

Speculative Design Pictorial

Influencer Economy: Existence as Labor

Jordana Dumont

MA HCI Student

jordana.dumont@post.idc.ac.il

Ayelet Zwickler Ackerman

MA HCI Student

ayelet.zwickler@post.idc.ac.il

ABSTRACT

The inseparability of social media in daily life and the democratization of the internet has resulted in the influencer as a justifiable profession. For the influencer, methods of self-presentation, such as constructed authenticity and strategic personal disclosures, are employed for the purpose of gaining followers and income. This pictorial aims to explore the influencer mentality of leveraging life's intimate moments as financial opportunities. We describe the process and design of our prototype Shop-A-Life, a government-funded, social media content agency that allows you to buy human experiences for your social media profile rather than actually experience them.

Author Keywords

Influencer; Social Media; Speculative Design; Authenticity; Existence.

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND / MOTIVATION

As social media's initial purpose was once to connect and entertain people, it has rapidly evolved into a powerful marketing tool. The impact it has on individuals' lives has spawned new economic opportunities and career paths. Today, to be an 'influencer', "individuals who leverage their social and cultural capital on social media to shape opinions and

purchasing decisions of others", has become a legitimate vocational practice for many [4]. As their career, influencers deliberately perform their identities online to build their audience, seeing themselves as profitable brands and entrepreneurial ventures.

The limitless shelf space of the internet and shrunk barriers of becoming an 'influencer' has enabled the everyday person to have their entire life be accessible online and monetized. Although celebrities in the past have had great influence on our society's cultural trends, the internet has democratized access to creation and broadcast tools empowering the ordinary and amateur to gain influence. Because of this, succeeding in this digital environment requires a different approach than in the past. Becoming a successful influencer today depends on one's ability to brand themselves by creating a consumable and appealing online identity. While some choose to promote luxurious and unattainable lifestyles, a bulk of successful influencers depend on appearing authentic and relatable to their followers.

The ability to persuade consumers stems from influencers' ability to build an intimate and seemingly genuine relationship with their audience. They strategically employ a perception of credibility and authenticity in order to strengthen trust and recognition

between them and their audience. Steven Woods writes, "A good influencer is one that has built up the trust with their audience to where a paid product placement seems authentic" [5]. They do this by sharing their emotions, memories and moments, or intimate and mundane details from their daily life all for the purpose of having a convincing online persona. This engineered authenticity is continually performed for an audience with the goal of being perceived as real and true.

In the influencer economy, the lines become blurred between living and selling. For our speculative project, we wanted to critically examine how the authenticity of influencers is manufactured within this ecosystem, and explore the tension that comes with existing and then commodifying that existence.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

For our research, our intention was to delve into how the presentation and monetization of the self carried out by influencers often bears no relation to their physical reality. We looked at real-world, existing trends that are seen on social media or covered in the news, as well as fictional examples shown in pop culture. We found work that portrays the absurd measures influencers employ to gain attention, and signify a deliberate lifestyle for the purpose of monetization.

RELATED WORK

Monetizing the Minutia

In Taylor Lorenz's New York Times article, "For Creators, Everything Is For Sale", she writes about a trend of startups that make it easier for influencers to monetize every aspect of their life. On one startup *NewNew*, fans pay to vote in polls to control some of a creator's day-to-day decisions, like what they eat or who they hang out with. The company refers to themselves as the "human stock market." The founder explains: "We're building an economy of attention where you purchase moments in other people's lives, and we take it a step further by allowing and enabling people to control those moments" [3]. From this, we were disturbed by people willingly ceding their daily existence to the whims of an anonymous audience. In our design, we wanted to incorporate how influencers are motivated to monetize each aspect of their lives, down to the minutia, in order to extract as much value from everyday interactions.

Our Present Dystopia

Black Mirror is a television series that depicts the unhealthy relationship between humans and technology, digging into the changes and consequences it introduces to society. In the episode 'Nosedive', they show a society where every interaction, in-person and virtual, is rated on an app by others from one to five stars. This world is entirely driven by ratings, likes, and followers, determining your job, your home, and all things attached to your reality. What we found intriguing is how this human to human rating app only feels a few degrees more severe than services we use today, like Uber or Instagram. While the show's intention is to be a dystopian series that deals with the future, the themes are more aligned with our current reality and behavior.

The episode shows that the people in this world, similar to influencers, are laboring to sustain an appealing profile. While they strive to cultivate an amicable persona, their form of work prevents them from being engaged with the real world, all the people and happenings in it [1].

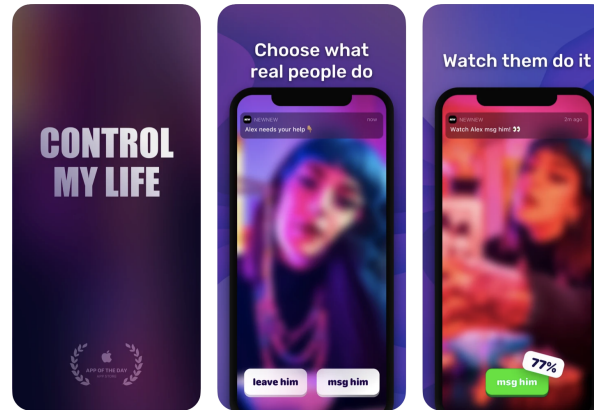


Figure 1. *NewNew* platform

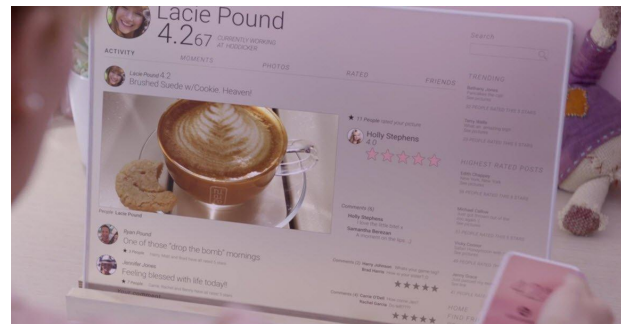


Figure 2. *Black Mirror* rating application

SPECULATIVE RESEARCH

EXPLORATION THROUGH COLLAGE

Our collage was composed in the early stages of our process. The very nature of constructing a collage mirrors the labor of the influencer: editing and manipulating an environment to spark inspiration. We used this mindset to enforce the medium: taking independent pieces and bringing them together to craft a dreamy, luxurious, utopian atmosphere. We wanted to transmit an ethereal feeling, a beautiful scene which communicates a feeling of a photoshopped environment that can be real and abstract at the same time.

This process ignited many questions within us about the reality of social media in general, and specifically the influencer culture where things may look attractive and ideal, but are in fact maneuvered to do so. The issues that stirred within us were concerned about deceptive vs. authentic, the physical experience vs. virtual experience, and what are the measures we are willing to take in order to be seen in a specific way by society. Our questions were:

What does the influencer industry say about our societal values?

What would a world look like where we were all forced to monetize our existence?

We already sell our time, our attention, our identities. What comes next?



Figure 3. Exploration through collage.

SPECULATIVE SOCIETY: POLITICAL SPECTRUM

For our speculative environment, we wanted to illustrate the consequences of extreme, unchecked techno-capitalism, by having a right-wing economy. We continued to build on our question of thinking about a society where it is mandated to monetize your lifestyle online. We had initially intended for this world to have an authoritarian government, but through gathering inspiration from related work, we were inspired to

design a prototype that can reflect our present tendencies and not feel far removed from our current state. We still wanted our initiative to have a government undertaking, therefore, our society would lie somewhere in the middle between libertarian and authoritarian.

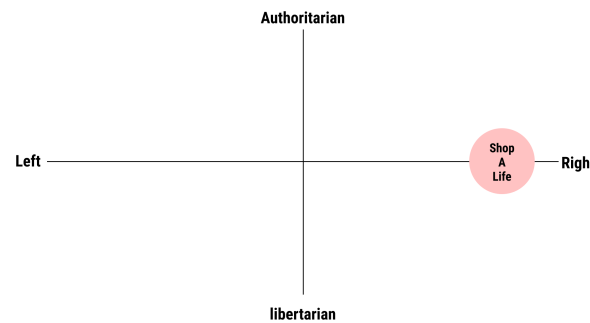


Figure 4. Political spectrum diagram.

SPECULATIVE DESIGN PROPOSAL

For our speculative design, we wanted to comment on the hypocrisy of the career of an influencer and their choice in using life's moments as business ventures. With commercials and advertisements, people are aware when they are being marketed to. In the influencer economy, the boundaries are less defined. For their labor, authenticity is an orchestrated performance, but simultaneously comes with expectations of spontaneity and truth from their audience. For our prototype, we wanted to highlight the influencer's mentality of using intimate and trivial moments in their lives as advantageous opportunities for their status and financial gains.

From Taylor Lorenz's article, we thought of the perspective of the influencer. In their career, it seems the act of experiencing something isn't as important as having that experience online and monetizing it. Additionally, from our related work research, we found there wasn't a large gap between our present and the

dystopian future shown in *Black Mirror*. The future was here. Therefore, we wanted this model to feel that it could be believable today.

Our approach incorporates elements from existing marketing agencies that help influencers enhance their social media profiles. We took inspiration from their business model and created a service for influencers to purchase content for their online persona.

Shop-A-Life

Our design proposal is Shop-A-Life, a government-funded, social media content agency that allows you to buy human experiences for your social media profile rather than actually experience them. We created a working website that provides relatable life experiences for people to purchase instead of having to literally experience them. Our menu has a range of common, day-to-day events like: Having a Midlife Crisis, Being the Least In-Shape in An Exercise Class, Quitting Marathon Training, or Funeral for a Pet. We chose moments that feel typical and unedited in order to have a strong authenticity factor. The service has a full staff providing the creation, production, and management services for the content. Because our agency has ties to the government, we provide the option for young adults to complete a national service requirement by volunteering with the agency. Furthermore, we wanted it to be framed as a humanitarian effort, therefore there are opportunities to make donations to different funds like The Ring Light Fund or Less than 1000 Followers Fund.

The design was inspired from contemporary millennial aesthetic and existing social media services. We wanted it to appear like a believable business and used a layout that is consistent with other online agencies. We used pastel colors to give a feeling of serenity, well-being, and charm. The simplicity of the style is meant to give an impression that our service is wholesome and risk-averse.

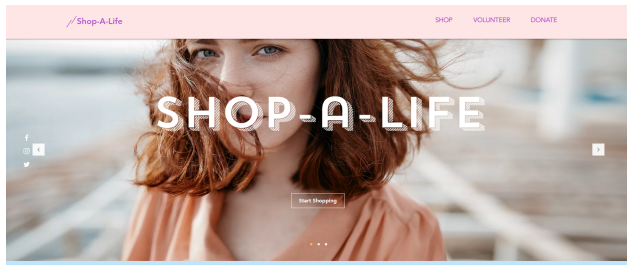


Figure 5. Shop-A-Life prototype

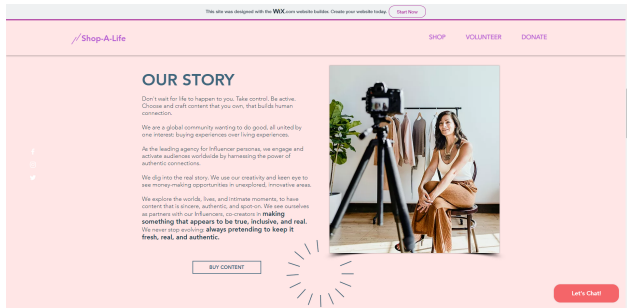


Figure 6. Shop-A-Life prototype

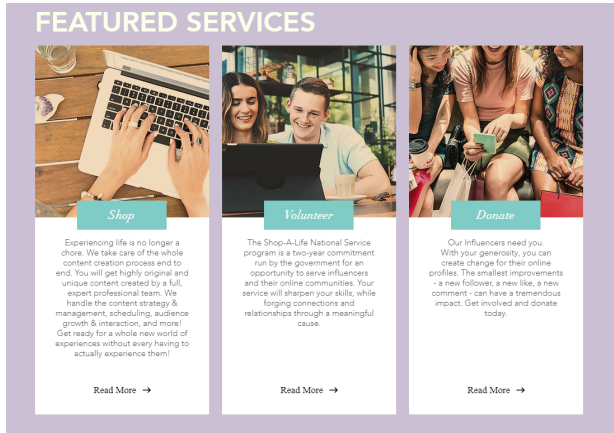


Figure 7. Shop-A-Life prototype



Figure 8. Shop-A-Life prototype

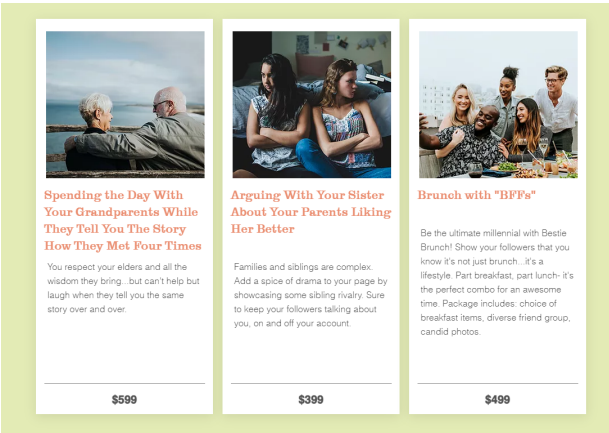


Figure 9. Shop-A-Life prototype

DIEGETIC PROTOTYPE VIDEO

For our video, we modeled the style after pharmaceutical commercials. In these advertisements, companies will overstate the positive components of a drug, and understate or almost entirely conceal the negative side effects. Similar to our product, we wanted to showcase the value of Shop-A-Life as a positive choice, and obscure the downsides of people purchasing an experience over living it. We chose to showcase our

website through this framework: presenting the need for the consumer with a light, glossy, and carefree ambiance that feels ignorant.

We used stock video footage to have it feel generic and mainstream, but still professional. We chose to walk through the key offerings: the store, national service, and donation opportunities. The footage presented snapshots of humans experiencing life events and milestones to increase the emotional appeal and entice potential customers to engage with the service. We concluded the video with an attractive, smiling woman to communicate the service as beneficial.



Figure 10. Diegetic Prototype Video Stills



Figure 11. Diegetic Prototype Video Stills



Figure 12. Diegetic Prototype Video Stills

DISCUSSION

Through our development of our prototype, we chose to explore the influencer vocation and mentality of exploiting the human experience for the end goal of status and profit. Influencers use their existence, even the most banal and imperfect moments, as content to communicate a sense of equality, and appealing normalcy with their followers. In their world, nothing is off limits. They willingly overshare even the most personal and intimate details for their work. We found this approach to labor harrowing and hollow, and attempted to question the way this line of work devalues core aspects of what it means to be human.

Our choice of prototype for a social media service agency was to challenge the notion of living and experiencing for the sake of online performance. The influencer career prioritizes having appealing content to put online. By purchasing life moments instead of living them, our goal was to emphasize the disregard the influencer economy has towards keeping intimate human moments sacred and untouched, and the nonsensical methods they employ to invent authenticity. We also chose to have our business have roots in the government as a commentary on the shift to social media surveillance and processing of personal data done by law enforcement and intelligence agencies.

CONCLUSION

In this pictorial, we demonstrated our exploration of the influencer industry and design prototype. Our focus was on the influencer's use of branding towards their everyday existence, and how their personal moments are strategically shared to cultivate a shoppable life. Our intention behind this process was to question this practice, and consider whether everything in human existence should be available to be shared and commodified. Our prototype, Shop-A-Life, challenges this strategy of manufacturing unpolished, authentic moments for an online persona by having these events be available for purchase on our store. Additionally, our prototype was intentionally designed to appear as if it can exist in our present, in order to highlight the irrationality of influencer practices that currently occur. As the influencer industry continues to mature as a career, we see it as crucial to shed light on these habits to better develop a codified set of ethical principles that will guide their work and decision-making.

REFERENCES

- [1] Charlie Brooker. 2016. Black Mirror/Nosedive. 3, 1 (October 2016).
- [2] Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby. 2014. *Speculative everything design, fiction, and social dreaming*, Cambridge: MIT Press.
- [3] Taylor Lorenz. 2021. For Creators, Everything Is for Sale. (March 2021). Retrieved July 4, 2021 from <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/10/style/creators-selling-selves.html?searchResultPosition=6>
- [4] Mariah L. Wellman, Ryan Stoldt, Melissa Tully, and Brian Ekdale. 2020. Ethics of Authenticity: Social Media Influencers and the Production of Sponsored Content. *Journal of Media Ethics* 35, 2 (March 2020), 68–82. DOI:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23736992.2020.1736078>

- [5] Steven Woods. 2016. #Sponsored: The Emergence of Influencer Marketing. *Chancellor's Honors Program Projects* (2016)