

# Weapons of the Chic: *Instagram* Influencer Engagement Pods as Practices of Resistance to *Instagram* Platform Labor

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## Abstract

This article examines the phenomenon of *Instagram* influencer “engagement pods” as an emergent form of resistance that responds to the reconfigured working conditions of platformized cultural production. Engagement pods are grassroots communities that agree to mutually like, comment on, share, or otherwise engage with each other’s posts, no matter the content, to game *Instagram*’s algorithm into prioritizing the participants’ content and show it to a broader audience. I argue that engagement pods represent a response to the material conditions of platformized cultural production on *Instagram*, where proprietary curation algorithms wrest knowledge and control of the labor process from producers. Cooperative algorithm hacking of this sort, although quite distinct from traditional organizing strategies, responds to the coercive force of the “threat of invisibility” that necessitates constant data production. They represent a collective attempt to exert some control over their “conditions of presence-to-others” and, in so doing, combat precarity and protect wages in the field. In a post-industrial economy where traditional models of labor organizing have struggled to address the conditions of platformized cultural work, I argue that the unusual phenomenon of *Instagram* engagement pods represents an organic form of worker resistance that responds to the unique conditions of these workers.

## Keywords

*Instagram*, engagement pods, platformization, precarious labor, cultural workers, algorithm hacking, labor organizing

## Introduction

In 2016, *Instagram* announced that its platform would be transitioning from a reverse chronological presentation of posts to a curated feed that selects content deemed most “meaningful” to each end user based on their usage history and the popularity of each post. In a blog post accompanying the change, *Instagram* explained that the curated feed is meant to improve the user experience by populating the news feed only with “the moments we believe you will care about the most” (“See the Moments You Care About First,” 2016).

The change is not surprising in this regard; preference-driven algorithms are designed to create seductive environments that keep people on the platform, liking, commenting, and producing data. *Instagram*’s own messaging about the change reflects this “users as consumers of content” priority. However, changes to platform infrastructure also inform participatory norms (Bucher, 2018), and *Instagram*’s change in presentation strategy has functioned to reorganize the productivity of creators, as much as it serves to create a more personalized experience for casual users. The shift has been

a game changer for *Instagram* influencers, whose livelihoods depend upon their visibility. Introducing personalized feeds has meant that their content is no longer necessarily showcased to all of their followers. This impacts their overall engagement numbers, which, in turn, impacts their value to advertising partners and, therefore, their earning potential.

Influencers contribute significantly to the platform’s value. They produce content designed to provoke others to “engage” in ways that produce data about themselves, their relationships, and habits that add complexity to each user’s data profile, stimulating the participation and interactivity that constitute the grist of communicative (Dean, 2005) and surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019).<sup>1</sup> Yet, the proprietary,

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black-boxed operational logics (Pasquale, 2015) of *Instagram* necessitate that these content creators work on an infrastructure that they cannot know, access, or direct. Indeed, the influencer exerts very little official control over the platform's infrastructure or governing logics, reflecting a chasm of power between platform holders and those who animate these spaces with their social and economic value. When changes are implemented, often without notice or explanation, these cultural producers are profoundly impacted by the new conditions of visibility that characterize their work.

However, cultural producers are not simply acted upon by platforms (Cotter, 2019); they actively orient themselves toward the demands of the technical infrastructure, attempting to make themselves "algorithmically recognizable" (Gillespie, 2017). In the wake of *Instagram*'s algorithm change, a landscape of clandestine forums for strategizing and information sharing has sprung up, where those who are invested discuss theories, share successes, and experiment with tactics to best the algorithm. In this article, I take up one such response—the phenomenon of *Instagram* influencer engagement pods—to interrogate algorithm gaming as a site of alternative labor organizing across this unique space of platformized cultural production.

Engagement pods are grassroots communities that agree to mutually like, comment on, share, or otherwise engage with each other's posts, no matter the content, in the hopes that this will trigger *Instagram*'s algorithm into prioritizing participants' content and show it to a broader audience. To date, little research addresses the ways communities on *Instagram* interpret and speak directly with algorithms. Cotter (2019) is one exception who offers the metaphor of "playing the visibility game" to foreground this type of conscious interaction with *Instagram*'s algorithmic infrastructure. My own contribution seeks to underscore the stakes of this "game" by placing engagement pods within a broader political economic context. From this vantage point, I propose that influencers' strategic participation in engagement pods begins to resemble a collective, organized effort to mitigate precarious employment conditions among a group of predominantly young and female cultural workers. In a post-industrial economy where traditional models of labor organizing have struggled to address the conditions of platformized cultural work, this article explores the phenomenon of *Instagram* engagement pods as an organic form of resistance to the unique circumstances of these workers.

Drawing upon data from 16 semi-structured interviews with self-identified *Instagram* influencers, I argue that engagement pods represent a response to the material conditions of platformized cultural production on *Instagram*, where proprietary curation algorithms wrest knowledge and control of the labor process from producers (Braverman, 1974). Cooperative algorithm hacking of this sort, although quite distinct from traditional organizing strategies, responds to the coercive force of the "threat of invisibility" (Bucher, 2018) that necessitates constant data production. It functions as a

mechanism by which influencers attempt to exert some control over their "conditions of presence-to-others" (Coudry, Fotopoulou, & Dickens, 2016) and, in so doing, combat precarity and protect wages in the field.

I begin by outlining the political economic context within which the influencer emerges and offers an overview of the academic literature in this field. Next, I use Bucher's (2018) concept of the "threat of invisibility" coupled with Labour Process Theory to develop a conceptual framework that centers algorithmic infrastructure in the influencers' work and guides my analysis of these groups. After a brief summary of the method by which the interview data were collected, I turn to my findings wherein I unpack interviewees' comments about how *Instagram*'s algorithmic structure affects their labor process and the various functions that engagement pods serve in response. Finally, I conclude by making the case that the engagement pod represents an organized, collective response to the precarious conditions that confront workers in this unique field of platformized cultural production.

## Work in the Cultural Industries and the Rise of the Influencer

The *Instagram* influencer emerges out of a broader set of political and economic transformations since the 1970s, predominantly in the West, that have trended toward greater employment insecurity across the post-industrial economy (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2015). Global capitalism, coupled with the intensified use of networked communication technologies, and shifts toward neoliberal governance have facilitated a more "flexible" regime of accumulation (Harvey, 1990) and ushered in new forms of "immaterial labour" (Lazzarato, 1996).

Work across the cultural industries is paradigmatic of changes to the organization of work under post-Fordism. The image of the creative, independently driven, risk-taking, flexibly employed, self-exploiting worker has become a model for 21st-century capitalism (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005; de Peuter, 2014; Gill & Pratt, 2008; McRobbie, 2001). Full-time, permanent employment at large media firms is increasingly giving way to short-term, project-based contract positions with little security, few benefits, and, dependent upon the field, downward trending wages. While the "self-employed" label has been celebrated for the freedom, autonomy, and flexibility it offers, it has also functioned to transfer risk onto workers (Neff, 2012) and intensify exploitation by extending the quantities of unpaid labor time involved in the production process of an increasingly mobile and untethered workforce (N. S. Cohen, 2016). Such conditions translate into workers operating in a perpetual state of precarity that de Peuter (2011) defines as the "existential, financial, and social insecurity exacerbated by the flexibilization of labor markets" (pp. 418-419) emerging in a context where the standard employment contract of Fordism is weakening.

The precarious cultural worker must remain flexible, entrepreneurial, and agile, with a diverse and constantly

updated skill set because “every interaction is an opportunity for work” (Gill, 2011, p. 249). Such conditions normalize the logic of “self-branding,” where individuals seek to mold the self into a salable product for the post-Fordist labor market (Hearn, 2008). Self-branding becomes a strategy to mitigate against an insecure and uncertain social, financial, and existential reality.

The influencer is an exemplar of these conditions. They are paradigms of “creative self-enterprise” (Duffy & Hund, 2015, p. 1), having fashioned their online presence into a marketable product for consumption by audiences and for sale to advertisers. An “influencer” is a type of “micro-celebrity” (Senft, 2008), and digital content creator who has cultivated an online following and earns an income on a contract basis from advertisers who pay them to promote commodities to their audience through their various profiles. The influencer creates platform-specific content designed for the widest possible distribution across a well-defined demographic segment. These partnerships between brands and influential social media personalities are increasingly common in a digital environment characterized by fierce competition for attention. Brands, seeking inexpensive and impactful online marketing strategies, are only too willing to partner with the wave of digital “microentrepreneurs” (Wong, 2012) pursuing “do-it-yourself” careers in the face of a fickle and competitive creative labor market. In many ways, some of the early optimistic discourse of the democratizing force of the Internet, and the power of “prosumers” to disrupt the control of major media companies over the landscape of cultural production, has dovetailed nicely with a post-Fordist regime of flexible accumulation that demands a creative labor pool characterized by flexibility, entrepreneurialism, individualism, and personal risk management (Gill, 2011; Neff, Wissinger, & Zukin, 2005).

It is common for influencers to work across multiple platforms, juggling personal blogs, and profiles for *Instagram*, *YouTube*, *Twitter*, *Snapchat*, and so on, to cross-promote and diversify their self-brand (Abidin, 2015); however, this article focuses explicitly on influencers’ work on *Instagram*. This is because *Instagram* has emerged as a leading platform in the influencer marketing industry. It is an established priority among both influencers themselves (PRNewswire, 2017) and marketers; recent industry reports suggest that 93% of influencer campaigns include *Instagram*, about twice as many as *YouTube* or *Facebook* (Williams, 2018).

Research concerning influencers has underscored the practices of self-presentation and reputation seeking they engage in (Abidin, 2014, 2016a, 2016b; Duffy & Hund, 2015; Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017; Marwick, 2015; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Wissinger, 2015). The proliferation of social media platforms seemingly democratizes access to celebrity status, offering anyone a potential following, social status, and the economic opportunities that come with it. Through the “performative practice” of microcelebrity (Marwick, 2013), influencers build fame online by packaging the self as

a persona to be consumed, and through the careful and ongoing affective management of an online following (Abidin, 2015; Abidin & Thompson, 2012; Marwick & boyd, 2011). These relationships are underscored by commercial interests where followers perform uncompensated “visibility labour” (Abidin, 2016b) on behalf of influencers and become part of a “promotional apparatus” (Carah & Shaul, 2016) for brands.

Other literature has emphasized the influencer’s self-presentation and reputation-seeking activity as a form of labor and sought to locate it within a political economic context. Hearn and Schoenhoff (2015) argue that the influencer emerges against the backdrop of an “exhausted neoliberal political economic system, marked by perpetual crisis, austerity regimes, and employment precarity” (p. 195). In such a context, Duffy (2016; 2017) shows how young female fashion bloggers pursue social status and economic security through “aspirational labour,” the largely unpaid, future-oriented, and entrepreneurial work done in the hope that it will eventually pay off in the form of an independent or creative career. The pursuit of this work, as Duffy and Wissinger (2017) further point out, is partly buoyed by cultural myths of fun, freedom, and authenticity that function to “discipline and incite” cultural workers and aspirants.

Less research, however, has explicitly centered the relationship between influencers and the *Instagram* platform itself. One exception is Cotter (2019), who explores influencers’ conscious interactions with *Instagram*’s algorithmic architecture and offers the “visibility game” as a metaphor to demonstrate that while algorithms provide a structure within which users act, they are not determining of user behavior. Like Cotter (2019), my own contribution focuses upon influencers’ conscious interactions with *Instagram*’s algorithmic architecture. However, in what follows, I intend to raise the stakes of the “visibility game,” by emphasizing *struggle* in this growing field of creative labor. Where Cotter (2019) sees a game, I see a collective effort to mitigate precarious conditions among a cohort of largely young and female cultural workers.

By conceptualizing the influencer as a worker, it is not my intention to reanimate the “free labor” debate, which pivoted upon whether or not social media users were “infinitely exploited” (Fuchs, 2013, p. 102) by companies through their free content and data production. I conceptualize the influencer as a worker because they exchange their labor power to advertisers for compensation. The term is used intentionally in order to maintain a critical focus upon the exchange relations that power the persona, cultural production, and conscious interactions with *Instagram*’s algorithm that influencers engage in. That said, platforms have “cut into the chain” and re-mediated the fixed employer–employee relation (Kushner, 2013, cited in Gandini, 2019, p. 6). While the brand occupies the role of employer, the platform functions as the site of the influencers’ work, a digital point of production, and part of the “milieu within which the capital-labour relation is enacted upon workers” (Gandini, 2019, pp. 2, 7).

It is upon and through the platform that influencers fulfill their contractual obligations to their advertising partners; their labor process is organized by the platform infrastructure, and it is via *Instagram*'s metrics that their work is evaluated and future contracts determined. With this in mind, in the following section, I outline a conceptual framework that foregrounds the platform in the influencers' work, offering a lens through which to interpret engagement pod activity as worker struggle.

## Conceptual Framework

Bucher's (2018) research on *Facebook Edgerank* offers useful conceptual tools to examine how algorithmic architecture shapes the participatory norms that organize the influencer's work. In her work on *Facebook* news feed algorithms, Bucher (2018) inverts the relationship Foucault outlines between visibility and discipline as it is organized by the technical architecture of the Panopticon. She writes,

Whereas visibility, as a consequence of the panoptic arrangement, is abundant and experienced more like a threat imposed from outside powers, visibility in the Facebook system arguably works the opposite way. The algorithmic architecture of the news feed algorithm does not automatically impose visibility on all subjects. Visibility is not something ubiquitous but rather something scarce. (Bucher, 2018, p. 85)

On *Facebook*, visibility is throttled by platform architecture where curation algorithms amplify some posts and constrain the visibility of others. In this way, under the algorithmic logic of the curated news feed, "visibility functions as a reward rather than as punishment" (Bucher, 2018, p. 87), the inverse of Foucault's panopticism. To be visible is to be chosen by the algorithm, selected, elevated, and given voice and legitimacy. While this structure of visibility remains disciplinary, through the curated news feed, "the problem is not the possibility of constantly being observed, but the possibility of constantly disappearing" (Bucher, 2018, p. 84). Bucher refers to this as the "threat of invisibility" that disciplines the subject into ongoing participation in the Facebook ecosystem. This threat impels continual posting and interactivity on the platform.

The threat of invisibility demonstrates how the algorithmic architecture of social media platforms imposes particular governmental logics onto users and organizes participatory norms. This threat, however, manifests differently in different contexts and via different subject positions. It is particularly acute among influencers, who participate not only as "users" but also as workers whose livelihoods are dependent upon their sustained social media visibility. The subject of the *Instagram* influencer necessitates that we grapple with how the imperative to participate imposed by algorithmic architecture is embedded in a system of capital accumulation. From this perspective, the curated news feed might be

usefully interrogated, not only as a disciplinary apparatus that produces obediently participatory subjects but also as a mechanism that intensifies the productivity of cultural producers working under platformized conditions.

It is here that Labour Process Theory (LPT) offers analytical purchase. Braverman (1974) charted a progression whereby the labor process is systematically measured, rationalized, and brought under management's control. Holistic knowledge of the work was appropriated from the laborer and made the exclusive purview of management, allowing management to "control each step of the labor process and its mode of execution" (Braverman, 1974, p. 119). This effectively separated concept from execution, deskilling and cheapening labor, intensifying productivity, and easing the appropriation of surplus value.

LPT has been largely sidelined in cultural industries scholarship due to its emphasis on control (N. S. Cohen, 2012). Across the cultural industries, workers operate with high levels of autonomy as they produce cultural texts, and the *Instagram* influencer is no different. Their production of images and videos for *Instagram* is largely self-directed. Advertisers may articulate general expectations for particular campaigns; however, they typically refrain from micro-managing the creative process, and surrender control to the influencer, given their expertise regarding their audience. Such conditions of work are ostensibly incompatible with a theory of monopoly capitalism that emphasizes the rationalization, systematizing, and rigorous managerial control of the labor process in an industrial regime of production. However, despite the fact that influencers have considerable creative autonomy in the production of cultural messages, the platform operates with near unbridled control over the influencer's labor process as it pertains to their circulation and visibility, which, for the influencer, is as central to their labor process as is the production of cultural messages.<sup>2</sup> Under the new algorithmic management, influencers have been dispossessed of a complete knowledge of the labor process in this regard. The ways in which their content is elevated and dispersed through the *Instagram* ecology have been complicated, automated, and veiled from the community. Interviewees indicated that this ambiguity has intensified their working day.

## Methods

Sixteen semi-structured interviews were conducted over Skype with self-identified *Instagram* influencers.<sup>3</sup> Each interview was approximately 1 hr long, and the topics discussed included work biographies, everyday use of the *Instagram* platform, and strategies employed to improve their visibility and metrics.

Interviewees worked across a variety of genres, including lifestyle, beauty, fashion, travel, health and wellness, cooking, crafting, and interior design. Nearly all interviewees were women (15 women and 1 man), reflecting the fact that

influencer marketing is particularly prominent in feminized sites of cultural production (Hellenkemper, 2019). Participants were between 24 and 41 years of age and located in Anglophone countries such as Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand.

Interviewees held diverse levels of “influence” in the industry. Their audience sizes ranged from approximately 1,000 followers to roughly 200,000, which positions them within the mid-tier influencer (between 50,000 and 500,000 followers), micro-influencer (between 10,000 and 50,000 followers), and nano-influencer (less than 10,000 followers) ranges (Mediakix, n.d.). For some interviewees, this work is their full-time profession; others do it on the side to supplement their income, still working “aspirationally” (Duffy, 2016) in the hopes of one day going “pro.” Some had professional representation that would broker advertising partnerships on their behalf. Others operated independently, contacting brands directly and negotiating deals on their own. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 2009).

## Findings

### *The Curated News Feed*

In the wake of the initial change, content creators across the *Instagram* community began reporting diminished reach and engagement numbers. Some tried to mitigate this by encouraging their followers to turn on notifications so that they would be alerted to newly published content. Others sought to pressure *Instagram* into reconsidering its strategy; a *Change.org* petition began to circulate demanding that *Instagram* revert its news feedback to chronological order. It garnered 343,011 signatures (Heard, 2016).

Several interviewees mentioned that now their posts, on average, reach about 10% of their total audience. Jennifer explained her own experience with the original shift to a curated feed:

It's definitely frustrating. [. . .] When they first instituted the algorithm [. . .] my engagement was literally cut in half. Everyone's was, you know? I had maybe 50,000 followers [at the time], and I was getting 2500 to 3000 likes per photo, but then after the algorithm, I was lucky if I hit 1000 likes.

Diminished engagement has the potential to jeopardize their earnings, as fewer interactions can translate into less interest from advertising partners. Sarah, a 34-year-old travel and beauty influencer in Toronto, expressed this concern:

It's hard when people are relying on that as their business or their main form of income. It's really frustrating to see the algorithm change and then you have to scramble to figure it out before they change it again. Because brands totally care about how much engagement, how many likes. Brands are so numbers focused

that an algorithm change that might drop your engagement by fifty percent can have a dramatic affect on how much income you're going to make, so it's tricky.

*Instagram's* algorithmic curation introduces uncertainty into the influencer's engagement metrics, which has real consequences for their livelihoods. Elizabeth, a 32-year-old lifestyle and photography influencer in California reflected upon the way that the algorithm change had introduced a new source of stress into her interactions with her brand partners:

Algorithms definitely influence things and especially when brands ask for feedback on how many people saw a post. Sometimes that's like “uh really? Do I have to?” It's really embarrassing. I want you [brands] to like what I did and be proud of the content I created and the engagement I created. When it's just like, “Hey guess what! Twelve percent of my followers saw the thing you gave me to post.” That really sucks.

Despite producers' anxieties about the change, the platform maintains messaging that in this system “high quality, on-brand content” (“Aside From Ads, How Do I Grow My Audience on Instagram?” 2019) reigns supreme. The suggestion seems to be that the best will inevitably rise to the top. In this way, the platform encourages producers to turn inward; if they focus on their brand, improve their content, and produce more consistently, they will see positive results. Any difficulties influencers might experience as a result of the new engagement-based criteria for circulation are personal failings of individual producers. They are asked to accept the newly opaque mechanisms by which their work is evaluated, rewarded, or buried, and trust that it results in an accurate reflection of what their respective audiences want to see. Angela, a travel influencer in Toronto, expressed adopting this position with some resignation:

I have literally tried every best practice out there and my likes are still incredibly low. My analytics show that only 10% of my audience is even seeing my content and that's enormously frustrating . . . especially since I have no control over that. I've stopped focusing on the numbers and just put out my best content.

Curation algorithms have altered the conditions of their work such that influencers feel as though they no longer have control over the results of their work process. Beauty and travel influencer, Sarah, reiterated the importance of maintaining a personal website or some external digital archive because the *Instagram* algorithm, “changes on a whim and you have no control over that!” Sarah's own frustration with *Instagram's* algorithm responds to this lack of control and its implications; when asked what would improve *Instagram* for her, she responded, “Just let it be chronological and stop wreaking havoc on people's lives!” Her answer is representative of the stakes of the visibility game (Cotter, 2019) as they manifest for cultural producers who earn a livelihood in

these spaces. Content curation algorithms are about more than creating personalized, digital experiences that encourage user data production; for cultural producers, they are also about employment precarity and a fundamental lack of any decision-making power regarding the conditions of their work, nor knowledge of how it is measured and evaluated.

The veiled algorithmic logics that determined their respective visibility on *Instagram* demand that influencers constantly engage with the platform to identify effective strategies. Maya, a travel, health, and fitness influencer in North Carolina, put it this way, “It seems like it’s changing all the time and just trying to keep up with the latest strategies to beat the system has been really challenging.” Lifestyle influencer, Christine, also articulated the time commitment associated with optimizing your use of the platform for maximum visibility. “A lot of people just struggle to find the time to go through and figure out what works and what doesn’t.” Alison, an outdoor sports influencer, reflected upon how algorithmic decisions about the visibility of her content had enlarged her use of the site:

It’s not just how much you post, it’s how much you interact with other brands by commenting. So that kind of stuff is all part of your job too. To be like, “Ok, yes. I do have to go through *Instagram* and make comments and do that kind of stuff,” because that’s part of the algorithm.

In implementing its new form of black-boxed algorithmic curation, *Instagram* consigns influencers to the work of constant engagement, experimentation, and data production in an effort to optimize for maximum visibility, effectively intensifying their working day.

### The Engagement Pod

Engagement pods are a grassroots tactical response developed to contend with these algorithmic conditions of cultural production. They are a collective effort by which influencers attempt to regain some control over their working conditions within the *Instagram* ecosystem. Despite the imposition of black-boxed curation algorithms, cultural producers recognize and resist these conditions in order to protect their own interests.

Couldry et al. (2016) argue that in an era characterized by pervasive systems of data production, measurement, and analysis, our presence “now necessarily involves being categorized and measured by automated processes over which the social actor may have very little control” (p. 132). The authors argue that the ways that people respond to the parameters of their measurement and categorization, in an attempt to exert some control over their “conditions of presence-to-others” (p. 121), are “an important site of struggle by social actors to retain control over their conditions of existence” (p. 123). The engagement pod represents one such struggle for control of that existence.

An *Instagram* engagement pod is a group of influencers who mutually agree to consistently comment on, “like,” or otherwise generate data in relation to the content posted by other group members, no matter what it is, or whether or not they actually like what it is. Comment pods are a very common form of engagement pod, although there are also like-only pods, and some groups organize different types of rounds periodically that trade different types of engagement. In the comment pod when a member of the group posts, other members are obliged to respond, typically with comments that are at least four words long and always tailored to each individual post. A series of emojis or a short, generic comment like “Nice shot” will not suffice because participants, such as crochet influencer Gloria, believe that these types of comments are “flagged as bot activity” and deprioritized by the algorithm. Speed is also crucial; the accepted knowledge goes that strong engagement numbers within the first 5 min of posting will trigger the algorithm into picking up that content and circulating it across the news feeds of a broader audience, so engagement pod participants must be prompt.

These groups are increasingly common, not only among influencers but in fields where an established social media presence and a ready-made following are useful assets for securing employment. They vary in size. Interviewees explained that some are small niche communities, organized around a particular theme, where members boost each other’s posts and share strategies when changes to the algorithm are perceptible. Other groups have thousands of members and are managed by bots that handle administrative tasks such as welcoming new members, answering questions, scheduling and closing rounds of posting, and publicly shaming and/or ejecting non-participants or “leechers” as they are commonly called. The frequency of activity within a pod varies similarly. While some groups may agree to a schedule of one or two posts per member each day, other groups run on a nearly hourly basis.

Groups are sometimes organized on *Instagram*, although they are also often organized on sites like *Telegram*, *Facebook Groups*, and occasionally *Reddit*. Where a group gathers typically depends upon the size of the group and the organizing tools required. Different platforms offer different affordances. For example, *Instagram Direct* has the benefit of being conveniently located within the app, keeping the activity centralized. However, the platform restricts the number of people you can include in a direct message to 32 (“How many people can I add” n.d.). *Telegram*, on the contrary, has no limitations on the number of group members. It has the added benefits of being encrypted, not owned by *Facebook*, and allowing third-party applications, so group administrators can develop and implement bots that automate the management of a pod.

In some of these larger groups, such as those on *Telegram*, users are permitted to set up and engage using a secondary shell account. In these cases, participants request to receive engagement on their primary account, while engaging

reciprocally with other group members' content through this secondary account. The point here is to safeguard against cluttering their primary *Instagram* with content that is irrelevant or suspicious, while still managing to participate reciprocally and generate the required engagement for other members. Overall, engagement pods tend to have strict rules for membership: participate consistently and in accordance with the group rules or be banned.

Interviewees articulated three interrelated uses for the engagement pod: to improve their algorithmic ranking and visibility, to share information and strategies, and to manage appearances to advertising partners.

### *Engagement Pods as Algorithm Hacking*

Most commonly, engagement pods are discussed as a way to game *Instagram*'s algorithm. This mutual back-scratching is intended to target the technical infrastructure of a platform. Participants seek to capitalize upon its algorithmic logics of content curation and direct them toward prioritizing their own content. The aim is to manipulate the algorithm into assigning a high ranking to their content by manufacturing the signposts of nascent virality that the algorithm was designed to seek out and amplify. The tactic is often articulated as a way to “fight” (Thompson, 2017), “game” (Pathak, 2017), “beat” (Cheung, 2018), or “hack” (Barkho, 2017) the algorithm. Participants hope that this will improve the likelihood that their content is visible in the news feeds of more members of their own audience and picked up by *Instagram* to be featured on the *Explore* page for new potential audience members to discover, growing their own following. Christine described it this way:

The end of the game is to take the algorithm into account. It [the algorithm] takes all of the actions that have happened on a post as soon as you post it, and if there are a lot of interactions happening, they're [*Instagram*] like “Oh my gosh, this must be a really valuable post, we'll push it out to more people.”

This type of coordinated algorithm gaming indicates that content creators do, indeed, fashion themselves to become “algorithmically recognizable” (Gillespie, 2017). Beyond this, it suggests that well-motivated cultural producers, like *Instagram* influencers, orient themselves not only so that the algorithm might recognize them but also so that they might seduce it, drive it to action, or “make it speak” (Bucher, 2018, p. 60). They orient themselves toward the algorithmic system of measurement that judges and determines their value, and they have organized in order to do so.

### *Engagement Pods as Information Sharing Networks*

For Elizabeth, her pod had morphed to take on another role; it came to operate as a clandestine forum of information sharing concerning all things algorithm:

I think, for the most part, what I've found with the pods is that they've been great, not necessarily for engagement, but just for “hey guys, has the algorithm just changed again? What's happening?” Doing a lot of talking with other influencers who care about that sort of thing, because normal people who just use *Instagram* for fun are not going, “OMG did it just change? What happened? How do we get around it? How do we do it right? What do we do?” So [the pod is about] having a space to talk about that with people who know different people than I do, who are trying different things and can kind of report back to each other.

Elizabeth's description reflects the way that these cultural producers navigate a dearth of definitive knowledge about the operations of the platform where they conduct their work. Faced with the fact that the conditions that determine their visibility are obscured and constantly changing, they work collectively to attempt to decipher the logics of the algorithm by “reporting back to each other” about the successes or failures of their various experiments. They develop communities of “experiential knowledge” (Bucher, 2018) based on their collective encounters with the algorithm's operational logics (Bishop, 2019). She continued,

The algorithm changes so much and we're like—we meaning influencers who are always talking about it—we're very aware of that and we're always on top of what's changed. What's changing, and how do we tickle the algorithm now?

The effort to “tickle the algorithm” is an effort to make it speak in their own interests, to understand and capitalize upon its operational logics, and, in so doing, to reclaim control over how they become visible. At base, this is a struggle to exert some control over their conditions of work.

### *Engagement Pods as Means to Manage Professional Appearances to Advertisers*

When the engagement pod works as intended, brands see a large, growing, and actively engaged community surrounding the influencer, which functions to secure them advertising projects, or strengthen their position while negotiating the terms of contracts with brand partners. If branded content does not perform well, future contracts with brands are jeopardized. Food and wellness blogger, Ruth, described how her pod came to be as a result of attempts to manage professional appearances to advertisers:

It didn't start as a comment pod. It started so that we could keep in touch with each other about different things going on. But we ended up making it a comment pod. One girl just posted one day and was like “hey, I'm doing my first sponsored *Instagram* post, can you guys go over and check it out.” And we were like “Oh yeah.” Because we know if you don't get a certain amount of numbers, you know, we know that brands are going to ask for your analytics afterwards.

The comment pod for this group emerged as a way to maintain the appearance of strong influence and the ability to command attention for advertiser within their niche, thus securing themselves brand partnerships more consistently. The comment pod acts as a reliable source of the engagement that plays such a large role in the future employment of these influencers. The guarantee of mutual engagement offers some stability in this regard.

It is worth here pointing out that not all influencers approve of engagement pods. Across the industry, perspectives on the engagement pods are mixed. Some characterize them as unfair to audiences and dishonest to advertisers, or as a form of cheating that corrupts a merit-based system and ruins the industry for everyone. As one blogger puts it, “Think of how you feel when you discover that one of your favourite athletes took steroids to cheat their way to the top” (McPhillips, 2018). The way that morality and integrity are invoked in discussions of the engagement pod is revealing of the boundaries of acceptability and legitimacy in social media platform labor (Petre, Duffy, & Hund, 2019). Those who do not participate for these reasons see themselves as playing by the rules and their own engagement numbers as more “real,” “natural,” or “authentic” as a result.

Among the influencers I spoke with who did not participate, some were skeptical that engagement pods were effective; others cited the unreasonable time commitment of participating and the inevitable feelings of guilt when they did not meet their commitment to other group members. Others abstained for more pragmatic reasons—because they feared the potential ramifications. Lifestyle influencer Melanie said,

I’ve always been very anti-comment pods because I just feel like you can never really cheat. I just feel like *Instagram* always knows. If you find a way to cheat the system, they’ll clamp down on it and penalize you for it.

Others, like style influencer Rachel, avoid pods because she worried about brands discovering her tactics: “I was in a few before until my PR person told me to get out of them. Because brands see that and they don’t like it. It’s not real engagement.” These comments are indicative of a type of panoptic discipline that guides their behavior. The possibility that *Instagram* or brands may be watching deters them from participating, despite the guaranteed engagement and mutual support that belonging to such a community might offer.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The new algorithmic management thrusts influencers into additionally precarious conditions, wherein platform infrastructure impacts their circulation and thus necessarily alters their conditions of work. Under the new algorithmic management, influencers feel dispossessed of knowledge and control—actual or perceived—of their labor process. By

alienating workers from knowledge of and control over the labor process, the platform has intensified the demand for productivity on the site. This is the sort of reverse panoptic discipline that underscores the threat of invisibility: influencers know that they are not visible in the feeds of all their followers, but they cannot know when, for whom, and under what circumstances their content has *not* been shown, and so cannot know when they have done enough. This disciplines influencers into generating consistent content to maintain optimal visibility, engagement metrics, and thus consistent sponsorships from advertisers.

Participation in engagement pods—whether intended to improve circulation and audience engagement metrics, to share information concerning algorithm changes, or to control appearances to advertising partners—is an attempt to combat the perpetual state of precarity that characterizes the work of these cultural producers laboring under platformized conditions. This conscious interaction with the algorithm certainly illustrates the way influencers “play the visibility game” (Cotter, 2019), but it further represents a communal response whereby these cultural producers seek a measure of stability. They manufacture their own consistent popularity despite shrouded and ever-changing systems of evaluation. Jennifer indicated that her strategies for engaging with the algorithm have allowed her to avoid a more unpredictable situation:

I think for me now, I’m less frustrated because I’ve figured out how to, not game the system, but to work with it a little bit. [. . .] If I were really in the toilet like some of my colleagues, I’d just throw in the towel and go drive Uber.

Algorithm gaming, such as that which takes place in the engagement pod, is a collective effort to stabilize the precarious working conditions that characterize this space of platformized cultural production. To that end, engagement pods represent a response to the material conditions of platformized cultural production on *Instagram*, where proprietary curation algorithms wrest knowledge and control of the labor process from producers (Braverman, 1974). Cooperative algorithm hacking of this sort, although quite distinct from traditional organizing strategies, responds to the coercive force of the “threat of invisibility” (Bucher, 2018) that necessitates constant data production. They represent a collective attempt to exert some control over their “conditions of presence-to-others” (Couldry et al., 2016) and, in so doing, combat precarity and protect wages in the field.

Opinions concerning the efficacy of the comment pod for achieving its goals are mixed, and it is not my intention to overstate it. Indeed, the algorithm is constantly changing and advertisers have begun to look for signs of “fraudulent influencer activity” among their influencer partners. What is significant here, however, is that comment pods are a piece of an increasingly sophisticated ecosystem of user workarounds designed to undermine the demands of *Instagram* platform

labor, or the relational labor (Baym, 2018) that powers social media platforms, more broadly. This represents what de Peuter and Cohen (2015) call “alternate constellations” (p. 591) of worker organizing that confronts the material conditions of work in a post-industrial information economy.

The engagement pod is not simply an artifact of social media narcissism or a celebrity-driven Internet culture. Understood from the perspective of the influencer, it is a small-scale collective resistance against content selective algorithms that have reconfigured their labor process in a way that intensifies their working day. They are organized efforts to manipulate the algorithm that has inserted itself between content creators and their audiences, and are an attempt to take control of the process whereby they are datafied, measured, and assigned value. In that sense, they represent a refusal of the algorithmic management of *Instagram* platform labor and constitute a small form of worker mobilization to maintain control of the labor process in this space of cultural production.

Notably, participation in the engagement pod is not motivated by an anti-capitalist politics or class-consciousness. It is carried out with the entrepreneurial zeal of aspirant micro-capitalists looking to grow their personal businesses. de Peuter and Cohen (2015) offer a useful conceptual lens to interpret such activity in their discussion of “mutual aid.” First proposed in the work of Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin (1902/1987), practices of mutual aid emerge in the context of shared material conditions that are particularly difficult or when faced with a common adversary. In such circumstances, when relying upon one another is essential to survive, relationships and practices of support are born of necessity. Among precarious workers, mutual aid emerges in context to ease the difficulties of their shared unstable conditions. Importantly, while practices of mutual aid have the potential to undermine capitalist domination, they are generally ambivalent in their politics, and so, they can also perpetuate or more deeply embed workers into the social relations of capitalism. The engagement pod does little to release precarious workers from their conditions or to challenge the social relations of dominance and subordination that undergird them. However, mutual aid does establish “the social bonds necessary to contest labour precarity and affirms the self-organization necessary for alternative economies” (de Peuter & Cohen, 2015, p. 594). In that sense, engagement pods do constitute significant networks of solidarity, camaraderie, and support among a group of workers who otherwise have virtually no traditional or institutional supports at their disposal. This experiment in collectivity is particularly striking given the culture of entrepreneurialism and the emphasis of establishing a unique and individualized self-brand that is so pervasive in the field. Social bonds that prioritize fellowship with other similarly positioned workers over competitive individualism are heartening and worth continued attention. It is this solidarity that is fundamental for any larger political project that seeks to reimagine how such

cultural production might be reorganized in ways that better support workers.

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### Notes

1. Communicative capitalism, conceptualized by Jodi Dean (2005), highlights the way that capitalist productivity now derives from the “expropriation and exploitation of communicative processes” (p. 4), while surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2015, 2019) underlines the way that capital increasingly uses behavioral data to “predict and modify human behaviour as a means to produce revenue and market control” (Zuboff, 2015, p. 75).
2. It is worth noting here that Sheila Cohen (1987) has argued that the continuing efforts of capitalists to exert control over the labor process as outlined by Braverman are more fundamental about exploitation and not “control” as an end in itself. It is “not about ‘bossing’ but about the relationship between effort and reward, labour intensification and work measurement” (p. 45). Capital can, and does, cede control in particular areas if it functions to hinder the appropriation of surplus value (N. S. Cohen, 2012).
3. The names of interviewees have been changed to protect their anonymity.

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