

A Post-Work Approach to Influencer Labor: The Paradox of Sustainability Influencers

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Abstract

How do Instagram sustainability influencers communicate criticisms of consumer culture, and try to promote more sustainable alternatives, in the context of a platform and industry that seeks to promote consumption by design? Drawing on an ethnography of Instagram influencers who advocate “zero waste” lifestyle politics, this paper argues that a “sustainability paradox” emerges from the impossibility of aligning environmental values with the commercial norms of the influencer industry. This paradox necessitates continuous negotiation and management for influencers, and routinely excludes them from pathways to paid work. As extensive research on influencer labor has shown, sustainability influencers are far from alone in being systematically marginalized from paid work because they are not “advertiser friendly” or “brand safe” according to the capitalist norms of social media platforms and the influencer industry. The paper makes two key arguments regarding the causes of, and solutions to, this problem. First, the “paradox” faced by sustainability influencers points to the irreparable *unsustainability* of the influencer industry and the environmentally destructive systems of production, promotion and consumption which it exists to promote. And second, solutions to the systemic problems of exploitative influencer labor cannot be found from tweaks to labor conditions in this unsustainable industry. Instead, the paper makes a case for the value of a “post-work” approach to influencer labor, which broadens critical and political imaginaries for what “influencing” might mean outside of exclusionary and environmentally catastrophic hegemonies of promotional labor and consumption.

Keywords

influencer labor, sustainability influencers, post-work, greenfluencers, anti-consumerism, sustainability

Influencer social media content has long been associated with the celebration of highly desirable and glamorous “shoppable lives” (Hund & McGuigan, 2019). This is facilitated not only by the advertising and data driven business models of platforms like Instagram, but by a whole influencer “para-industry” that has sprung up to streamline the monetisation of influencer “self-brands” into promotional arrangements (Bishop, 2021). In recent years, however, influencers have received growing criticism from followers for the levels of commercialism or “selling out” in their content (Duffy et al., 2022). Indeed, a growing sense of mistrust toward the celebration and promotion of consumerism is found across popular media cultures and social media, from de-cluttering self-help guides (Sandlin & Wallin, 2022) to backlashes to fast fashion campaigns (Holman & Maheshwari, 2023) to YouTube “anti-hauls” (Wood, 2021), or TikTok “de-influencing” and “under-consumption core” videos (Wong, 2024). The idea that consumer culture is harmful in terms of wellbeing, working

conditions, and the environment has become a mainstream proposition (Lekakis, 2022).

How do some influencers communicate these criticisms of consumption, and try to promote more sustainable alternatives, in the context of a platform and industry that seeks to promote consumption by design? To answer this question, this paper draws on a digital ethnography of a group of Instagram influencers who advocate a “zero waste” lifestyle politics of refusing and reducing consumption. Through participant-observation of Instagram, attending industry events, and interviews with 15 influencers, the research found that these “greenfluencers” (Olbermann et al., 2024) hold deep levels of concern about the environmental impact

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of consumption and waste and are committed to sharing ways to address it through lifestyle change. This commitment repeatedly comes into conflict with normative practices which allow some influencers to become highly visible on the platform and, eventually, make a living through promoting consumption. As a result, sustainability influencers are routinely excluded from, exempt themselves from, or experience challenges in maintaining, pathways to paid promotional labor.

This kind of precarity and exclusion from paid work is not unusual, indeed it could even be described as the norm of influencer labor (Duffy et al., 2021). Social media influencers, like many other platform workers, are on the front lines of a contemporary “crisis of work” (Hoffmann & Frayne, 2023). Promotional social media work escalates trajectories toward increasing precarity, insecurity, and risk, exacerbating existing social inequalities through systematic exclusion (Duffy & Meisner, 2023). However, sustainability influencers find that their commitment to environmentalism means they cannot unproblematically pursue these already precarious forms of promotional work. They are not able to reconcile the de-growth logics of sustainable lifestyle politics with the economic growth priorities of the consumer market on which the influencer industry rests, creating a “sustainability paradox” (Frig & Jaakkola, 2023). This paradox, of which many sustainability influencers themselves are explicitly aware, necessitates continuous discursive and practical negotiation and management for this group of influencers (Jacobson & Harrison, 2022).

In this paper however, the sustainability paradox is not understood as a problem affecting only a small group of influencers. The fact that influencers committed to environmental sustainability struggle to find a footing in the influencer industry points to a much bigger problem: the fundamental *unsustainability* of that industry. Influencer markets and labor in their current form are inextricable from the environmentally catastrophic hegemony of neoliberal consumer capitalism (Ang, 2021; Barry, 2012). Drawing on Goodman and Littler’s (2013, p. 270) concept of “celebrity ecologies,” I am pointing here to the “larger assemblages and systems within and around which” social media content creators are enmeshed. The creator economy in its current iteration is inherently “tied to the ideology of economic growth, to be deployed as a resource to sell more and more stuff” (Goodman and Littler, 2013, p. 269). This is not to blame individual influencers and consumers for their choices, but to highlight that the macro impacts and demands of creator ecologies cannot possibly be sustained by the earth’s resources. It is this unavoidable fact that creates the paradox shaping sustainability influencer labor, as living within sustainable capacities is in fundamental opposition to the market’s *modus operandi*.

Seen in this context, it becomes clear that the solution to precarious, exploitative, and unequal labor conditions faced by the research participants, along with many other influencers, cannot be resolved by reforms that might come from within an unsustainable industry. The field of influencer

studies has taken labor as its central critical and political lens and used this extremely effectively to highlight the industry’s many harms. However, I contend that this has inadvertently reproduced a “workerist” politics (Weeks, 2020) in influencer research which can only serve to reinforce hegemonies of labor and consumption that are unsustainable at their core. Again and again, researchers identify and speak to influencers who are systematically marginalized because they are not seen as “advertiser friendly” or “brand safe” by a range of gatekeepers from algorithmic platforms to brand partners to “para-industry” stakeholders (Bishop, 2021; Duffy & Meisner, 2023; Rauchberg, 2022). These forms of marginalization are not oversights or accidents, they are by design (Duffy et al., 2021) and cannot be fixed by anything other than the wholesale reimagination of the market ideologies on which the industry is built. Influencer research needs to broaden the radical scope of its political imagination if it is to address what “influencing” might mean if it were to be genuinely built on principles of equality *and* sustainability.

In order to consider solutions to the crisis of influencer labor beyond the hegemony of the market, I draw on ecological and feminist post-work and de-growth scholarship (Hoffmann & Frayne, 2023; Weeks, 2020). Post-work approaches argue that the ideological, financial, and material centrality of labor to current ways of living is irretrievably exclusionary and ecologically destructive. As an alternative, post-work offers imaginaries of society no longer organized around the core of work. While intentionally utopian, post-work politics are not abstract and are built on the resistant practices of the present (Hoffmann & Frayne, 2023). In the final section I take inspiration from the alternative discourses and practices of sustainability influencers themselves to explore what post-work influencer futures might look outside of intertwined hegemonies of labor and consumption.

In the following section I outline the problematic and position of this paper in relation to existing influencer research which has centered on theorizing labor, highlighting an alternative framework from “post-work” theory. The paper then explains the digital ethnography methodology before presenting the findings in two sections. First, “the sustainability paradox,” analyses the conflict between the norms of promotional labor and environmental lifestyle politics which sustainability influencers navigate, articulate, and manage. Then, “post-work influencers,” examines zero waste influencers’ accounts of mutual care, climate activism, and creative approaches to sustainable living, arguing that these represent seeds of influencer futures and imaginaries outside of the restrictive and exclusionary parameters of promotional labor.

Influencer Labor: A Post-Work Approach

That platform workers are at the vanguard of the current labor crisis has been well established (Jarrett, 2022), with influencers representing one form of highly precarious

creative digital platform worker (Duffy et al., 2019). The much vaunted cultural and creative industries have seen accelerating shifts toward insecure and unpaid labor since the 1990s as risk and responsibility has been devolved from employer to employee (McRobbie, 2018). While it would be simplistic and Western centric to contrast current states of precarity with an idealized past of “secure” work which was only ever available to a limited few (Fan, 2024), it is undoubtedly the case that contemporary creative platform labor comes with the expectation that workers will engage in entrepreneurship, flexibility, and self-direction (Glatt, 2022; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010; McRobbie, 2018).

Labor is a “trendy research topic” in research on influencers (Duffy, 2016, p. 444), reflecting a wider “turn to labor” in sociology and media and cultural studies in recent decades (Elias et al., 2017). These fields have demonstrated the ubiquity and centrality of emotional, affective, and immaterial labour in post-industrial economies (Hardt, 1999). Terms such as “relational labour” (Baym, 2015) and “hope labour” (Mackenzie & McKinlay, 2021) capture the “soft skills” required, and the precarity engendered, by creative and platform work. Influencer studies has been at the forefront of this wave as the creator industry has grown and professionalized, with scholars developing a plethora of useful terminology, methods, and conceptualisations for the various forms of labor in which influencers engage. Three frameworks have particularly illuminating: visibility, authenticity, and aspirational labor.

Visibility labor (Abidin, 2016, 2021); highlights the work involved in curating and promoting a version of the self that will be appealing and successful to ever shifting technological and social visibility mechanisms across various platforms, markets, and audiences (Abidin, 2016). Abidin’s concept highlights that “influencer” is first and foremost a “monetizable status” hinging on the right kind of positive visibility that can be commercially mobilized, necessitating significant labor to curate and translate into various pathways to paid work (Abidin, 2021, p. 79). A number of critics (Arnesson, 2023; McRae, 2017) have concurrently developed “authenticity labor/work” to describe how influencer self-curation involves labour to balance visibility and commerciality with the construction of a persona that feels genuinely “real” to followers (Banet-Weiser, 2021; Wellman et al., 2020; Whitmer, 2021), and offers value for brands who use influencers to naturalize their appeal (Arriagada & Bishop, 2021).

Given that many, if not most, social media influencers do not and will not make a financial living from being an influencer, Duffy (2016) describes ‘aspirational labor’: the highly gendered forward-looking orientation of unpaid work in hope of a future potential “pay off,” however unlikely. Duffy’s concept highlights the hyper-precarity of influencer work (Duffy et al., 2021). Feminist researchers have shown that this extremely competitive and ruthless industry systematically discriminates according to existing inequalities and

forms of marginalization along lines of gender, race, class, disability, and sexuality (Bishop, 2018, 2021; Duffy, 2017; Duffy & Meisner, 2023; Glatt, 2022; Rauchberg, 2022; Lukan & Čehovin Zajc, 2024). As Glatt (2022) summarizes, only “creators who are the most profitable to platforms become the most visible” and can therefore generate income. Content creators whose politics and/or identities are not “brandable” may seek alternative sources of income, for example through crowdfunding platforms such as Patreon (Karhawi & Grohmann, 2024; Sylvia & Moody, 2022) or launching a small business (Jacobson & Harrison, 2022), but these creators still face precarity, inequality, and emotional labor in maintaining their audiences (Glatt, 2024). Ethnographies of the influencer industry have highlighted the deep-seated anxieties and forms of overwork that are normalized as precarious conditions and risks are taken on as individual burdens (Duffy et al., 2021; Glatt, 2022).

Centring labor in influencer scholarship, then, has been highly productive in revealing exploitative and unfair systems and conditions of work. It has also spurred research into labor organizing and resistance (Niebler, 2020; O’Meara, 2019; Trittin-Ulbrich & Glozer, 2024), and policy research impacting improvements to influencer regulation and rights (Goanța et al., 2024; Verdoodt et al., 2020). However, this paper argues that taking labor as the central lens for theorizing what influencers do has also inadvertently limited the political horizon for imagining possible solutions and futures to the crises of hyper-precarity and inequality that pervade the industry.

The scholarship outlined above points to individuals and groups that are systematically excluded from, or struggle to secure and maintain, paid work as influencers, whether because of their marginalized identities, their political or otherwise not “brand safe” content, the exploitative and discriminatory mechanisms of the platforms and industry, or a combination thereof. This paper could readily have made a similar argument about sustainability influencers and stopped there. But if this is the “problem” that we set up in our research, what solutions to that problem are we able to envision? The implication set up by this problematic is that the system should be regulated and reorganized such that a diverse range of creators could receive fairer pay and conditions. Existing scholarship does not focus on the question of solutions in detail, though researchers are very much aware that exploitative and discriminatory labor norms are “embedded within a social structure that is far from stable—or equitable” (Duffy et al., 2021). This paper argues that exploring solutions, and radical ones, should take up more of our attention. As it stands however, the central paradigm of labor means that imagining alternative futures remains out of scope.

Arguments that the critical and political lens of labor, while useful for revealing and even challenging conditions of exploitation, can limit theoretical and political imaginations are not new. There is a long history of cautions against the often tacit “workerist” politics that emerges within

critiques of, and even resistance to, unpaid and unfair work (Lafargue, 1883/2022; Frayne, 2015; Himmelweit, 1995; Vradi, 2021; Weeks, 2020). Whether intentionally or otherwise, “workerism,” with its focus on calls for better working conditions and more equality and dignity at work, ultimately serves to reproduce and reinforce the ideology of work itself (Weeks, 2020). Its hegemonic status means that labor is not only the essential means of survival in capitalist economies but is also seen as a moral good and duty, a source of individual purpose and fulfillment, and the central organizing principle of life (Gerold et al., 2023). Reinforcing this hegemony only serves to cement the financial and social exclusion, stigmatization, and punishment of those who will not or cannot adhere to its norms of “productivity” (Taylor, 2004) and limits our ability to imagine the political potential of practices which cannot be subsumed into a framework of labor (Himmelweit, 1995). Instead, a more radical “post-work” approach would focus on *liberation and autonomy* from work and its ideological sanctification (Stardust & Hester, 2021). Post-work politics does not imagine a world in which no work is necessary but envisions a future in which labor is de-coupled from the ability of individuals to survive and thrive and find social meaning and purpose, and has underpinned calls for reforms like universal basic income (Weeks, 2020).

A post-work approach expands the scope of social transformation that we are able to consider in challenging normalized conditions of precarity, insecurity, and inequality in the influencer industry. This is even more vital when we consider that the hegemony of labor is not only exclusionary, but also profoundly environmentally unsustainable. The same global neoliberal logics of capital and growth that marginalize anyone who will not or cannot align with normative values of “productivity” are the very same forces causing widespread catastrophic environmental destruction and crisis (Barry, 2012). Any vision of sustainability must have at its core “values of social justice, political equality and ecological integrity” (Blühdorn, 2018, p. 42). The premise, therefore, that neoliberal capitalism can be genuinely “sustainable” is not only hollow and disingenuous, it also forms a barrier to the large scale social, political, economic, and environmental transformations urgently needed (Blühdorn, 2018). Current inter-dependent economic, social, and technological systems of productivity, production, labor, consumption, and waste—to which the influencer industry significantly contributes and promotes—cannot be sustained by the earth’s capacities (Gerold et al., 2023). Environmental scholarship therefore points to post-work as a key form of sustainable social transformation (Hoffmann & Frayne, 2023).

Sustainable solutions to the problems of influencer labor cannot be found in expanding and cementing highly energy intensive and environmentally harmful systems of promotional work, and instead must be located in a move away from work and the market altogether (Hoffmann & Paulsen,

2020; Vradi, 2021). Importantly, a post-work future is not seen as a far off, abstract, or purely theoretical utopia to be dreamt up by researchers. Instead, it is a way of life that can be germinated in the present through attending to and nourishing existing pockets of practice and action (Hoffmann & Paulsen, 2020). In the final section of the paper, I explore the alternative imaginaries of “influencing” that emerge in the tactics, practices, and discourses of sustainability influencers and consider the alternative futures and solutions outside the hegemony of labor that they offer.

Methodology

This research emerged from an interest in how the sustainability focused content creators I followed on social platforms might manage, understand, and navigate ideas about consumerism and environmentalism in their work. Given the wide range of overlapping but distinct topics, concerns, and levels of commitment that fall under the sustainability banner (Jacobson & Harrison, 2022), the research focused on a narrower subgroup: zero waste influencers. First popularized by US based blogger Bea Johnson in 2009, the zero waste lifestyle movement focuses on reducing waste through the so called ‘5 Rs’: reduce, reuse, recycle, and rot the rest (de Wilde & Parry, 2022). Recognizing the harm to the planet, nature, and human health wrought by the global generation and disposal of immense quantities of waste, the movement advocates a move toward a circular economy where resources can be reused and recovered rather than accumulated, disposed of, and replaced (Balwan et al., 2022). Given its origins in lifestyle blogging, zero waste advocates tend to emphasize household and individual waste, focus on personal responsibility, and center individual, rather than infrastructural and political, solutions (de Wilde & Parry, 2022).

Though zero waste influencers operate across a range of social platforms, Instagram was selected as the primary focus for observation, participation and recruitment given its association with promotional labor and conspicuous consumption (Hearn & Banet-Weiser, 2020; Marwick, 2015). Zero waste influencers on Instagram provided a focused yet rich case study for this research given the movement’s clear opposition to the celebration of consumer accumulation and display usually associated with influencer culture on this platform.

A digital ethnography methodology was chosen as it allowed the research to make sense of the range of approaches across zero waste networks on Instagram and in influencers practices and narratives (Kaur-Gill & Dutta, 2017). There were three strands to the digital ethnography. First, a research Instagram account (@zerowaste.influencer.research) was set up and used to follow, interact with, and observe zero waste content over a period of three months in 2022. Second, the researcher attended a small number of in person and online industry events such as free talks and trainings as part of the “Ethical Influencer” network and

talks and events at zero waste shops and sustainability trade fairs. Finally, fifteen zero waste influencers were recruited via Instagram posts and direct messages and took part in semi-structured one-hour interviews via video call. The collated data sets—comprising Instagram pages, ethnographic notes, and interview transcripts—were thematically coded. In the analysis that follows, all data is anonymised through the removal of identifying information and the use of pseudonyms for interviewees.

As de Wilde and Parry (2022) also found, the sustainability influencers with the largest following observed during the Instagram ethnography appeared to be affluent white British or American women in their twenties and thirties, reflecting widely noted class, race, and geographic visibility and wage disparities in the influencer industry (Bishop, 2021). For the interview stage a greater degree of diversity among participants was sought, with some success. Participants ranged from their 20s to their 50s; eight were White, two Black and four Asian; and participants were from a range of economic and social class backgrounds. The interview participants were all “nano-influencers” with between 1,000 and 10,000 followers. Though some were earning a small amount of money from paid brand partnerships, no interviewees were earning a full-time living from their roles as influencers. Instead, three participants were stay at home parents or on parental leave, one was on benefits, another was a freelance cleaner, three participants were full-time students, and the rest had full or part-time professional jobs in areas such as education, health care, and sustainability sectors. All participants were based in European or North American countries or in the United Kingdom. Despite efforts to recruit an interviewee among the much smaller number of men who are zero waste influencers, all interview participants were women, reflecting not just the feminisation of the sustainability sphere but also the lifestyle influencer one.

The Sustainability Paradox

“Stick to Your Values”

From the outset of the ethnography, it became clear that the conflict between principles of sustainability and the normative influencer practices of promotional labor was something that environmental influencers were themselves explicitly concerned with. Negotiating these contradictions runs through sustainability influencer culture, openly articulated in influencer accounts and networks and their own understandings of their role. In this section, I explore how this conflict is expressed through the language of “values” which expresses the struggle that lies at the heart of sustainability influencing.

When attending a free training session about working on paid promotions as part of the Ethical Influencer network, a key piece of advice to influencers was to define what their ethical “values” were and “stick to your values.” Values

might be compromised, we were told, by the glamor and promise of free trips, products, or paid work from big brands which do not “share your values.” Ethical influencers were told to not be tempted by the “dollar value” of paid deals or “free stuff,” and instead be “accountable” for their content by doing research and, if necessary, turning down offers, because “ethical influencers will use their influence for good and for more than just selling stuff.” ‘Staying true’ to your values was described as an important way to build your authenticity for followers who would “see through” cynical product pushing. The speakers tried to reassure attendees that they would not be “penniless” and they could enter into some paid deals, but always while ensuring the companies paying them shared, and therefore would not compromise, their ethical values.

This neatly summed up the dilemma in which sustainability influencers find themselves. It is not unusual for influencers to need to balance their constructed self-brand values with the need to earn money, as being overly commercial undermines authenticity (Arriagada & Bishop, 2021; Wellman et al., 2020). Some influencers were reluctant to emphasize promotion in their content at all, with interviewees saying, ‘I’m not here to sell stuff’ (Ines), ‘I don’t want [promotion] to be what this is about’ (Charlotte), and ‘I don’t want my content all to be like sell sell sell’ (Lucy). Navigating this already impossible authenticity “bind” (Duffy & Hund, 2019) becomes even more complicated for zero waste influencers, however, when “staying true” to their *environmental* “values” involves refusing and discouraging all but the most “essential” and low impact forms of consumption (Haastrup & Marshall, 2024).

Interviewee Lucy explained: ‘I feel like there’s like two questions that I need to answer when I work with brands. It’s like number one, are they sustainable and then number two, is it something that I would use and love.’ Mia described the questions she considers about brands and products: “How eco-friendly is it? Do they ship plastic-free? Is this a business that I do want to support? . . . Are they really being sustainable? Are they paying their workers? . . . Are [the] products cruelty free?.” As this suggests, determining alignment with values requires extensive research. When this information was not available influencers questioned the brand’s representatives directly in emails and direct messages, something attendees at the Ethical Influencer training were told they would routinely need to do. Brand impression management in the form of “greenwashing” (Jones, 2019) was often blamed for the lack of transparency about sustainability. Faith explained that a company’s claim to be “eco-friendly” ‘is just greenwashing’ if it lacks evidence to “back it up” such as sustainability reports and certifications, documents she would seek out and comb through when considering working with a brand.

While greenwashing was widely criticized, there was broad agreement that *influencers* as individuals are the ones responsible for doing this time consuming and knowledge

intensive research to ensure a brand aligns with their “values.” This became clear when influencers discussed the risk of criticism if and when they “got it wrong.” Both Angelina and Lucy had promoted a popular brand of “eco” laundry detergent and were criticized by followers because of its plastic content, harmful chemicals, and international shipping and production. Angelina described the criticism as “embarrassing” and “worrying” and Lucy was “nervous” and unsure how to respond given she didn’t know whether all the accusations were accurate. This reflects broader social tendencies to move blame and responsibility for greenwashing away from the companies who perpetuate it and onto the media- and consumer-literacy of individuals to sift through often deliberately misleading claims and gaps in information (Breves & Liebers, 2022). Taking individual responsibility for sifting out greenwashing lest they be seen to undermine their “values” and receive criticism involves significant emotional labor and presentational self-management for sustainability influencers. Ultimately though, these conflicts are beyond the capacity of individuals to resolve.

“Things Need to Look Good on Instagram”

Like all content creators, zero waste influencers must work around the unpredictability and changeability of the platform cultures and mechanisms that can grant and take away their visibility. Drawing on their algorithmic imaginaries about what “it” (the algorithm) wants from them (Bucher, 2019), alongside collective algorithmic gossip about platform changes and how to respond to them (Bishop, 2019), influencers express their frustration with the platform while taking on personal responsibility for managing the precarity and time intensive nature of platform work (Glatt, 2022).

For the research participants there was an additional layer of concern about the perceived difficulty of making content about sustainability and climate crisis visible on Instagram. Sometimes this was expressed in broad anti-corporate terms that veered on the conspiratorial, reflecting the way that creators and users often attribute “all-seeing” motivations to algorithms that chime with their existing beliefs (Cotter et al., 2024). Ines stated that ‘it’s actually really biased and if you put hashtag #climatecrisis your reach is going to go down,’ saying she thought this was a deliberate suppression of messages “against consumerism.”

Other interviewees spoke about the challenge of cultivating the “right” kind of visibility friendly content about environmental topics. Certain types of topics or posts—educational content, “negative” or “serious” topics, or posts that do not look ‘pretty’—were understood to be less likely to gain visibility. Lucy was frustrated that her most widely viewed reels were those that were light on environmental information: ‘you post a reel, it’s you just lip syncing to an audio. . . and it blows up and it’s just you are losing that kind of educational sense’ (Lucy). This echoes the findings of Hautea et al. (2021) and Haastrup (2023) about the positive and humorous climate change videos that gain most traction on TikTok.

Influencers expressed difficulty in presenting zero waste content in a suitably visually pleasing or “aesthetic” fashion. Instagram is primarily a platform that favors communication that can grab and hold the visual attention of users (Zulli, 2018), something zero waste content wasn’t always seen to easily fit into. Interviewee Remi summed this up by saying that ‘things need to look good on Instagram. . . a blurry picture of a worm [while] talking about composting isn’t going to win it.’ Charlotte described how a post she had made about how to avoid food waste by labeling items in the fridge was “just kind of ugly looking” and therefore ‘wasn’t popular.’ She continued that she was trying to “play the game a little bit,” noting that “some of these bigger sustainable accounts that do have that perfect aesthetic are really popular.” Similarly, in the Ethical Influencer training attendees were advised to think strategically about ways to make sustainability content look aesthetically pleasing because people like things that look “polished and new.”

Instagram observation showed some popular influencers finding creative ways of “playing the game” to try and gain algorithmic visibility (Cotter, 2019). For example, creators posted ‘flatlays’—a genre of Instagram post where a series of items are attractively laid out on a surface—of things like non-recyclable and non-compostable household waste. They also created “haul” posts—collections of items recently purchased—featuring items such as organic packaging free vegetables from a market. These kinds of posts suggest a kind of “algorithmic culture-jamming” whereby creators harness the promotional visibility strategies favored by commercial creators and platforms for alternative ethical or anti-consumer ends (Wood, 2021). This speaks to the specific challenges and constraints of visibility labor for sustainability creators, where it was felt that some compromises must be made to gain visibility as granted and favored by the consumer centric logics of the platform.

‘I’m Not Making Money From What I’m Doing’

Some interviewees, like Eva, hoped to grow their accounts, framing this not only as a way to gain income but as a way to “reach more people” and therefore “do a lot of good for the planet.” However, it was acknowledged that growing an online presence would be challenging for two reasons. First, the income precarity and individualized risk that research has shown influencers routinely face (Duffy, 2021) was a barrier. Interviewees spoke about the challenges of finding time to create content at the level needed to grow engagement and a following while not earning. Cathy, who juggled content creation with paid work and child care, felt ambivalent about how much time to invest in what Duffy (2016) calls “aspirational labor” given ‘you don’t get paid or anything do you? So it’s just building it so I could make some money out of it in the future.’ Jane was wary of the risk of relying on social media for income when “Instagram could switch off tomorrow.” These precarious labor conditions speak to the exploitation of free or under-paid promotional labour by brands

and platforms, and the contingent class inequalities of the influencer industry where those with financial support are more likely to have the time and resources to stay the distance (Glatt, 2022; Lukan & Čehovin Zajc, 2024).

In addition to this, like other sustainability influencers (Jacobson & Harrison, 2022), some zero waste creators felt that compromises to their environmental values would be unavoidable should they want to make an income from their work. Some chose not to pursue growth and income because they felt this would undermine sustainability goals; Jane described not joining the influencer “rat race” which she felt underpinned the cycle of unsustainable shopping her account set out to challenge. Lucy, a student who was working with several brands, found it hard to picture generating more significant income from influencing without being willing to make concessions regarding the ecological credentials of the brands she was willing to promote:

I do follow sustainability influencers like Marta Kanga on Instagram and her job is a full-time sustainability influencer. And I physically don't understand how she pays her bills. . . [There are] big brands that want to talk about the particular sustainability partnership they have going on. . . But I just feel like that's inauthentic. I kind of do prefer to work with small brands that actually are sustainable. . . But I don't know, that might have to be what I do if I want to make this full-time.

While the precarious, aspirational labor conditions are shared, the specific contradictions, forms of ambivalence, and compromises that sustainability influencers face cannot fully be accounted for by using exploitative labor alone as a critical lens. Instead, these conflicts arise from the “sustainability paradox” that emerges from attempts to align commercial imperatives with environmental politics.

Post-Work Influencers

The analysis above has shown the difficulty and contradiction sustainability influencers face in trying to manage on an individual level the impossible paradox of aligning hegemonies of economic growth with the planet's ability to sustain this. Whether in large corporations (Argento et al., 2022) or lifestyle websites (Frig & Jaakkola, 2023, 15) the imperatives to promote forms of consumption and commercialism that are fundamental to economic performance and growth are inherently at odds with any real acknowledgment of the need “for adjusting consumption in the age of scarcity.” Influencers draw on the tools and language they have to hand—values, authenticity, visibility, and aspiration—to discursively, emotionally, financially, and politically negotiate and manage the paradox they face.

The impossibility of straightforwardly aligning environmental and commercial values is not just a niche problem impacting sustainability influencers. This paradox evidences the fundamental *unsustainability* of the influencer economy itself. The influencer industry is embedded in, and contributes

to, a broad set of economic structures and processes that are environmentally destructive and cannot be sustained. This is not to blame individuals, but to call attention to the environmental harms of the industries' central imperatives and impacts, namely: the intensification in production, promotion, distribution, and sale of highly resource intensive consumer goods and experiences (Boström, 2023); the consumption of consumer items and the creation and management of unsustainable levels of waste, including from packaging (Arefin & Fredericks, 2024); and the environmental impact of internet technologies themselves, including smartphones and the digital data storage and processing requirements of social media platforms and advertising (Hogan, 2018). Interestingly, during the digital ethnography it was observed that the latter area was very rarely addressed by sustainability influencers, while the first two were extensively discussed, possibly reflecting its comparative lack of visibility in public awareness of climate change (Hogan, 2018).

However, despite often explicit acknowledgment by sustainability influencers themselves of the conflicts between promotional norms on Instagram and environmentalism, the fact remains that they continue to care about and cultivate their social media accounts. As recent research has shown (Fan, 2024; Karhawi & Grohmann, 2024), it is important we attend to the agency, creativity and struggles of marginalized influencers in continuing to produce content on platforms despite their awareness of drawbacks and limitations. It would be reductive to paint zero waste influencers as being stuck in a futile cycle of trying to squeeze environmental ideals into a box of promotional labor in which they can never fit. Many of the practices and ideas evident in these influencers' accounts could more accurately be described as not only compromising with but also exceeding, or perhaps flourishing in spite of, the normative commercial logics of the platform and industry. These practices and discourses point to seeds of possibility contained within the present that might suggest pathways to more genuinely sustainable “post-work” futures (Hoffmann & Paulsen, 2020).

Post-work is a “counter-hegemonic strategy” that operates on the level of the collective imagination to expand the scope of the possible, striving against the realist perspective that there is “no alternative” to neoliberal capital (Srnicsek & Williams, 2015, p. 131). Though utopian, post-work politics should be grounded in existing tendencies and practices (Srnicsek & Williams, 2015). Frayne (2015) examines “escapes” from the hegemony of work undertaken by various actors, arguing that, under current conditions, post-work forms more of a potentiality or mentality than a coherent political project (Frayne, 2015). Frayne (2015, p. 232) calls for research that attends to “the unsung inventiveness of people who are already developing their own conceptions of pleasure, sufficiency, wealth and well-being, fit for a less work-centred society.” This paper responds to this by highlighting the agency and creativity of zero waste influencers in engaging in counter-hegemonic practices within a normatively consumer capitalist creator ecology. To be clear,

though some influencers were critical of the creator “rat race,” post-work was not a political framework they explicitly engaged with by name. Instead, in the following analysis I am taking inspiration from the imaginaries they offer of what “influencing” might mean beyond its market confines, and theorizing these within a post-work framework as a way of appreciating their radical potential. I examine three alternative sets of practices and discourses which sustainability influencers engage in that can be seen through this post-work lens: mutual care, climate politics, and slow sustainable living.

Influencers were enthusiastic in emphasizing the mutual care they had experienced and practiced through their Instagram accounts. Interviewees highlighted the positive and helpful community, with four interviewees discussing being part of “pods” (O’Meara, 2019) or chat groups with fellow creators which were used not only for boosting engagement, but also for mutual support with issues like climate anxiety and for learning about environmental topics. Faith spoke about the pleasure of “always learning” from other influencers and Amber found it “amazing” how much she had learned on topics from veganism to fast fashion. Beyond the sense of care and kindness in the “community” between followers and creators, the ethnography also found pervasive ideas in influencer posts and in interviews about the importance of caring for the earth, for animals and children and for the future. de Wilde and Parry (2022) theorize these discourses, common within feminized sustainability content, as “feminist care,” a political practice that centers on the activist potential of relationships between people and between non-human agents such as animals and organic and man-made materials.

Many influencers blend lifestyle content with what might more accurately be described as social and political environmental activism, evidencing the often gendered and arbitrary distinctions between environmental lifestyle advocates and activists (O’Shaughnessy & Kennedy, 2010). Eva and Charlotte were typical in framing their accounts as a form of activism, a way to “do more” and be more “proactive” about climate change. Climate action intersected with other political issues: Remi had used Instagram to forge connections with black community gardening activists around the world, and Amber spoke about the impact of colonialism on environmental damage in the Philippines where her family originated. A valid critique of zero waste lifestyle activism is its emphasis on individual action (de Wilde & Parry, 2022). However, many Instagram accounts took pains to situate individual lifestyle change as just one small component of the action needed to combat climate change, a sentiment expressed by Lucy: ‘[small individual changes] aren’t enough in the grand scheme of things. . . But at least for me now there’s this.’ This sense of “doing what I can” was underpinned by a desire to reach beyond small changes to a kind of collective individualism (Humphery, 2010) or relational activism (O’Shaughnessy & Kennedy, 2010).

Finally, the overall focus of sustainable influencer content showcases alternatives to the cycle of consumer promotion,

accumulation, hype, and excess routinely and normatively celebrated in influencer lifestyle content. Creators often use the logics of the platform strategically to promote creative ways of using and repurposing what you have and refusing the constant lure of “new stuff” (Wood, 2021). Influencers spoke about the “fun” and “creativity” involved, with Aisha enjoying the collective creative process through which creators found and exchanged inventive ways of “exchanging unsustainable things into sustainable things.” As I have examined, this kind of non-consumption oriented content creates fundamental limitations on creators’ ability to become visible and make money, but the importance of sharing and celebrating alternative, slow, sustainable everyday practices of living should not be overlooked in the broader context of climate politics and futures (Shove & Walker, 2010; Soper, 2014).

These discourses and practices—from care to climate activism to creative sustainability—are not comprehensive or fully rounded solutions, but they do nonetheless show the possibilities offered by imagining differently about what “influencing” might mean beyond hegemonic paradigms of promotional labor. Importantly, Remi deliberately decoupled her identity as an “influencer” from commercial and promotional aims, describing her desire to reach people and “influence” them, not to “buy things” but to “change their habits, or to question more from big corporations, or to interrogate green washing.” That sustainability creators keep pursuing this kind of “influencing” in the face of its paradoxical restrictions evidences that, despite the disciplinary and normative forces of the industry (Duffy & Meisner, 2023), not all influencer practices are reducible or resigned to the imperatives of capital.

Conclusion

This paper has offered a critical opportunity to reflect the on kinds of political futures we envision in influencer scholarship. The group of influencers analyzed in this paper are not unusual in that their politics and values sit at odds with the destructively narrow and normative commercial imperatives of social media platforms and the wider influencer industry, leading to forms of exclusion from promotional income generation practices that influencers are left attempting to strategically navigate and manage. In this case, the conflict points to the inherent unsustainability of “influencing” as it is currently imagined, which sits at the heart of environmentally catastrophic systems of productivity, promotion, consumption, and waste.

The paper has resisted a “workerist” paradigm; the systematic marginalization of non-commercially friendly influencers is not a problem that can be solved by changes to pay and working conditions that would ultimately reinforce unsustainable and unjust hegemonies of influencer labor. Instead, the paper has drawn on post-work politics and theory which proposes deliberately utopian imaginaries which are nonetheless born of, and evident in, the politics and material conditions of the present. The insider/outsider status of

sustainability influencers, and their critical orientation toward norms of consumerism and growth that underpin creator ecologies, mean they practice content creation in a way that offers glimpses of these alternative futures. At the same time, these influencers operate within the structural confines and imperatives of the present. A genuinely sustainable and equitable post-work future would involve social, political and economic transformations from the ground up, taking on the whole totality of power and capital (Srnicek & Williams, 2015). This paper seeks to contribute to seeding that larger project, then, by using a post-work theorisation of influencer labor as a way of “cracking open those spaces of possibility” that exist in the present (Srnicek & Williams, 2015, p. 130).

Sustainability influencers’ own reasons for valuing their experiences on social media speak to practices that are not reducible to commercial imperatives: mutual care for others and the planet, and a climate politics that imagines the power of collective individual actions and finds pleasure and community in sharing creative sustainable ways to transform everyday living. Their perspectives open up the possibility of germinating alternative models of “influencing” decoupled from the commercial hegemonies of the current influencer economy. It is for us as researchers to continue to engage with these kinds of accounts and use them to broaden the horizons of our imaginaries for what a truly equitable and sustainable “influencer” ecology might look like.

Data Availability

Data sharing not applicable to this article as datasets are specific to the current study.

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