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The influencer pay gap: Platform labor meets racial capitalism

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Abstract

Existing research emphasizes the precarity of workers engaged in the exchange of goods and services through digital platforms. Yet few studies have systematically examined how racial discrimination shapes the opportunities of platform workers. Here, we focus on influencers, or people who monetize content on social media platforms. Drawing on a mixed-method analysis of 1,082 posts crowdsourced by the @InfluencerPayGap Instagram account, we document three findings. First, while most influencers in our sample received monetary payment for sponsored campaigns, rates are significantly lower than expected based on industry estimates. Second, social media metrics are racialized to justify paying influencers of color less than white influencers. Third, influencers of color are less likely than white influencers to receive monetary compensation or succeed in their negotiations with brands. Contrary to the rhetoric of fairness and democratization promoted by digital platforms, these dynamics reproduce racial domination and undermine collective action among social media influencers.

Keywords

Influencers, compensation, Instagram, racial capitalism, discrimination, platform labor, social media

Introduction

Over the past decade, influencers have become highly visible figures on social media platforms. From travel influencers' restaurant reviews to TikTokers "Renegade" dance moves to beauty YouTubers' tips for natural hair, social media creation features a wide variety of genres, norms, and formats. While journalists often emphasize the glamorous

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lifestyle associated with social media creation, influencers and creators have spoken up about their experiences of rampant inequality. They have explained how race, gender, class, and sexual orientation shaped their opportunities and online visibility. They have reported that brands discriminated against influencers of color, especially those who were vocal about social and racial justice (Carman, 2020).

In this article, we provide the first mixed-method study of racial inequality in influencer compensation. We focus on the "influencer pay gap"—an industry term referring to the discriminatory dynamics shaping how much brands pay influencers for sponsored campaigns. We analyzed 1,082 posts shared on the @InfluencerPayGap Instagram account, a non-representative dataset created and curated by Adesuwa Ajayi, a Black woman who crowdsourced information about racial disparities in influencer compensation. Based on our analysis and triangulation of this racially diverse data, we document three findings. First, while most of the influencers in our sample received monetary payment for sponsored content, we report that the actual distribution of rates is significantly lower than influencers may have been led to expect based on industry accounts. Second, we find that metrics are often used and interpreted in a racialized manner to justify paying influencers of color less than white influencers. Third, influencers of color are less likely than white influencers to receive monetary compensation or succeed in their negotiations with brands. When they complain about the rates they receive, influencers of color also face online harassment from brands. Through this analysis of Instagram influencers, our paper contributes to the growing literature on racial capitalism and platform capitalism (Benjamin, 2019; Dubal, 2021; McMillan Cottom, 2020b). Beyond documenting the mechanisms of racial discrimination taking place between brands and influencers, our examination of the @InfluencerPayGap account shows how the dynamics of metricization, individualization, and racialization undermine collective action and solidarity among platform workers.

Platform labor meets racial capitalism: the case of influencers

In recent years, two distinct lines of research have converged to make important contributions to our understanding of how platforms reproduce and create new forms of inequality among digital workers: critical studies of platform labor and digital studies of racial capitalism. We introduce these contributions and how they apply to the case of social media influencers.

From platform labor to racial capitalism

Over the past 20 years, platform labor—labor that takes place through digital platforms—has become a ubiquitous feature in the landscape of work and employment. Under the labels of "sharing economy" (Schor, 2020), "gig economy" (Rosenblat, 2018), and "platform economy" (Srnicek, 2017; Van Doorn, 2017), digital platforms have conquered a growing number of domains of social life, typically serving as intermediaries between different categories of actors and making a profit from such intermediation

(Gillespie, 2010; Vallas and Schor, 2020). A wide range of industries—including transportation, care work, piecework, and food delivery—have witnessed a transformation of their labor markets from "word of mouth" recruitment to platform-based mediation and accreditation.

Platforms have justified the "disruption" of existing labor markets by emphasizing their democratic potential. In contrast to traditional systems of employment and promotion, platforms claim to provide more transparent systems of worker evaluations based on user ratings and rankings (Kellogg et al., 2020). Yet multiple studies document the precarious working conditions experienced by most platform workers. Drawing on qualitative methods, scholars find that workers experience feelings of dependency in the absence of a social safety net (Duffy et al., 2021; Griesbach et al., 2019), nudges toward constant work, and multiple forms of invisible labor (Gray and Suri, 2019; Shestakofsky, 2017). Scholars also find that platforms reproduce and amplify discrimination. Ratings and rankings, far from systemically being "fairer" and more accountable than traditional systems of evaluation, have the potential to entrench gendered and racial biases (Levy and Barocas, 2018). Indeed, online users often have different standards depending on the protected characteristics of platform laborers. For instance, they expect Black women to have more curated profiles on care work platforms (Ticona and Mateescu, 2018) and refuse Airbnb customers with Black-sounding names (Edelman et al., 2017).

In parallel, recent work building on critical race theory developed theoretical frameworks such as the "New Jim Code" (Benjamin, 2019), "algorithms of oppression" (Noble, 2018), and the "New Racial Wage Code" (Dubal, 2021) to analyze how racial formations (Omi and Winant, 2014) are reproduced through digital technologies. Specifically, scholars mobilized the concept of "racial capitalism" to make sense of the platform economy. Robinson (1983) developed the theory of racial capitalism as a critique of Marxist theory for omitting race in its description of oppression under capitalistic systems. He analyzed capitalism as systematically deriving economic value from racialized ethnic groups through racist, antisemitic, and colonialist appropriation. Drawing on Robinson, McMillan Cottom (2020b: 441) diagnoses a "meaningful gap in the literature [. . .] at the intersection of platform capitalism and racial capitalism" and emphasizes the role of "predatory inclusion," a process through which platforms are "including marginalized consumer-citizens into ostensibly democratizing mobility schemes on extractive terms" (McMillan Cottom, 2020b: 443). She notes the role of desire in how platforms appeal to the hearts and minds of marginalized workers, encouraging them to "hustle" for more (Brock, 2020; McMillan Cottom, 2020a). Dubal (2021) echoes this perspective by showing how ride-hailing platforms "strategically activate tropes endemic to neoliberal racialization by presenting 'freedom narratives'" (p. 29) while enforcing systems of wage discrimination that end up "remaking racialized economic hierarchies and undermining labor solidarity" (p. 1).

Across studies of labor and inequality on digital platforms, recent research identified patterns of resistance—sometimes called "algoactivism" (Kellogg et al., 2020)—among platform workers. These often begin on digital forums, online spaces, and group chats where workers compare their rates and revenues. They share tactics to increase earnings, reduce dependency, develop new frames to make sense of their experience, and organize protests as well as unionization (Salehi et al., 2015). To date, however, there has been no systematic examination of the information thus shared by platform laborers, or of the effects of racial capitalism and predatory inclusion on these collective efforts. Our study fills this gap through a mixed-method study of compensation data crowdsourced by social media influencers, whom we analyze as a specific type of platform laborers.

Platform labor and racial discrimination in social media creation

Within the world of digital platforms, social media platforms are characterized by the ability to create individual accounts, post content on one's account, and share content with public and private lists of contacts (boyd and Ellison, 2007). Over the past two decades, social media platforms have grown in number and size, leading to an oligopolistic market dominated by Meta (Facebook and Instagram), Alphabet (YouTube), Twitter, and ByteDance (which controls TikTok).

Early studies of social media production emphasized the creativity of "remix culture" (Jenkins, 2006) and praised the emergence of new categories of content producers such as "produsers" and "prosumers" (Bruns, 2009). In the second half of the 2010s, a growing number of users began to rely on their social media production to make a living (Bishop, 2021a; Cunningham and Craig, 2019; Duffy, 2017). These are often called "influencers" (a gendered term that mostly applies to female Instagram producers) or "creators" (primarily for video producers on YouTube, TikTok, and Twitch) (Bishop, 2021b). While the number of influencers and creators is hard to assess, recent reports indicate that 46.7 million people around the world describe themselves as part-time creators (Yuan and Constine, 2021).

Influencers and creators can make money in a variety of ways. On platforms such as YouTube, they can receive advertising revenue for their videos directly from YouTube if they qualify for the Partner Program (Caplan and Gillespie, 2020). In contrast, and despite recent efforts to promote influencer tools, Instagram does not systematically provide creators with direct advertising revenues (Leaver et al., 2020).[1] Thus, for Instagram influencers, the most significant and reliable source of revenue comes from brand sponsorships, or what influencers call "sponcon" (for sponsored content), in which influencers individually negotiate with brands for marketing campaigns. A 2020 survey of 69 influencers by Influence.co reported that 78% of influencers listed brand sponsorships as their primary revenue source (InfluenceCo, 2020).

These negotiations take place independently of Instagram, which does not have access to the rates and details of the transactions between influencers and brands. Most of these transactions, however, rely on metrics provided by Instagram about its users, including the number of followers, number of posts, and number of likes and comments of a given influencer that can be calculated from their posts. The composite metric that most marketers rely on is the engagement rate (the total number of likes and comments divided by follower count multiplied by a hundred). This metric is private. Brands typically access this information either through influencers' social media kits (a document providing key performance metrics that influencers directly share with brands) or through so-called "influencer analytics platforms" that rely on Instagram's Application Programming Interface (API) to extract and summarize influencer metrics (Bishop, 2021b).

Platforms frequently emphasize the fact that "anyone" can be an influencer and make money through sponsored content, describing social media as more "open" than traditional creative careers (Cunningham and Craig, 2019). Furthermore, platforms and marketing specialists often highlight the "fairness" of their pricing practices, arguing that rates and payment are "objective" because they are directly based on these influencers' metrics. As in other cases of platform labor, however, influencers navigate a complex system of uncertainty, precarity, and dependency (Glatt, 2022). Duffy et al. (2021) document that, contrary to platforms' public narratives emphasizing the empowerment of a variety of cultural producers, influencers experience unpredictability across three levels: markets, industries, and platform features. One recent study noted that "a crucial question remains whether platformization enables more diversity in cultural producers in terms of gender, sexual identify, race, ethnicity, age, and social class/location" (Duffy et al., 2019: 4).

This is where the question of racial discrimination takes center stage. In the second half of the 2010s, online racism and racial oppression gained mainstream attention as part of the media coverage of social media platforms. Influencers used social media to promote messages of social and racial justice, with viral movements and hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter, #JusticeForTrayvon, and #SayHerName (Jackson et al., 2020). Influencers and creators also described the rampant inequity they experienced, explaining how race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and nationality shaped their visibility and opportunities in the so-called "creator economy." In response, Meta launched several initiatives for creators of color, including a $650k grants program to support Black artists (Instagram, 2022), as well as a tag system to ensure that influencers of color received credit for the content they produced on Instagram (Richardson, 2022). These piecemeal programs were widely criticized as insufficient, however, in part because they did not target the main source of revenues of Instagram influencers, namely brand deals. Multiple scandals broke out when Black, Latinx, and Asian influencers revealed that brands had paid significantly less than their white counterparts for similar campaigns involving comparable amount of labor (Bishop, 2021a; Carman, 2020; MSL, 2021).

It is within this context that the @InfluencerPayGap crowdsourced Instagram account emerged. Adesuwa Ajayi, a Black woman who worked with influencers at the talent agency AGM, created the account in April 2020 as a space to collect influencers' highest paid collaborations with brands for accountability and transparency, so that isolated influencers could learn more about rates and strategies for negotiating with brands. As she put it in first post shared on the account: "Now more than ever it is important to take a solid stance against the disparities in opportunities, pay and visibility between black and non-black influencers. This is an open call for transparency."[2] Ajayi asked influencers to send her their highest paid collaboration with a brand through "Direct Messages" (DMs) on Instagram with the following information: race, number of followers, engagement rates, industry, brand, type of campaign (photos, videos, link, and so on), and fee per post. She then screenshotted the DMs, anonymized them, and publicly reposted the screenshots on the @InfluencerPayGap account. Right after her first post, DMs, followers, and comments began pouring in. In about a year, the account had attracted more than 60,000 followers and shared 1,082 posts containing information about influencer compensation. In this article, we provide the first systematic analysis of racial discrimination

1. RACE: BLACK

2. TOTAL FOLLOWER COUNT & ENGAGEMENT AT THE TIME: 18k & 5%

3. INDUSTRY: Health & Haircare

4. BRAND: XXXXXX

5. CAMPAIGN: Post 4 Gummy Hair Vitamins photos, with product on Instagram page. Tagging company and using hashtag.

6. FEE PER POST: $150

Retrieved on Sept. 28, 2021 from https://www.instagram.com/p/CBJYuxShXE7/

Figure 1. @InfluencerPayGap posts.

in influencer careers through a study of this publicly available and anonymized data shared by Ajayi on the @InfluencerPayGap account.

Data and methods

The article relies on a mixed-method analysis of the non-representative dataset comprising all the public posts (*N* = 1,082) shared by Ajayi between 7 June 2020 and March 27, 2021 on the @InfluencerPayGap Instagram account. The crowdsourced posts were anonymized and most of the posts had the following format (provided by Ajayi as an example to follow) (Figure 1).

We used the Python-based command-line application Instagram-Scraper to collect all the publicly available posts shared on the @InfluencerPayGap account. Instagram-Scraper has been widely used in previous studies relying on Instagram data collection (Ketonen and Malik, 2020; Muhammad et al., 2018). Overall, the final dataset contains 889 single-picture posts and 193 multiple-picture posts (1,082 image posts total). This number matches the information provided by Instagram about the number of posts on @ InfluencerPayGap (1,086 posts, including 1,082 images and 4 video posts). Our analysis included every post shared on the account to date.

We turned to human coding to collect in-depth data from the posts. We analyzed each post as offering information about a given individual (the "influencer") who engaged in one or several "exchanges" (any interaction with a brand, marketing company, or influencer platform for a sponsored campaign). We coded each exchange as

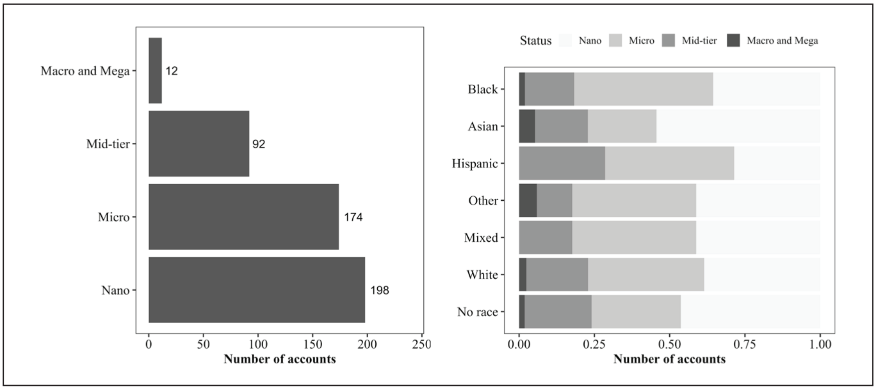


Figure 2. Influencers by status and race/ethnicity.

either "successful" (e.g. an influencer and a brand reach an agreement and the influencer proceeds to share a sponsored post about the brand with their followers) or "unsuccessful" (e.g. the influencer and the brand do not reach an agreement, either because the influencer does not agree with the brand's rate or because the brand does not agree with the influencer's rate; consequently, the influencer does not share a branded post). Many posts on @InfluencerPayGap contain information about several exchanges conducted by the same influencer.[3] Consequently, the unit of analysis is the exchange rather than the individual. Five sets of variables were included for annotation in our coding process: *exchanges and negotiations* (exchange outcome, type of negotiation, negotiation outcome); *work and output* (platform, type of collaboration, type of industry, type of output, special requirements); *compensation* (type of compensation, rate offered by the brand, influencer bid, and final price); *demographics* (age, gender, race, sexual orientation, location); and *social media metrics* (number of followers/subscribers, engagement rates).

In total, this two-step collection and coding process resulted in a following dataset of 908 exchanges posted by 729 influencers. Out of these 908 exchanges, 668 took place on Instagram only.[4] Given that Instagram is the primary platform for influencer marketing campaigns, and for the sake of consistency, the rest of this analysis focuses specifically on this Instagram sample. Information about these 668 exchanges was shared by a total of 549 unique influencers. All of them remained anonymous. In all, 69% of the influencers indicated their race or ethnicity. Among those, 167 identified as "White" (44%), 110 identified as "Black" (29%), 57 identified as "Asian" (15%), 7 identified as "Latino/a" or "Hispanic" (2%). Nineteen influencers (5%) listed other ethnicities, identifying as "Brown" or a "Woman of Color." Seventeen influencers documented multiple racial and ethnic identities (5%), for example, identifying as "Black and Hispanic" or "White and Asian." Out of the 549 Instagram influencers in our sample, 229 (42%) disclosed their gender (91% of them identified as female). Only 32 influencers shared their age (30 of them indicated that they were under 30 years old). Of the 77% who indicated their location, 47% said that they were living in the United States and 40% in the United Kingdom.

A total of 476 influencers (87%) disclosed their follower counts. Following industry templates, we coded them into four categories: "nano" influencers (fewer than 10,000 followers); "micro" influencers (10,000–99,999 followers); "mid-tier" influencers (100,000–499,999 followers); and "macro & mega" influencers (more than 500,000 followers). The left panel in Figure 2 provides a breakdown of the distribution of influencers by category. Overall, our sample primarily features nano-influencers (198) and micro-influencers (174). The right panel details the distribution of influencer categories by race and ethnicity. Micro-influencers dominate our sample for all racial and ethnic groups except for influencers identifying as Asian, who are more likely to be nano-influencers.

To conclude this presentation of the data, we reiterate that our sample is non-representative. First, the submissions came from the network (followers as well as followers of followers who reposted the call) of Ajayi, whose sociodemographic characteristics and political convictions provide an opportunity to gather data about influencers of color (only 167 of the 549 influencers in the sample identify as white), as well as about nano- and micro-influencers, a population that is typically hard to reach on social media platforms (Bishop, 2021a; Hargittai, 2020; Poell et al., 2022). Since the posts are anonymized, we could not control for misleading or false disclosures: it was not possible to directly contact the influencers who shared information with Ajayi and conduct interviews with them. Thus, we lack more fine-grained information about the background of influencers, their living conditions, or their reasons for sharing this information.[5] Nevertheless, in the absence of publicly available data about influencer revenues from brands, agencies, or Instagram, this crowdsourced account is our best chance to explore the compensation, rates, and work experiences of influencers of color engaged in paid partnerships with brands. The next section turns to the findings provided by our mixed-method analysis of the @InfluencerPayGap data.

Findings

Who gets paid for Instagram campaigns?

Do the influencers receive compensation for their work, and if so, how much? In her account of early bloggers and influencers, Duffy (2017) developed the concept of aspirational labor ("do what you love") to explain how they justified doing uncompensated work for one's blog. While Duffy examined the early days of influencing through qualitative methods, we quantitatively analyze the distribution of influencer compensation in 2020–2021 in the @InfluencerPayGap data. Specifically, this section focuses on 631 exchanges in which influencers were asked to create original content for a given brand on Instagram.[6]

Table 1 provides an overview of the distribution of compensation options in our sample. Overall, 65% of the exchanges involved some form of monetary compensation (407 exchanges). Within these 407 exchanges, the distribution of rates has a long tail: the highest rate in our sample was $100,000 for three posts and nine stories (reported by a mega influencer with more than 1,000,000 followers); the lowest reported monetary rate was $5 for multiple stories.[7] The median reported rate was $140 for all exchanges

Table 1. Type and distribution of compensation.

Type of compensation	Number of exchanges
Monetary compensation	407
Product/gift/gift card	196
Discount/affiliate code	25
Commission only	4
Free work	30

(including unpaid ones)—a somewhat positive development compared to the numbers reported by Duffy (2017), which include a 2012 survey according to which "81% (bloggers) never made even $100 from blogging" (p. 16). Yet we also find ample evidence of non-monetary compensation in our sample: 31% (196 cases) of the exchanges involved some form of gifting, including free products or gift cards with the brand. In 25 exchanges, influencers received discount coupons, and in 4 exchanges influencers only received commission. Finally, in 30 exchanges, influencers posted content about a brand without receiving anything in exchange.

How does this distribution of compensation and rates in our sample compare to recent industry accounts of how much influencers should get paid? As discussed earlier, metrics are at the core of how social media platforms incentivize and compensate workers. While this is particularly salient for YouTube, which allows content creators to receive advertising payments based on video views, it also applies to branded campaigns on Instagram, where most marketers and brands have adopted a metrics-based compensation scale for determining rates for sponsored posts. In the 2010s, the rough formula used by influencers and marketers to determine a "fair" rate for sponsored posts was the following: $100 per post for each 10k followers (Carbone, 2019). This meant that micro-influencers with 50k followers on Instagram could charge $500, mid-tier influencers with 500k followers could charge $5,000 per post, and macro-influencers with one million followers could charge $10,000. We refer to this formula as the "early template." In 2020, as the creator economy expanded, experts recommended switching to another formula to calculate rates: charging 4% of the influencer's total followers (Lisitza, 2021). Accordingly, micro-influencers with 50k followers on Instagram could charge $2000 (instead of $500 according to the first formula), mid-tier influencers with 500k followers could charge $20,000, and macro-influencers with one million followers could charge $40,000. We refer to this formula as the "later template."

To assess how the actual distribution of rates in our sample compares with these templates, which are widely shared among influencers, we provide a structured comparison of the hypothetical pricing structures delineated in industry publications with the actual distribution of rates reported by influencers on the @InfluencerPayGap. We compare the average price per post from the reported exchanges involving monetary compensation in our dataset and the modeled prices according to the "early" and "later" templates for influencer pricing. Figure 3 shows estimates of average price per post (total company price divided by number of outputs, be it image, story, or video) with bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals. The first point reveals the average price per post received by influencers

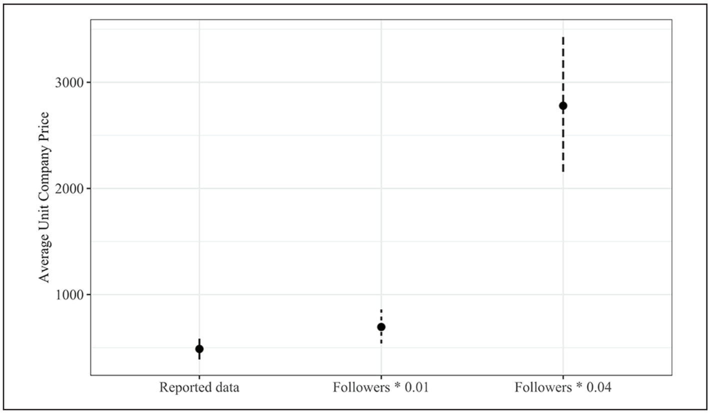


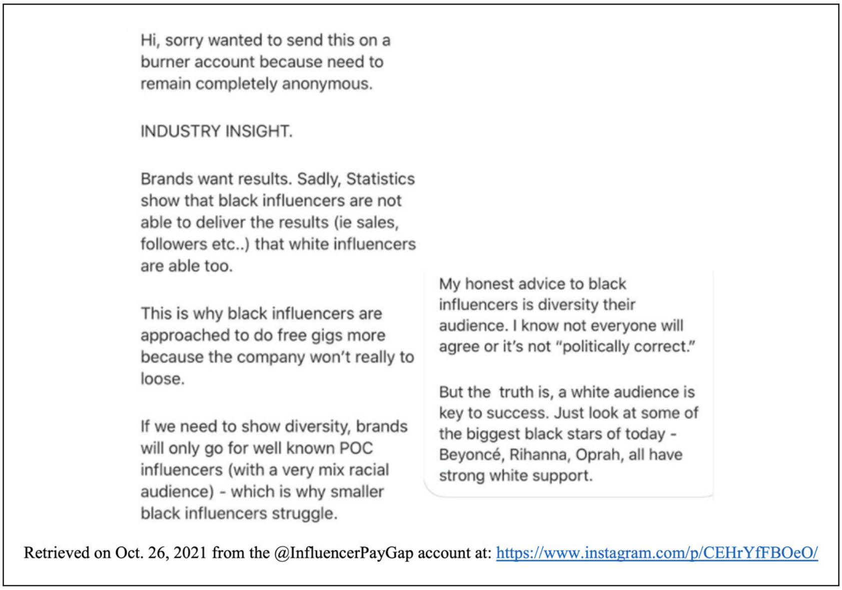
Figure 3. Average price per Instagram post (reported data vs industry templates).

in our sample of Instagram exchanges; the second point shows the average hypothetical unit price influencers should receive following the early industry template ($100 per post per 10,000 followers); the third point shows the average hypothetical unit price influencers should receive with the later template ($400 per post per 10,000 followers). The average price per post ($487.4) reported by influencers on the @InfluencerPayGap account is far lower than the hypothetical payments they should receive, which would be $694.7 on average based on the early template and $2,778.9 on average based on the later template. These differences are particularly striking given the fact that influencers were asked to report their "highest paid gig," per the instructions of Ajayi.

Thus, we find that the actual distribution of rates reported by influencers is significantly lower than the average rates predicted by the industry literature. Publicly available guidelines about influencer rates provide an inaccurate picture of how easy it is to make money from one's social media production. Influencer agents, marketers, and experts promote a somewhat disingenuous message when they explain that influencers can charge $400 for each 10,000 followers they have. Overall, these results support the early qualitative findings provided by Duffy (2017): it remains much harder to "do what you love" than what these rosy industry formulas suggest. This is particularly true for influencers of color, as we find in the next section.

Racialized metrics

At first glance, platform and industry templates for influencer rates seem relatively transparent, objective, and fair. After all, if rates for sponsored posts are determined by metrics such as number of followers and engagement rates, the recipe for making more money appears simple: one must simply acquire more followers. In these idealized accounts, race and ethnicity have little to no import: everything is mediated through metrics that are widely considered to be "spare, clear, and direct" (Igo, 2008: 247)—in addition to fairly representing the popularity and influence of creators regardless of their race and ethnicity.



Hi, sorry wanted to send this on a burner account because need to remain completely anonymous.

INDUSTRY INSIGHT.

Brands want results. Sadly, Statistics show that black influencers are not able to deliver the results (ie sales, followers etc..) that white influencers are able too.

This is why black influencers are approached to do free gigs more because the company won't really to loose.

If we need to show diversity, brands will only go for well known POC influencers (with a very mix racial audience) - which is why smaller black influencers struggle.

My honest advice to black influencers is diversity their audience. I know not everyone will agree or it's not "politically correct."

But the truth is, a white audience is key to success. Just look at some of the biggest black stars of today - Beyoncé, Rihanna, Oprah, all have strong white support.

Retrieved on Oct. 26, 2021 from the @InfluencerPayGap account at: https://www.instagram.com/p/CEHrYfFBOeO/

Figure 4. "Industry insight."

Yet many posts shared by influencers of color on the @InfluencerPayGap account cast doubt on these accounts. First, marketers often rely on metrics-driven explanations to justify paying Black influencers less than white influencers. For instance, in Figure 4, an anonymous marketer claimed that, "sadly," the "statistics" (number of followers and number of sales) of "black influencers" were not as good as the metrics of "white influencers." That specific marketer assumed that it was fair to pay Black influencers less because "black influencers are not able to deliver the results (i.e. sales, followers etc.) that white influencers are able to."

This racialized interpretation of social media metrics mirrors some of the dynamics analyzed by economists as statistical discrimination, in which employers rely on statistical information about the group of job candidates as a proxy to infer productivity. In this case, marketers rely on the allegedly lower metrics of Black influencers and their lower value to advertisers to justify paying individual Black influencers less than their white counterparts. As Tilcsik (2021) argues, this kind of statistical reasoning about race is not neutral: it helps employers rationalize and justify discriminatory decisions. It resembles what Benjamin (2019) analyzes as automated racism, in the sense that the metrics-driven logic is used by marketers to legitimize racial discrimination by distinguishing between "successful" high-performing white influencers and "struggling" Black influencers. This logic is particularly problematic given the higher risk of harassment and suspension that influencers of color face on social media platforms, both of which negatively affect their engagement metrics (Bishop, 2021a).

Marketers and influencers describe another pathway through which discrimination against influencers of color occurs. As the Director of Sales at a leading influencer

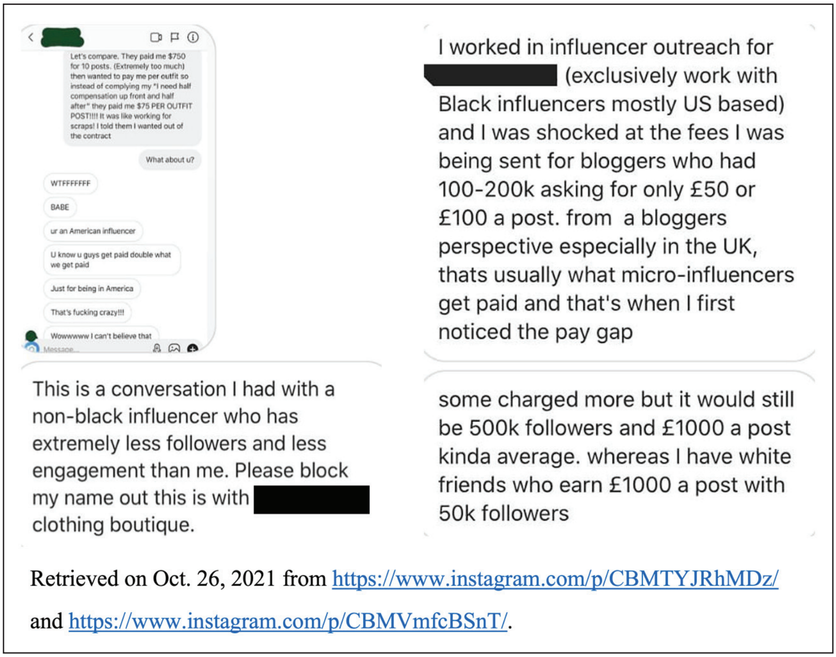


Figure 5. A tale of two pay gaps: influencer and industry perspectives.

platform put it: "How much should we be paying a particular influencer for their posts, stories, YouTube videos, etc.? The answer is fairly simple and always the same: it depends." (Carbone, 2019). This indeterminacy opens the door to multiple forms and types of discrimination: influencers with similar metrics working for similar brands and similar campaigns often receive vastly different wages—especially when one is white and the other is not. Several marketers and influencers anonymously recounted their experience of witnessing starkly lower rates for Black influencers compared to white influencers on the @InfluencerPayGap account, even when their metrics were similar. In Figure 5, the left-side post recounts a text message exchange between a Black and "non-Black" influencer who worked for the same brand. Despite having lower metrics, the rate reported by the non-Black influencer was higher. The right-side post provides a comparable account from a marketer, who explains being "shocked" by the "pay gap" between her "white friends" and the "Black influencers" she worked with.

How race and ethnicity shape compensation and negotiations

These qualitative accounts of how racial discrimination occurs in influencer marketing campaigns prompted us to systematically examine how the race and ethnicity of influencers shape compensation dynamics in branded campaigns (see Supplemental Appendix A for a detailed histogram of rates by race and ethnicity). In Figure 6, we report that exchanges with influencers of color are less likely than exchanges with white influencers

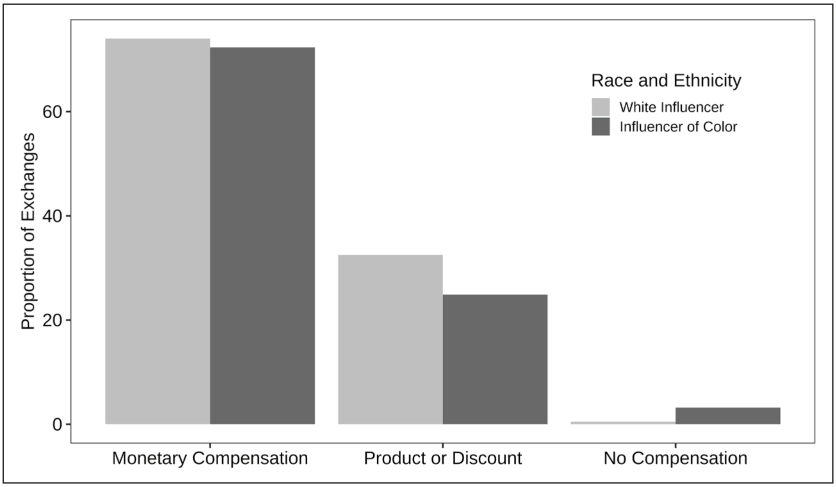


Figure 6. Type of compensation by race and ethnicity.

to involve monetary compensation (72.3% for influencers of color report monetary compensation against 74.0% for white influencers, yet this difference is not significant). Influencers of color are less likely than white influencers to receive free products or discount coupons (32.5% of exchanges with white influencers involve product or discount compensation, compared to 24.9% with influencers of color, and the difference is significant at the .1 level). Influencers of color are significantly more likely to be involved in instances of free labor (without any form of compensation, monetary or not) than white influencers (3.2% against 0.5%, a difference that is significant at the .05 level). We also found a negative (but non-statistically significant) association between identifying as influencers of color and the rates offered by brands in an ordinary least squares (OLS) model controlling for a range of variables (see Supplemental Appendix B).

Compensation is not the only point in the exchange between brands and influencers where influencers of color are facing discrimination. Until now, our analysis of the breakdown of exchanges and rates has made influencer campaigns appear relatively seamless. Yet each campaign involves multiple back-and-forths between brands and influencers, including lengthy exchanges about rates and payments. We find that white influencers and influencers of color do not face the same hurdles when negotiating with brands, for several reasons.

First, posts shared on the @InfluencerPayGap often raise the question of negotiations with brands. Many influencers highlight the importance of "knowing one's worth," and "advocating for oneself" when negotiating with brands. These calls echo existing discourses in popular feminism to "lean in," "ask," and advocate for oneself in the paid labor market (Babcock and Laschever, 2003). Both white influencers and influencers of color argue that the lower rates received by Black influencers come from the fact that they "undercharge" and don't negotiate with brands and platforms. For instance, one influencer explained that they successfully followed the advice of their (white)

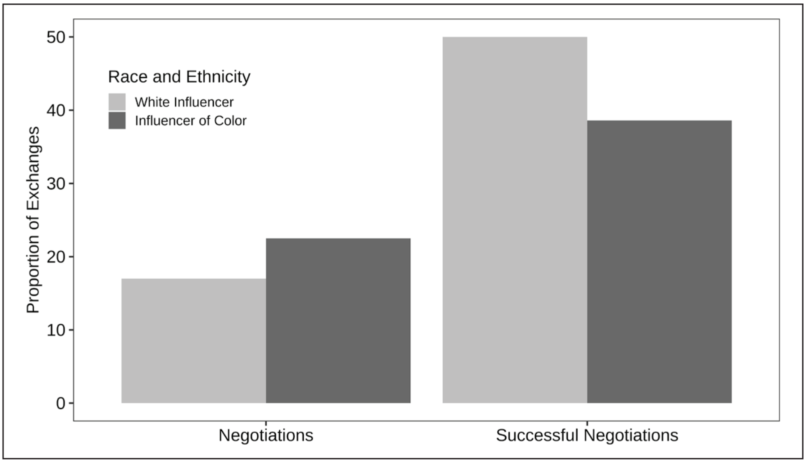


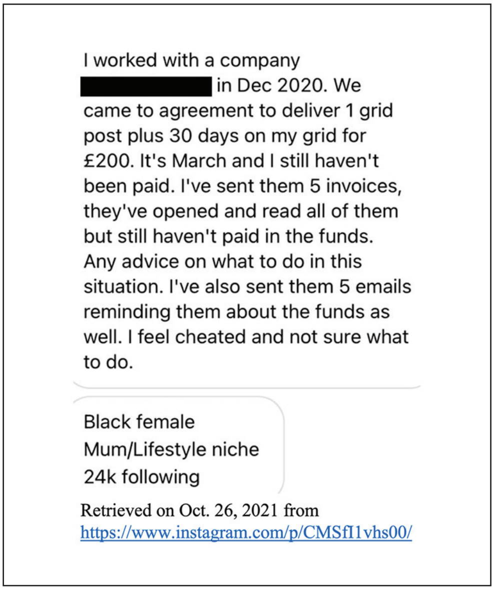
Figure 7. Negotiating with brands by race and ethnicity.

influencer friends to avoid "undercharging" and asked for £500. They further argued that even when rates "seem set in stone" it was often "possible to negotiate." Such "transparency," they explained, was the road to "people [getting] paid what they deserve."[8]

While well-intentioned, these calls for individual empowerment through the negotiation of fair rates for one's worth do not address the structural factors shaping pay discrimination in the labor market, namely the fact that companies and brands may rely on racial categories when assessing whether negotiation requests are legitimate. Indeed, many influencers of color reported that negotiating with brands is not the same thing as *successfully* negotiating with brands. Here we examine how influencers in our sample navigate the hurdles of negotiating with brands. In Figure 7, we analyze the distribution of negotiations (e.g. whether the influencer reports asking for a higher payment or rate with a given brand, regardless of whether the negotiation is successful or not); and successful negotiations (e.g. whether the brand and influencer agreed on a rate after a negotiation and proceeded with the campaign) depending on the race and ethnicity of influencers.

We find that white influencers negotiate less often in general but succeed in these negotiations *more* often than influencers of color. Overall, the average rate of negotiation is higher among influencers of color (22.5%) than that of white influencers (17.0%). However, the numbers change dramatically when considering whether the exchanges with the brands are successful or not. While 50.0% of negotiated exchanges reported by white influencers were successful, this number drops to 38.6% for influencers of color, indicating that influencers of color were less likely to see their demands accepted by brands. In other words, despite negotiating more, influencers of color are less likely to successfully negotiate with brands.

Our qualitative analysis further reveals two additional hurdles that influencers of color must navigate in this context. First, influencers of color often report having to "chase" after brands to receive their payment after having performed a given campaign.



I worked with a company [redacted] in Dec 2020. We came to agreement to deliver 1 grid post plus 30 days on my grid for £200. It's March and I still haven't been paid. I've sent them 5 invoices, they've opened and read all of them but still haven't paid in the funds. Any advice on what to do in this situation. I've also sent them 5 emails reminding them about the funds as well. I feel cheated and not sure what to do.

Black female
Mum/Lifestyle niche
24k following

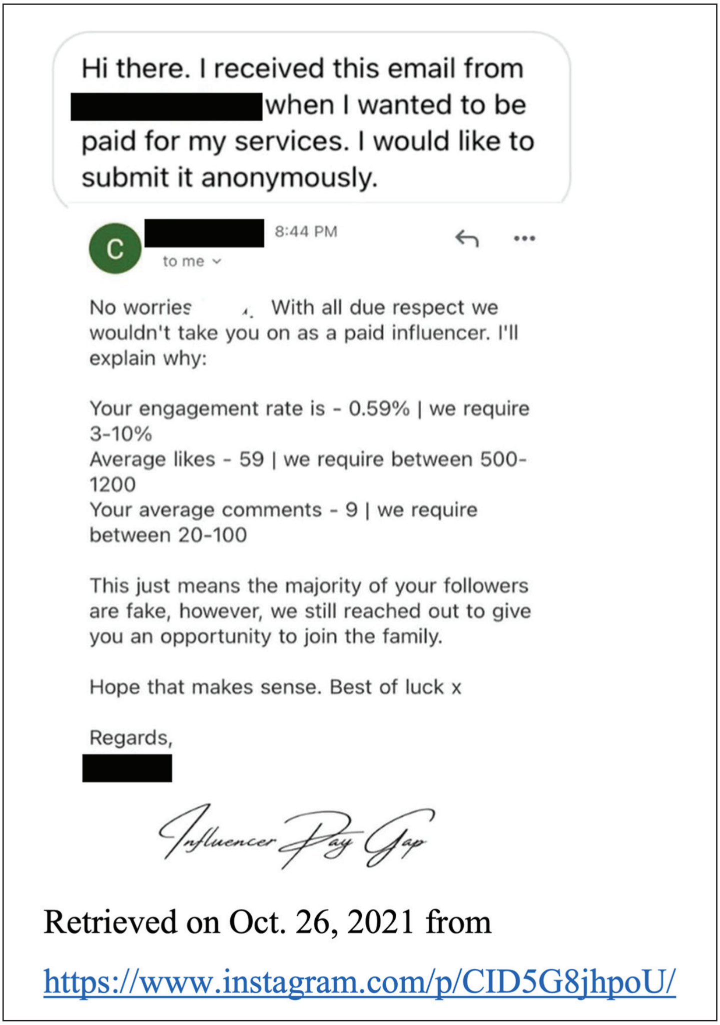
Retrieved on Oct. 26, 2021 from
https://www.instagram.com/p/CMSfI1vhs00/

Figure 8. Chasing after payments.

In Figure 8, a Black female influencer describes a case where, more than 3 months after the campaign, she was still sending invoices to the brand to receive a £200 payment. She mentions feeling "cheated" and "not sure what to do." We also found other cases where brands asked influencers to purchase their products for the campaign, which the influencer did, after which the brand stopped answering when the influencer asked for payment for their work.

Second, influencers of color often report receiving disrespectful, aggressive, or outright harassing messages from brands when the negotiations break down. For instance, in Figure 9, an influencer of color shared the email she received from a brand after asking to receive monetary compensation for a campaign. "With all due respect," the brand representative explained, the influencer did not deserve to be paid because "the majority of [her] followers [were] fake."[9] In contrast to the cutesy expressions featured in their message ("no worries," "join the family," and so on), the marketer relies on opaque standards to discredit the influencer's credibility, accusing her of having fake followers. Note that influencers can be suspended by Instagram if they are found to have bought fake followers.[10]

In other cases, the abuse and harassment were even more striking. In Figure 10, a Black female influencer provided a vivid example: she received an offer from a brand that asked her to pay for a product and its shipping herself, after which she never received the product. The influencer reported reaching out to the brand and reporting it as a scam, after which the brand representative sent her abusive messages on Instagram, calling her a "b****" and telling her to "take BLM [a mention to Black Lives Matter] from [her] profile." Not only did the brand representative use racialized


Hi there. I received this email from [redacted] when I wanted to be paid for my services. I would like to submit it anonymously.

[redacted] 8:44 PM
to me

No worries With all due respect we wouldn't take you on as a paid influencer. I'll explain why:

Your engagement rate is - 0.59% | we require 3-10%
Average likes - 59 | we require between 500-1200
Your average comments - 9 | we require between 20-100

This just means the majority of your followers are fake, however, we still reached out to give you an opportunity to join the family.

Hope that makes sense. Best of luck x

Regards,
[redacted]

Retrieved on Oct. 26, 2021 from https://www.instagram.com/p/CID5G8jhpoU/

Figure 9. Low metrics and "fake" followers.

and gendered insults against the influencer; they also relied on multiple accounts to reiterate their harassment.

Together, these two examples—the dismissive message about fake followers and the string of insults and abuse above—give a sense of the range of negative experiences that influencers of color, especially female influencers of color, experience online. These instances of online abuse and cyberbullying confirm the findings of existing research: online harassment overwhelmingly targets women and racialized groups, often making them retreat from public-facing activities due to the emotional toll such harassment takes on its victims (Citron, 2014; Sobieraj, 2020).

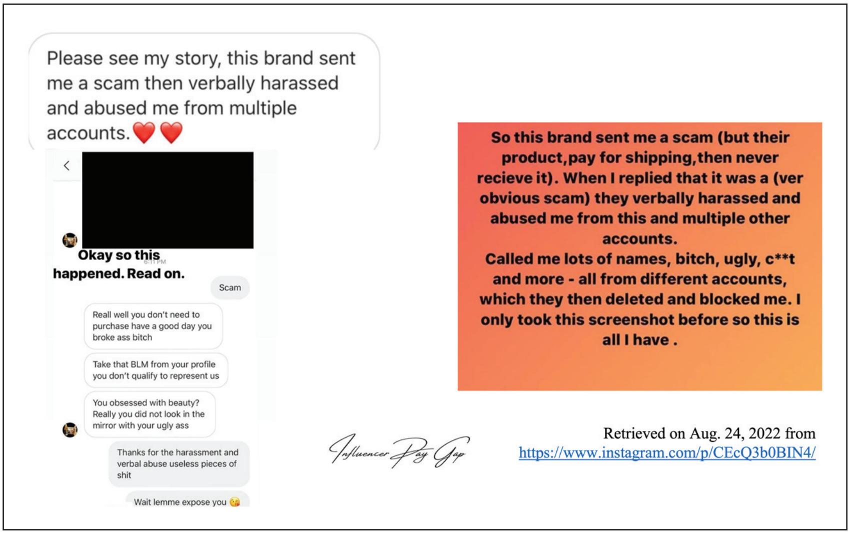


Figure 10. Harassment and abuse.

Discussion: individualization and solidarity in platform labor

This article provides the first systematic study of discriminatory compensation dynamics among influencers by analyzing a crowdsourced dataset of anonymous posts shared with the @InfluencerPayGap Instagram account—a non-representative sample that overrepresents two populations otherwise hard to reach on social media: influencers of color, as well as nano- and micro- influencers. We now discuss the ramifications of these findings for the study of racial hierarchies and collective action in platform labor.

We began by highlighting recent calls for research on the intersection of platform labor and racial capitalism (Dubal, 2021; McMillan Cottom, 2020b). Our study shows that the dynamics of influencer labor align with McMillan Cottom's concept of predatory inclusion. While social media experts emphasize the economic opportunities linked to influencer careers, the picture that emerges from the @InfluencerPayGap is one of unpaid or underpaid work: the median payment for creators in our sample is $140. This discrepancy between industry promises and the actual magnitude of payments sheds light on the somewhat disingenuous role of marketing experts who publicize the glamor of influencer careers even though most creators are unlikely to realize such economic opportunities.

Within this ecosystem, we document how brands and marketing firms implement extractive compensation schemes that unevenly allocate opportunities and hurdles across racial groups. Discursively, brand representatives and marketers frequently interpret metrics in a racialized light to justify paying influencers of color less than their white counterparts. The supposedly "objective" nature of social media metrics is mobilized to anchor racialized categories that distinguish between differently valued types of workers—insidiously dividing valuable high-performing white influencers from supposedly inefficient, low-return influencers of color. These racialized representations in turn affect the concrete structures of exchange between influencers and brands. As we saw, influencers of color are less likely than white influencers to receive monetary compensation, they are more likely to do unpaid work (without receiving anything in exchange for their effort), and they are less likely to see their negotiations with brands succeed. When they complain about a given brand, usually following a failed negotiation or lack of payment, influencers of color face online abuse, insults, and harassment.

These results echo recent research on wage negotiation that finds that "low-status actors" such as women, people in lower-class jobs, and immigrants "are more likely to be in jobs where negotiation is not possible"; that they are "less likely to negotiate even when given the opportunity"; and that, even when they engage in negotiation, "agency in wage claims does not seem to improve [their] wages" (Sauer et al., 2021). This leads the authors to conclude that "the advice to 'lean-in' will not substantially lower wage inequalities for everyone." Similarly, against rosy encouragements to "know your worth," "lean in," and "ask for more," our analysis shows that individual negotiation does not necessarily result in improved outcomes for influencers of color. Such racial inequalities in negotiation outcomes stem from multiple causes, including different types of social networks (including what sociologists have called "negative social capital") (Lin, 2000; Portes and Landolt, 2000) between white influencers and influencers of color; uneven access to the "hidden curriculum" and valued norms of exchange of white middle-class professionals (Clair, 2020; Lareau, 2003); and social media content that is perceived as less valuable by brands—often because it is more political—for Black influencers (Jackson et al., 2020).

Together, these findings help us understand a key ramification of predatory inclusion in the case of platform labor: the fragmentation of worker collectives. Compared to earlier accounts of labor movements and worker solidarity in traditional workplaces, social media workers are assessed through apparently objective individual metrics used by brands to allocate scarce payments. These overlapping dynamics of individualization, metricization, and racialization lead to the emergence of atomized representations among influencers. Repeatedly, influencers—both white and of color—emphasize individual negotiation and personal success. Such individualized representations are reinforced by brands and marketers, who draw racialized boundaries between workers deemed more or less valuable based on their aggregate metrics. This statistical and racialized definition of worth turns influencer compensation into a zero-sum game in which marketers can enforce—and justify—exclusionary dynamics between who counts as a "real" influencer deserving of payment, and who does not (Tilcsik, 2021).

The @InfluencerPayGap effort itself reflects some of the contradictions and fragmentations of this atomized environment (Schou and Bucher, 2022; Soriano and Cabañes, 2020). On the one hand, it can be analyzed as a strategy of resistance, building collective structures for activism and solidarity among isolated workers. Its rapid growth, along with other developments such as initiatives allowing influencers to unionize (Germain, 2021), certainly served as a catalyst among influencers and marketers. Several posts shared on the account explicitly called out individual brands and agencies for their unfair, discriminatory, or exploitative measures against influencers. In the face of public outrage, brands and marketing companies pledged to improve their employment practices (MSL, 2021). On the other hand, though many posts shared on @InfluencerPayGap account appear to reproduce the industry *status quo*. Influencers—both white and of color— often uncritically rely on the individualized, metricized, and racialized categories of marketing companies to justify their own success. They encourage their counterparts to "know their worth," "lean in," and "be professional" when negotiating with brands, explaining that these individual strategies worked for them, without necessarily acknowledging the broader inequities shaping the influencer industry—including the low payments, lack of transparency, and systemic patterns of discrimination enacted by brands.

Such contradictions within worker collectives should in turn be understood as a result of predatory inclusion in platform labor. The allure of entrepreneurial "hustle," the apparent objectivity and transparency of digital metrics, together with the individualized hopes of economic success cherished by most workers, shape their discourses even when they criticize platforms. While online platform worker collectives can make important contributions in raising consciousness about inequities in platform labor and calling out brands for their most egregious behaviors, these structural contradictions raise the question of how durable such online collective efforts can be. For instance, in the case of the @ InfluencerPayGap, the momentum depended exclusively on Ajayi, the creator of the page. Ajayi abruptly stopped sharing posts on March 26, 2021, leaving her followers and fellow influencers at a loss, asking "what happened to this account. . . please come back," "this was such a great page," "Why has this account stopped posting," "I hope you come back, miss you" without getting any responses.[11]

The @InfluencerPayGap account is not the only space of its kind. Across sectors and industries, platform workers are turning to social media groups, forums, subreddits, and listservs to document abuse and, in many cases, start collective action (Aloisi, 2019; Kellogg et al., 2020; Schou and Bucher, 2022). These include initiatives such as Coworker, Uber Drivers Forum, Turkopticon, and We Are Dynamo (Salehi et al., 2015). Worker-led forums are promising sites to examine racial and economic hierarchies in gig labor. These initiatives can lead to new avenues for contestation and collective action in the face of all-powerful platforms; they can also reproduce existing hierarchies, however, if their contributions are limited to promoting "self-help" advice for workers to better navigate existing platforms (Soriano and Cabañes, 2020). Although this article has examined a non-representative dataset, we suggest a new methodological pathway for the study of platform labor through mixed-method analyses of worker-generated data. Future research could rely on similar methods and frameworks to compare the discourses, tactics, and outcomes of other platform workers' collective organizing efforts. In particular, we hope that further ethnographic research will directly examine the social contexts of crowdsourcing, information sharing, and direct messaging among platform workers.

To conclude, we call for more data transparency from digital platforms and advertising intermediaries. In recent years, social media platforms have limited their collaborations with academics and journalists, tightly restricting outside access to their data and algorithms. Similarly, brands, marketing firms, and talent agencies have been notoriously secretive about their rates and contracts, thwarting the emergence of industry-wide standards and minimum wages. We acknowledge that making the data collected by platforms and marketers more publicly available would raise issues about anonymity, de-identification, and the protection of worker identities. As reseracher s, however, we believe that this would be an essential step to fully understand–and hopefully address–the dynamics of inequality and racialization in platformed careers.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. In 2021 and 2022, Meta developed several monetization tools on its platforms (Facebook and Instagram) as part of its efforts to compete with TikTok and YouTube. These include simplified online shopping options; affiliate links; subscription programs; badges; a creator marketplace; and a $1B fund allocated in 2021–2022 for "bonuses" for qualifying creators who publish "reels," or short videos mimicking the TikTok format (See: https://creators.instagram.com/ earn-money). However, these options remain far less encompassing than the YouTube Partner Program, and Instagram influencers complained that the bonuses were opaque and hard to get (Perloff, 2022; Porter, 2021).
2. Retrieved on 28 September, 2021 from: https://www.instagram.com/p/CBJYuxShXE7/.
3. Distinct exchanges by the same influencer are typically shared in a single post, making it clear that it is about the same individual, despite the anonymization.

4. We also found cases in which merchants required influencers to create content on multiple platforms with a "bundle price" or "monthly payment." We excluded these exchanges to focus on Instagram-only transactions.
5. Due the anonymized nature of these posts, we cannot fully rely on visual ethnographic methods, since we lack the "production texts" (Mitchell, 2008: 367) central to visual ethnography (Pink, 2013: 2). That said, this project is informed by a broader ethnographic study of influencers and marketers conducted by the first author, which includes 92 interviews and virtual observations with influencers, marketers, and agents. While not directly about the creators who shared data on the @InfluencerPayGap, this broader study shaped the questions and interpretation of the findings presented in this article.
6. We excluded 37 exchanges that did not require influencers to create original content but included other types of collaboration such as licensing existing content or attending events without posting obligations.
7. For posts that do not indicate the original price offered by the company but only the final price, we code this final price as the company price.
8. Retrieved on 26 October 2021 from: https://www.instagram.com/p/CBL47cKhLzV/
9. Since all the posts shared on the @InfluencerPayGap account are anonymized, we cannot confirm or disconfirm the marketer's accusation that this influencer's followers are "fake." Instead, we rely on this post to show how metrics often become contested objects over the course of the negotiations between brands and influencers.
10. See: https://help.instagram.com/ 477434105621119
11. Comments retrieved on 26 August 2022 from the last post shared on the @InfluencerPayGap account, available at: https://www.instagram.com/influencerpaygap/

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Yingdan Lu is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Communication at Stanford University. Her research applies data analytic and computational methods to large-scale multimodal datasets to explore how authoritarian governments use digital media to maintain their rule and how individuals experience digital technology in different media environments. Her work has appeared in peer-reviewed journals such as *Political Communication, Human-Computer Interaction, Computational Communication Research*, and *Mobile Media & Communication*.