected, "My generation's the first to know what it's like growing up on social media...future generations will make that skepticism smaller and smaller as we have examples of people who have actually created viable careers on social media.

But while these systems are robust, they are rarely visible to audiences or collaborators. PI8 stressed the breadth of responsibilities she manages:

Like, I'm reading contracts, I'm negotiating. I am like filming, editing, publishing, like working with a bunch of different people. So, it's kind of a lot to do and it can be really overwhelming at times.

Even aspiring influencers recognized this hidden labor. As AI5 noted,

A lot of people might just think it's like silly...but like there actually is a lot more behind the scenes,

and AI13 added,

It's hard to juggle all that...sometimes it's hard to be a full-time student, have jobs, but also try to make content.

This acknowledgment of invisible work reinforces that influencing, while glamorized, is a demanding endeavor requiring consistent effort and emotional investment behind the scenes.

[Subtheme] Financial Literacy & Platform Disparity

Participants described financial challenges involving taxes, content pricing, business formation, platform monetization, and inconsistent income, highlighting financial literacy as an important component of sustaining an influencer career.

In addition to labor, participants reflected on the significant challenge of managing finances. PI3 revealed her early struggles with the backend of the business:

It was hard at the beginning because...I was looking at this more of a business owner, entrepreneur perspective...how do I start an LLC...you're building this community, but you have to do all of the legwork and admin that comes with being a business owner.

The absence of early support often led to costly oversights. PI2 said,

A lot of influencers starting out forget that...gifted collaborations...anything trade can be taxed...I paid a chunk of taxes on gifted collabs, and I didn't realize [that was required].

This reflects how financial literacy functions as a core professional competency within influencer careers. Without formal education in taxation, pricing or business operations, many creators are forced to learn through costly trial and error. Similarly, PI1 called the work a "juggling act" between what makes sense creatively and what works from a business standpoint.

Even established influencers admitted they navigated these challenges through trial and error. PI5 explained,

Keeping track of your expenses, creating an LLC, understanding write-off...all important,

while PI8 shared that she handles this herself:

The invoices out. I keep track of all my expenses. I file my own taxes, like probably should get an accountant for that transparently, but that's what I'm doing because most people do that.

[Theme] "This Is Work Too": The Emotional Labor of Being Online

Aspiring and established influencers described the emotional demands of constant online visibility, including pressures surrounding authenticity, creativity, shifting algorithms, and the blurred boundaries between personal identity and an online brand.

AI10 described the exhaustion of constant content creation:

I feel content burnout. Like I just get to a point, I'm like, I don't even know what to post anymore.

Similarly, AI8 reflected on the vulnerability of speaking online, noting,

I didn't post a video of me talking until probably like maybe last year, honestly.

These emotional hesitations were echoed by PI2, who shared that early in her career,

I just didn't share because I wanted to curate this image online...now I've gotten really good with being authentic on there...I also try to keep some things private.

For some, the monetization of daily life further blurred personal boundaries, like PI4, who admitted,

My life has become the thing I make money on...becomes very disorienting...I'd love to have a hobby that I don't make money on.

This quote captures the unique emotional demands of influencer work, where personal identity becomes intertwined with economic value. Unlike many traditional professions, influencers often monetize aspects of everyday life, making psychological detachment from work especially difficult.

[Subtheme] Burnout, Boundaries, and Comparison Culture

Many influencers described working long hours, sacrificing downtime, and comparing themselves to peers online, all without clear boundaries between personal and professional life. This subtheme captures the mental and emotional challenges that accompany influencer work and reflects the internal struggle to separate self-worth from content performance.

Participants described difficulty maintaining boundaries between work and personal life. PI3 shared,

It was hard...I would pack my weekends...honestly, I'm not working any less now than I was then.

Meanwhile, PI1 voiced the emotional fatigue that came with having your life tethered to public output:

When do I turn off...and just be a normal human being?

[Subtheme] the Algorithm Made Me Do It

Participants often brought up how algorithmic shifts affected both their well-being and how they approached content. Some reported modifying posting habits to remain relevant, even when it didn't align with their true voice. This pressure to adapt triggered emotional stress and highlighted the lack of control many creators feel over their reach, relevance, and income.

AI13 was candid about the emotional toll that performance metrics can take, stating,

I have a couple reasons why I would find it challenging as a full-time thing...just like discouragement of not getting enough engagement...I just don't think it would be good for like anybody's self-esteem. And then I think my anxiety would also have a hard time with thinking about people watching me and what their thoughts are about me...I just don't think that would work well for me on a larger scale.

AI1 echoed this sentiment, explaining,

You need to quickly put on a really strong shield to the hate. You're going to get the emotional toll, the mental health of it all.

PI5 noted how high visibility shapes emotional well-being, saying,

...when you put yourself out there on social media...you're opening yourself up to be perceived all the time by hundreds of thousands of people.

This perception can result in overwhelming expectations. AI12 remarked,

I think about like who's all popular. And then I see like, well, those people have a lot of money. I don't have a lot of money right now to go invest in all of these different outfits for more aesthetic content.

For many, algorithms are volatile forces influencing both strategy and self-perception. PI7 summed it up plainly:

Everyone is kind of at the will of the app... if TikTok's not really liking your content, it's hard.

These responses position algorithms as influential structural forces shaping visibility and income, but also confidence and emotional well-being. Participants often described platform performance metrics as directly influencing their self-perception and career sustainability. Still, some participants held onto a sense of control - like PI1, who offered,

I feel like just sticking true to your authenticity...is what the algorithm will always favor.

[Theme] "Why Weren't We Taught This?": The Education Gap

Participants consistently identified a lack of formal preparation for influencer careers, instead relying on self-directed learning, peers, and trial and error. They expressed interest in formal instruction spanning content strategy, branding, financial literacy, and platform analytics.

Participants described relying on informal rather than institutional learning. PI2 admitted,

Really starting out I didn't have any guidance...a lot of the research I would say was watching YouTube videos from other creators...for the most part, I think it was trial and error learning things.

These responses reveal a gap between the skills required for influencer success and the training available through traditional education.

In addition to formal coursework, participants also called for more industry-specific spaces to foster professional development. PI8 shared,

I just wish there was more places for like influencers to come and listen to talks and like, talk about trends and reporting. Like yes, you can just go to like a typical marketing conference. But I think I would like to see that...maybe more of a guide of what to do on certain things.

PI8 added that while some opportunities may exist,

Things are changing so rapidly that I feel like a lot of times it's late to catch up.

This insight emphasizes that alongside classroom education, influencers are seeking conventions, conferences, and dedicated industry workshops that provide professional spaces to connect, learn, and stay updated on evolving best practices.

To address this gap, both aspiring and established influencers outlined a specific vision for what an ideal curriculum should include, emphasizing practical, interdisciplinary training that blends creativity, business and communication. Many called for foundational instruction in content creation, including video editing, platform-specific strategy and visual storytelling. AI9 reinforced this by explaining how time-consuming editing can be and the need for technical training. PI2 recommended a course on “how to actually film content...what settings to use, what kind of font to use,” demonstrating the nuances of stylistic choices across platforms.

Besides content, participants called for training in personal branding, financial literacy, and business operations. PI5 advised,

Here's what you need to understand. What a write-off is...spending money for your business to make money,

while PI8 recommended walking students through example contracts or inviting lawyers to explain influencer-specific legal issues. Several also emphasized the value of learning how to pitch brands, build media kits, and comply with Federal Trade Commission (FTC) guidelines. As PI2 explained,

Teaching them how to properly disclose things for the FTC...to create a pitch e-mail...a lot of its kind of does have some sales tactics to it.

Notably, participants did not advocate solely for creative training. Their recommendations emphasized interdisciplinary preparation spanning legal, financial, branding and communication competencies, reinforcing the complexity of influencer work as a profession.

Aspiring influencers echoed and expanded upon these priorities. AI13 stressed the importance of personal branding, “internally and externally...to make sure there's a coherent voice across all platforms,” and AI8 advocated for greater emphasis on public speaking because “a lot of people aren't comfortable talking online.” AI7 added that understanding platform-specific content styles and analytics would also be valuable:

Posting on LinkedIn is very different from posting on TikTok, and the content creation is entirely different.

[Subtheme] Informal Mentorship and Need for Curriculum

Without formal support systems, participants described relying on peers or other creators for mentorship, while others reported navigating their careers without guidance.

PI8 said,

I don't think I had any mentors per se...It was like, really me figuring things out.

Others, like PI7, found informal help from peers:

If I had some questions, I honestly would ask [I1] ...not like anything crazy but...it was really helpful to have her show me those things.

PI1 shared that during their own career journey,

There was nobody that I could pick the brain of...I was just trying to keep up and figure out what was going on,

but later acknowledged,

Sometimes it's also just about observing other influencers on the internet...but yeah, definitely a collaborative effort.

Aspiring influencers similarly expressed interest in more formal guidance. AI4 stated,

I feel like it should be taught a little bit more within the major.

This perspective, which emerged across focus groups, suggests that participants viewed curriculum as one potential source of professional preparation.

These accounts suggest that mentorship within the influencer industry is often informal, inconsistent, and largely dependent on personal networks or self-initiated learning. Unlike more established professions with structured onboarding, advising, or career development pathways, influencer career preparation remains highly individualized, leaving many creators to navigate complex professional challenges without reliable support systems.

Discussion

This study offers insight into how aspiring and established influencers understand the labor and professional preparation associated with influencer careers. The findings reveal a disconnect between public perceptions of influencing and the business, emotional, and strategic demands participants described.

Notably, the findings illustrate that influencing is far more than content creation. Rather, it is a multifaceted profession involving tasks akin to marketing, consulting, editing, analytics, and brand development. Influencer participants in this study are engaging in the day-to-day realities of an unspoken "job description" for influencers: tracking invoices, managing community engagement, negotiating contracts, and adhering to the unpredictable whims of algorithms. These behaviors reflect what Edeling and Wies (2024) refer to as the emergence of 'creatpreneurs' who function as self-made entrepreneurs navigating an increasingly competitive and unregulated landscape with both individual drive and environmental responsiveness. Aligned with this, the present findings also reinforce Heine's (2020) typology of amateurs, opportunists, and entrepreneurs with three distinct influencer identities that emerged across interviews and focus groups, each representing different degrees of strategy, income reliance, and professional ambition. The results of this study position influencers as strategic, self-directed business operators whose roles extend past their public-facing social media presence to include financial, branding, and operational responsibilities.

In this study, many professional influencer participants reported entering the field unintentionally. For most, content creation began as a hobby and gradually evolved into a core part of their identity and income. This shift reflects the phenomenon identified by Guíñez-Cabrera and Aqueveque (2022), who note the blurred boundary between passion and profession among influencers. However, the experiences of aspiring influencer participants suggest a different path.

Many of these Gen Z participants are actively and intentionally pursuing careers in influencing. A career that individuals once could “fall into” is now a deliberate professional goal for some aspiring creators. Their desire for structured training and educational pathways reflects this change. These findings further support the value of curriculum for aspiring influencers who view influencing as viable work and want guidance on how to pursue it professionally.

An important contextual consideration is that all professional influencer participants identified as women. Consequently, themes surrounding authenticity, emotional labor, audience engagement, and the negotiation of personal and professional identities may reflect gendered experiences that have been well documented within scholarship on influencer labor and the creator economy (Abidin, 2016; Duffy & Wissinger, 2017). While many of the entrepreneurial and business-oriented challenges identified in this study may extend across influencer populations, women creators often encounter unique expectations regarding visibility, self-presentation, emotional availability, and relationship building with audiences. As such, the findings should be interpreted as illuminating one important perspective on the professionalization of influencer careers rather than representing the experiences of all creators. Future research should explore how professionalization is constructed across diverse gender identities and examine whether the skills, challenges, and support systems identified here differ across influencer populations.

In responding to the research question, the findings underscore a growing demand for legitimacy and structure within the influencer industry. As outlined by Hund (2024), the current lack of regulation has left influencers vulnerable to burnout, exploitation and unequal treatment. These challenges were echoed by participants in this study who described struggles with mental health, platform visibility and monetization. This also reinforces the broader entrepreneurial pressures documented by Edeling and Wies (2024), where creators must constantly innovate, pivot and manage instability to sustain their careers.

Considered as a whole, the findings suggest that legitimizing this career path requires both credentialing and curriculum. As noted in the results section, many participants expressed a strong desire for formal education on contracts, content strategy, financial literacy, and branding. The growth of academic programs at institutions like Cornell, University of Southern California, and Washington State (Haberman, 2024) reflects early movement in this direction. Yet there remains a significant gap between what aspiring influencers want and what is institutionally available. Higher education has an opportunity to play a greater role in preparing aspiring influencers for this emerging profession, just as it did with journalism, public relations, and advertising in earlier eras.

Similarly, the effectiveness of educational programs and certifications in improving influencer outcomes is also a noteworthy opportunity for continued consideration and scholarly inquiry. Given that many participants voiced frustration over the absence of formal guidance and advisory frameworks, future studies could evaluate emerging influencer education programs to measure their impact on creator confidence, brand strategy and business literacy. Research might also explore how curricular support can ease the learning curve for aspiring influencers and professionalize the field. Future research should also critically examine whether professionalization is universally beneficial, including how increased standardization, credentialing, or institutional oversight may create new constraints on creator autonomy, authenticity and creative freedom.

It is important to note that while this study highlights strong participant support for increased training, mentorship and formalized structures within the influencer industry, it is also critical to situate these findings within broader tensions surrounding professionalization. On one hand, participants’ call for education, financial literacy training and industry guidelines reflect a

desire for greater stability, legitimacy and protection within an otherwise unregulated industry. On the other hand, these accounts also point to the possibility that institutionalizing influencer work may introduce new forms of standardization or surveillance that could constrain the creativity and autonomy that initially attract individuals to this career path. Taken together, these findings suggest that professionalization is not a unidirectional or inherently beneficial process, but rather an ongoing negotiation between support and constraint. Therefore, the goal of professionalization is not to replicate traditional professions, but rather preserve creativity and autonomy while providing influencers greater protection, transparency, and opportunities for professional development.

In terms of industry practice, this research unintentionally maps out a job description for what it means to be an influencer, one far more nuanced than most companies or institutions may realize. Brands and agencies should take this understanding seriously in market research, influencer campaign development and recruitment. Influencers are not merely “faces” for content; they are strategists, brand builders and community leaders. Industry and trade associations also have an opportunity to formally recognize influencing as a profession by establishing clear codes of conduct and best-practice standards that protect both creators and the brands they represent.

Looking forward, and based on the results of the current study, future research should further explore the long-term sustainability of influencer careers. More specifically, future research could investigate the impact that job factors such as burnout, financial pressures, content strategies, and brand evolution have on enduring success in the field. The results from the current study suggest that influencing success comes at a cost—emotional, financial, and physical—and while those costs are offset by real and meaningful benefits, implications for job security and stability remain. Existing commentary also supports this concern; Sanders (2022) writes that “while one may not be solely a social media influencer for more than a few years, the job leads to many opportunities of what one could do for a future career,” highlighting how short career spans may be common. Similarly, Abidin and Hong-Phuc (2023) emphasize that inconsistent pay and unclear expectations leave many creators navigating unstable and unpredictable financial conditions. These insights reinforce the need to understand not only what allows influencers to enter the career but also what helps them remain in it.

An additional area for consideration includes the effects of race and identity on influencer pay, visibility and opportunity. A thread present in the data but not deeply explored in the results section, but is worth addressing here, is the racial pay gap. Participants, particularly influencers of color, pointed to disparities in brand deals, compensation and platform support. Aligned with literature cited from the MSL Group (2021) report, Black influencers earn 35% less than their white counterparts, and this phenomenon was echoed by a participant who shared: “As an influencer of color, as a Black woman, I 100%...feel like as a person of color, it is a lot harder to make money on social media than it would be if I wasn’t a person of color.” Christin and Lu (2024) provide additional empirical support for these findings, demonstrating how racial capitalism perpetuates pay inequities in platform-mediated influencer work, with influencers of color consistently undervalued in brand partnerships, affirming that compensation bias, whether overt or systemic, is a lived reality that shapes influencer experience and trajectory. Future studies should explore this sentiment by investigating the racial disparities often experienced as bias, discrimination and inequity across the influencer profession.

Finally, while it is not clear through the present study on the ways in which platforms and intermediaries can better support creator well-being, it is a clear opportunity to explore. Research should assess how platforms, agencies and management networks could implement tools, protections, or mental health resources that help creators maintain both performance and personal

well-being. This study suggests that a more structured ecosystem could ease the emotional and logistical burdens that come with being perpetually “on.” In fact, Later (2023) found that many creators experience burnout due to these very pressures, and most feel platforms offer little to no mental health support, highlighting an urgent need for systemic intervention.

By capturing the voices of both aspiring and professional influencers, this study contributes to the growing recognition of social media influencing as a legitimate career pathway. In doing so, this study ultimately makes the case that the creator economy is not a passing trend but an evolving professional landscape, one that deserves the same institutional investment, scholarly attention and structural support that has historically been extended to the careers and industries that came before it.

Limitations

This study is designed to provide depth of understanding rather than statistical generalizability. Accordingly, the findings offer insight into how aspiring and established influencers construct understandings of professionalization, and are intended to support transferability rather than broad population-level claims. With that said, several limitations should be considered. First, the study focuses primarily on nano- and micro-influencers who have monetized their content and incorporated influencing into their professional identities. While this group offers valuable insight into early-stage professionalization, experiences may differ for macro-influencers, celebrity creators, or those operating large-scale influencer businesses. Future research should examine how constructions of professionalism vary across levels of visibility and economic scale.

Second, aspiring influencers were recruited from a single university in the southeastern United States, many of whom were studying communication or related fields. These participants may possess greater familiarity with branding and media production than the broader population of aspiring influencers, limiting the transferability of findings to other educational, geographic, or cultural contexts.

Third, the sample was predominantly female, with all established influencers identifying as female. Given that gender shapes experiences of visibility, authenticity, emotional labor, and audience expectations, the findings may reflect gendered dimensions of influencer work. Future research should further explore the experiences of male creators and those with diverse gender identities.

Fourth, the study relies on self-reported accounts collected through interviews and focus groups. While these methods provide insight into participants’ sensemaking processes, they do not directly capture influencer practices such as content production, audience interaction, platform analytics, or brand negotiations. As such, the findings reflect participants’ interpretations of professionalization rather than observed behaviors or industry outcomes. Relatedly, this study examines how influencers construct understandings of labor and preparation, rather than measuring the material conditions or economic realities of influencer work. Future research could integrate observational, ethnographic, or platform-based data to further examine the relationship between perceived and enacted labor.

Finally, the rapidly evolving nature of the creator economy presents a temporal limitation. Platform algorithms, monetization structures, and audience dynamics continue to shift, meaning these findings reflect a particular moment in the development of influencer careers.

Despite these limitations, this study offers meaningful insight into an emerging and underexamined profession, providing a foundation for future research on digital labor, creator professionalization, and the continued evolution of influencer careers.

Declarations

Author Contributions

Jacqueline Jevtich: Conceptualization, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project Administration, Visualization, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing. Dr. Amanda Ruth-McSwain: Conceptualization, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – Review & Editing.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

The study protocol was reviewed by the Institutional Review Board at the College of Charleston and verified as exempt under 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) for tests, surveys, and interviews (IRB #2025-02-005).

Informed Consent Form

Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study. Participants were informed of the nature of the research, the confidentiality of their responses, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants also provided consent for the recording of interviews and focus groups.

Data Availability Statement

Due to the confidential nature of the qualitative interview and focus group data collected for this study, the data are not publicly available.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Use of AI and AI-Assisted Technologies Disclosure Statement

AI tools, specifically ChatGPT and Claude (Anthropic), were used for the following purposes: (1) locating and reviewing relevant scholarly studies; (2) polishing language, primarily for a final review to identify grammatical, spelling, and mechanical errors; (3) condensing the introduction and literature review sections for the journal manuscript submission and removing redundancies throughout; and (4) enhancing the structure and flow of the literature review section.

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