

ABSTRACT

NJATHI, ANNE WANGARI. *The Glitz and Glamour Platform Economy: Issues for Instagram Monetization for Influencers in Nairobi, Kenya* (Under the direction of Dr. Adriana de Souza e Silva).

As in other parts of the world, Instagram has become a popular platform in Africa—particularly Nairobi, Kenya—for socializing, communicating, entertainment, and information-seeking, and as a thriving digital marketplace. The platform also permits its users to commodify their private lives online to make a living. As a result, the rapid rise of Instagram influencers, also known as content creators, is scaling up in Africa as well. Therefore, it is important to investigate how influencers in developing world contexts, such as Nairobi, are contributing to the larger dynamics of the digital economy given its susceptibility to foreign power, different cultural and socioeconomic dynamics. Although it is generally understood that influencers are creating real value for advertisers, there is lack of consensus on what constitutes how the commodification of self translates into incentivization, especially in emerging markets whose practices and culture are thoroughly differentiated. Simultaneously, Instagram does not distinguish how influencers monetize their activities online, despite being the current leading platform for influencer marketing.

Scholars have focused on Instagram affordances as a digital workplace, self-curation, aesthetic and representation of self, potential for branding and marketing endeavors, and labor, but less so on the specific idiosyncrasies of the economic incentive afforded to influencers. This study interrogated the practices and subjectivity of Instagram influencers in Africa as commodified subjects of a global cultural phenomenon of platformization. First, I investigated the economic incentives tied to influencers' activities and practices on Instagram. Second, I explored how Instagram economic incentives impact the activities and practices as well reproduction of culture given the commodification of self for influencers interest. Finally, I

analyzed who, how, and why this incentivization occurs. To answer these questions, I leveraged qualitative methods, such as semistructured interviews, app walkthrough, and document analysis to further interrogate how Instagram influencers in Nairobi are commodifying their private lives to make a living and how policy makers are attempting to regulate and legislate platformization, as an emerging new media economy, taking root in Nairobi. In addition, I used actor network theory to identify and map out the actors involved in the Instagram economy, the obfuscated influencer model adapted by Instagram through mapping out the actors, nuanced complexities, interconnections, messiness, and dynamics of everyday life of an influencer in Nairobi.

Findings of study indicate that platformization, as an emerging new media economy, is taking root through its infrastructure, technological affordances, influencer model and ascendancy in Kenya, a developing economy, in rather different shape and format, but strikingly not very different from those in the West. In this process, systems of power and inequalities, including an entrenched digital divide, digital colonialism, and cultural dynamics are getting reproduced, influenced, and reshaped as Nairobi influencers produce themselves as commodified subjects to fit the global Instagram operating model. The findings reiterate the pressing need for deeper investigation into platformization in emerging markets. Future investigations should account for politics of inclusion, future of work, power systems, globalization of technology and digital colonialism, cultural hybridity, and platform governance as scholars assess platformization in the Global South. Further research should be conducted to answer questions of subjectivity through the commodification of self, the legitimization of platforms as digital workplaces, and the sustainability of the creator industry.

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The Glitz and Glamour Platform Economy: Issues for Instagram Monetization for Influencers in
Nairobi, Kenya

by
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DEDICATION

Mwene Nyaga

Thaii Thathaiya Ngai Thaii.

Mum

With all my heart and soul

This one is for you!

I honor you for allowing to me fulfill my dreams;

for relentlessly believing in me

through your resilience and respect for education

despite the challenges you faced, and the things you went without.

You sacrificed to ensure our success;

You went without so that we could acquire proper education

and realize, perhaps, our wildest dreams, so unimaginable from our past reality.

Without your steadfast love, prayers, humility, and untold sacrifices,

none of this would have been possible.

Uhotani!

Tendai

My curious and wonderful son!

You are the best of me.

For being the light and inspiration in life,

my rockstar, biggest cheerleader,

I owe you more than you know.

You sacrificed many play dates, movie nights, late nights, and weekends

without me while I worked to complete this manuscript.

Throughout this process, you unconsciously reminded me of importance of breaks

And the urgent need to stay focused to finish the PhD—.

I hope you think in the future that this was worth the sacrifice.

I can confidently say I've been a good steward.

Certainly not perfect, but we did good.

To the little African Black girls

all the invisible, voiceless, and vulnerable,

those whose lives involve an urgent need to exist and survive.

You who have come before me and made space,

and those who will come after me;

who dare to dream but still wait in hope;

May it never be too late

to find your place in this world.

I implore you to keep fighting;

you are ENOUGH.

With resilience, we shine bright!

No matter how long the dream takes.

To the relentless student mothers

*Especially those who boldly left their motherland to chase a doctorate dream,
far away from everything familiar... oceans away from home,
who lost everything, including self,
to balance their personal and professional lives.*

*This selfless act has no barriers.
Do NOT resign to the melancholy!
Keep smashing the glass ceiling
with a sledgehammer!*

BIOGRAPHY

Anne W. Njathi, Ph.D. is a scholar, researcher, and educator at North Carolina State University in the Interdisciplinary Communication, Rhetoric, and Digital Media program where she conducts research on platform studies, creator economy, data privacy, Internet/platform governance, FinTech, mobile communication, digital economy, and ICT4D from an emerging markets perspective. She is an African School of Internet Governance and Kenya School of Internet Governance (KeSIG) Fellow. Her work has appeared in peer-reviewed journals, publications, and conferences, including *Information, Communication & Society*, *New Media & Society*, and *AoIR Selected Papers of Internet Research*, *National Communication Association*, *IT4Change*, *Microsoft Race & Tech Workshop*, *Global Perspectives on Platforms and Cultural Production*, *Development Studies Association conference*, *Mozilla Festival*, *International Association for Media and Communication Research*, *International Communication Association* and *Rowman & Littlefield*. Her research has also been featured in media outlets, such as *The Cable*, *Daily Nation*, and *Business Daily*. At NCSU, she has taught Advanced Topics: Digital Media in Public Relations (COM 493), International and Cross-cultural Communication (COM 392), Communication in a Changing World (COM 2000), and Environmental Ethics (IDS 601/602). She is a Chartered Marketer (ACIM), with 9+ years of industry experience in Africa in building sustainable brands in a multicultural international setting.

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DISSERTATION INTRODUCTION

Digital platforms are changing the way ordinary citizens are choosing to generate income to meet their basic and social needs in the 21st century. In established and emerging markets, digital platforms have become an online workspace where individuals with and without marketable skills and resources commodify themselves for the entertainment of others with the hope of securing at least a partial level of financial stability. Platform companies, what I call digital international companies (DICs), such as Google, Amazon, Meta, Apple, Microsoft (a.k.a. the GAFAM companies), are heavily entering and investing in Sub-Saharan Africa. While the majority of platform companies originated in the Global North, they are now becoming important to the people in the Global South because of increased access to devices and connectivity in these regions (Koskinen et al., 2019). Millennials and digital natives in Africa are leveraging the internet to develop programming and business skills—sometimes without any formal education—and are expressing themselves through innovative software and other product solutions, rather than looking for jobs overseas or other ways to vacate the continent (Osiakwan, 2017).

The panoply of data available on the continent makes Africa irresistible to DICs, which view Africa as a suitable uncharted market for testing out new technical products. Ehimuan (2021) noted that no technology company can ignore the growing market that Africa represents. In addition, there is a youth population bulge in Africa, particularly in the KINGS countries (Kenya, Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa). This means the KINGS have a critical mass of youthful people creatively leveraging web platforms to develop solutions for businesses to solve social problems, some of which may become global role models (Osiakwan, 2017).

Perhaps one of the most remarkable examples of global role model technology out of Africa is Ushahidi. Ushahidi, a Kenyan nonprofit crowdsourcing platform, allows its users to monitor events and incidents, such as elections and natural disasters (Srinivasan, 2019). Owing to its successful roll out, Ushahidi is now an empowerment tool for community response to major global events, such as the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, 2011 election in Nigeria, national elections in the United States, the 2011 tsunami in Japan, and the civil war in Syria (Srinivasan, 2019). If people produce data, and if over 70% of Africa's population is under the age of 25 (Hinshaw, 2015), then much of the data coming from Africa will come from a younger population. This is important for four main reasons: young people are the future of Africa's web traffic, young people fuel the internet population growth rate, Africa is seeing an influx of younger people into the workforce, and there is a promise of a larger domestic market as a result of product penetration into the continent.

The social media boom took off in Africa in 2010 when the majority of Africans joined global online conversations on platforms like Facebook (with 17 million users in 2009) through the exponential uptake of mobile phones (Essoungou, 2010). In the future, Africa's web traffic (internet clicks and views) will be primarily driven by the youth population, more than in other parts of the world with older populations (Silver & Johnson, 2018; Wangari, 2017). Africa has the fastest growth rates in internet penetration in the world, with an increase from 2.1% in 2005 to 24.4% in 2018 (ITU, n.d.). Nevertheless, Graham et al. (2017) held that the gap is still significant because the internet use/access in Africa sits at 22 individuals per 100 inhabitants, the lowest in the world. For this reason, African countries contribute less than 1% of the world's digital knowledge production as measured by collaborative coding and domain registrations (Graham et al., 2017). Bukht and Heeks (2017) found that digital infrastructure is often lagging

behind global standards in developing countries and there is still a significant percentage of the population in those areas who are out of range for digital connectivity.

Growth in the younger populations means more people coming into the workforce, and a larger workforce equals more profit for industries. Ultimately, an increased youth population will inevitably lead to a larger domestic market with sizeable spending power. According to Dixon (2022), over 66% of all Instagram users worldwide are 34 years of age or younger. These youthful consumers are attractive to Instagram, so much so that Instagram is now recruiting digital labor under guise of *content creators*. While Instagram purports to be invested in influencer marketing through content creators, it is actually concerned with accumulating data. Digital content creators in Africa are producing data that Instagram uses to continue its quest for power. The low employment rates in Kenya have enticed many younger people in the country to look for alternative ways of earning a livelihood on powerful platforms like Instagram. Instagram is a “celebrity-making machine” (Frier, 2020, p. xvii) that fuels ordinary peoples’ careers and celebrities’ empires through brand deals (Frier, 2020).

It is no wonder the global creator culture that includes the social media influencer economy is becoming an important part of the Nairobi economy. As the creator culture rises, young, unemployed—or even employed—Kenyans leave formal employment to pursue a creator career (Murage, 2020), or tackle content creation as a *side gig*. The creator economy can be understood as an emerging industry where independent digital entrepreneurs, mainly enterprising content creators, leverage their passions and creativity to build a following and monetize their digital skills (Njathi & Wambui, n.d.). Influencer marketing is part of a creator phenomenon, which is regarded as *platform livelihood* (Caribou Digital & Qhala, 2020).

This dissertation was inspired by the pervasive transnational movement of the tech giants into African space with their business models, such as the creator economy, and their relentless search for profit as a real force that fuels capitalism (Castells, 2009). Broadly, the goal of the study was to understand how capitalism, globalization, power structures, and platform governance are reorganizing today's global communication networks. As DICs move into emerging markets, a new economy is established (Castells, 2009). This new economy promises profitability and competitiveness characterized by informative, global, and distinctive networked features. Sociologists, such as Castells (2001, 2009, 2011) focused on the technology that permits the fast movement of capital, thereby significantly increasing global financial flows. However, Castells' view of the new economy did not account for the new forms of capitalist exploitation Hardt and Negri (2006) warned about when examining the transnational movement of tech giants into other global markets.

An alternative understanding of the new economy underscores tech giants' planetary ambitions, agendas, and strategies, which are in a constant state of reorganization in today's global communication networks (Hardt & Negri, 2006). While the transnational movement proffered by the tech giants is not a novel concept, it paves the way for the introduction of new ferocious, dominant forms of power that are aligning themselves globally alongside the technology revolution in emerging markets like Nairobi. Therefore, this dissertation sits at the intersection of race, class, gender/sexuality, globalization/nationality, North-South relations, culture, indigeneity, and the future of work to highlight the power wheel in operation in the Sub-Saharan landscape, particularly in Nairobi, Kenya.

My interest in this topic stems from my heritage as a citizen of Kenya and my insatiable desire to research and find real-world solutions to the complex regulatory and governance

challenges facing Africa's fast technological uptake—mostly exported from the West. Concerns about the role of technology in Kenya and the Global South, in light of the persistence of inequalities connected to colonialism led me to interrogate how socioeconomic, cultural, and political forces are reorganized through digital transformation. During many years of industry work experience as an executive leader in mobile and IT sectors, renewable energy, and public relations/advertising, I began questioning why Africa has become the focus of digital transformation, especially as it relates to ICT4D and M4D, and why there is such strong interest from the Global North to save Africa from poverty through technology. My own experiences and frustrating interactions with proposed technological solutions, which were exported from abroad without understanding the socioeconomic, cultural, and political dynamics of Kenya's digital economy prompted me to ask how entities from without the Sub-Saharan African geographic realm could presume to know what is best for Africans within the region in terms of digital transformation. I realized the lived experiences of Africans, and particularly Kenyans, were being ignored and must be lifted up by researchers with intimate knowledge of the Kenyan culture if a greater understanding of the role of digital transformation and platformization in Africa is to be gained.

Justification for the Study

This qualitative study was conducted to answer the call for further understanding how platformization is taking shape in Kenya, a developing country, using the Instagram influencer economy as the platform of focus. Platformization is not a uniform process but follows different trajectories along the paths of infrastructure, governance, and practice (de Kloet et al., 2019). The quest for understanding these issues from an emerging market perspective, such as Nairobi is not a mere fete to corroborate the findings emerging from the Western studies; rather, it is an

attempt to evaluate platformization through empirical data originating from Nairobi as the site of study. There is no substantive academic research to support the observations made by writers of blogs and other media sources on the rapid uptake of digital platforms, such as YouTube, TikTok, Snapchat, and Instagram in the Global South (Njathi & Lee, 2021). As Poell et al. (2021) contended, the question of who the economic winners and losers in the platform economy are, the factors enabling or hindering success on the platform, and to what extent these factors influence the platform remain largely understudied primarily because of the scant attention in the literature to the cultural producers within platforms. Perhaps, as Poell et al. (2021) suggested, this deficit of research could be because the majority of media and communication scholars have, to a large extent, steered away from empirical economic analyses of platforms. Although a handful of researchers (Eltringham, 2018; Kleintjes, 2017; Njathi & Lee, 2021; Otiende, 2018; Wilson, 2019) presented in-depth accounts of influencers' visibility in Sub-Saharan Africa, the economic incentive generated by African influencers remains unclear. Thus, empirically grounded research, which is present in Western markets, is lacking to bring to fore the implications of platformization in the Global South. Implications include institutional shifts in markets, infrastructures, and governance, as well as practices of labor, creativity, and democracy (Poell et al., 2021).

Understanding the Instagram Influencer Model

Instagram is a “photo and short video sharing social network” (Iqbal, 2023, para. 1) founded in 2010 by software engineer, Michel Krieger, and computer programmer and former Google employee, Kevin Systrom (Frier, 2020). Today, Instagram is owned by Meta, the fourth most powerful, and one of the wealthiest social media companies in the world (Curry, 2022; Frier, 2020; Kwet, 2020). Instagram is ranked after Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp in terms

of monthly active users (Statistica, 2022). Over 70% of Instagram users are under 35 years old. Meta acquired Instagram in 2012 at a cost of \$1 billion USD (Curry, 2022). The platform hit 1 billion monthly active users as of June 2018 (Iqbal, 2023). As of 2020, Instagram was responsible for over 25% of Meta's total revenue through targeted advertising growing into a significant part of Meta's core advertising platform (Curry, 2022). Instagram's revenue skyrocketed during the global COVID-19 pandemic when Instagram users and brands actively engaged on the platform, raising its revenue to an estimated \$47.6 billion USD in 2021, almost 50% of Meta's total revenue.

Instagram is Meta's cash cow given its strength in a youthful, devoted, and mobile userbase, with about 130 million users clicking on a commercial link for online purchases, 90% of shopping enthusiasts following a business and 50% Instagrammers are more interested in brand after they see an ad for the product or service (Simon, 2022). From the platform's targeted advertising strategy, Instagram's Ad impressions have been growing by 209% year-over-year (Simon, 2022). According to Simon (2022), Ad impressions is a leading indicator of ad hits for Instagram because.

An ad impression is recorded when a user of a site views a page that includes an advertisement. In the Internet marketing world, ad impressions are good, but ad clicks are better. A click on an advertisement is a positive user response directing them to the advertised product's site. (para. 11)

Besides, the influencer economy model, there are main ways Instagram makes money – the primary “marketplace” in Instagram is the advertisements as bought/sold through the Instagram Ads in Ads Manager. The mix of revenue coming to Instagram and how it gets distributed, depends on the ad one opts for and the option for “showing it in these locations:

Facebook feeds (mobile and desktop), Facebook right-hand column, Instagram (stories and feed), Audience Network, Instant Articles, In-stream Video. These are called ‘ad placements.’”

(“Choose Your Placements,” para. 1).

Instagram is a cultural phenomenon. Frier (2020) stated that “Instagram was one of the first apps to fully exploit our relationship with our phones, compelling us to experience life through a camera for the reward of digital validation” (p. xvii). According to Santora (2023), Instagram is still the most popular platform for influencer marketing even though TikTok is rising in popularity. According to Iqbal (2023),

Instagram has played a central role in this century’s popular culture, with popular users dubbed ‘influencers.’ Influencers have become a key demographic for Instagram, and the app has opened up its platform with shopping and other marketing tools to make these popular users more successful. (para. 9)

To ward off the fierce competition of other social media platforms and “in an effort to keep its top stars from migrating to TikTok or YouTube” (Hutchinson, 2022, para. 6), Instagram recently launched the “‘Creator Portfolio’ option, which will enable creators to build what’s essentially a media kit type package, in order to showcase their audience, reach, as well as previous brand work” (para. 1). Instagram chief, Adam Mosseri, stated the Creator Portfolio is a top priority. Hutchinson reported,

In [an internal] memo, Mosseri said that surveys of creators showed that Instagram “lag[s] behind TikTok and YouTube on all the dimensions that are most important to creator satisfaction,” including several unrelated to the ability to make money, such as “fun, reach, fair algorithm and care.” Mosseri also said the team is “behind where we

need to be” on initiatives to help creators make money on the platform but is “upping our urgency and progress.” (Hutchinson, 2022, para. 8)

A decade after Instagram’s launch in 2010, the platform has evolved to offer new, unique tools and features that empower users to monetize the platform to make a living by posting on behalf of brands. Beyond its photo-sharing features, such as Reels and Insta-stories (Instagram from Meta, 2020), Instagram connects social media influencers to over a billion people across the globe through brand deals. Reels are short, entertaining videos developed with creative tools like augmented reality (AR) effects, music, and text overlays, while Insta-stories are photos or 15-second video clips that vanish after 24 hours (Instagram Business, 2021). According to Instagram (n.d.), creators on the platform can receive payouts of their earnings from the following monetization tools: badges, bonuses, branded content, gifts and subscriptions. Influencers leverage both features to promote products, services, and brands through sponsored Instagram posts and offline events with an influencer appearance (e.g., product launches, unboxing, product sampling, meet and greets, store openings, brand trips). Simply stated, social media influencers commodify themselves to endorse and promote products and services through sponsored content (De Veirman et al., 2017; Vrontis et al., 2021) in exchange for earning money or free products (Wallace, 2021), a phenomenon known as *platform livelihood* (Donner, 2021).

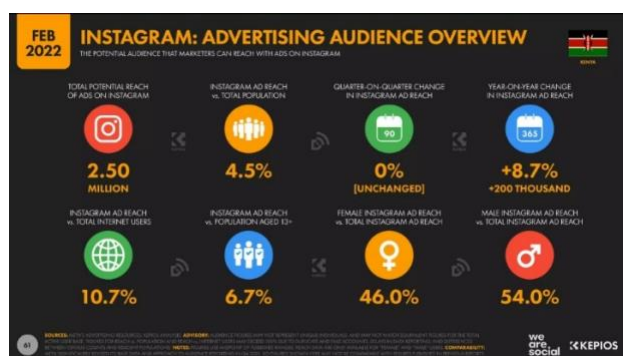
Fuchs (2014) argued that through digital labor, users create the value of platforms like Instagram. Young people in Kenya are engaged in digital work as a means of income. Fuchs and Seignani (2013) stated,

Digital work is the organization of human experiences with the help of the human brain, digital media and speech in such a way that new products are created. These products can be online information, meanings, social relations, artifacts or social systems. (p. 255)

One form of digital work many people in Sub-Saharan African countries have turned to is the Instagram influencer space. As in other parts of the world, the *Instagram economy* in developing cities across Sub-Saharan Africa is an increasingly major workplace for young people. Young people in Kenya engage in Instagram influencer activities to supplement or even replace their existing income (Njathi & Lee, 2021; Otiende, 2018). Like South African influencers on Instagram (see Becker, 2016; Kleintjes, 2017), aspiring Nairobi youth see influencer activities as a main source of income, albeit insecure, as payments vary from monetary to gifts-in-kind (see Appendices A and B). In Kenya, Instagram garners 2.50 million of the 11.75 million social media users in the country, suggesting that Instagram's ad reach is equivalent to 4.5% of the total 2022 Kenyan population (see Figure 1; Kemp, 2022). This means that the share of income to be garnered from Instagram influencing is produced from an extremely small part of the total income-generating businesses in Kenya.

Figure 1

Kenya's Instagram Advertising Audience Overview



Note. Adapted from *Digital 2022: Kenya*, by S. Kemp, 2022 (February 15), Data Reportal (<https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-kenya>). In the public domain.

The cross-border platform structure of Instagram also presents challenges in monetization. In Europe and other developed countries, the monetization and proprietary acquisition of user data by platform companies seem to be recognized (Cunningham & Craig,

2019; Duffy, 2017; Frier, 2020; IT for Change, 2017); however, developing countries are grappling with “insufficient recognition of how platforms monetize and claim property rights over the data users” (IT for Change, 2017, p. 2). Whereas researchers (Eltringham, 2018; Kleintjes, 2017; Njathi & Lee, 2021; Otiende, 2018; Wilson, 2019) have acknowledged a deeper, more nuanced account of the amplified visibility of influencers in Sub-Saharan Africa, specific numbers around the economic incentive generated by influencers remain difficult to ascertain. Eltringham (2018) highlighted the inefficiencies of the influencer compensation model by pointing out the amount of time and effort needed to invest in this form of work is not consummate; yet young trendsetting Instagram influencers in South Africa continue promoting the platform as an unconventional digital workplace.

Arguably, one of the most challenging elements of the evolving Instagram economy in the African context is the fact that the glamorous yet young and immature Instagram economy (Njathi & Lee, 2021; Toesland, 2017) is flawed with nebulous influencer compensation theories that might be difficult to grasp and articulate. This opaqueness further complicates understanding the oligopolistic mode of the Instagram economy, as there is no clarity and knowledge on who is paying who, why, how much, and where (the space where the transaction takes place). Like Facebook, Twitter, Twitch, and Snapchat, Instagram thrives on scale by leveraging user-generated content, where creators’ large audience network effects grant them opportunities to monetize content on Instagram through commodification of self and self-branding tactics. Instagram features specifically facilitate creators’ engagement with branded content and influencer marketing (Cunningham & Craig, 2019). Instagram permits users the agency to liberally cherry-pick how to present themselves digitally. This presentation concept has been termed by digital media critics as an *aesthetic* representation of the self (Lorenz, 2019).

Additionally, there is a lack of consensus on the definition of a social media influencer among scholars and practitioners (Ruiz-Gomez, 2019). The number of followers an influencer has is not always the best indication of their success (Solis & Webber, 2012). Instead, the true measure of an influencer's success, according to Solis and Weber (2012) is the extent to which they can convert their social capital into measurable actions and outcomes from brand partnerships. Brands seek collaborative partnerships with influencers who are not just popular but have the capability to curate content for generating return on investment (ROI) for their advertising endeavors. In general, influencers are new forms of celebrity (Gamson, 2011; Ruiz-Gomez, 2019) who acquired fame on social media. One characteristic that strikingly sets influencers apart from any other ordinary Instagram user is the fact that they allow advertisers on their pages, by engaging in the commercial practice regarded as "influencer marketing" (Cunningham & Craig, 2019, pp. 67–68). Being an influencer is considered a business because influencers gain economic benefit from brand deals and sponsored ads (Slutsky, 2020). In Africa, according to Adeleke (2021), "the creator economy is an ecosystem of writers, videographers, social media influencers, gamers, podcasters, skit makers, etc., and the software tools and platforms that enable them to build an audience and potentially make money" ("Unequal Outcomes," para. 3).

During my fieldwork, participants wrestled with creating or claiming their identity. All of the participants did not want to be addressed as influencers, and insistently claimed "content creator" as the right way to define their digital entrepreneurial craft, as aspiring creators who aim to build sustainable careers. Upon further investigation, I learned the ecological changing of definitions has not only morphed over the years but has also been a highly contested issue. The morphed identity has moved from socialites to slay queens to influencers, and most recently

digital content creators over time. Labels like socialites and slay queens hold negative connotations where young attractive women such as Vera Sidika, Huddah Monroe, and Bridget Achieng flaunt their flashy-funded lifestyles on social media platforms (BBC News Africa, 2018; Kadandara, 2018) acquired through the transactional sex culture by older wealthy men in a culture famously known as “sponsor culture” (Pala, 2018, “Sex and the Sugar Daddy,” para. 1). Because the majority of socialites and slay queens had also upgraded into influencers owning top businesses, new and upcoming creators did not want to be associated with the term influencer. In this dissertation, I use the term influencers interchangeably with digital content creators.

As shall be argued throughout this dissertation, the Instagram influencer economy does exert considerable power over influencers, advancing beliefs that they can make livable income on the platform and sustain fully blown careers—paving the way to a system of capitalist exploitation. The glitz and the glam perpetuated, promoted, and displayed on the vibrant platform makes it difficult to see the kind of long, slow, and persistent reality of precarious labor and instead reduces everything to *for the gram*, awash from the reality of the life an influencer.

Understanding the Instagram Economy in Nairobi

Kenya is clustered as an emerging market with a population earning less than \$1.25 USD per day (ITU, 2015), meaning only a few Kenyans can afford to maintain the influencer lifestyle. Recent world economy concerns have economists speculating over the fate of Kenya’s financial stability. Omondi (2022) stated, “A third of Kenya’s middle class are just a shock away from sliding into poverty, pointing to a precarious position for workers whose spending power has been ravaged by sky-high inflation and the worst drought that cut farmers’ earnings” (para. 1). The average monthly Income in 2007 for the poorest of poor in Nairobi, according to the Labor Institutions Act Kenya implemented by Ministry of Labor and Social Protection (National

Council for Law Reporting, 2007), was between \$100 and \$150 USD depending on the specific category of work. As of 2022, “over 8.9 million Kenyans [live] in extreme poverty” (Kamer, 2022b, para. 1), and for this reason, Kenya’s president increased the monthly minimum wage to \$116.68 USD (Reuters, 2022). Furthermore, in 2021, only 2.9% of Kenyans in formal employment (middle class) earned more than \$1,000 USD per month, a significant drop from previous years due to the economic disruptions impelled by the COVID-19 pandemic, indicating Kenya’s growing economic inequality (Guguyu, 2021).

Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya, is considered one of Africa’s most influential cities with a thriving commercial and financial hub. It is home to regional headquarters of various major international companies and organizations (Quest et al., 2019). The growing metropolis has a population of 4.3 million residents (Kenya National Bureau of Standards [KNBS], 2019) with an average estimate of gross national income per capita of \$2,082 USD (World Bank, n.d.). Nairobi is a demand center with an emerging middle class whose purchasing power, especially for digital services, is on the rise (van der Meer, 2018). Fengler (2011) claimed that Nairobi is already powering Kenya’s economy since it contributes to 40% of the country’s wage earnings—despite having only 10% of its population. Furthermore, Nairobi has been monikered as the main innovation hub of East Africa (van der Meer, 2018). This is because Nairobi is home to the mushrooming of entrepreneurial hubs with a strong technological service, rendering its new name the *Silicon Savannah* (Akamanzi et al., 2016; Donner & Locke, 2019; Friederici et al., 2017; Marchant, 2018). Because Nairobi is a site of sociocultural and economic transformations, I used it as a case study to analyze how the Instagram influencer culture is unfolding in emerging markets.

According to a survey conducted by the United States International University Africa and the U.S. Embassy, Nairobians who earn between \$241 and \$394 USD a month are the largest consumers of social media in the city (Igadwah, 2019, para. 1). On a typical day, the majority of these low-middle income earners spend up to 3 hours on social media platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and WhatsApp (Igadwah, 2019). Middle income earners, mostly university graduates in entry level jobs, earn between \$500 and \$1000 USD (KNBS, 2018) and spend up to an hour daily on platforms like LinkedIn, Twitter, Yahoo, and Snapchat (Wamuyu, 2018). The Digital 2022 Kenya report produced by Data Reportal (Kemp, 2022) indicates the most popular platforms used in Kenya are WhatsApp (93.5%), Facebook (89.6%), and Instagram (69.4%). Wamuyu (2020) stated Kenyan youth favored Snapchat (68%), Instagram (61%) and TikTok (63%) over Facebook, while Kemp (2022) reported all internet users aged 16 to 64 surveyed ranked WhatsApp as their favorite social media platform (41.4%), followed by Facebook (19.5%) and Instagram (11.7%). Wamuyu (2020) argued the reason for Kenyan youths' social media site preferences could be attributed to a key development where the uptake in visual content consumed from social media users has become highly popular.

To understand the process of platformization in Africa, we need to analyze how the new Instagram economy culture is embedded into existing socioeconomic, cultural, and political frameworks. To address these issues in this dissertation, I asked the following overarching research question: *How does the Instagram economy get reproduced and/or restructured in an emerging market, and specifically in an African space?* To further fulfill the broad research objective, I asked the following specific research questions:

- How does platformization, as an emerging new media economy, take root through its infrastructure, technological affordances, influencer model and ascendancy in Kenya, a developing economy?

- How do the politics of inclusion and exclusion, embedded into an entrenched digital divide, reproduce, influence, and shape the Kenyan influencer Instagram economy and its beneficiaries?
- How do systems of power reproduce, influence, and shape the Kenyan influencer Instagram economy and its beneficiaries?
- How do Nairobi influencers produce themselves as commodified subjects to fit the Instagram operating model, and how does this commodification influence cultural reproduction in Nairobi?
- How can the Instagram influencer ecosystem, which is a global economy system, be governed in a way that is equitable, inclusive, and sustainable to all countries while mitigating the challenges, threats, and opportunities of digital content creators in an emerging market?

I facilitated my inquiry into the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy through an ethnographic study guided by actor network theory.

Theoretical Framework

Actor network theory (ANT) (Callon, 1986; Latour, 1988, 1993, 1996a, 1996b, 2005) provided the theoretical, methodological, and analytical framework to map out the network of multiple actors involved in the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy. Although there are many ways to study the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy, I adhered to the dictum of ANT, tracing associations using the ethnographic approach of “following the actors” (Callon, 1986a, p. 228). Though Law (2002) deemed ANT neither a theory nor a method, combining ANT with an ethnographic approach allowed me to better understand the unfolding of platformization in Nairobi. ANT serves as a way to view the ethnography in all its complexities, recognizing that multiple actors influence the stability of the digital creator economy, while various networks work for and against Kenyan influencers’ efforts to sustain a livelihood in the digital creator economy. Network activities or network outcomes can only be fully comprehended by taking into account the full range of dynamic interrelationships found therein (Callon, 1986; Latour, 1996; Law, 1992). I used ANT concepts, such as human and nonhuman actors (Latour,

2005); translation (Callon, 1986); invisible actors (Callon, 1986); immutable mobile (Latour (2013); multiple realities (Mol, 2002) and heterogenous practices (Latour, 1998, 1999b; Law, 1992; Mol, 2006); messy and complex realities (Law & Singleton, 2005); invisible moments of translation (Callon, 1986; Mol, 2002); moments of tension (Mol, 2002); and black box (Callon & Latour, 1981) to guide my analysis of the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy.

Human, Nonhuman Actors, and Immutable Mobiles

One of the distinctive characteristics of ANT is that it does not discriminate between human and nonhuman actors (Latour, 2005). The growing importance of nonhuman actors in ANT and their undisputed role in the translation process cannot be overemphasized (Latour, 1993, 2016; Haraway, 1988). Mol's (2002) work on the ethnography of a disease stands out as a good example of the significance of nonhuman actors in examinations of events and systems. Admittedly, Latour (1993) and Law (1992) acknowledged that society is not simply human-related. Law (1992) argued, "Society and organizations would not exist if they were simply social. ... Almost all of our interactions with other people are mediated through objects of one kind or another" (pp. 379–381). Taking a similar approach, I identified both human and nonhuman actors that do matter in the Nairobi Instagram influencer network, while understanding them as outputs of ongoing network forces. For example, I considered money, Instagram, the internet, smartphones, and data bundles as nonhuman actors, sometimes referred to as "things" (Marcus, 1995, p. 107) that contribute to the Nairobi Instagram influencer network. As Marcus suggested, this study was "produced in the speculative, open-ended spirit of tracing things in and through contexts," (p. 107), which added to the richness of the findings and allowed the deepest nuances of the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy to emerge.

Instagram is an evolving platform, a concept known as an immutable mobile in ANT terms (Latour, 2013). In this dissertation, the immutable mobile accounts for the dynamic and networked relationships between the platform's existing actors in the local cultural/political context within Nairobi, such as users (influencers), the Instagram platform itself, DICs, advertisers, policymakers/government, civil society, academia, and nonprofit organizations. The network creates room for these additional actors and, potentially, forces repulsion that attempts to expel actors.

Translation

The process by which an actor joins a network is an act of “translation,” according to Callon (1986). To fully comprehend this translation process in the network formation, Callon advocated for the concept of tracing associations. Callon argued that the process by which an actor-network is created goes through four critical moments of translation that include (a) problematization, (b) interessement, (c) enrollment, and (d) mobilization. This four-stage translation process proved invaluable in guiding me to explain the complex process of assembling an actor-network from heterogeneous entities that involve negotiations, emplacement, and displacement of some actors. My analysis involved fundamentally questioning if the actors in the Nairobi Instagram network would stand the trial of a strength test (Latour, 2013) in the process of translation to either empower or disempower the current network.

Invisible Moments of Translation

Law (1992) suggests that “an actor is also, always, a network” (p. 384), that is, as long as an actor exists to perform any action they are, by default, part of a network. This happens regardless of whether the action is active or passive, visible or nonvisible, together or separate. Callon (1984) illustrated different actors and their interests when he examined the domestication

of scallops by three fishermen on St. Brieuc Bay. Furthermore, Latour (1988) offered an example of Pasteur with microbes as nonhuman actors, among others, while Latour (1993) discussed various parts of a door where actors left out are brought to light. Although the use of ANT enabled me to map out the actors within the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy and their contribution to the network, one must bear in mind Callon's (1986) and Law's (1992) arguments that there is always the possibility of alternative configurations within or outside a network. Hence, I noted throughout the study that some networks have no relationship to each other. They exist independently or parallel to each other, illuminating the stubborn limitation of ANT approaches in accounting for multiple, interacting assemblages that are governed by contradictory logics of a network.

Multiple Realities, Heterogenous Practices, and Moments of Tension

Another ANT concept borrowed in this dissertation is that of multiple realities and heterogenous practices. Mol's (2002) perspective of multiple realities was reflected in a study of atherosclerosis diseases where multiple networks were operating at any given time toward producing a coherent diagnosis. For example, multiple practices are performed by the radiologist, the clinician, and the pathologist to treat a single entity/disease. Similarly, for the digital economy in Africa, Osiankwan (2017) argued that innovation thrives best when there is a coalition of actors who work together while playing their roles effectively. As this study demonstrates, many actors who vary in scale and scope contribute toward the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy network. At any given point, there are many variations of enactment by the various actors; hence, Mol (2002) argued multiple realities are produced through these plural, heterogeneous practices. According to ANT, networks are the end product of diverse and distinct materials (Law, 1992), that is, they are heterogeneous actor-networks. However, more than just

sketching out the complexity of the network, I traced the actors and their relationships with all other actors, to showcase all the moments of tension and coordination (Mol, 2002) that happen in the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy network. These invisible moments of translation (Callon, 1996; Mol, 2002) are like the interplay of atoms that we tend to overlook and instead stand back and call it “nature.”

Messy and Complex Realities

Law and Singleton (2005) proposed the idea of ‘messy objects’ after struggling to research alcoholic liver disease as a single, explainable object. They believed that this was not due to the fact that they “simply weren’t doing good research” (p. 332), but that the disease, as an object to be studied, was enacted in such complex ways that it slipped through most theoretical and methodological interrogation approaches. Law and Singleton argued, “It turned out to be much more difficult to map such trajectories than we had imagined it would be” (p. 332), which manifests as a moment of tension in the network. As they were conducting 25 interviews with a wide range of staff it was immediately obvious to Law and Singleton that each interviewee saw a different picture, which they found “more or less impossible to fit together” (p. 332). To take various approaches to examine each individual system (nodes of activity) – each providing unique insights but also generating fresh issues relating to the reporting of the interpretation of the findings. It turned out to be much more difficult to map such trajectories than we had imagined it would be (p. 332). As a method, the collection of differing accounts presented the network as messy (p. 350). Law and Singleton stated,

Messy objects are interpretatively complex objects, and if we want to understand them we need to take this into account. We need to *explain* (and in some cases explain

away) the different perspectives, and so retrieve the real object behind the interpretations.”
(p. 333)

Variably, at any given point of translation of the network, there are many variations of enactment practices and performances by the various actors; hence, Mol (2002) argued multiple realities are produced through plural, heterogeneous practices. Since “enactments tend to be vague and indefinite” (Law, 2004, p. 14); it is the researcher’s undertaking to disentangle the network by paying close attention to linkages with material resources and less visible actors. Law and Singleton (2005) propose two strategies for knowing the mess that are adapted throughout this dissertation to understand how complex realities are ‘enacted into being’. The first concerns the multiple perspectives of an object that are held by different people. This strategy, they argue, is one taken up by the concept of boundary objects. Law and Singleton suggested epistemological strategy, using boundary objects, is a useful analytical tool to make visible knowledge practices that emerged in the work of a messy object. An epistemological framing posits that these different analytics produce different perspectives on an object, which can be flexibly interpreted and, consequently, objects are interpretively complex. Complexity is thus a product of diverse analytics and multiple interpretations, rather than a quality of the object in question.

The second is an ontological strategy, explores the enactment of realities through admitting various objects and the role they all play in the messiness. An ontological framing understands objects as already and always multiple and complex, and “moves us from multiple interpretations of objects to thinking about multiple objects themselves” (Law & Singleton, 2005, p. 334). ANT argues that realities are enacted in the processes of knowing (Law & Singleton, 2005).

Black Box

A black box, according to Pinch (1992, p. 488) and Winner (1993, p. 365) is a system, or object, that can be described in terms of inputs and outputs, but its inner workings remain invisible. Callon and Latour (1981) stated that black boxes contain “that which no longer needs to be reconsidered, those things whose contents have become a matter of indifference” (p. 285). This is because as actants get integrated into a unified single whole, there lies the danger of being obfuscated and sometimes invisible, becoming an oversimplified complex reality while establishing durable and stable configurations of the network (Law, 2007). In ANT terms, black boxes are useful to uncover how networks are constructed through the relationships between actors. Latour (2005) urged researchers to open black boxes to examine their ontology which include actors, actants, and the actor-networks inside them that ushered their construction. Through Callon’s (1986) moments of translation framework, I therefore opened the black box (Callon & Latour, 1981; Latour, 1987) of platformization process, recognizing its inherent boundary problems that constrain the establishment of what is inside and outside of the network. Additionally, I examined the actors within the network in terms of their interrelationships and actions to expose the true characterization of the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy.

Methodological Approaches

I took a customized sociocultural theory approach developed from ANT (Latour, 2005), qualitative ethnography methods (Burrell, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Gold, 1997; Gupta et al., 1997; Marcus, 1995), and the app walkthrough method (Kaye et al., 2021; Light et al., 2018; Wang & Lobato, 2019) to investigate how the Instagram economy is getting reproduced in an emerging market like Nairobi. Sociocultural theory is concerned with the relationship between micro-level practices of communication and macro-level structures that influence their

performance (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). I established the methodological approaches in this study from a careful examination of sociocultural theory as the basis for explaining how platformization in an emerging market is influenced by the context in which it is enacted . I leveraged the empirical findings—a mix of field interviews, documents, and secondary source analysis—within the broader contexts of digital inclusion (digital infrastructure, access, adoption, and usage), global capitalism, power and power structures, digital colonialism, cultural hybridity and platform governance and regulation.

Inasmuch as the use of ANT helped me map out the Nairobi Instagram influencer network, it has an epistemological shortcoming whereby it solely focuses on how networks are formed and sustained but does not answer the question of why (Law, 2006), especially in terms its political and power aspects. Therefore, using a sociocultural theoretical perspective, I applied ethnographic qualitative methods and approaches to uncover what ANT invariably fails to deliver—the reproduction of the Instagram economy in an emerging market/African space and the influencers’ motivations for the commodification of self. Concurrently, I questioned what globalization of technology actually means for Africa, and how empowering or disempowering the globalization of technology is to the African people and the digital creator economy.

Ethnography (literally, “people describing;” Lindlof & Taylor, 2019, p. 174) is the genre of qualitative research whose distinctive goal is to describe and interpret the observable relationships between social practices and systems of meaning based on “firsthand experience and exploration” of a particular cultural setting (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019, p. 174). Ethnographers are able to gather valid and reliable qualitative data through the development of close and continuing contact with the object or subject of study (Gold, 1997).

Bearing in mind that qualitative research does not privilege any specific method or practice over the other (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), I analyzed the data with the objective of “tracing a cultural formation across and within multiple sites of activity” (Marcus, 1995, p. 96). The idea of multiple sites is reflected in ANT through Mol’s (2002) idea of multiple realities, and includes both human and nonhuman actors (Latour, 1988; 1993). There is no one right way to look at the positionality of Africa in the global digital creator economy. Callon et al. (2011) argued that the kinds of problems faced in modern society are complex enough that one cannot simply take a singular approach to make sense of the problem. With this admonition in mind, I borrowed Law and Singleton’s (2005) similar understanding of the network as messy, acknowledging that “we cannot know it by insisting that it is clear” (p. 350). I applied Law’s (2006) approach to steer away from telling the story of platformization as a single narrative and instead focused on the “art of describing the patterns and textures that form intellectual patchwork” (p. 62) through a set of “little stories” (p. 62) that are held together by ambivalences and oscillations. This approach allowed me to take into account the multiplicities of different networks that exist at any given time and at the same time permitted me to disentangle the networks as they are enacted in the local context. Law’s (2006) little stories is an approach reflected by other ANT scholars (i.e., Latour, 1988, 1996, 1999a, 1999b; Law & Singleton, 2005; Mol, 2002; Mol & Mesman, 1996) allows for the accommodation of different theoretical frameworks traditionally used to tell the African internet technology story. For example, I draw from M4D and ICT4D, diffusion of innovation, appropriation and adoption theories to connect the heterogeneous network of the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy. Throughout this dissertation, I used many little stories garnered from real life experiences of Nairobi influencers during the interviews, garnering qualitatively gathered data to understand influencers’

monetization strategies and question whether incentivization on digital platforms blurs influencers' and other actors' objectivity. The little stories approach paired well with the African culture's reliance on story-telling as a primary means to make sense of the world. Stories were selected based on how they answered the research questions in the study.

Although some ANT studies (i.e., Mol, 2002; Latour, 1996) utilized various focal points to study the translation process, I centered my focus on a diverse range of influencers selected from the vast influencer categories in Nairobi, which became the primary unit of analysis in this dissertation. Callon (1986) explicated that the process of translation is followed from the perspective of one actor, the focal actor. Lindlof and Taylor (2019) stated the focal point is "someone who is willing to serve the dual role of an interview subject and a guide to new potential new subjects" (p. 148). Nairobi influencers and their commodification interests acted as entry points in my attempt to trace associations (Callon, 1986; Lindlof & Taylor, 2019; Marcus, 1995) within the Nairobi Instagram influencer network, allowing me to analyze how they enroll other heterogenous actors circulating within the network through negotiation, emplacement, and displacement (Callon, 1986). This study excluded other types of influencers that includes political leaders, academics, authors, film and TV stars, artists, etc. who although they are powerful users and are linked to brand deals and sponsorship, did not fit within this study's inclusion criteria (see Appendix B).

Recruitment

Using a convenience sampling method (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019), I first recruited influencers by sharing an invitation to participate with 100 active Nairobi Instagram influencers. I circulated a call for participation flyer with a link to a Google form in niche groups on digital media platforms like Instagram, WhatsApp, and Telegram (see Appendix A). In addition, the

recruitment process involved sending influencers who met the inclusion criteria for the study a standard invitation to participate (see Appendix B) through direct message (DM) on Instagram. I also reached out to my diverse personal networks in the marketing industry in Kenya to help me recruit influencers. Each responding individual received detailed information about the research, a consent form (see Appendix C), and demographic survey (see Appendix D) with a request to complete and return via email. I asked participating influencers to set a date for the interview and the app walkthrough observation. From the pool of those individuals who consented to the interview, I utilized a “chain of referrals,” which is often the best way to reach a hidden or hard to recruit population (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019, p. e). The chain of referrals is expected to be an expanding pool of respondents, which grows larger over time (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019, p. 148). The initial interviewees acted as dual focal point, one as the interview subject and two as the guide to new potential subjects (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). After conducting the interview with the initial interviewee, the focal point participant recruited or referred me to people from their circle of acquaintances who fit the criteria of the study sample (Gold, 1997; Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). The chain of referrals allowed me to expand of the pool of influencers to include some influencers who might be unreachable to me because of their *microcelebrity* status, but who might consider participation if their peers with certain attributes in common participated in the study.

The chain of referrals (Lindlof and Taylor, 2019) aided in the triangulation (Gangneux, 2019; Tracy, 2019) of empirical data gathered from the influencers, which increased the credibility and transferability of the research findings (Moon, 2019). Denzin and Lincoln (2011) argued that “multiple representations of a situation should be encouraged, perhaps placed alongside one another” (p. 10). Triangulation of data gathered from the influencers in this study

helped guarantee the commonality of experience and perception the influencers held about working within the Instagram influencer economy. Latour (2013) argued that gathering the voices of multiple sources within a network ensures that the truth of the network can be revealed through comparison and extension of the data.

Nairobi influencers referred me to their counterparts in the industry. Through the chain of referrals, other crucial human and nonhuman actors in the Nairobi Instagram influencer network emerged, highlighting the complexity of the network. Human actors included policy makers, government officials, lawyers, Think Tank representatives, and Meta policy representatives. Nonhuman actors included the Instagram platform, smartphones, internet, data bundles, digital labor, budgets, planning and policy documents, press articles, budgets, Instagram posts, screenshots and photos, maps, places, things, algorithms and metrics, electricity, metaphors, stories, Twitter posts, and documents. I leveraged Marcus' (1995) "following the thing" (p. 106) strategy, which added methodological value by welcoming the role of material objects to describe social processes constituted and articulated through sociotechnical practices. One of the distinctive characteristics of ANT is that it does not discriminate between human and nonhuman actors; it advocates for following both human and nonhuman entities (Latour, 1993, 1996, 1999a, 2005). Therefore, the chain of referrals in this study, guided by the focal point of influencers, led to a thick and rich description of the Instagram influencer economy, and further confirmed the credibility, dependability, and transferability of the findings (Moon, 2019).

Sample

The sample for this study consisted of 35 influencers, 12 influencer agencies, independent policymakers, lawyers, Meta representatives, and government ministries and

agencies residing in Nairobi, Kenya. Each study participant signed an informed consent prior to participating in the study. Table 1 displays the descriptive profile of the participants in the study.

Table 1

Descriptive Profile of Participants

Participant Category	Description	Number of Participants
Influencers	Nairobi content creators monetizing the Instagram platform	35
Influencer Agency	Wowzi – an intermediary agency that mediates brand deals and sponsorship between corporations and influencers	1
Independent Policymakers	Organizations and individuals working with the formulation of tech policies in Kenya (ICANN; KICTANET)	3
Lawyers	Represent influencers to guide them on the legal framework of their contracts; specialize in tech policy, law, and regulation	4
Meta Representative	Meta Public Policy Office for the East and Horn of Africa Region	1
Government Ministries and Agencies	MoICT is the government ministry charged with creating and implementing ICT laws and regulations in Kenya by working with various government agencies (e.g., Communications Authority, Ajira, KEPSA)	3

As a part of the “follow the thing” (Marcus, 1995, p. 106) method of data collection, I examined the multiple nonhuman actors within the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy. “Follow[ing] the things” (p. 106) included reviewing Instagram platform features such as algorithms and metrics; Instagram and Twitter posts, screenshots, and photos; smartphones; internet; data bundles; digital labor; planning and policy documents; media and blog articles; infrastructure and connectivity concerns, such as WIFI and electricity access influencers’ geographic location; and influencers’ “little stories” (Law, 2006, p. 62). Together, the gathered little stories evinced a shared understanding of the emerging Nairobi Instagram influencer economy ranging from content production, management, distribution, and monetization to the highly contentious regulatory efforts systematically undermining platformization, which in some cases, are nonexistent.

Influencers were the focal point of entry for this study on the emerging Instagram economy in Kenya. For this reason, I provide a detailed description of 35 Nairobi influencers who participated in this research throughout the dissertation. To adhere to ethical requirements and protect the interests of the participants in this study, I did not collect personal details that could identify influencers' information. To protect the participants from potential harassment, especially influencers, I obscured each influencer's identity by using a pseudonym. In addition, I avoided using identifiable information and details about the influencers, such as scandals covered by gossip and entertainment blogs that could be linked back to them. All explicit examples and screenshots I used were sourced from public available venues, such as popular press and blogs across Kenya.

I engaged a diverse range of young creators in Nairobi who were under 40 years old (see Figure 2) from various Instagram categories, who were actively monetizing the Instagram influencer economy for livable income.

Figure 2

Instagram Influencers in Nairobi: Age Profile

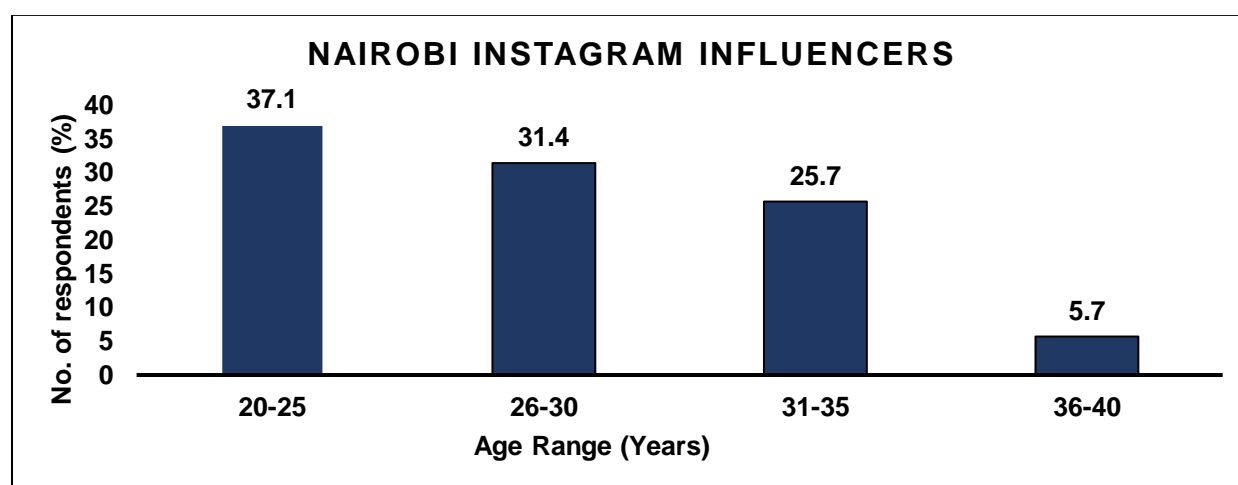


Table 2 displays the demographic information for the 35 influencers included in this study.

Table 2

Number of Influencers by Type

Type of Influencer	Frequency	Percent
Lifestyle	13	37.1
Beauty/Makeup	6	17.1
Fashion	5	14.3
Fitness	3	8.6
Food	3	8.6
Cars	2	5.7
Creative Arts	2	5.7
Travel	1	2.9
Total	35	100

The majority of the Kenyan influencers are Nairobi-based. According to my interviewee Mike, a founding director at Wowzi, a leading local influencer agency in Nairobi, the Wowzi platform has presented opportunities for more than 80,000 active influencers across Kenya to earn a fee from various brand sponsorship deals. Mike shared that Wowzi conducted research in Kenya to identify the characteristics of the Nairobi influencer population. Wowzi distinguished three types of influencers in Nairobi: (a) nano influencers (250-5000), (b) micro influencers (5000-30,000), (c) macro influencers (30,000-100,000), (d) mega influencers (100,000 to 500,000), (e) meta (influencers 500,000 – 1,000,000) and (f) super influencers (over one million followers)¹.

I aimed to interview 50 influencers, and achieved only 70% of my goal ($N = 35$). Table 3 shows the categories of influencers engaged in my study, indicating that mega influencers

¹ Wowzi's statistics were provided by Mike during our interview.

(100,000–500,000 followers) were the leading category, with a 31% response rate. The next biggest categories were micro influencers (5,000–30,000 followers) and macro influencers (30,000–100,000 followers), with response rates of 26% and 20%, respectively. Only 9% of interviewees had over one million followers, qualifying them as super influencers.

Table 3

Categories of Instagram Influencers in Nairobi Based on Followers

Number of Followers	Frequency	Percent
Nano Influencers (250–5,000 followers)	4	11.4
Micro Influencers (5,001–30,000 followers)	7	20.0
Macro Influencers (30,001–100,000 followers)	9	25.7
Mega Influencers (100,001–500,000 followers)	11	31.4
Meta Influencers (500,001–1 million followers)	1	2.9
Super Influencers (Over 1 million followers)	3	8.6
Total	35	100.0

More than 66% of Instagram users worldwide are 34 years of age or younger (Dixon, 2022), as was the case with all participants in this study, defining the role that Web 2.0 arguably plays in the lives of digital natives for communicating, socializing, creating, and learning.

Nairobi influencers are predominantly female in this unconventional digital workplace.

Respondents in my study were 63% female ($n = 22$). The young middle class Nairobians who make up most of this influencer community are fundamentally educated up to the undergraduate level. The influencers I interviewed considered content creation a full-time job. I even had challenges scheduling interview appointments in December during the holiday shopping season when the majority of influencers were shooting content for all kinds of brands to share their visual experiences with their followers in the Instagram world.

Data Collection

I employed a semistructured, in depth interview approach using a prepared interview guide (see Appendix E) as the data collection method. I spent December 2021 and January 2022 in Nairobi where I conducted 45–60 minute in-depth, face-to face or Zoom, semistructured interviews with 35 influencers to explore their perceptions of, and current day-to-day lived experiences within the Nairobi Instagram economy. I also conducted 45–60 minute in-depth, face-to face or Zoom, semistructured interviews with 12 select influencer agencies, independent policymakers, lawyers, Meta representatives, and government ministries and agencies concerned with the emerging creator economy in Nairobi. All interviews were conducted in English, with the exception of occasional lapses into Swahili and Sheng, a Swahili/English slang (Mazrui, 1995). Face-to-face interviews were audio-recorded using an iPhone and digital recorder. Some influencers and policymakers were unable to meet face-to-face; therefore, interviews were conducted and recorded with the Zoom platform in addition to digital recording. Additionally, I took hand-written notes during each interview to capture salient comments and record probing questions that arose during the interview conversations.

I adopted Lindlof and Taylor's (2019) "collaborative interactions" (p. 3), during my interviews with influencers, where most of what was said in the conversation emerged organically as opposed to imposing much structure. I adapted the approach to induce influencers' sense of entrepreneurial passion, creativity, freedom, negotiation, and struggles to delve deeply into personal and sometimes sensitive issues regarding their commodified self as commercially viable objects. I mapped out the Instagram obfuscated economy model using data gathered from interviews with influencers and the app walkthrough method, such as the influencers' terms and conditions of engagements and how influencers get paid to illuminate Instagram's lack of

transparency. Consequently, this interview approach offered insights into who is benefiting and how those benefits are realized within the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy.

After the semistructured interviews, I asked each influencer to walk me through their process of monetizing Instagram through the app walkthrough method. This method is “a way of engaging directly with an app’s interface to examine its technological mechanisms and embedded cultural references to understand how it guides users and shapes their experiences” (Light et al., 2018, p. 882). It is possible to illuminate unexpected user practices through engaging various features of the platform, such as multimodal features as well as in-app settings, privacy policies, and Terms of Use. Kaye et al. (2021) and Wang and Lobato (2019) uncovered foundational insights for further analysis of understudied Chinese apps, such as TikTok and Douyin. My app walkthrough process leveraged on *verstehende* sociology (Gold, 1997), where I actively, personally, and deeply became acquainted with the informants’ experiences and views as demonstrated in ethnographic works (Latour, 1996, 1999a, 1999b), and the works of Law and Singleton (2005), Mol (2002), and Mol and Messman (1996). The purpose of the app walkthrough was to study things in their natural settings to make sense of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln 2011; Gupta et al., 1997). This form of data collection, regarded as sociological sampling (Gold, 1997), assumes that “people whose society is to be studied are the very best source of information on how to put together an empirically grounded, representative sample of the society” (p. 390). Ethnographers are able to see the studied world in action and embed their findings in it (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 9). Most importantly, ethnographers must be able to gather valid and reliable qualitative data even when developing close and continuing contact with those being studied (Gold, 1997).

I also followed nonhuman things akin to Latour (1996; 1999), who used a rich archive of documentary sources to conduct a multisite ethnographic study. Inasmuch as my methodology focused on the importance of interviews with human actors as a source of data, when tracing the Nairobi Instagram network. Interviews with influencers led to me to additional human actors, such as business leaders and policymakers, as well as nonhuman actors. I recognized and acknowledged nonhuman things (Marcus, 1995)/actors (Latour, 1996, 1999a, 1999b), such as money, Instagram, the internet, smartphones, and data bundles, which evidenced translations through digital footprints, terms of contracts, access and usage, and algorithmic patterns. The adoption of ANT in ethnography empowered me to consider and follow the actors as part of a more heterogeneous field of data types, which I probed and interrogated further to derive their meaning in the Nairobi Instagram network.

Furthermore, I used examples of the Instagram influencer economy from various parts of the world as “many little stories” (Law, 2006, p. 62) to examine a series of connections relative to Nairobi as an emerging market by which to draw contrasts. My objective was to “trace a cultural formation across and within multiple sites of activity” (Marcus, 1995, p. 96) through Burrell’s (2009) suggestion of understanding fieldwork sites as “entry points, rather than sites,” (p. 190). Burrell’s (2009) entry points approach sorts out the connections between the global and the local at the same time assessing the viability and appropriateness of the technologies and crafts fresh new linkages the tech giants are bringing with them into the local, as part of the translation process. Marcus (1995) called for putting questions to an emergent object of study whose contours, sites, and relationships are not known beforehand but are themselves a contribution of making an account that has differently, complexly connected real-world sites of investigation (1995, p. 102). Burrell (2009), for example, in an ethnographic observation of

urban youth in Ghana's cybercafes demonstrated that the field site idea is not to cast in stone and researchers need to be agile and flexible continuously throughout the project. This is especially so for multi-sited studies which oftentimes "remain more ambivalent about relevant locations [and actually] make it part of their goal to find out where interesting things might be going on" (Hine 2007a, p. 661).

Marcus (1995) argued that ethnographic research should move out from single sites and local situations of conventional ethnographic research designs to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space. Exemplary transnational ethnographers (Mackenzie, 2010; Miraftab, 2014; Miraftab, 2016; Tsing, 2011; Vannini, 2011) offer a conceptual toolkit for global multi-sited ethnographic research in the 21st century that allows a discussion of the transnational connection across different spatial and political contexts. The approach defines for itself an object of study that cannot be accounted for ethnographically by remaining focused on a single site of intensive investigation (Marcus, 1995).

Data Analysis

I followed Braun and Clarke's (2012) six-phase plan for thematic analysis. The six phases are: (a) familiarizing yourself with the data, (b) generate initial codes, (c) search for themes, (d) review potential themes, (e) define and name themes, and produce the report (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The first step in familiarizing myself with the data was accurate transcription of the interview recordings. The transcription process required multiple listening sessions to ensure the accuracy of the interviewees' comments.

During familiarization of the data, I also undertook the process of generating initial codes. I took notes on each transcript, highlighting keywords and phrases that were significant and repeated across all interviews, as well as those statements and perspectives that were unique

to individual actors. The process of coding involved constant comparison by going back to the original data several times. Once codes were established, I grouped them into patterns of similar descriptors, leading to an iterative process where themes were defined to identify and tell a story. In addition, I looked for subthemes in each of the themes, gave the themes working titles, and described their content. For easy analysis, interpretation, and making inferences, I aligned the subthemes and titles with the six main questions in the interview guide. I used tables to visually display the organization of the themes, and figures to represent the understanding of data analysis.

I compiled the artifacts gathered in the data collection process, which represented some of the nonhuman actors, by source. For example, during the app walkthrough, I observed Instagram posts, pictures, and influencer analytics that I later captured in the form of screenshots to substantiate the findings for each chapter. I also gathered Instagram policy documents, media articles and blogs, and data on Kenyan influencer contracts, including client contracts, legal forms, and brand engagements. I coded each artifact according to its respective chapter and stored it electronically in a folder labeled for that chapter.

Chapter Structure

This dissertation is a pioneering attempt to advance a theoretical and conceptualized account of the digital creator economy systematically unfolding in Africa from a platformization lens beyond the plethora of coverage that DICs are moving to Africa and Africans are using platforms to monetize like their counterparts in other parts of the world. Each chapter is organized as a set of working themes with sufficient evidence of the statistically analyzed data through tables and graphs to demonstrate the prevalence of the theme in line with the research questions. Each chapter addresses a single research question building off the overarching

question that concerns the reproduction of the Instagram economy in an emerging market, such as Africa. The chapters in this dissertation expose the divisive and controversial dark side of the Instagram influencer economy, highlighting how each individual facet contributes to a complicated reality in Nairobi, heretofore unexamined in the context of the digital creator economy in an emerging market.

Chapter 1: Platformization and the New Instagram Economy in Africa

In Chapter 1, I take a deep dive into the culture of platformization unfolding in Nairobi. I situate the Instagram influencer economy in Nairobi as part of this platformization process. Specifically, I answer Research Question 1: How does platformization, as an emerging new media economy, take root through its infrastructure, technological affordances, influencer model and ascendancy in Kenya, a developing economy? Starting with the influencer as the Instagram network focal point, I identify the major human and nonhuman actors involved in the construction of the Instagram economy.

I outline the interrelationships between these actors and the roles they play within the Instagram network. I employ key ANT concepts, such as obligatory passage point (OPP), the immutable mobile, multiple realities, enactment, translation, messiness, and complexity of the network to explain how the Instagram network is formed during the translation process. The translation process of Nairobi's Instagram economy is one of multiple realities and is complex; it simultaneously reproduces politics of digital inclusion, exclusion, and power, which are all central to digital colonialism. As the Instagram influencer economy is dissected, the ways in which it separates, ranks, and empowers the various actors within the economy become evident.

Chapter 2: Politics of Digital Inclusion/Exclusion

Chapter 2 answers the question: How do the politics of inclusion and exclusion, embedded into an entrenched digital divide, reproduce, influence, and shape the Kenyan influencer Instagram economy and its beneficiaries? The chapter delves into the economic and political aspects of what it takes for a young Nairobiian to be included in the global Instagram influencer economy. For inclusion to take place, influencers must not only own a high-end smartphone but also understand Instagram's constantly changing affordances, such as image and video formatting, editing filters, and algorithms that sort and prioritize content. Nairobiians are assimilated into the Instagram economy but encounter a structure that is embedded into preexisting systems of inclusion/exclusion. A hidden layer of the internet exists within the Instagram economy, one that requires knowledge and skills beyond basic internet user techniques to create, produce, distribute, and monetize content. This layer is an obligatory passage point all creators/influencers must pass through to be accepted into the network. Other critical politics of inclusion and exclusion, combined with this obligatory passage point, make it possible for the Nairobi Instagram culture and economy to exist with thriving usage and adoption. Chapter 2 explores how influencers from different socioeconomic backgrounds negotiate the complexities of the Instagram economy in fashioning their Instagram account.

Chapter 3: Nairobi Instagram Power Play: The Path to Digital Colonialism

Chapter 3 examines power struggles amongst the actors in the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy network. I address who has the power to shape the influencer economy and who benefits among all the major actors identified in Chapter 1. I examine the emerging tensions, contradictions, and power imbalances of the Instagram culture in Nairobi by asking the

question “How do systems of power reproduce, influence, and shape the Kenyan influencer Instagram economy and its beneficiaries?”

The Nairobi Instagram influencer economy can be viewed as a pyramid of power constructed of four forms of power: ownership, platform, brand, and individual and elite power. The history of digital platforms underscores the patterns, continuities, contestations, and consolidation of ownership power that Instagram/Meta derives from its vantage point as the pinnacle of the power pyramid. Each other form of power also finds expression within the economy, yet these pseudo-powers are ultimately controlled and manipulated by Meta, who holds the ownership power. The shared views of influencers revealed the platform is continually in a state of digital disruption, which paves the way for the reproduction of power and power structures that results in digital colonialism. Although digital colonialism is central to the business models adapted by DICs, it has received limited attention from scholars (Kwet, 2019; Thatcher et al., 2016).

Chapter 4: The Chains That Bind Us: The High Price of Cultural Capital in the Instagram Culture

Chapter 4 examines the sociocultural component of the Instagram economy. I describe the identity making process of a Nairobi social media influencer. I consider if Instagram’s popularity promotes an *Americanization* of the Nairobi culture, or if Nairobians are choosing to align themselves to the globally acceptable cultural practices associated with digital content and production to remain relevant. I describe the profiles of Nairobi influencers in terms of commodification of self and self-branding, assimilation, and adaptation to the existing Instagram economy within the global and local context. I answer the research question: How do Nairobi influencers produce themselves as commodified subjects to fit the Instagram operating model,

and how does this self-branding process influence cultural reproduction in Nairobi? I examine the process of cultural reproduction that happens with Instagram in Nairobi guided by the ANT concept of making visible the invisible moments of translation (Callon, 1986; Mol, 2002). These invisible moments are most clearly identified through day-to-day commodification of self, practices, particularities, experiences, realities, and lifestyles of Nairobi influencers.

Chapter 5: Willing Buyer-Willing Seller: The Plight of Instagram Influencers in an Unregulated Creator Economy

Chapter 5 focuses on governmental policies related to the Instagram economy in Nairobi. I describe the opportunities and challenges of existing or missing regulations that govern digital platforms, including social media influencer activities. I showcase the *dark side* of influencers who have attempted to become successful but failed. I bring out the complexity of becoming a successful influencer and the impending barriers of entry in the Instagram influencer culture. Given the pressure to build social capital to attract followers and advertisers through endless digital labor and capital investment, Chapter 5 answers the research question: “How can the Instagram influencer ecosystem, which is a global economy system, be governed in a way that is equitable, inclusive, and sustainable to all countries while mitigating the challenges, threats, and opportunities of digital content creators in an emerging market?” I analyze Instagram policies, policy gaps within the Kenyan creator economy, general tech policies for emerging markets like Nairobi, and the process of policymaking within the Kenyan government. A primary focus of the chapter is the incentivization of the social media influencers—a major impediment of getting Nairobi influencers to penetrate the main global Instagram influencer economy. Specifically, I examine digital service tax, infrastructural gaps, digital pay gaps, data protection and privacy, and content moderation.

Conclusion

The introduction to this dissertation outlined the unfolding of platformization in Nairobi, identifying opportunities and threats as well as other critical measures required to understand, leverage, and regulate digital platforms across emerging markets. It is not enough to generalize platformization and its implications as a practice in Kenya without consideration of the specific platform—Instagram—and the infusion of cultural practices, local contexts, and actors that create the Instagram influencer economy in this developing country, and specifically in Nairobi. This study was conducted to advance knowledge of the Instagram economy in a localized context and to reveal how invisible moments of translation (Callon, 1986; Mol, 2002) coalesce to create a highly messy and complex reality (Law & Singleton, 2005) for Nairobi creators who are looking for ways to improve their economic standing by leveraging recognition, fame, respect and influence. In this introduction, I detailed the theoretical framework for the study and described the methodological approaches I undertook to conduct the study. I also provided a brief overview of the five major topics in the study, which are organized as chapters. Each chapter is presented as a discussion of a major topic, with connections to the overarching research question.

CHAPTER 1: PLATFORMIZATION AND THE NEW INSTAGRAM ECONOMY IN AFRICA

Our technology is, also, ahead of its time, if we reckon by the ability to recognize it for what it is (McLuhan, 1964, p. 65).

On December 12, 2021, amid my data collection in Nairobi, Kenya, news and social media outlets broke the news of the sudden death of a popular Kenyan Instagram influencer, Empresal Sally, due to complications arising from a botched skin-lightening procedure. A family doctor performed the procedures on the influencer and her husband in their home, intravenously injecting a whitening vitamin C supplement mixed with glutathione (Ngigi, 2021). The 39-year-old mother of four had showcased an opulent lifestyle on Instagram, posting photographs of local and international luxury travel and meals in high-end restaurants (Nyota, 2021). Although her family and close friends denied the botched skin-lightening procedure as the cause of her death (Ngigi, 2021; Nyota, 2021), a popular Kenyan blogger continued to leak screenshots displaying evidence and creating a connection between the failed skin-lightening procedure and Empresal Sally's demise (Lydiah_Ke, n.d.; Omondi, 2021). Empresal Sally, like many other Kenyan Instagram influencers, believed her appearance was her best commodity, and invested in having the most appealing physical presence as possible, which ultimately led to her death.

As a global concern, the Instagram influencer economy has led to increased demand for skin-lightening and other body-enhancement procedures, such as liposuction, Brazilian butt lift (BBL) and Botox, in many countries and among many individuals (Frier, 2020; Hibbert & Crisp, inzpire.me, 2019; Lawrence, 2022). Dr. Kevin Brenner, a plastic surgeon in Beverly Hills, California confirmed his business has been booming since the advent of Instagram (Frier, 2020) with hundreds of customers flocking to his clinic for these kinds of procedures. Hibbert and

Crisp (2014) wrote an article for *Aljazeera* confirming skin-lightening as a highly popular treatment in Kenya, especially among the Black market, where unlicensed beauticians provide less-expensive injections. Dr. Pranav Pancholi, a Harvard-trained dermatologist, argued that the unregulated injections are harmful to the body because “the products are packaged and marketed to look attractive, but anything could be inside. Injecting products containing AHAs is abnormal. It can kill body tissue and cause serious infection” (Hibbert & Crisp, 2014, para. 9)². A white paper published by inzpire.me (2019), a global influencer marketing platform, revealed findings from a review of 10,000 content creators/influencers. Among the key findings inzpire.me reported that “while 24% [of influencers] believe that the influencer industry has a ‘positive’ effect on body image, 32% are willing to concede that the impact on body image was ‘negative’” (p. 5). According to Lawrence (2022), Kenyan women such as Nyakim Gatwech take great risks to make their bodies social media acceptable or *Instaworthy*.

Empresal Sally’s tragic death highlights the length Kenyan women go to in order to increase their visibility and gain a social media presence through Instagram, as Frier (2020) suggested. In Kenya, being light skinned has connotative meanings of being from a privileged background, financially independent, or holding Western standards, as Ruth Abade explained during her interview with Quartz Africa (Cheng, 2021). Abade stated, “The color of one’s skin is marketable, monetizable. Connotations of lighter skin include higher visibility, being more ‘seen’” (Cheng, 2021, p. 4). Vera Sidika, a popular Nairobi influencer dubbed Kenya’s Kim Kardashian, confirmed to have spent \$170,000 for a skin-lightening procedure in the United

² A recent CNN article on the skin lightening industry provides a relevant example of the unregulated practice that is sweeping the social media landscape, signified by the hashtag #skinwhitening. The article cites Kenya as one of the most prevalent cultures engaging in dangerous skin lightening procedures (Palumbo, 2022). <https://www.cnn.com/style/article/skin-whitening-products-social-media-as-equals-intl-cmd/index.html>

Kingdom (BBC, 2014), saying in a televised interview, “My body is my business, and it is a moneymaker” (Hibbert & Crisp, 2014). Subsequently, Vera’s hashtag, #BleachedBeauty, trended on Twitter, as local netizens expressed disbelief in her lack of self-acceptance, calling the procedure demeaning of Black identity and a waste of money as some Kenyans languished in poverty and died from hunger and starvation (Hebblethwaite, 2014). Another popular influencer, Bridget, exemplified these assertions. During a TV show interview, Bridget confirmed that before her skin-brightening procedure, which cost \$87,000 USD, she was hardly recognizable (Wanjoji, 2021). Prior to having her skin lightened, Bridget rarely received work and could not qualify for television auditions because her appearance was unappealing (Wanjoji, 2021). Influencers with lighter skin complexion and certain body types tend to attract more brand deals. Self-branding as a popular performative act is seen as a precursor to gaining social capital and luring brands for commercial interests. As Duffy (2017) argued, maintaining visibility is critical for success in the attention economy; an individual must be seen to bolster their image and burnish their self-brand.

Instagram has become a platform for Kenyan, and specifically, Nairobi women, to seek monetary gain, and strengthen their emerging economy. Although Instagram is changing the economic landscape of Nairobi, it is important to note that most Instagram users will consume content and maybe post for friends without ever joining the paid creators’ program or finding paid sponsorship deals. Becoming an influencer is one-way Kenyan citizens have found to supplement their income and provide for self-improvement procedures. During my interviews for this study, some female Nairobi influencers confided that they were raising money for body modifications and enhancement, which they perceived as the *Holy Grail* to stand out in a cluttered influencer space. Crucially, as observed from this study, the Instagram platform

requires individuals who want to stand out as influencers to create and curate click-worthy content; increase and sustain their audience reach to be ever-active; and generate revenue by growing their network activities within the platform.

The study of platformization has predominantly taken place among Western researchers who, although investigating platforms in developed economies, fail to understand how the process of platformization unfolds in developing spaces, such as African countries.

Platformization researchers look at the social implications of digital platforms like Instagram primarily from a developed nation perspective (de Kloet et al., 2019; Duffy, 2017; Helmond, 2015; Poell et al., 2021; Van Dijck et al., 2018). For example, Duffy (2017) analyzed the intersection of aspirational labor and gender on platforms in the Global North, specifically the United States. Poell et al. (2021) studied platforms and cultural production with a primary focus on the United States as well as China, which is a developed nation in the Global South. Van Dijck et al. (2018) explored how digital platforms are extracting value from various sectors they venture into through a combined process of datafication, commodification, and selection, while de Kloet et al. (2019) analyzed the platformization of Chinese society with particular interest on infrastructure, governance, and practice. Taken together, these studies present idiosyncrasies brought to life through the implications of platformization in nations around the world, mostly within developed economies. The issues covered in the majority of these studies range from the deepening digital capitalism, precarious conditions of platform economy workers, and the reconfiguration of cultural production across the globe, primarily from a Global North perspective (Duffy, 2017; Frier, 2020; Poell et al., 2021) to the need for policy and regulation. Poell et al. (2021) insisted, “but while current research allows us to describe the contours of the dynamic relationship between platforms and different types of cultural producers, exactly *how*

these relations are organized remains to be seen” (p. 165). What is less understood, however, is how platformization is influencing the Global South, specifically in African countries such as Kenya.

The purpose for this chapter is to interrogate platformization as a worldwide phenomenon that is in the interest of what I call *digital international companies* (DICs). Because so much of current research focuses on markets in developed nations, which is an effect of the coloniality of global knowledge/academia, there is a dearth of scholarly attention to issues of platformization in developing countries. This chapter provides a foundation for exploring the complexities and realities of reproducing the Instagram influencer economy in an emerging market, such as Nairobi, Kenya. Specifically, this chapter is designed to answer Research Question One:

How does platformization, as an emerging new media economy, take root through its infrastructure, technological affordances, influencer model and ascendancy in Nairobi Kenya, a developing economy?

First, I describe how platformization is unfolding in Nairobi to identify and explain the phenomenon of influencing as an economic commodity. After defining platformization, I interrogate its function through ANT’s translation process, with an emphasis on problematization. There are four fundamental translation processes of an actor-network—problematization, interessement, enrollment, and mobilization. To further explain how the translation processes unfolds, I describe problematization as the first moment of translation. I then focus on one nonhuman actor of the network, the internet as an obligatory passage point (OPP) of the network. I then address the second translation process of interessement, focusing on Instagram as an immutable mobile non-human actor. After examining enrollment, I dissect the fourth translation process, mobilization. Threats to platformization exist and are explored in

within mobilization under moments of tension (Mol, 2002) in the Nairobi Instagram platform, messy and complex realities (Law & Singleton, 2005), and invisible moments of translation (Callon, 1996; Mol, 2002). These hidden moments are revealed to expose the influence of the other invisible actors—the *digital service tax* (DST) controversy, digital labor on the platform, and the new Instagram economy in Nairobi.

Platformization

The term platformization is derived from the word platforms. By definition, “platforms are data infrastructures that facilitate, aggregate, monetize, and govern interactions between end users and content and service producers” (Poell et al., 2021, p. 5). As a widely accepted term among consumers and the press, a *platform* is the dominant mechanism for social media companies to position themselves in the market and address their users’ needs. Platforms are multisided markets, further understood as “aggregators of institutional connections, including economic transactions, that mediate between end users and content and service providers” (Poell et al., 2021, p. 35). Helmond (2015) first introduced platformization as the major infrastructural and economic model of the social web—focusing specifically on Facebook. Facebook’s platform can be viewed as an infrastructural model, enabling the social media network to expand into other online spaces, such as internet-based services and businesses. Facebook then leverages these platform extensions to meet its economic interests by commodifying user activities with web and app content, using algorithms to tailor the user’s Facebook experience to their interests and browsing habits through advertisements and suggested posts.

Nieborg and Poell (2018) further developed the definition of platformization as “the penetration of economic, governmental, and infrastructural extensions of digital platforms into cultural industries as well as the organization of cultural practices of labor, creativity, and

democracy around platforms” (p. 4276). According to de Kloet et al. (2019), one shortcoming with this definition is that it overlooks platforms’ social and cultural aspects. These two elements are central to this study as they not only show that platformization “is not merely a top-down process dictated by platforms” (Poell et al., 2021, p. 8), but one that is steered by actors’ practices and activities within the network formation as they advocate and push for their agendas and interests. Consequently, platformization goes beyond institutional shifts in markets, infrastructures, and governance to practices of labor, creativity, and democracy (Poell et al., 2021). For example, as observed during my interviews, various human actors (i.e., influencers) pursue individual ambitions, sometimes enabling or constraining platformization. The examination of the fundamental reorganization of these kinds of interactions and relationships allows for an understanding of platformization in an emerging market.

Gillespie (2010) emphasized the participatory and economic aspects of platforms, whereby platforms are opportunities for interaction and commerce. Platforms are designed and orchestrated to not only invite but to shape participation toward particular ends (Gillespie, 2017). Instagram, argued Frier (2020), is not designed to be a neutral technology as are electricity or computer code. Instead, Instagram is “an intentionally crafted experience, with an impact on its users that is not inevitable but is the product of a series of choices by its makers about how to shape behavior” (Frier, p. 279). Instagram views users as individuals and maximizes its content to allow each user to individualize their experience with the app, capitalizing on users’ habits of liking and following accounts that are of particular interest to them. Instagram’s platform power is in its “editorial strategy [and] partnerships with top accounts” (p. 279), which optimize a positive image that users can emulate. For the purpose of this study, then, platformization is the process through which Instagram is shaping socioeconomic and cultural lives through its

infrastructure, technological affordances, influencer model, and ascendancy. Although, there are other conceptualizations of platformization from economics, business strategy, etc., this study does not focus on scopes such as (gig work, sharing economy, e-commerce, operating systems with third party programs) across other industries. This study only engages with the concept of platformization, as a media studies construct, one kind of a process (user generated content and labor) while drawing on (Gillespie ,2010; Gillespie, 2017; Fuchs, 2014; Poell et al., 2021). Particularly, this study narrows down to "platformization of cultural production" around the emerging industry of the creator economy on social media platforms for the creation, distribution, marketing and monetization of digital content.

Platforms can be understood as new and improved Web 2.0 applications where “user participation” and “users’ cooperation” are key (Barassi & Treré, 2012, p. 1273). As Nieborg and Helmond (2019) demonstrated through their study of the Facebook Messenger app, platforms emerge quickly and apps may evolve into platforms of their own, thereby gaining infrastructural properties. Fuchs (2014) asserted:

The notions of Web 2.0 and social media created the impressions that newer platforms are radically new and promise huge economic returns. Web 2.0 and social media are therefore also marketing ideologies aimed at attracting venture capital investments for newly founded internet companies. (p. 113)

According to Beer and Burrows (2007), social networking sites like Instagram are classified as one specific type of Web 2.0 application because as Madden and Fox (2006) stated, they foster collaboration and participation. Web 2.0, also known as the “participatory web” (Madden & Fox, 2006, p. 1), is characterized by users’ ability to produce content. The development of Web 2.0 marked an important epoch in the history of the internet as it paved the

way for wide-scale participation that allows individuals to make their thoughts and opinions known (Beer & Burrows, 2007). However, the increased visibility and voice provided by Web 2.0 created a new set of challenges. According to Beer and Burrows (2007), “*the user profile* has become *the* commodity of Web 2.0, as users engage in simultaneous acts of production and consumption” (p. 7). Beer and Burrows (2007) argued that despite being developed as a free tool for the individual and ordinary consumer, social networks “remain overwhelmingly commercial” (p. 7). As such, Instagram provides a platform for participation where consumers of content are also producers of content, a phenomenon regarded as prosumption (Beer & Burrows, 2010; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). But Instagram also permits users to commodify information and develop monetization strategies. The reaction to this sociotechnical development of the web has arguably heightened prosumption activities across digital platforms. Instagram provides a variety of monetization strategies and tools by which influencers can position themselves through brand deals. Platforms, as a multisided market (Poell et al., 2021), involve a simultaneous engagement of actors. When viewed through the lens of ANT, the choreography between actors in a platform is clearly demonstrated. To fully understand platformization, it is necessary to use ANT’s translation process as a guiding framework.

Understanding Platformization Through ANT’s Moments of Translation

Although there are many ways to study platformization, I adhered to the dictum of ANT, tracing associations using the ethnographic approach of “following the actors” (Callon, 1986a, p. 228). Though Law (2002) deemed ANT neither a theory nor a method, combining ANT with an ethnographic approach allows me to better understand the unfolding of platformization in Nairobi. ANT serves as a way to view the ethnography in all its complexities, recognizing that multiple actors influence the stability of the digital creator economy, while various networks

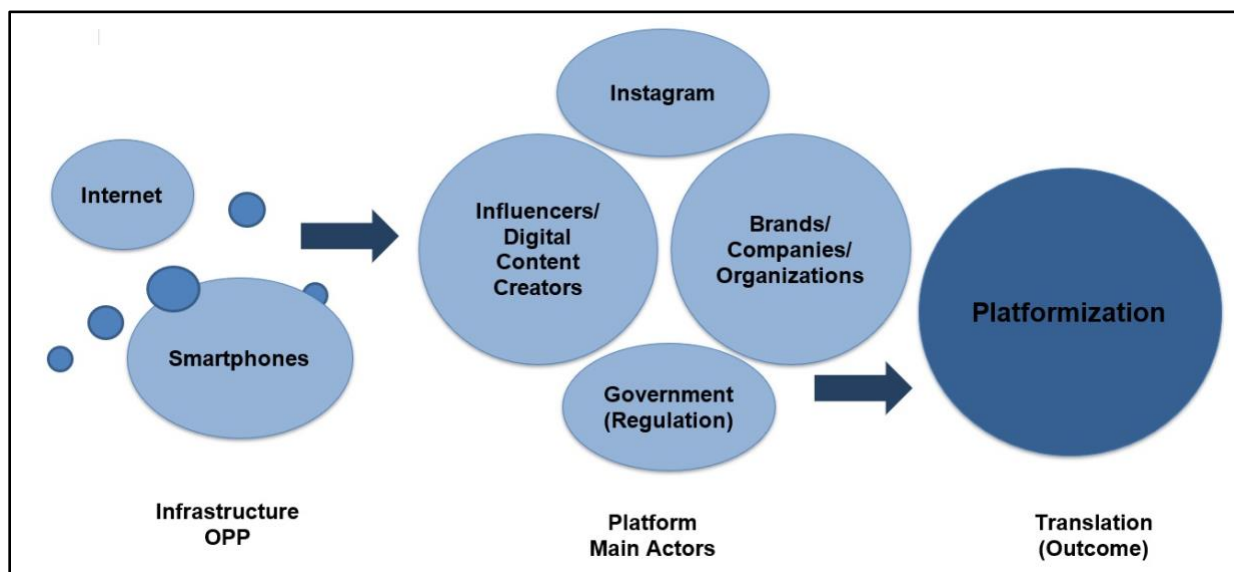
work for and against Kenyan influencers' efforts to sustain a livelihood in the digital creator economy. I study platformization through the analysis of the Instagram influencer economy network in Nairobi and the translations of influencers and other actors within the localized Nairobi network. Latour (1996) deployed ethnographic methods to "follow the blame" in a study on the demise of Aramis, a Paris-based automated train system. Each time an interviewee pointed to another actor (human or nonhuman), Latour (1996) took the opportunity to contact that actor, seeking a more concrete answer to the question of what led to Aramis' failure. His findings uncovered other influences, orchestrated by multiple actors in the system. Each actor's influence contributed in some way to the understanding of the system. Because Aramis was "treated as a complete and finished object" (p. 212), its scope was not fully understood until Latour (1996) dissected the problem by following the trail of blame. Latour's (1996) approach provided a more complete understanding of the phenomenon.

Taking an inductive approach, akin to Latour (1996), I follow Nairobi Instagram influencers' movement to understand how they build relationships through sociotechnical infrastructures of human and nonhuman actors through the process of translation. I extrapolate each individual actor's moments of translation, following Latour's (1996) idea of taking more realistic and smaller sets of associations with the goal of understanding where networks start from and how they come to being.

According to ANT, networks are formed through a process of translation, which happens when an actor joins a network (Callon, 1986). The process of translation through tracing associations is followed from the perspective of one focal actor and involves the alignment of the interests of diverse actors with the focal actor. The designated focal actor in this study is the influencer, who is the central part of the Instagram platformization network and the main unit of

analysis for this study. If we consider Nairobi influencers as the focal actor of the network, then analyzing the process of translation by which other human and nonhuman actors compose the network will help define the actors and their motivations, interests, and commitment, to offer an explanation for how platformization is unfolding in the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy.

ANT investigates how actants form a network out of heterogeneous bits and pieces to produce a functioning order, and how they mobilize, juxtapose, and bind the elements of that network (Law, 1992, p. 381). Comprehending network activities or network outcomes requires considering the full range of interrelations that occur within the network (Callon, 1986; Latour, 1996; Law, 1992). Mapping shows each actor as a distinct contributor in a world that is both complex and messy. In the case of the Instagram influencer economy network, these heterogeneous bits/actants include human actors, such as influencers and users; and nonhuman actors, such as brands, government, internet, and smartphones (see Figure 3). Translation is a process which is never completed. Moments of translation do not necessarily follow a sequential order; they happen concurrently, iteratively, and within any phase (Callon, 1986).

Figure 3*Nairobi Instagram Heterogenous Network*

Callon's (1986) process of translation (by which an actor-network is created) results in an established actor-network, which passes through four critical moments: problematization, interessement, enrollment, and mobilization. Problematization in this study refers to the influencer's own interest in creating content and monetizing the Instagram platform for livable income. Interessement involves negotiating with all actants (influencers, brands, government) to facilitate the influencer's interest within the creator economy. Enrollment, the process of accepting the influencer's interest, creates moments of tension (Mol, 2002) within the Instagram platform because every actor is pursuing a separate agenda that is not necessarily streamlined with the focal actor's interest. Thus, mobilization is stunted by the messy realities of establishing and sustaining the influencer economy. The stabilization of the Instagram influencer economy is threatened by power struggles within and across each of the platform's main actors, as will be discussed in Chapter 3. It is important to note that other ANT scholars built on Callon's concept

of translation, providing useful ANT concepts, such as heterogenous networks (Latour, 1998, 1999b; Law, 1992), multiple realities (Mol, 2002), messy and complex realities (Law & Singleton, 2005), invisible moments of translation (Callon, 1986; Mol, 2002), and moments of tension (Mol, 2002). These concepts are woven into the discussion of the ways the four processes of translation are unfolding within the Kenyan Instagram influencer economy. I begin the discussion with problematization, the first moment of translation, followed by the other three moments: intersement, enrollment, and mobilization.

Problematization

Problematization is the first moment of translation, during which a focal actor, in this case, the influencer defines identities and interests of other actors that are consistent with its own interests (Callon, 1986). The focal actor defines a problem or the challenge at hand and attempts to persuade other actors to accept the challenge, to pursue a solution. At the start of this study, each potential actor appeared disentangled and incompatible within an amorphous network of the Nairobi Instagram economy. Their engagement with other actors was limited as each actor conducted independent activities toward platformization in silos. Actors appeared to exist in parallel to each other. Each individual actor tended to devote their energy to individualistic ambitions. With Law's (1992) understanding that everything is both an actor and a network, the problem became clear: the actors exist as their own networks, alluding to the possibilities of alternative configurations within or outside a network (Callon, 1986; Law, 1992). The internet, as an actor, is the OPP for the Instagram economy in Nairobi that facilitates a site of sociocultural and economic transformations. The OPP is a situation that must occur; it is necessary for all actors to pass through the OPP in order to create a network and achieve their interests. These interests are defined by the focal actors, who, in my study are the Nairobi

influencers (Callon, 1986; Latour, 1987). As such, the Internet has a distinct role in sustaining the platform.

The start of the 21st century brought major changes to the Sub-Saharan Africa technological landscape. According to Aker and Mbiti (2010), during the first 10 years of the century (2000–2010), mobile technology took hold; by 2010 “60% of the population [had] mobile phone coverage” (p. 207). In fact, the International Telecommunication Union indicated there were “10 times as many mobile phones as land lines in Sub-Saharan Africa” (p. 207) by 2010. Mobile phones are accessible across the socioeconomic strata. Access to all citizens is increasingly possible through inexpensive mobile devices (Donner, 2015). One billion users came online for the first time in the Global South between 2013 and 2018 (De Bastion & Mukku, 2020). The Global System for Mobile Communications (GSM Association, 2021) reported that “by the end of 2020, 495 million people subscribed to mobile services in Sub-Saharan Africa, representing 46% of the region’s population—an increase of almost 20 million on 2019” (para. 2). The population in the region is young; “more than 40% ... [are] under the age of 15” (para. 2), meaning that mobile phone usage will continue and even increase in coming years (GSM Association, 2021). Even though Kenyans are gaining in educational attainment, their mean income is still only \$100-150 a month,³ depending on the specific category of work.

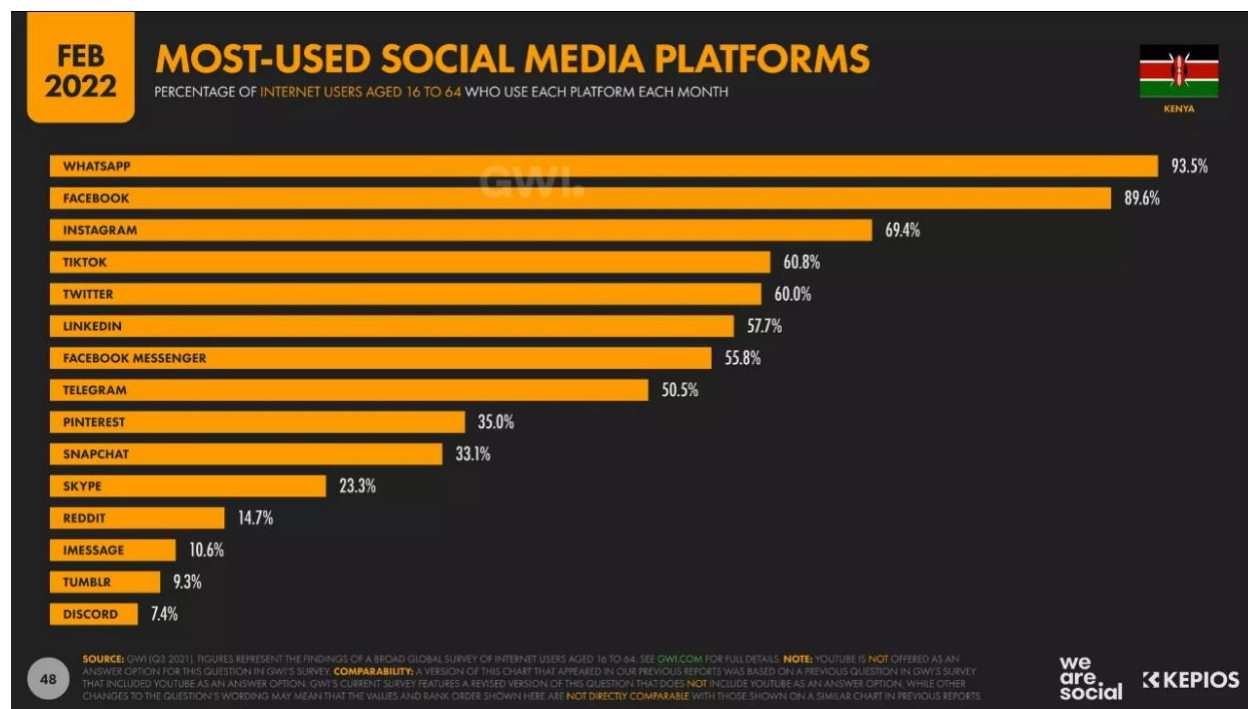
Despite the popularity of mobile devices, Kenyans’ overall internet use is still low, in line with most African countries. With a population of 50 million, Kenya has 23.35 million internet users (Kemp, 2022). Broad adoption and use of smartphones helped drive platform growth in Kenya (Kemp, 2021; Pew Research Center, 2018). *Digital 2022: Kenya* (Kemp, 2022) published

³ Labour Institutions Act Kenya, No 12 of 2007. The regulation of wages was amended in 2018, containing all revised rates of different professions.

by Data Reportal, showed that the mobile phone's penetration in Kenya is at 114.2%; however, only 42% of Kenyans use the internet, with 95.9% accessing the internet via their mobile devices. Specific to social media platforms, Kenyans' usage is even lower. Of the 23.35 million Kenyan internet users, there are 11.75 million social media users; these users spend an average of 3 hours a day on social media. As illustrated in Figure 4, the five most-used social media platforms are WhatsApp (93.5%), Facebook (89.6%), Instagram (69.4%), TikTok (60.8%), and Twitter (30.0%). While Instagram usage went down in 2022 by 1.5%, it remained the third-highest social media app used by Kenyans. In the Data Reportal survey, Kenyans reported Instagram as their "favorite social media app" (11.7%) compared to WhatsApp (41.4%) and Facebook (19.5%; Kemp, 2022). As observed in the field by my participants, most influencers use cellular networks (both 4G and 5G) and free Wi-Fi in places like shopping malls, eateries (restaurants and coffeehouses), and educational institutions (colleges and universities) to stream their content.

Figure 4

Top Five Social Media Platforms in Kenya



Note. Adapted from *Digital 2022: Kenya*, by S. Kemp, 2022 (February 15) Data Reportal (<https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-kenya>). In the public domain.

In spite of low internet usage, Kenya has a better internet infrastructural capacity than any other African country. As a result, Kenya's internet capacity has potential for current content creators in Nairobi to leverage digital platforms. The government has addressed access and invested heavily in infrastructure (Kenya Digital Economy, 2019) through projects like fiber optic⁴ installation and the Universal Service Fund⁵ (USF), digital economy blueprint⁶, Konza

⁴ Kenya has five undersea fiber optic cables: SEACOMS, EASSy, TEAMS, KDN reliance, and FLAG Falcon. The Kenyan government owns SEACOM, with various multinational companies in partnership with local companies owning the rest.

⁵ To complement private sector initiatives toward meeting universal access objectives to the grassroots level (Communications Authority of Kenya, n.d.).

⁶ Digital Economy Blueprint.

Technopolis⁷ smart city, and curriculum reform. These efforts include digital skills in the competence-based curriculum education system, presenting the Kenyan government's digital vision for the future of providing all Kenyan citizens access to modern, high-quality communication and digital services.

The internet has offered a plethora of new opportunities for Joshua, an interviewee, and many other young creators in Kenya. Joshua established his influencing career in 2014, posting pictures and videos as stories and reels on Instagram. Although his career began as something he really enjoyed, his consistent posting built him a significant number of followers and brands started asking him to feature their flights, hotels, menus, and accommodations, among other commodities. Prior to engaging in influencing, Joshua said, "I had never imagined that the power of the internet could see me cultivate a whole career just by posting my travel diaries." Brands began offering Joshua PR packages, such as free flights and money. Joshua had no idea how to price his services, which were now attracting attention, not just in Kenya, but across Africa and beyond. In the beginning, he took anything brands offered until "I learnt influencer marketing was a thing in 2017 and started giving it my best. Since then, I have invested in every new iPhone that is launched annually to be able to maintain high-quality videos and photos."

From my conversations with many creators, I could tell they embraced the internet and its promise for a better future by monetizing their activities on platforms such as Instagram. Further, as other ethnographic researchers of media cultures in Africa have noted, the internet is a "key resource for enacting a more cosmopolitan self" (Burrell, 2012, p. 4) or, as in the case of my influencers, a neocolonial self, which they portrayed by embracing procedures such as skin

⁷ Konza Technopolis, 2009, a smart city designed to house the Business Process Outsourcing industry and utilize the fiber capacity to position Kenya as a global destination for outsourcing.

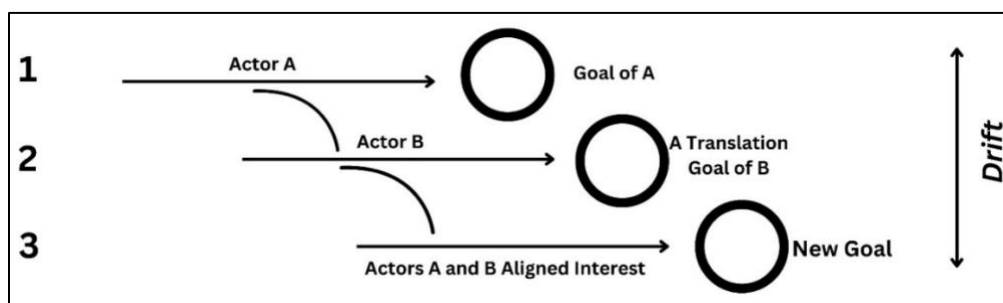
brightening and BBL. My research showed the rise of the Instagram influencer economy in Nairobi is made possible by the robust internet coverage across the country of Kenya. The internet and internet access are key actors in the process of translation, leading to platformization in Nairobi, in line with ANT.

Interessement

Interessement is a form of negotiation (Callon, 1986). As the second process of translation, interessement involves negotiating with actors to accept the definition of the focal actor (Callon, 1986). Using Figure 5 as a model, platformization should be understood as a nonhuman actor A (Instagram) and as an advertising visual platform that allows monetizing activities of human actors B (influencer; Latour, 1999b). Actors A and B have corresponding interests. Although they are two different actors with different goals, knowing of each other's existence, they are drawn into alignment due to their intersecting and mutually beneficial interest, which is to develop a new goal of an Instagram economy in Nairobi.

Figure 5

Translation of Interests



Note. Adapted from “Science’s Blood Flow” in *Pandora’s Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* by B. Latour, 1999b, p. 89. Copyright 1999 by Harvard University Press. Reprinted with permission.

As a nonhuman actor, Instagram serves as the visual site for executing the influencers' work and activities, fosters freedom of creative expression and, for some, forges a career path by monetizing content. Instagram is also the point of convergence for all actors where intersement is negotiated. According to Latour (1999b), the relationship is dependent on how each of the actors have worked to foster the connection through the process of intersement, as described by Callon (1986). Instead of assuming the possibility of translation does take place due to the connections between actors, or assuming it as a pure process, the focus is on examining the struggles of the actors as they work within the relationship (Latour, 1999b).

According to Instagram's cofounder, Kevin Systrom, Instagram was designed to be an "escape from the rest of the internet, a place where things were more beautiful, and people were optimistic about their lives" (Frier, 2020, p. 220). Furthermore, Instagram has become a tool that is intricately infused in our daily lives, and operates, to an extent, as a measurement of digital recognition and validation via likes, comments, followers, and brand deals (Frier, 2020). With over 1 billion monthly active users in 2021, Instagram is one of the most popular social media platforms in the world (Frier, 2020), making it the most lucrative for content creation influencers through sponsored posts. People in developing countries are becoming consumers of new media technologies as tech giants start to target them online (Arora, 2019). In fact, Instagram is the first ever mobile app to achieve a \$1 billion valuation (Frier, 2020). Instagram has a 70% usage in Kenya, which equates to approximately 8 million Instagram users out of the 11 million social media users in the country (Data Reportal, 2022). Those 8 million Instagram users represent less than 10% of Kenyan's total population of 50 million people (KNBS, 2019).

Because of the limited barriers to becoming an Instagram influencer (Cunningham & Craig, 2019), the number of influencers globally has risen sharply in the last 10 years. If a brand

is willing to sponsor their activities, every user can potentially be an influencer (Ruiz-Gomez, 2019) and anyone can become famous among strangers (Frier, 2020). Therefore, it is nearly impossible to pinpoint the actual number of Instagram influencers in Nairobi.

For Nairobi youth, the Instagram platform has become part of a global phenomenon with a highly stylized internet. Instagram is an “immutable mobile,” a concept introduced by Latour (2013) to describe displacement without transformation of the thing that moves. In Latour’s rationale, an immutable mobile is something that moves around but also holds its shape (Law & Singleton, 2005). The notion of immutable mobile has been previously applied to various ANT studies: the ship of Theseus (Latour, 2013), Zimbabwe bush pump (De Laet & Mol, 2000), and the briquettes-making machine (Law, 2006). Law’s (2006) account of the exportation of the Swedish brick-making technology to Nicaragua from Sweden demonstrates how the process of translation occurs with immutable mobiles, adding new actors and creating new relations without necessarily changing the shape of the technology. The Swedish brick-making technology transfer to Nicaragua was intended for making briquettes out of forest waste, a similar process that was deemed economically successful in Sweden. Unlike Sweden, Nicaragua experienced subversive setbacks such as fuel shortage and scarcity of wood, which was replaced by experiments using alternative raw materials, such as rice waste and the stalks of cotton plants. As a result, a new cast of heterogeneous actors were introduced, rendering a series of negotiations with human actors, such as farm owners and farm laborers, and nonhuman actors, such as cotton pests, deforestation, the geography of the country, roots, more machinery, the civil war, waste disposal laws, and market forces. Although the Swedish brick-making technology remained the same when transferred from Sweden to Nicaragua, “the social and technical relations around it also start[ed] to change” (Law, 2006, p. 49). The account of Swedish brick-making technology is a

story of two different networks in transformation. In the end, the Swedish brick-making technology demonstrates both similarity and difference in the translation process.

Instagram is a technology exported from the United States, and despite it being present in multiple countries and cultures around the world, it still holds its shape, legacy, physical or geographical space, and network of associations. Instagram's design and function as a social media site are static across the global platform; however, to a certain extent, its relationality and functionality might be altered according to the dynamics, realities, and strikingly different context of the Nairobi influencer economy, as demonstrated by heterogeneous experiences and practices of the interviewees in this study. As such, rather than understanding Instagram as a fixed platform, Instagram can be viewed as a platform that is transformed in contextual practices to make meaning derived from multiple interpretations of objects, which can be "flexibly interpreted," as Law and Singleton (2005) advocated. Immutable mobiles have flexibility in practice, while retaining an identifiable form (Law & Singleton, 2005).

Jean Burgess and Nancy Baym (Microsoft Research, 2021) argued that although it is enticing to view a platform as a single "technology"—a static object seen as a causal agent of societal change—an in-depth analysis "reveals that platform companies, their technologies, and the cultures that form through and around them constantly push against and reshape one another" ("Abstract," para. 1). ANT's immutable mobile concept offers an intervention for this challenge. From this perspective, platformization, as argued by Poell et al. (2021), is not a uniform or a unilateral process; instead, "it is highly dependent on the context within which it emerges and takes shape" (p. 194). Platformization has understandable and recognizable characteristics that, from a distance, make it look quite immutable as a concept. However, the way in which it operates within different geographic and social spaces illustrates its mutable properties, to form

itself into the space in which it is contained (Law & Singleton, 2005; Mol, 2002). The platform of Instagram is what Law and Singleton (2005) called a “fire object, that jumps, creatively, destructively and more or less unpredictably from location to location ... a dancing and dangerous pattern of discontinuous displacements between locations that are other to (but linked with) each other. ... [It is] much more dynamic, more sporadic, less predictable, more discontinuous than is suggested by the metaphor of flow [or fluidity]. (p. 11)

The fire object of Instagram platformization is readily seen in the way various actors relate to the platform. For example, Kenyan influencers view Instagram as a vehicle for producing a livable income and achieving fame, while brands consider Instagram to be a vehicle for advertising and product exposure. The Kenyan government depicts Instagram as a taxable resource that legitimizes its presence and the attention it receives. Meanwhile, Kenyan policy makers recognize it as a highly unregulated space that breeds the dangers of cyber-exploitation and cyber-crimes. The far-reaching fingers of the platform invade other sociocultural structures, such as law enforcement and the judicial system, as cyber-crimes must be identified and prosecuted. The findings from my interviews support these various mutable enactments of the immutable Instagram platform. While Meta continuously reviews Instagram’s functions and interface,, the basic look of the app does not change. The ways in which actors engage with Instagram, however, is highly dependent on each actor’s interests, but is also influenced by and influences tangential sources that interact with the actors. The concept of a fire object to describe the Instagram platform in Nairobi also illustrates how the understanding of Instagram’s influence varies in different global spaces. In Western countries, Instagram is more regulated, brands have less opportunity to exploit, and influencers may be less dependent on their Instagram income for

their livelihood. However, in Kenya, the fire object of Instagram is widespread and uncontrollable.

The successful process of *interessement* (Callon, 1986) within translation develops new objectives, relationships, and artifacts to form heterogeneous associations (Latour, 1999b). These new goals are illustrated in the translation of interests model. As I continued tracing the observed connections through the interviews and beyond Nairobi influencers' network activities, I started noticing that influencers' moments of translation involved enlisting other kinds of human and nonhuman actors that varied in size and scale to their network activity, which was observable within the platformization network posited on the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy. Latour (1988) affirmed, "each network is sparse, empty, fragile, and heterogeneous. It becomes strong only if it spreads out and arrays weak allies" (p. 206). Therefore, *interessement* is an important step in the translation process that leads to enrollment.

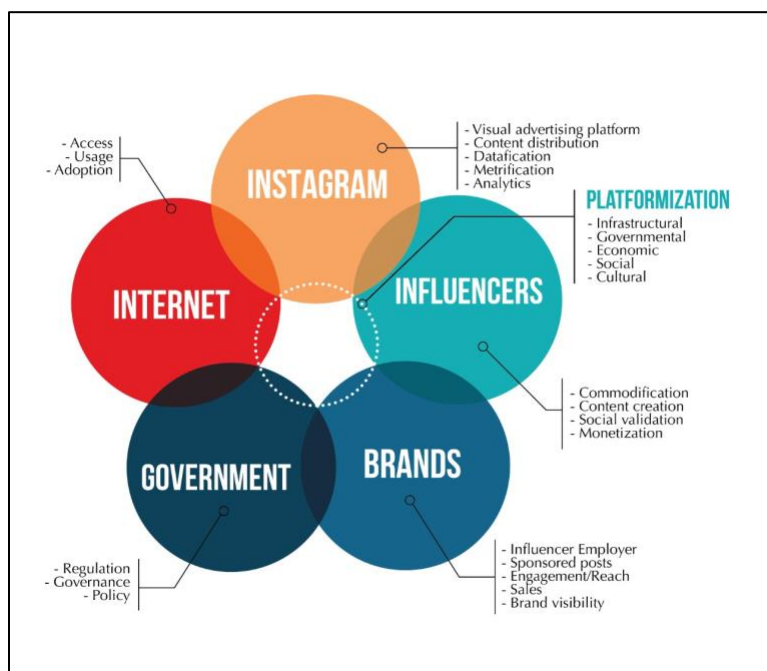
Enrollment

The third moment of translation is enrollment, wherein other actors in the network accept (or get aligned to) interests defined for them by the focal actor (Callon, 1986). Latour (2006) elucidated the enrollment process, "To do so, you have to add as many elements to the statement so that it becomes undeformable for those who grasp it" (pp. 41–42). In this phase, the focal actor succeeds in convincing other actors through persuasion and negotiation to accept the roles proposed as part of the *interessement* moment. In my attempt to unravel Nairobi's Instagram platformization, I increasingly relied on other actors, recruited through *interessement*, and enlisted through enrollment, who are creating connections and associations with Nairobi influencers, forming a heterogeneous network (Law, 1992) to reveal the nuances of platformization in the Instagram influencer economy. For example, I specifically engaged with

human actors, such as lawyers, policy makers, and government representatives, and nonhuman actors, such as smartphones, Wi-fi, Instagram as the platform, and money.

According to Law (1992), networks start from a collection of heterogeneous actors, each living in their own realities that have no necessary relationship to each other. Law (1992) stipulated that actors are themselves actor-networks consisting of heterogeneous actants (p. 384), thereby making the process of translation a complex series of negotiations within networks whereby identities are fought over, roles are ascribed, and power relations fixed. Enrollment makes the formation of a heterogeneous network possible and includes multiple realities as heterogeneous entities develop the alliances that create the heterogeneous network (Callon, 1986; Mol, 2002).

During the moment of enrollment, actors who share the same interest form heterogeneous networks (Callon, 1986). Everything becomes both an actor and a network (Law, 1992). Thus, the platform may be comprised of multiple heterogeneous networks, which are also made up of heterogeneous entities. Platformization specific to Nairobi's expanding Instagram influencer economy shows a complex process of assembling an actor-network from heterogeneous entities (Law, 1992) as I illustrated in my depiction of the Nairobi Instagram influencer network (see Figure 6). The Nairobi influencer economy network is comprised of actors that emerged as part of my interviews. The actors are both human (influencers/content creators) and nonhuman. Nonhuman actors include the internet, Instagram, brands (private sector), advertising agencies, regulatory bodies (government and agencies), academia, think tanks, internet governing organizations (IGOs), civil society organizations (CSOs), and the media.

Figure 6*Nairobi Instagram Network*

In my study, I identified five major actors in the Instagram influencer economy: (a) Instagram, (b) influencers, (c) brands, (d) the government and (e) the internet. Influencers/content creators are the focal actors in this study and each of the other four actors influence and are influenced by the influence/content creators. The government is both an actor and a regulator—the Nairobi government is heavily involved in the platformization of the Instagram economy. The private sector, or brands, are the temporary partners who align with influencers to promote a product or accomplish an objective. The media acts as an ombudsman of sorts over society, yet has been derelict to highlight young creators' struggles with the Instagram economy in Kenya. The media quantifies the success or failure of influencers through rankings, money earned, or even lifestyle, and has thus created an imbalanced view of the platformization of the economy. Finally, academia/research bodies have a responsibility to both expose the inconsistencies missed by the media and to further explore gaps of understanding related to the Kenyan Instagram

economy. It is only through wide-scale research that the dangers of the economy can be exposed and hopefully, addressed.⁸

In this study, actors enrolled in “tracing influencer associations” (Callon, 1986, p. 228) included influencers leveraging brands as actors for brand deals, the rise of third-party agencies in Nairobi acting as intermediaries between brands and influencers, and the government’s birth of new policies, such as DST, which are intended to regulate the digital marketplace that includes Instagram. As a result, influencers’ interests were starting to be translated as each actor gained a new goal, which was aligned to platformization. Consequently, I noticed different translations visible within the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy network activity. It became apparent that the most visible human actors, the influencers, should not be viewed as any more powerful than the internet, Instagram, brands, and government, illustrating the concept of multiple realities (see Figure 3). Multiple realities are produced through plural, heterogeneous practices (Mol, 2002). These threats to platformization are best extrapolated through the fourth moment of translation, mobilization.

Mobilization and Threats to Platformization

Callon (1986) defined the process of mobilization as occurring when the actor-network becomes stabilized by ensuring durable and irreversible relations. Mobilization is affected by moments of tension (Mol, 2002), as well as messy and complex realities (Law & Singleton, 2005). According to Callon, during translation the actor-network becomes stabilized. It is important to keep in mind that translation is a process, never a completed accomplishment. At

⁸ In subsequent chapters, I will more fully explore the major actors who are involved in the Instagram network, such as Nairobi influencer communities and businesses/advertisers. I will also explore the institutional processes and interrelationships that sustain the major actors in emerging economy.

the same time, translation does not necessarily follow a sequential order and can occur in any phase (Callon, 1986).

Mobilization is the positive outcome of platformization, but mobilization is vulnerable to limitations that threaten the uptake of platformization. According to Nieborg and Poell (2018), platformization is an infusion of “economic, governmental, and infrastructural extensions ... into cultural industries” (p. 4276). If, as Nieborg and Poell argued, platformization is affected by the “cultural practices of labor, creativity, and democracy” (p. x), then it is easy to understand how these characteristics affect the mobilization of the platform. Global threats to platformization range from precarious working conditions (Duffy, 2017; Frier, 2020); policies and regulations regarding gender pay gaps, algorithmic bias, content moderation (de Kloet et al., 2019; Poell et al., 2021); and contextual factors based on the influence of country-specific “cultural industries” (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. x) on the development and sustainment of the platform (Nieborg & Poell, 2018; Poell et al., 2021). Additionally, the development of competing platforms with similar affordances, such as Tik Tok, are also a threat to the spread of platformization globally (Rodriguez et al., 2022). While the Kenyan Instagram influencer economy has similar characteristics to any platform, it also has unique contextual practices that provide meaning for Kenyan influencers. The flexible interpretation of Instagram standardized objects, such as features, brands, and promotions (Law & Singleton, 2005) precariously position the platformization of the Kenyan Instagram influencer economy as a fire object.

In Kenya, the Instagram influencer economy is not stabilized and is not at the point of mobilization. The Instagram influencer economy is an unregulated industry in Kenya; therefore, it is vulnerable to many practices that may threaten its stability. Additionally, invisible moments of translation (Callon, 1996; Mol, 2002) are at work behind the scenes, impacting the effects of

mobilization within the platform. In the case of the Nairobi influencer Instagram platform, mobilization is stunted, and is therefore unable to stabilize its various relations. According to Callon (1986) and Law (2006), translation can be seen as *treason* because translation is never an exact replica; there is always some degree of displacement.

The process of Nairobi influencer Instagram platformization is demobilized by moments of tension (Mol, 2002), and messy and complex realities (Law & Singleton, 2005). These tense realities occur amid the invisible moments of translation (Callon, 1996; Mol, 2002), such as human and nonhuman labor and resources, and lack of pay transparency for influencers in an emerging market. To problematize platformization more broadly in an emerging market, I suggest that the problem is epistemological as well as political, specifically regarding platform capitalism. Platformization must be understood within the context it occurs if one is to gain true knowledge of the forces that influence its sustainability. The final process of translation, mobilization, is manifested through the ANT concepts: moments of tension (Mol, 2002), messy and complex realities (Law & Singleton, 2005), and invisible moments of translation (Callon, 1996; Mol, 2002), which impede the process of platformization from taking root in Nairobi. In the next section, each of these concepts are explored in relation to the Instagram platform in Nairobi.

Moments of Tension in the Instagram Platform in Nairobi

The stories outlined in this chapter are clear indications of the “dangerous lengths people are willing to go for the gram” (Frier, 2020, p. 240). The stories also demonstrate the evolving culture drawn by shaping behavior, for the attention of young people on Instagram, and making compromises as online social currency. For acculturation to take place, influencers must

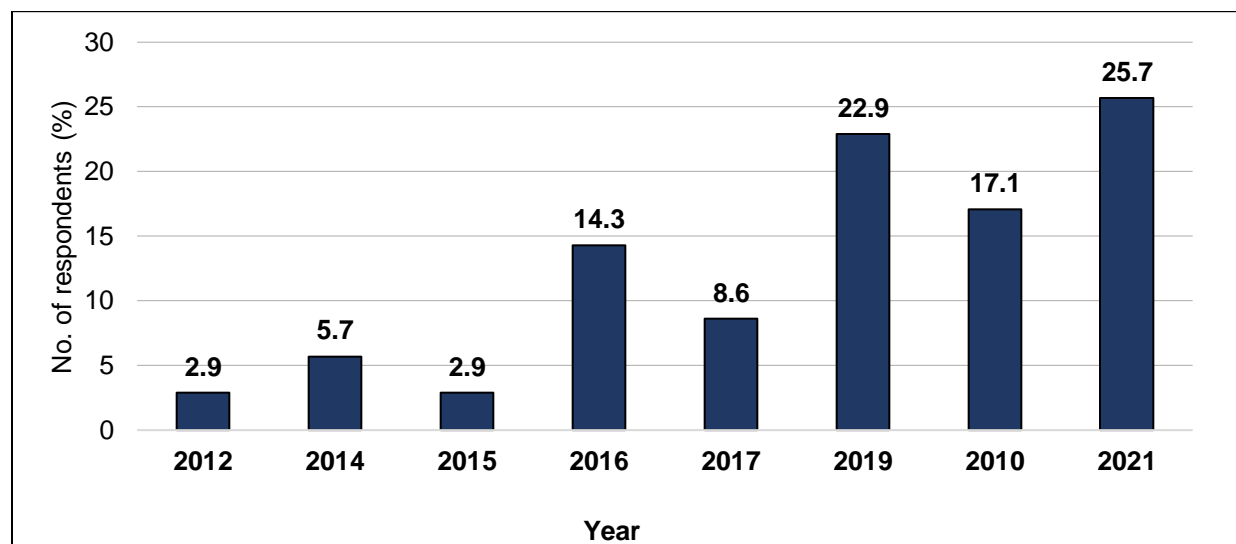
understand Instagram's constantly changing affordances, such as built-in tools like image and video formatting, editing filters, and algorithms that sort and prioritize content.

Across the globe, Instagram has become a platform where young creators commodify themselves to earn a livelihood. Platform livelihoods are ways in which people earn a living by working, trading, renting, or engaging in digital marketplaces (Donner, 2021). According to my interviewee, Mike, a founding director at Wowzi, a leading local influencer agency in Nairobi, the Wowzi platform has presented opportunities for more than 80,000 active influencers across Kenya to earn a fee from various brand sponsorship deals; the majority of the Kenyan influencers are Nairobi-based.

During my conversation with a project director of a Kenyan government-sponsored digital skills empowerment national program, named Ajira, EHUD told me that a survey conducted by the program demonstrated that the number of online workers had doubled during the COVID-19 pandemic, and digital content creation activities held a significant lead (see Figure 7). In fact, most influencers I interviewed confirmed to have been engaged by brands in short- and long-term brand deals where they gained meaningful monthly income (from \$500 to \$1,000 USD). My interviews showed the highest amount an influencer received from brand deals was \$10,000 USD, while the lowest amount was \$1 USD (for more details, see Appendix F).

Figure 7

Participants' Initial Engagement With Brand Content on Instagram, by Year



Influencers confirmed to have received payment from sponsors in the form of PR packages, branded merchandise, free clothes, free products, and exposure (see Appendix G). However, these modes of payment are problematic, and sometimes discriminatory, because they are not able to represent the equivalence of the human and capital investments, such as camera, transportation, internet data, and editing sessions required for successful content creation. Nonmonetary compensation is an unquantifiable value compared to the true cost of content production, nor does it translate into cash that can be applied to living expenses or as a re-investment in the entrepreneurial endeavor.

An influencer, Jane, claimed to be generating enough income from brands, making Instagram her main income stream to an extent of living “the life.” She recounted, “Without bragging, I can confidently say that I am living the life. With three to four brand deals, each paying me \$3,000 USD per month, I am good to go.” Jane makes close to \$10,000 USD on average for a good month. Because of her high income, she lives in the affluent part of Nairobi

that is comprised predominantly of White settlers; wealthy Kenyans, such as politicians, celebrities, ambassadors, and businessmen; and expatriates, such as those working in the United Nations' African headquarters. This prosperous neighborhood is home to the upmarket malls of Nairobi with an acre of land priced, on average, at \$2 million USD. Jane wines and dines in top-end restaurants, and holidays frequently in places like Dubai, Cape Town, and Turkey, where she affords herself designer clothes, shoes, and make-up to show off on Instagram.

The illustrations shared by my interviewees point to the concerns of an evolving African Instagram economy as glamorous, yet young and immature (Njathi & Lee, 2021; Toesland, 2017), and guided by unclear, nebulous influencer compensation strategies such as digital payment gaps, payment in kind, products, and freebies, as seen with my interviews. Despite a few presumably success stories, data collected for this study suggested there is confusion over who is paying whom, why, how much, and where (i.e., the space where the transaction takes place). In Europe and other developed countries, platform companies' monetization and proprietary application of user data are understandable concepts; however, developing countries such as Kenya face "insufficient recognition of how platforms monetize and claim property rights over the data users" (IT for Change, 2017, p. 2). The general lack of definitive economic data on the distribution of revenue in particular cultural industry segments and how this differs across genres, regions, or platforms subsidiaries, is a worrying concern for researchers, according to Poell et al. (2021).

In South Africa, the influencer model is a primary, but unreliable source of income, as payments vary from money to gifts (Becker, 2016; Kleintjes, 2017). Eltringham (2018) highlighted the inefficiencies of this model, arguing that the necessary investments of time and effort are not consummate, with young, trendsetting Instagram influencers in South Africa using

the platform as an unconventional digital workplace. The influencer economy definition is vague and not commonly known in Nairobi. The findings gleaned in this research align with Eltringham's (2018) assessment, and bolster the findings from South Africa studies by Becker (2016) and Kleintjes (2017).

At face value, Instagram's position as a celebrity-making machine, fueling noncelebrities' careers and celebrities' empires through brand deals (Frier, 2020), is visible within the Nairobi Instagram economy. Although most of the digital platforms such as Instagram have their origins in the Global North, they are an important part of life for people in the Global South because of increased access to devices and connectivity in these regions (Koskinen et al., 2019). However, the severity of obfuscated payment systems and other conditions, such as unequal gender pay, invisible labor, tax burdens, and mental health issues are greater in the Global South due to limited technology access (i.e., the digital divide), lack of or inadequate digital competencies, and nonexistent or incomplete digital policies.

Messy and Complex Realities

During my interviews with government officials, the messiness (Law & Singleton, 2005) within the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy was apparent. I observed that the government does not seem to know how it would like to characterize, categorize, or legitimize the influencer economy for regulation. From my conversation with Adhiambo, a senior policy official at the Communications Authority, I could tell that the government is far from understanding the implications of a platform economy and how to deal with them. When I asked, "How is the Kenyan government regulating digital platforms entering the Kenyan space?" Adhiambo replied,

You are raising very pertinent, at the same contentious, concerns with digital platforms.

Although we are aware of platformization, the digital benefits and harms it presents, I am

not sure how much we can control these platforms. It becomes difficult to control what you do not own, especially when it has become indispensable, displacing many aspects of our daily lives, including the future of work, as you have explained monetization tactics influencers are taking to earn a livelihood. As a country, we are completely dependent on this privatized platform ecosystems mainly from the U.S. and China. Mostly, given the high costs of material infrastructure, human, and financial capital we cannot afford to take a powerful stance as other parts of the world have done. Take, for example, GDPR by European countries. However, what we strive for is creating a balance between various actors through implementation of policies, allowing us to address emerging issues such as data protection, privacy invasion, cyber bullying, among others. As far empowering young creators goes to fully exploit the platforms, I do admit, we have a long way to go.

Adhiambo's sentiments were not reassuring. Instead, they explicitly displayed messiness, which renders the government as a regulatory actor who is divorced particularly from the young creators who are monetizing platforms and who are disempowered, with no alternatives but to accept platform business and economic models without question. This disconnect endangers the rest of the actors that are engaging on these platforms through various activities. Consequently, the disparity between the influencers' and the government's goals reinforces the global inequalities in regulatory power, as argued in theories of coloniality and global platform imperialism (Couldry & Mejias, 2019a; Kwet, 2019; Srnicek, 2018). I contend that the process of platformization includes messy objects that are difficult to explore due to their inherent complexity. The "realities, messy or otherwise, are enacted into being" (Law & Singleton, 2005, p. 334), which occurs simultaneously with coordination. For example, undeterred by this

messiness, influencers view the social platform as a legitimate workplace that provides livable income; brands want to position themselves on Instagram through influencers, and agencies earn commission by linking brands with brand fit influencers. The process of heterogeneous actors, who are enacting through an ongoing interaction between singularity and multiplicity and the inherently messy platformization through the Instagram economy's reproduction in Nairobi, suggests moments of tension (Mol, 2002). The conflict raises questions about the platform's legality, legitimacy, power and general operations.

Thus, I observed complex and variable connections in consideration of the complicated Nairobi platformization network. For instance, as the influencer economy thrives globally, with brands spending a record \$13.8 billion on influencers (Mostrous & Gbedemah, 2022) in Nairobi, the influencer culture develops on Instagram amid gray infrastructural, regulatory, and taxation issues on exploitation, unfair competitive business practices, discrimination, and abuse. Through my interviews, I put forward another layer of messiness embedded in the Nairobi fabric of platformization. Within the amorphous network of the Nairobi Instagram economy, the actors seemed to be incompatible. This observation was primarily constructed because the actors' engagement was limited by inadvertently operating their independent activities in silos, which complicated the process of platformization. In the translation process of the Instagram influencer economy, actors have varied ambitions, agendas, and strategies. Sometimes, there are convergent interests between actors; other times, they have antagonistic interests, as the discussion of the DST will show. The purpose of the Instagram influencer economy's structure is to maximize user engagement and how much time people spend on the platform. Instagram generates revenue through advertising and the influencer economy is the highest revenue generator (Frier, 2020). However, Instagram promotes itself as a place to bring people closer and "capture and share the

world's moments" (Mission Statements Academy, n.d.). In line with Law and Singleton (2005), the Nairobi Instagram influencer network is "messy" and "cannot [be] know[n] by insisting that it is clear" (p. 350). Although these complications could impede platformization, they are invisible. It is imperative to understand the distinctive logics, ambivalences, and multiplicity of objects (Law, 2002) through their development, limits, and contradictions through the invisible moments of translation (Callon, 1986; Mol, 2002). This knowledge makes it possible to ask questions and determine the risks of platformization in an emerging market like Nairobi, with its disparate practices and culture.

Invisible Moments of Translation

Invisible moments emerge throughout translation, including the invisibility of human and nonhuman labor and resources and the contentious DST, as shown by the examples of influencers Jane, Sally, Vera, and Bridget. In January 2021, KRA introduced the DST under the Finance Act. The DST is a payable income that is derived from services offered in Kenya through a digital marketplace, such as Instagram and Facebook, among others (KRA, 2021). KRA defined a digital marketplace as a platform that enables direct interaction between buyers and sellers of goods and services through electronic means. Upon the DST launch, KRA held an online meeting with some influencers to chastise them for not paying taxes, despite making money from online platforms. Out of the 35 influencers I interviewed only Kimani was fortunate enough to be invited to this meeting. Kimani, a 35-year-old lifestyle influencer, lamented his experience during the meeting,

KRA wants my money! They are not more concerned about what am I doing online.

They invited me alongside a few other influencers to a Zoom meeting to tell us, "We know you are making money online and as you make your returns going forward, you

must file for your influencing activities.” This is because there was a spike on influencer activities at the height of COVID 19 in 2020. ... I felt as though this was the wrong meeting for me. First it was not consultative, it was a decision made that we influencers were to abide in. If anything, it was one speaker after the other for a complete 2 hours. Secondly, the kind of technical language used required an accountant, the person who files my taxes and not me. It was too complicated. As we speak till now, people still don't understand what digital tax is.

In November 2021, KRA announced it would monitor online users' social media accounts to identify people posting pictures and videos of luxury cars, expensive parties, designer attire, and extravagant vacations (Labhuram, 2021). Njeru (n.d.) explained, “The agency said it would scour Facebook and Instagram profiles for tax defaulters. Those targeted are social media users posting videos and pictures exhibiting the verve and drip in their ‘covetable’ lives” (p. 2). Essentially, KRA's new mandate is mainly touching on influencers' day-to-day craft, which involves a display of a lavish lifestyle congruent with their seemingly perfect lives on Instagram. KRA Commissioner General Githii Mburu told me that Business Daily Newspaper that KRA is using special gadgets and technology to track Kenyans posting images of houses, cars and other flamboyant activities. Mburu claimed,

In the social media, we have some people posting some nice things. You would see some posting nice houses, cars, taking their families to nice places and so on. Here, we are not sleeping, when we see those, we see taxes. We have our officers looking, they have gadgets. They key in very quickly (the number plate) to check. We are working exceptionally hard (Mwangi, 2021, para 2).

This unconventional Kenyan government approach of scrutinizing activities of influencers online to match their tax remittances, as a government's new policy intensifies the pressure of being an influencer in Kenya while feeling targeted by the KRA. During their Zoom interview with me, a top lawyer in Nairobi questioned,

Where will KRA get the time to inspect every single post on these platforms when it has failed to see the bigger picture, to tax the Big Tech? I think this is unnecessary, myopic, and complete waste of time when they have bigger battle to fight.

This lawyer's comment brings to question the conventional notions of agency that are redefining the role of the government in our private lives on social media. The threats to platformization cannot be discussed without a deeper investigation into the power of the government in making the Instagram influencer network a stable economy; therefore, Chapter 3 is devoted to power dynamics, which include the government's role in making the Instagram influencer economy a legitimate practice.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I explained the concept of platformization and how it can be used to describe the Instagram Influencer economy in Kenya. I analyzed the contested versions of platform, income, tax dodging, as well as data and content creation within the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy through ANT concepts, with a particular focus on the relevance of the translation process in creating actor-networks. The Nairobi Instagram economy network is living in multiple messy complex realities. Actors within the system represent different aspects of the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy; each actor's role varies according to their own interests.

As a digital platform, Instagram aims to maximize user engagement by circulating viral content. The Instagram influencer economy is beneficial to a small percentage of people who collect a disproportionate share of the money being generated on the platform. All the money is concentrated in the hands of a minority of winners, including executives, shareholders, and elite influencers. Although Instagram and its platform economy in Kenya, and perhaps in most African countries, is at a nascent stage, it already faces challenges that are likely to thwart progress given that Kenya is a young economy battling other economic national challenges. Specifically, the regulatory environment for the platform economy that includes content creators is quite complex and requires time to unfold, streamline, and strengthen. Current policies regulate digital uptake in general but are not specific to the issues influencers are facing. For example, Kenya does not have an equivalent of Federal Trade Commission (FTC) that protects influencers from overexploitation by brands.

Indeed, the entire heterogenous ecosystem from the internet, Instagram the platform, the influencers, private sector (brands), government, and other actors (academia, press and IGOs) are all entangled in multiple realities. My findings demonstrate that the number of people actively leveraging platforms is very small compared to other developed markets. The demand for influencer activities is gradually on the rise, proving that Kenya as an emerging market is catching up. This means that the amorphous and unstructured opportunities in the platforms, such as the influencer creator economy are unveiling as various actors. The creators, regulators, and platforms discover, stumble, understand, circumvent, and navigate through the uncertainties, threats, challenges, and opportunities as Nairobi platformization occurs. The translation process of Nairobi's Instagram economy is arguably one of multiple realities and complex issues that is,

at the same time, reproducing politics of digital inclusion, exclusion, and power that are all central to digital colonialism as will be discussed in Chapter 2.

CHAPTER 2: THE POLITICS OF DIGITAL INCLUSION/EXCLUSION

In Nairobi, the Instagram influencer economy has become a symbol of freedom, democracy, and inclusivity for young Kenyans as Nairobi millennials and Gen Z/digital natives attempt to leverage the digital workplace for sustainable income; that is, they believe digital connectivity leads to economic development. Across the world, Instagram has fueled the careers of celebrities and noncelebrities alike (Frier, 2020). For Nairobi, the explosion of American and European-based creators into influencers with fully emerged careers has prompted a perceived sense of hope, stability, and growth-producing opportunities beyond African boundaries. Mega-influencers from the Global North have built careers by securing deals with rich brands because, as creators, they have been offered the means to monetize their content through influencer marketing campaigns (Cunningham & Craig, 2019). Nairobi influencers look up to American, European, and other global influencers as the epitome of success. They observe that their role models have made a life out of platforms, such as Instagram and believe they can do the same. For instance, Vera Sidika, a Kenyan influencers, leverages her image as the Kim Kardashian of Africa. Vera believes she can and will be as successful as the Kardashians as long as she emulates them in her looks, behaviors, and lifestyle. Although influencers in Nairobi frequently tell their own stories of accomplishment within Kenya, the majority of my interviewees still hold dreams of becoming important global digital content creators and making money with influential international brands across the world. The drive to emulate what appears to be an ideal way of life is catapulting young Kenyans into a battle for exposure and acceptance and creating a debate about the qualities associated with inclusion and exclusion in the Nairobi Instagram/social media landscape.

The Kardashians, who are considered by some to be the American culture's icons of success, transformed their lives through content and brand promotion deals garnered through their Instagram account (Frier, 2020). In fact, the exposure and wealth gained from their Instagram fame is believed to exceed their TV reality show, *Keeping up With the Kardashians*, which had already secured a fanbase for the wealthy family (Frier, 2020). The *Kardashian effect*, an urban term coined to describe the use of selfies or social media presence as an asset to promote oneself as famous or deserving of attention (Bido, 2020; Frier, 2020), has reinforced the belief that is possible to sustain a living off of content creation in many parts of the world, but specifically in the Nairobi platform economy, as observed in this study. Interviews with the government official, Representative Ehad, as well as with influencer agencies and influencers in Nairobi attested to the vibrant influencer culture and the idea that Kenyans are indeed *securing the bag*, which means generating livable income via the Instagram economy.

The surging ambitions and narratives exposed in this study revealed the influencer economy is touted as a way to empower, support, and upgrade young, unemployed Kenyans. In his interview, Representative Ehad confirmed the notion of platform livelihood (Donner, 2021), arguing that “amidst high levels of unemployment, influencers are making money; content creation has become the new, emergent way to earn a living for young Kenyans.” Of utmost recognition are the opportunities for full- and part-time career pursuits that have emerged among Nairobi young people, painting a picture of the creator economy that is taking shape in Kenya. The creator economy can be understood as an emerging industry where independent digital entrepreneurs, mainly enterprising content creators, leverage their passions and creativity to build a following and monetize their digital skills (Njathi & Wambui, n.d.).

These optimistic, single-minded, yet positive narratives entwined with assumptions about the socioeconomic benefits yielded from the Nairobi influencer economy not only fail to account for the repressive and subverting experiences influencers undergo but become a breeding ground that inhibits the translation of platformization in Kenya. My fieldwork and interviews revealed the growth of the platform in Nairobi is actually magnifying and replicating the politics of digital inclusion/exclusion and inherent power structures within Nairobi, despite the idealization of the opportunities the Instagram influencer economy presents within the Kenyan culture. While interviewees' perspectives suggested the new economy appears to offer increased and positive opportunities for Kenyans to improve their financial standing, the multiple realities (Mol, 2002) viewed within the context of the Nairobi Instagram economy exposed the invisible moments of translation (Callon, 1986; Mol, 2002) that are often overlooked in favor of the perceived benefits of platform engagement.

There is a knowledge gap in the developmental context of the general creator economy in the Global South. Influencers are overwhelmingly platform-dependent, a concept Nieborg and Poell (2018) defined as reliance on the platforms by content creators to create, produce, distribute, and monetize content on platforms because their success is hitched to particular platforms of cultural production. Therefore, it is important to question how the Kenyan influencer economy unfolds amidst the already entrenched digital divide in the Global South. Global digital media culture scholars (Arora, 2019; de Kloet et al., 2019; Donner, 2015; Gordon & de Souza e Silva, 2011; Poell et al., 2022) question how people in the peripheries use and appropriate internet and internet technologies, the way people and technologies are embedded and adopted into society, and what internet technologies mean to people on the fringes of the global digital culture. Combined, these scholars recognize the importance of examining the

trajectories and dynamics of overlapping, yet distinctive implications of the sociocultural and political diverse use of technology, such as the global growth of digital connectivity such contexts reveal. In this chapter, I follow the lead of these scholars while concentrating on the structural characteristics of the problems identified in Chapter 1, to document the politics of digital inclusion/exclusion debates and disruptions, as well as colonization of everyday life (Couldry & Mejias, 2019b; Kwet, 2019) around the emerging platformization in Nairobi.

The politics of inclusion and exclusion are characterized by messy and complex realities (Law & Singleton, 2005) and invisible moments of translation (Callon, 1986; Mol, 2002) between individual, and/or a network of relationships that are multiple in nature and include human and nonhuman actors (Mol, 2002). The challenge of bridging the digital divide is far more complex than early technocratic perspectives, such as information and communication technologies for development (ICT4D) and mobiles for development (M4D) implied. Sassi (2005) argued that the “digital divide is not a one-dimensional phenomenon” (p. 685), aligning to Mol’s (2002) concept of multiple realities. Arora (2019) urged researchers to “shelve the fairy tales of the digital divide project as we explore the digital realities of a complex and much overlooked global populace” (p. 30).

The multiple realities (Mol, 2002) of the social media platformization are more nuanced in the Nairobi creator economy as additional layers of the digital divide start to emerge, revealing the day-to-day struggles experienced by a Nairobi digital content creator. For example, although some Nairobi influencers have *access* to mobile phones and the internet, this access is far from ideal. Access to digital tools that allow Nairobi content creators into the global Instagram economy consists of a “complex present” (p. 48) made up of a multitude of nonhuman and human actor-networks, which are enacted through a continual oscillation between the

singularity and multiplicity of the politics of inclusion and exclusion. This complex and entangled reality deepens the digital divide and reproduces existing power structures as more privileged actors wield control over the available benefits of content creation.

From an ANT perspective, any actor who imposes its interest on others is considered a member of the network (Latour, 1988). The internet as the obligatory passage point (OPP), algorithms, metrics, high-end smart phones, photography skills, lighting tools, editing tools/skills, and business management skills contribute to the “heterogeneous network” (Law 1992, p. 379). Influencers strive for technical, social, and business autonomy while encountering other actors that cultivate resistance or acceptance in the Nairobi influencer network. As the influence network formation process grows, each actor is engaged in the quest for its own goals. In this chapter, then, I use an ANT lens to portray a more holistic picture of the network and power issues involved in the Nairobi creator economy. The ANT perspective allows me to bring to fore the messiness of the Nairobi creator economy as I examine it through the politics of inclusion and exclusion.

I also employed Bukht and Heeks’ (2017) argument related to a series of divides that influence the rise and sustenance of digital economies. According to Bukht and Heeks, “there are dangers of exclusion from opportunities ... [dangers arising from] low levels of digital skill and technology penetration ... lack of resources, capabilities, institutions, relations” (p. 3), and concerns about volatility and marginalization that can impede the progress of the digital economy in Kenya. I argue that the divide within the Nairobi influencer economy is a multi-faceted, complex, messy reality (Mol, 2002) comprised of structures with varying levels of power who control the rules of inclusion and exclusion for Kenyans who desire to become an integral part of the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy. Bukht and Heeks’ (2017) series of

divides (divide of availability, divide of affordability, and divide of applicability) serve as a guiding conceptual typology for analyzing the politics of inclusion/exclusion in the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy.

This chapter strives to answer the question: “How do the politics of inclusion and exclusion, embedded into an entrenched digital divide, reproduce, influence, and shape the Kenyan influencer Instagram economy and its beneficiaries?”

Throughout the chapter, I reference the ANT notion of invisible moments of translation (Callon, 1986; Mol, 2002), seen through the messy realities and moments of tension (Mol, 2002) that occur between human and nonhuman actors. The chapter is organized into three sections. In the first section, I define the concept of the *digital divide* while providing an overview of existing debates and research that eschew politics of access, adoption, and usage of the internet by Nairobi influencers. I focus on two research perspectives, ICT4D and M4D, that have been used to explain digital technology uptake in Africa. I discuss the problem with using technocratic perspectives to address a complex and dynamic phenomenon, such as Instagram. In the second section, I offer a deeper and more succinct understanding of the outcome of inequality that is undergirded by inclusion and exclusion while reflecting on a series of divides: the first-level digital divide (Attewell, 2001; Campos-Castillo, 2015), second-level digital divide (Hargittai, 2002), and third-level digital divide (Ragnedda, 2017; van Deursen & Helsper, 2015; van Deursen & van Dijck, 2019; Wei et al., 2011). The first-level digital divide is characterized by the tools that allow individuals to access the internet (Attewell, 2001; van Deursen & van Dijck, 2019) which are dependent on socioeconomic and cultural differences (DiMaggio et al., 2001). The second-level digital divide is concerned with the level of skill internet users have to access digital content, which should diminish over time (Hargittai, 2002). Finally, the third-level digital

divide addresses the variance of concrete benefits, opportunities, and outcomes from internet interaction, given that all users have equal access and skill (Ragnedda, 2017; Ragnedda & Ruiu, 2020; van Deursen & Helsper, 2015; van Deursen & van Dijck, 2019; Wei et al., 2011).

Digital Divide: Display of Inequality

The phenomenon of the digital divide has received much scholarly attention (Attewell, 2001; Castells, 2001; Hargittai, 2002; Sassi, 2005; van Dijck & Hacker, 2003; Warschauer, 2002). While Sassi (2005) stated that the digital divide is an unbalanced diffusion of technology, which causes societal consequences, Castells (2001) argued that the digital divide is the “inequality of access to the internet” (p. 248). For Castells (2001), access to the internet is “a requisite for overcoming inequality in a society in which dominant functions and social groups are increasingly organized around the internet” (p. 248). Examining the digital divide from a global perspective, Castells (2001) came to understand the “new technological divide” (pp. 256–257) as,

the conditions under which the internet is diffusing in most countries, ... creating a deeper digital divide. Key urban centers, globalized activities, and the higher-educated social groups are being included in the internet-based global networks, while most regions and most people are switched off. (p. 262)

Castells (2001) argued that “the internet’s potential as a means of freedom, productivity, and communication comes hand-in-hand with the denunciation of ‘the digital divide’ induced by inequality on the internet” (p. 246). Other scholars (e.g., Aker & Mbiti, 2010; Horst & Miller, 2006; James & Versteeg, 2007; Ling & Horst, 2011; Sey, 2011; Tacchi & Chandola, 2015; Wallis, 2011) extended Castells’ (2001) inequality argument, studying the problem from the perspective of access or no access to the internet. The conclusion from this body of research was

that the digital divide is actually made up of a series of divides, conceptualized as first-, second-, and third-level divides (Attewell, 2001; Burri, 2011; Hargittai, 2001).

Series of Divides

Early studies of the digital divide focused on the *haves and the have-nots*, and rested on access to the internet. For example, James and Versteeg's (2007) study of mobile phone ownership in Africa illustrated the divide of affordability. Findings showed that although there was increased phone ownership among young people, phones were mostly shared and borrowed among families, friends, and neighbors. In Ghana, specifically, Sey (2011) found, "the motivation to have a mobile phone is not the result of a centrally planned development initiative, but it is simply individuals adopting technology that makes sense to them and helps them with the arrangement of their daily affairs" (p. 365). In contrast, Wallis' (2011) ethnographic study of rural-to-urban migrant female workers in China found that mobiles "can support asymmetrical power relations, create new modes of exploitation and control, and supplant what should be relations of trust with suspicion" (p. 481).

Aptly, these scholars demonstrate Attewell's (2001) description of "the first-level digital divide" (p. 253). In this scenario, the divide depends on internet access and technological resources (Attewell, 2001; van Deursen & van Dijck, 2019), and oscillates from inequalities in physical technological access to inequalities in material access. The first level divide has received criticism from various scholars (Arora, 2019; Heeks, 2022) who pointed out that providing internet tools and access is "small part of reducing the digital divide" (Arora, 2019, p. 7). The over-glorified idea of digital and internet access has been fostered through various policy projects, such as Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, n.d.), which pays less attention to other multiple digital divide complexities (Mol, 2002) beyond

access. The measure of closing the digital divide is not through the number of people connected to the internet; rather, the measure should be the consequences of connection and lack of connection, which illustrate inclusion and exclusion (Castells, 2001). Projects like One Laptop Per Child (OLPC),⁹ Facebook Free Basics,¹⁰ Instagram Lite, and Google Balloons¹¹ all intend to bridge the first digital divide, but they grossly underestimate the dystopian messy realities which constrain uptake of new technologies and limit full and equal participation. If anything,

what was considered the original digital divide is largely resolved. ... Today the digital divide resides in differential ability to use new media to critically evaluate information, analyze, and interpret data, attack complex problems, test innovative solutions, manage multifaceted projects, collaborate with others in knowledge production, and communicate effectively to diverse audiences—in essence, to carry out the kinds of expert thinking and complex communication that are at the heart of the new economy. (Burri, 2011, p. 219)

In contrast, Hargittai (2001) proposed the second-level digital divide as depending on each individual's digital skills and know-how of using the internet. Burri elucidated,

These divides are drawn not at the entry to the net but within the net itself, and limit access to content. The increasing barriers to content, though of a diverse nature, all relate to some governance characteristics inherent in cyberspace, such as global spillover of

⁹ The One Laptop Per Child project in Paraguay gave all school-attending children a laptop to use for schoolwork; however, students instead used the laptops for entertainment, rather than for the nobler purpose of education (Ames, 2019).

¹⁰ Facebook's pursuit to bridge the first digital divide through Free Basics in African countries received heavy criticism due to its restricted features although it was hyped as a digital connectivity tool for the unconnected markets (Kwet, 2019).

¹¹ Google attempted to launch a project to bring 4G connectivity to the remote parts of Kenya. The project failed within less than a year due to costs and the short lifespan of the balloons housing the satellite dishes that would provide access.

local decisions, regulation through code, and proliferation of self- and co-regulatory models. (p. 217)

Digital literacy ranges from the basic ability, attitude, and awareness to use a computer and computer-related technologies, such as the internet, to locate information online all the way to platform literacy (Dutta & Mathur, 2014; Hargittai, 2005; Jones-Kavalier & Flannigan, 2008; Park, 2011). It is hard to contain a single-minded definition of digital literacy given the new and emerging ICT and digital tools and platforms are constantly advancing (Meyers et al., 2013). I view digital literacy as a never-ending learning process that includes a new set of digital competences to create, produce, distribute, and monetize platforms. Reddy et al. (2021) argued, “Today, digital literacy is not strictly about competence in school-based research tasks, but it is about effectively participating in our new digital world. This learning strategy is the beginning of life-wide and lifelong learning” (p. 89).

My study findings challenge this notion of digital literacy. I found that some Instagram influencers did not comprehend the sophisticated platform features, such as algorithms and metrics inherently impeding on their entrepreneurial spirit. Despite this fact, these influencers are fully participating in the influencer economy. While second-level digital divides improve people’s ability to locate information online, such as political information, the divides do not consider creating, producing, distributing, and monetizing highly engaging and relevant content as pertinent skills that should be required of all content creators (Hargittai, 2002).

The third level of divide narrows down “disparities in the returns from internet use within populations of users who exhibit broadly similar usage profiles and enjoy relatively autonomous and unfettered access to [computer technology] and the internet infrastructure” (van Deursen & Helsper, 2015, p. 30). Burri (2011) argued that as the “internet becomes more sophisticated and

more integrated into economic, social, and cultural processes, a ‘third’ generation of divides becomes critical” (p. 217) because it is the process through which new digital divides are taking place “within the net itself” (p. 222). Specifically, the third-level divide aims to ascertain who benefits from internet use, given that users might have equal access and skills, yet varying outcomes (van Deursen & Helsper, 2015; van Deursen & van Dijck, 2019). The third-level divide is concerned with the differential ability to benefit from otherwise equivalent internet use. For example, within the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy, the third-level digital divide resides in the influencer’s ability, capability, and capacity to use the platform to cultivate social capital, increasingly maintain the status quo, while creatively and consistently generating and producing content for their audience—essentially cultivating an ever-growing cult and content that engenders more value for brands, leading to continued business. Like the first and second level divides, the third-level divide is limited by the fact that it requires users’ motivation (Arora, 2019; Scheerder et al., 2017) as a key determinant of inclusion or exclusion. Use of the internet requires what van Dijck (2005) called motivational access, and not simply Sassi’s (2005) information access argument that claims online platforms are only available to those individuals with better literacy skills. Motivational access is conceptualized as the user’s attitude toward the use of technology (van Dijck, 2005). The first-, second-, and third-level divides present in the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy are clear indicators of the existing messy and complex reality (Law & Singleton, 2005) of power structures, which are embedded in the politics of inclusion and exclusion. Because of the intricacy of the inclusion and exclusion aspect of the digital divide phenomenon, scholars have suggested other approaches to understanding the adoption of internet technology and practices, including Sassi’s (2005) four interconnected approaches.

Four Interconnected Approaches

In 2005, Sassi encouraged a departure from the first-, second-, and third-level divides and introduced four interconnected approaches directly or indirectly linked to accelerating the digital divide to the rate at which internet penetration takes shape. Sassi examined the history of the digital divide conversation, noting that traditional models of the digital divide were based on the differences between developed and developing countries in terms of access. The differences were related to the level of information each country was afforded based on access to the internet. Beyond a purely two-dimensional view of access, however, Sassi stated there must also be consideration of the divides *within* the community of online access that further separates those “who do and do not use digital resources to participate in public life” (p. 686). In other words, Sassi proposed looking at the *democratic dimension* because it offers a multidimensional perspective to the digital divide. Sassi’s proposal fell in line with other digital divide scholars (e.g., Axford & Huggins, 2001; Becker & Slaton, 2000; Hacker & van Dijk, (2000). Drawing from existing digital divide perspectives and debates in the history of communication technology in the 1970s that focused on the unbalanced way mass media was dispersed throughout society, Sassi described the four approaches as technocratic, social structure, information structure and exclusion, and modernization and capitalism.

Technocratic

The first approach, technocratic, happens when technology, even in the most advanced countries, tends to favor “industrialized Western societies in which the new technology is already used” (Sassi, 2005, p. 687) while systematically alienating some social groups. For example, as Kenya’s capital city, Nairobi is connected to high-speed internet while remote towns in Kenya

are not. The technocratic approach is strictly focused on technology access, which corresponds to the first-level digital divide.

Social Structure

In line with Sparks (2000), who argued that the presence of (or access to) the internet is less critical than the ways in which the internet acts as a resource, Sassi (2005) deemed the second approach the social structure approach. That is, “the problem is not the potential of the technology but ways in which it’s embedded in societies” (p. 689). According to this perspective, what matters is how the internet is used and diffused. According to Sassi, “finding out who has access in a society is the first step toward understanding its democratic potential” (p. 689).

Information Structure and Exclusion

The third approach, information structure and exclusion, deals with the role of information and communication technology (ICT) in a geographical context, where some populations and territories are excluded from participation and citizenship in ICT and social integration within the structures of ICT. Sassi (2005) drew on Lash’s (1994) discussion of how greater access to communication breeds greater disparities between those who are informed on societal matters and those for whom access to the same information is limited or nonexistent.

Modernization and Capitalism

Fourth, the modernization and capitalism approach is related to information structure and exclusion and states that “the inequalities related to information technology are understood as highly structural and technology is seen as accountable not only for strengthening existing inequalities but even for creating new ones” (p. 694). Sassi (2005) supported Castells’ (1998) argument that inequality is intricately entwined with informational capitalism. The rise of informational capitalism can also create new digital divides, which Sassi regarded as “new social

cleavages” (p. 686), and concurrently strengthen old divides. Sassi argued information access on online platforms is only available to those individuals with better literacy skills. Sassi’s four interconnected approaches show the complexity of the digital divide, while development approaches demonstrate the socioeconomic and political implications of the divide.

Development Approaches

Other approaches to the digital divide have also been offered. ICT4D and M4D are the two most popular developmental approaches used to explain Sub-Saharan Africa’s uptake of technology and its drivers, barriers, impact, and socioeconomic challenges. These developmental approaches propose that access to and adoption of technology will help countries achieve social/political/economic development.

ICT4D

The ICT4D concept emerged in the mid-1990s when digital tools were “idolized as the tool for delivery of development” (Heeks, 2009, para, 3), largely by international development organizations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) as the key actors of the ICT4D framework. During this time, internet availability—a tool in search of a purpose, and the United Nation’s Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)—a purpose in search of a tool amalgamated, solidifying the notion of ICT4D to benefit the people at bottom of the pyramid, i.e., “the 3 billion on the planet who live on an average of less than \$2 USD per day” (Heeks, 2009, p. 3). By the time mobile phones were increasingly becoming popular in the mid-2000s, their presence heightened the optimism held within ICT4D, whereby many researchers fostered a neoliberal ideology that argued, “all that is needed is a mobile phone to let the market work its magic, and inequities and power differentials related to gender, and class are rendered irrelevant” (Wallis, 2011, p. 473).

Despite its popularity, the notion of ICT4D is problematic (Boateng et al, 2017). First, the majority of ICT4D interventions failed to take off because they put technology as a central agent of change, whether at the individual or organizational level, hence leaving out structural social issues. When it comes to development through digital transformation, ICTs alone are not enough to shift the positionality of the peripheries and the center of the global economy (Graham, 2019). If anything, Heeks (2009) regarded ICT4D projects like the telecenters implemented in Colombia, Mali, and India between the mid/late-1990s to the mid/late-2000s as “failure, restriction, and anecdote” with the need for “a rolling re-appraisal of priorities, processes, and purposes” (p. 4). Second, scholars like Donner and Locke (2019) argued there is “concern that the decades-old and optimistic frame of ICTs for development [ICT4D] is increasingly naïve in accounting for the impact of these platforms” (pp. 39–40). Donner and Locke maintained that the traditional ICT4D frames are largely unequipped to address the considerable breadth and depth of the involvement of Facebook, Uber, Mechanical Turk, or any other digital platform in the structure of the economic and social spheres of developing economies.

M4D

In the mid-2000s, the scholarly focus on ICTs shifted by two important milestones: (a) massive adoption of mobile phones in the developing world; and (b) development of mobile technologies with internet connection, increasing access to faster networks, such as 4G and Wi-Fi, location awareness, and faster access networks. Since the majority of mobile phones in the world could be found in the developing world, a vast number of mobile communication scholarly undertakings emerged (e.g., Campbell, 2013; de Souza e Silva, 2017; Jensen, 2013; Ling & Typhina, 2016; Taipale & Fortunati, 2014), illuminating a new wave of rising trends and challenges when studying the revolution in mobile communications technologies progressively

across the world. Soon, the introduction of M4D (de Souza e Silva, 2017) became a subarea of mobile communication studies, focusing more specifically on the so-called mobile revolution that spearheaded a leapfrogging of the fixed-internet era with a massive uptake of the mobile internet in Africa within a decade (Aker & Mbiti, 2010).

Consequently, I identified socioeconomic sectors that experienced transformation due to the uptake and usage of mobile phones. M4D scholars, such as Wamala-Larsson and Svensson (2015) illuminated areas where M4D reshaped the way information and services were disseminated to the public. Areas such as mHealth, mLivelihood, mGovernance and mLearning all benefitted from the study of M4D (Wamala-Larsson & Svensson, 2015, p. 10). Elsewhere, Duncombe (2010) claimed the impact of mobile phones was as revolutionary as older technologies, such as roads, railways, and ports. M4D reinforced social cohesion and opened entrepreneurial endeavors that fostered trade and created jobs.

Although the notion of M4D leading to development paradigm has received overwhelming attention, it has been criticized as technologically deterministic (Friederici et al., 2017; Wamala-Larsson & Svensson, 2012) because technology does not lead to social change (Hafkin & Huyer, 2006). We should not study the diffusion of mobile phones in Africa as a panacea, even though the uptake of mobile phones throughout the continent is swift, bringing the possibility of enhanced operations for many industries, such as access to updated crop price information for farmers (Aker & Mbiti, 2010). According to de Souza e Silva (2017), “Cell phones themselves do not necessarily bridge nor create divides. Rather, they are embedded in existing social practices” (p. 412). This statement shows that mobile phone adoption, or access to digital platforms, does not necessarily bring radical changes to the structural system of the society or hold the promise to close the digital divide. Likewise, Arora (2019) highlighted that

the increasing pervasiveness of digital platforms and DIC aggravate existing conditions of poverty and build onto already existing digital vulnerabilities. Therefore, there exists a need for a broader view of rationalizing the different social and contextual factors to account for the digital divide and inclusion for Nairobi digital content creators. Social and cultural dynamics are consuming Instagram, especially in the context of the developing world where technology is optimistically expected to change lives socioeconomically.

The Messiness of Using Technocratic and Development Approaches

There is a messiness involved in using technocratic and development approaches. The approaches are so intertwined that it becomes difficult to separate any discourse about them to examine them individually. Technocratic and development approaches always privilege those who are in power because of access, adoption, and usage of technology (Sassi, 2005).

The technocratic approach obscures the sociotechnical challenges, opportunities, and threats that make up the reality of the digital divide, producing an illusion that technological equality can be achieved simply by access. The approach falls apart when considering the very real problems individual cultures encounter when attempting to adopt technology in the digital age, highlighting the messiness of an actor-network (Law & Singleton, 2005), such as the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy. Issues such as Wi-Fi dead zones, cost of service, electricity fluctuations, digital competencies, language barriers, and access to supporting structures make it difficult for many people in various parts of the world to simply adopt an ever-changing information technology. Building off this argument, de Souza e Silva (2017) maintained that,

Mobile communication is a world of contrasts. While there are similar patterns of mobile use around the world, cross-cultural and socioeconomic differences are evident when we

confront the discourses of scholars who live in different parts of the world, such as the United States, Denmark, South Africa, and Australia. (p. 6)

In my study, those “cross-cultural and socioeconomic differences” (de Souza e Silva, 2017, p. 6) moved beyond national divides, permeating the Nairobi digital economy at the micro level. Differences of access and adoption were evident through the influencers’ descriptions of the difficulties they face as they navigate carving out a sustainable presence in the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy. Influencers referenced challenges specific to Kenyan culture that cannot be transferred to other cultures. Arora (2019) stated the technocratic perspective fails to account for the tremendous optimism of the next billion users who will come online for the first time in the Global South, passionately consuming digital products and inhabiting new online spaces through cheap and affordable mobile phones and data plans. Furthermore, a variety of scholars (i.e., Boateng et al., 2017; Bukht & Heeks, 2017; Friederici et al., 2017; Graham, 2019; James & Versteeg, 2007) highlighted the disturbing scarcity of research-based ICT4D and M4D studies to fully showcase the potential of the digital creator economy. Instead, critiques of the technocratic perspective suggest we should center the discussion on the social and critical perspectives that illustrate how technology use is often embedded into existing power structures, and might accentuate divides, rather than bridging them (de Souza e Silva, 2017; Sassi, 2005), which supports the strong hypothesis argued by Sassi (2005). The role of power structures to increase divides will be more fully discussed in Chapter 3.

De Souza e Silva (2017) emphasized that scholars need to deviate from generalizing the use of technology to the national level and instead start focusing on how socioeconomic differences, policy regulations, and technology availability affect adoption and appropriation of technology, primarily when studying developing countries whose cultural practices and national

patterns of phone use vary. However, the narrowly theorized discourse of the digital divide/inclusion that focuses on national boundaries is still prevalent around the world (Donner & Locke; 2019). The ongoing misrepresentation of the digital divide spurs the technocratic and development perspectives, creating an exceedingly skewed dialogue, which focuses on the impact of the ICT4D and M4D perspectives (Donner & Locke, 2019). Problematically, ICT4D and M4D argue that new digital technologies will help the people of the community catapult their way out of poverty because the development approach assumes that widening access and usage mean including new groups of users, hence proposing that access to, and adoption of technology will help countries achieve social/political/economic development.

Likewise, much of the development perspectives are based off industry and anecdotal reports and case studies (Friederici et al., 2017; World Bank, 2016), as opposed to empirically grounded research (Deichmann & Mishra, 2019). As a result, the impact of ICTs remains inconclusive, mixed, and characterized with a technological determinism (Friederici et al., 2017). The lack of scientific data suggests not much can be measured regarding the digital economy (or digital enterprises) in Africa (Boateng et al., 2017). It becomes difficult to know who is benefitting from the rise of the digital economy and how to maximize these opportunities. The implicit assumptions and interpretations around connectivity and growth lack tangible evidence. The term development, according to Graham (2019), comes with a barrage of “conceptual baggage,” meaning different things to different people at any given time (p. 8). Therefore, it is necessary to approach the inclusion/exclusion problem within the platform economy in Kenya from the viewpoint of messiness, complexity and multiple realities contended by Arora (2019), de Souza (2017), Donner & Locke (2019), and Sassi (2005), rather than relying on the traditional technocratic and development approaches so often used in the extant literature.

Politics of Inclusion and Exclusion: Outcomes of Inequality

The politics of inclusion and exclusion accentuate and produce outcomes of inequality throughout the network. The digital divide is an intricately complex, dynamic, and multidimensional phenomenon. Existing studies have explored the digital divide in terms of inequality of access but have not delved into the outcomes of inequality (van Dijk & Hacker, 2003; Warschauer, 2002). Castells (2001) and Ling and Horst (2011) urged researchers to go beyond access when trying to understand the digital divide. Likewise, de Souza e Silva et al. (2011) found that a narrow focus on the dichotomies of *have and have-not* fails to capture the diverse ways people develop relationships with digital technologies. The notion of the haves and the have-nots resonates with the technocratic approach that assumes widening access and usage mean including new groups of users (Sassi, 2005). Much of the digital divide scholarship leans toward this overly optimistic understanding (Aker & Mbiti, 2010). Partly, this perspective can be attributed to highly, unevenly distributed digital technologies, despite technology enthusiasts insistently arguing that connectivity via mobile phones and internet-connected devices will bring massive development gains (Deichmann & Mishra, 2019). Inevitably, this defective approach to understanding connectivity deepens inequalities (Graham et al., 2017). Furthermore, digital technologies risk amplifying existing inequalities (Deichmann & Mishra, 2019), potentially leading to new forms of discrimination (Ndemo, 2019). Because of this, the poorest and most marginalized are also more likely to suffer disproportionately from some of the darker aspects of internet connectivity (Pepper & Jackman, 2019), as will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

Sassi (2005) asserted that the characteristics of users are more important than the characteristics of ICT in shaping the adoption and use of ICT; therefore Sassi advocated for a departure from technocratic explanations to embrace a discourse more akin to Mol's (2002)

concept of messy realities. For Sassi, there must be a recognition of the constantly evolving manifestation of the digital divide that takes into consideration the active and potent fluctuations that are inherent to digital technology adoption and adaptation. Sassi conceptualized the digital differentiation perspective as a recursive and dynamic concept that focuses on the differences in ICT and the implications of ICT use among those who have equal access to ICT. Digital exclusion and divide continue to expand as technologies do, and “grand visions of connectivity will themselves lead to an exacerbation of the very things that they purport to solve” (Friederici et al., 2017, p. 17).

However, despite the alignment between Sassi’s (2005) view of the digital divide and Mol’s (2002) messy realities, Sassi’s (2005) argument does not go far enough in accounting for the ANT perspective, which proposes that all actors (human and nonhuman) are equal; without every actor playing its role, the network fails (Latour, 1993; Law, 1992). According to ANT, there can be no distinction between human and nonhuman actors when examining social relations, as each actor has equal agency within the network (Latour, 1993; Law, 1992). All activities in the network, whether visible or invisible (Callon, 1986; Law, 1992) contribute to the outcome of the network, whether they disrupt the network or sustain it.

Donner (2009) argued that the correlation between ICT penetration and development cannot be easily captured because social and economic usages are often blurred. Poignantly, this study’s interview findings demonstrate that it is not a matter of connection/disconnection as the technocratic perspective argues, but rather the microlevels of connection that create opportunities for benefit. In a study of Pokémon Go players in Nairobi and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, de Souza e Silva et al. (2021) confirmed erratic connectivity based on location is a constant contention when accessing the internet in emerging countries. In Kenya, all the influencers live within the

geographical context of the city of Nairobi where connectivity fluctuates based on neighborhood/estate (Apindi & Nyanchama, 2022). Influencers who live in high-end markets like Westlands and Kileleshwa, and those who frequent Nairobi's central business district, experience 5G connectivity, while influencers outside those areas have varying degrees of connectivity, ranging from 1G to 4G access.

The politics of inclusion and exclusion refers to increasing levels of technological privilege provided by socioeconomic dynamics, which Bukht and Heeks (2017) referred to as divides of availability, affordability, and applicability. The divide between availability (for those living outside the footprint of mobile signal coverage), the divide of affordability (for those who have insufficient money to afford a smartphone), and the divide of applicability (for those who lack the capabilities to use particular apps or to undertake particular types of digital work) are locking most people in developing countries out of the benefits that digital tools provide (Bukht & Heeks, 2017). Similarly, van Dijk and Hacker (2003) identified four types of barriers to access: *mental access*, *material access*, *skill access*, and *user access*. Van Dijk and Hacker explained that the lack of mental access refers to a lack of elementary digital experience. The lack of material access means an absence of possession of computers and network connections. The lack of skill access is a lack of digital skills. Finally, the lack of user access signifies the lack of meaningful usage opportunities (van Dijk & Hacker, 2003).

As observed, Nairobi influencers wrestle with layers of the digital divide in a bid to score clicks on a rapidly evolving Instagram, further illustrating Sassi's (2005) argument that the problem of the digital divide is far from one-dimensional. Burri (2011) argued that "as the internet becomes ubiquitous and penetrates all facets of contemporary societal life, new and different tiers of division and discrimination seem to emerge" (p. 219). The first-, second-, and

third-level divides discussed by some digital divide scholars (Attewell, 2001; Hargittai, 2002; Ragnedda, 2017) align with a technocratic approach. In contrast, Bukht and Heeks' (2017) conceptualization of availability, affordability, and applicability divides provide a framework for a deeper and holistic examination of all the messy realities (Mol, 2002) and hidden moments of translation (Callon, 1986; Mol, 2002) that form the politics of inclusion and exclusion at play in the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy.

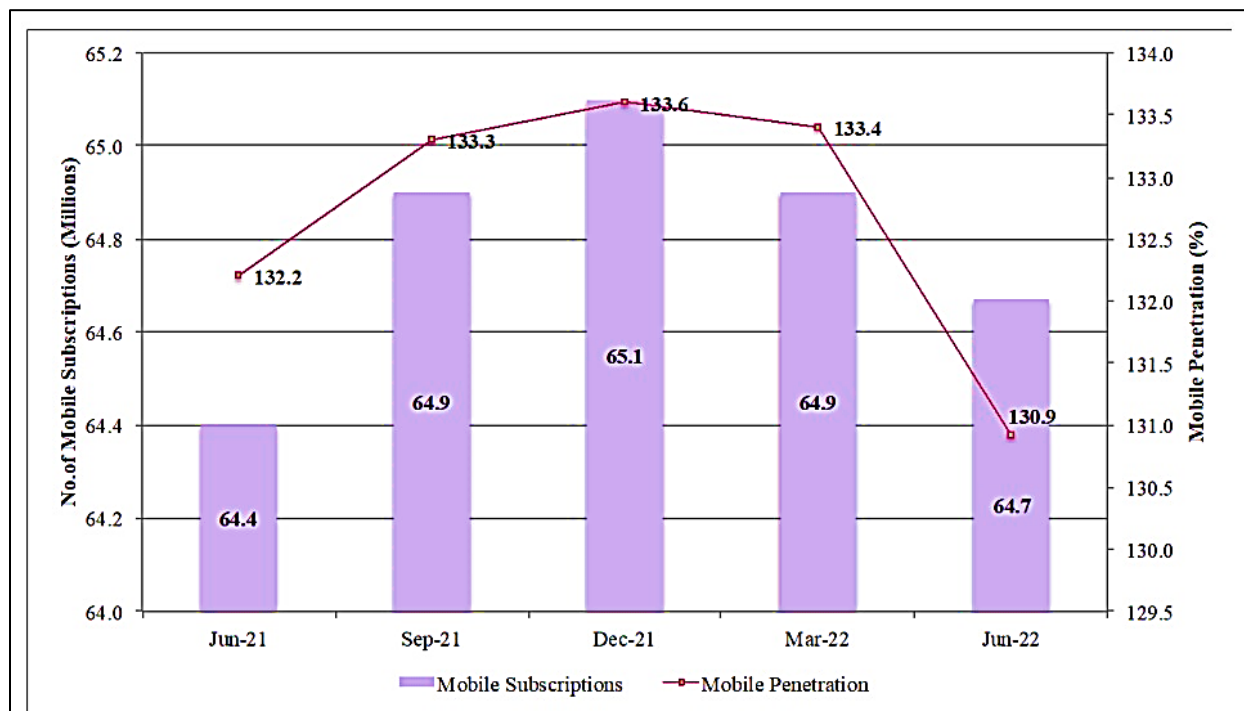
Availability

A discussion of the politics of inclusion/exclusion in the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy first begins with the problem of availability or access. Availability, the first of Bukht and Heeks' (2017) typology, is understood as user access to the internet and internet access tools, such as smartphones. In Kenya, 95.9% of all internet users in 2022 accessed the internet on mobile phones, spending nearly 4 hours every day engaged in internet activities on their mobile devices (Kemp, 2022). During my interview with Becky, a 21-year-old lifestyle influencer, she argued, "The only currency to becoming a successful influencer is access. Access to capable devices unlocks innumerable opportunities for income and other social benefits." Although Kenya's mobile penetration rate is difficult to ascertain since there are varying independent studies defining mobile penetration differently (Geopoll, 2021), the Communications Authority of Kenya (2021) defined mobile penetration and uptake in Kenya by SIM penetration. In 2022, SIM penetration stood at 130.9% and the number of active mobile (SIM) subscriptions was 64.7 million (Communications Authority of Kenya, 2021). However, counting the number of phones or SIMs owners, as argued by various scholars (James & Versteeg, 2007), is not the true measure of evaluating the impact of mobile phones in developing countries. According to Aker and Mbiti (2010) and James and Versteeg (2007), the actual ways in which people in Africa use mobile

phones and the benefits they derive from using mobile phones is the best way to determine the impact of mobile phones. This is because many people in Sub Saharan Africa have multiple phones and sim cards while some have none and often share sim and phones cards with others (James & Versteeg, 2007)

Figure 8 illustrates the trends in mobile subscriptions and penetration in Kenya between April and June 2022 (Communications Authority of Kenya, 2022). Oteri et al. (2015) underscored the importance of mobile subscriptions and penetration to help determine how strong the communication sector of the country is, particularly in Kenya where telecommunication has a troubled history. Oteri et al. commented,

In earlier times, a “telephone” was a symbol of status. It was quite a difficult and lengthy process for one to have a telephone connection at his/er home. ... Those who were not lucky enough to get a line had to make long queues behind a telephone booth (located at long distances from one’s home) to make a call. But now the situation is totally changed in that technology is available which can avail the information within a very short time, thanks to mobile phones. ... Employment opportunities have increased whereby most graduates get placed in formal employment in the telecommunication sector, which can take graduates from various fields. (p. 1)

Figure 8*Kenyan Mobile Subscription and Penetration Trends*

Note. Adapted from *Fourth Quarter Sector Statistics Report for the Financial Year 2021/2022 (1st April–30th June 2022)*, by Communications Authority of Kenya, 2022 (<https://www.ca.go.ke/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Sector-Statistics-Report-Q4-2021-2022.pdf>). In the public domain.

Although using mobile phone subscription data to analyze access points to a technocratic perspective (Sassi, 2005), the first-level digital divide “remains relevant today”, to account for those who are “now included in, not excluded from, digital systems” (Heeks, 2022, p. 690). The same individuals are unable to benefit from advanced digital technologies and capabilities, such as creator economy, because even with access, availability is not uniform because of Wi-Fi dead zones and erratic connectivity issues in certain geographic locations throughout Nairobi. The imperative need, according to Heeks (2022) is an understanding of how inequalities are created for some groups that are included in digital systems. In the case of Instagram influencers, mobile phones are the prerequisite material artifacts, and having access is a basic-level entry point; the

more expensive the phone with front and back cameras that produce high-end photos, the more enhanced the quality of output by the influencer. Although all smartphones bear camera and recording features, Karen, a 28-year-old female fashion influencer argued,

It is not just any smartphone; it must be the best smartphone camera offering top-notch performance in all aspects, from a camera that takes photos/videos that are ultra-sharp and rich, to one that has a high battery shelf life, and is Wi-Fi ready, to upload photos quick[ly] or go live on Instagram.

Nairobi influencers without high-end smartphones are not entirely excluded from the digital economy but are not able to fully participate in it due to these digital inequalities which are perpetuating further digital divide. In addition, Heeks (2022) contended,

Inequalities may therefore be reinforced between different groups that use the same digital system. Identification of adverse digital incorporation must therefore analyze the specific experiences of groups as they interact with digital systems rather than seek to categorize at the system or application level (p. 693). ... The concept[s] of the digital divide and ... digital inequality have moved beyond their initial simplistic origins ... [yet] remained rooted in a worldview of exclusion from the benefits of digital systems. ... This worldview remains necessary, but it is no longer sufficient. We need as well to account for the inequalities that arise in the global South when less-advantaged individuals and groups are included in rather than simply excluded from digital systems. (p. 698)

From an ANT perspective, mobile subscriptions are critical nonhuman actors for the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy as well as for digital entrepreneurship. Mobile subscriptions are the entryway for would-be influencers to begin building their social media presence and help shape influencers' day-to-day activities by making it possible for influencers

to create content from a variety of locations. As new internet providers and cheaper internet connections crop up, the platform economy and smartphone penetration have helped connect 28% of the population in Africa (GSMA, 2021). Mobile penetration in Kenya is higher than the average for the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa, as many parts of the country get access to mobile services including 5G technology (Geopoll, 2021). All creators interviewed for this study had either a high-end iPhone or a high-end Samsung, indicating the central role high-end smartphones play in the lives of content creators. As evidenced from my interviews, high-quality videos and pictures are needed to scale-up visibility, attract a significant number of followers, and position the influencer for growth.

While Aker and Mbiti (2010) explained that access to mobile phones creates income-generating opportunities in rural and urban areas, in Nairobi, it is the younger, more highly educated, and urban segments of the population who mainly use mobile phones to expand their opportunities. The majority (68.5%) of influencers in my study were below 30 years old. All the influencers I interviewed had received formal education; 63% possessed an undergraduate degree, while 86% held at least a 2-year postsecondary diploma. Osiakwan (2017) stated that some of Africa's millennials and digital natives without formal education are thriving online, but this assertion was not supported by the findings from my small sample. Only two of the influencers had a technical certificate but no other postsecondary education; the other 33 influencers held at least 2 years of postsecondary education. These findings align with Ling and Horst's (2011) assertion that those who have more powerful positions, such as those who have an opportunity for education, continue to stay in power compared to those without resources like education, money, jobs, status, and notions of appropriate roles. In retrospect, Castells (2001) argued that "the digital divide, in terms of access to the internet, will be mainly the concern of

the poorest, most discriminated segment of the population—thus furthering their marginality” (p. 254). Clearly, availability is linked to access, but includes more than just owning a smart phone and having access to the internet. This finding aligns with Burri (2011), who discussed the need to recognize the deeper aspects of access within the internet itself. Graham (2019) advocated for regressing “from over-privileging technology and connectivity as primary agents of change, and instead focus on the forces using those tools as a medium” (p. 14). Graham (2019) further argued that a more layered perspective of the problem will build evidence to inform and challenge and generate new kinds of contemporary theories to make sense of networking for both the global cores and the poorest people and places around the world.

The adoption of the mobile phone to create and monetize content produces an additional layer of inequalities, as seen with Karen’s example. When influencers’ shared experiences are combined, they indicate there is much less clarity, and particularly, idiosyncrasies on the increased usage of mobile phones beyond access, but more so on creation and monetizing content on platforms. As Donner and Locke (2019) argued, mobile phones and apps have democratized the means of production and also the intensely focused ownership of the means of distribution. It is not surprising that the influencers I spoke to are willing to invest and pay a large amount to get the latest and most powerful smartphone with features that accentuate their trade. Creators use their smartphones to not only access Instagram but also expand their social networks (Horst & Miller, 2006). The demand for high-end smartphones among Nairobi influencers remains “one of their most prized assets” (Arora, 2019, p. 33). The mobile phone’s unique affordances and features, mainly “mobility and individuality” (Horst & Miller, 2006, p. 7), empower influencers to enjoy ubiquity, reachability, and immediacy, and to monetize via platforms. Karen, for example, saved for almost 10 months to be able to afford the iPhone 11 Pro

Max, which she regarded as the “biggest game-changer” in her influencing career. Karen argued that the iPhone 11 Pro Max comes with an ultra-wide lens paired with a dual-lens feature while retaining the quality of the images, which is nonnegotiable for influencers. Prior to buying the iPhone 11 Pro Max Karen had used cheaper and readily available Android phones, which created a struggle for mobile photography.

Contributing to the messiness of influencers’ inclusion and exclusion is the uncertain availability of internet access across the country (Ndemo, 2019; Ndegwa, 2022). Despite the launch of fiber optics in Kenya in 2009, broadband penetration in Kenya is extremely low, with a need to aggressively scale up internet penetration from 3% to 60% across the country over the next 3 years (Ndegwa, 2022). Although most places in Nairobi, Kenya’s capital city, experience high-speed internet, I learned from interviewees there are various availability challenges that impede internet access in Kenya, ranging from erratic connectivity, Wi-Fi dead zones, cost of access, and power rationing, leaving some households without adequate and consistent online connectivity. Nairobi has an extensive geographical internet coverage, yet some creators in my study who were located within and on the outskirts of Nairobi had a different experience with internet connectivity. Murugi, a hair influencer who lives in the Eastlands part of Nairobi said,

I live less than 15 minutes away from one of the most connected cities in Africa. ... Wi-Fi is just dead in my house. I have unsuccessfully tried three internet providers to get the best connectivity to post my content.

In the process of digitization, there is much focus on building digital infrastructures and technology, such as laying cables yet “it is the content that is the driver of digital infrastructures, technology, and services, of new business and consumer behavior patterns, and not the other way around” (Burri, 2011, p. 219). Internet users are no longer merely consumers but should be

understood as active creators. Hence, “it would be foolish to think that once one starts the internet browser (i.e., having overcome the first and the second digital divides), content is easily and readily findable and accessible” (Burri, 2011, p.220). Burri’s (2011) sentiments display the multiplicity (Mol, 2002) of the politics of inclusion and exclusion. Some influencers reported trouble uploading content on Instagram and other services, especially during the COVID-19 lockdown when access to public Wi-Fi was not possible. Eric, a 31-year-old male influencer based in Kikuyu, which is 18 kilometers from Nairobi, explained,

The slow service and bumpy internet connections interfered with my productivity on IG [Instagram]. I just cannot seem to get a decent signal. It was worse during the pandemic. Unlike prelockdown days when I could go looking for alternative Wi-Fi connections in malls, parking lots, high-end coffee houses, and restaurants, now I was stuck at home with a low connection.

Ironically, while some influencers were frustrated about poor internet connectivity, another group of influencers could not even get basic data depending on their location within the city of Nairobi, leaving them vulnerable with no opportunities to pursue brand deals. Others outside of the capital city of Nairobi struggled with limited to no broadband access, as parts of Kenya are still on 2G connectivity. Broadband access mostly affects creators, especially travel influencers, when they travel to other parts of the country to produce content. Castells (2001) argued that the idea of “being disconnected, or superficially connected to the internet is tantamount to marginalization in the global, networked system” (p. 269). Likewise, Friederici et al. (2017) added that differing degrees of internet connectivity result in uneven economic impacts across geographies and social strata, while Graham et al. (2017) claimed that “internet costs and speeds [are] out of reach for all but the most privileged citizens in Sub-Saharan Africa”

(p. 347). Combined, these perspectives underline the messiness and complexities (Law & Singleton, 2005) of the multiple realities (Mol, 2002) embedded in the politics of inclusion.

Meta, aware of the competitive pressure and the “unstable, slow, and expensive” (APO Importer, 2021, para. 4) connectivity challenges in emerging markets, launched an Instagram Lite version in 2018 to competitively upscale its global reach and increase uptake in emerging markets (Kharpal, 2018). In 2021, Meta launched Instagram Lite in Sub-Saharan African countries with low bandwidth to cultivate a new audience (APO Importer, 2021; Meta, 2021). The Lite version allows Android users to download Instagram more quickly while also giving them a fast and reliable user experience on the platform. Instagram’s move shows the company understands the growth potential and the total addressable market in the Sub-Saharan African space (Suleiman, 2021). In a 2021 press release Peter Shin, the engineering manager for Instagram Lite explicitly claimed, “Our team aims to leave no one behind, so today we are very excited to bring Instagram Lite to people in over 170 countries, including the entire Sub-Saharan Africa region” (APO Importer, 2021, para. 5). Shin’s logic reflects an understanding of Castells’ (2011) networking power, where the value of being in the network increases exponentially with the size of the network. That is, it benefits Instagram to have more actors connected to their network.

The launch of Instagram Lite emulated Facebook Lite’s successful roll-out some years ago. Facebook’s pursuit to bridge the first digital divide through Free Basics in African countries is under heavy criticism due to its restricted features, yet is hyped as a digital connectivity tool for the unconnected markets (Arora, 2019; Kwet, 2019). Instagram Lite is likely to suffer the same fate because, as Suleiman (2021) argued, some features are not currently supported, such as Reels creation, shopping, and IGTV. These features are critical tools of the trade for influencers.

Unfortunately, not much is known of this initiative in Kenya; only one of the influencers I interviewed had heard of it but was not using it.

After I introduced Instagram Lite to the influencers in my study, they criticized it as a tool that could potentially marginalize users from leveraging its unique features and affordances. Their sentiments indicate a disconnect between Instagram's vision of cultivating new users and meeting people's needs in Sub-Saharan African countries. Notwithstanding, Instagram Lite's rollout to other markets shows Meta's never-ending spirit of expansion for Africa is an ongoing project that continues to court new demographics with enticing alternative, technological affordances, such as its Lite versions of both the Facebook and Instagram platforms.

Access to the internet is magnified by the plethora of challenges Kenyans face on a daily basis as members of an emerging country. Amidst the messy reality of internet availability, sometimes absent and inconsistent in some parts of Nairobi, Nairobi influencers often endure distinct challenges such as frequent power outages and intermittent Kenya Power and Lighting Company (KPLC) power rationing that persist for as many as 8 hours at a time, interfering with creators' productivity levels. KPLC implemented power rationing in 1999 to deal with the electricity demand that is fast outstripping supply (Standard Media, 2011).¹² Faced with extremely disruptive outages, interview respondents indicated how intermittent power supply obstructs their day-to-day content production plans. Wamukoya and Ng'weno (2017) explained that electricity is quite expensive in Kenya compared with other countries, and electricity is the principal cause of downtime because, without power, operations cannot run. Kuek et al. (2015) contended that the lack of cost-effective, available, and reliable electricity is a major obstacle to

¹²Kenya has activated a power-rationing program that might hurt industry and small service providers already battered by high energy and commodity prices.

digital economy development. While investing in generators is out of the question due to the high cost of purchase, the majority of the creators learned to pause their tasks until power resumes or employ other survival tactics. For example, instead of engaging in meaningful and productive tasks, Marcus, a 29-year-old male influencer must travel a distance or wait until power resumes to continue with his work. Marcus endures frequent power outages and KPLC power rationing days that interfere with his productivity levels at least two or three days a week. Since Marcus and other influencers cannot afford backup generators during power outages and rationing days, Marcus has learned survival tactics. “[During] power rationing in our estate, I use public means to get to my friend’s estate to access power and internet as it goes all day and sometimes does not come back till late in the night,” Marcus stated. Instead of productive tasks, Marcus must travel a distance or wait until power resumes to continue with his work. This messy reality highlights that access is not the only divide; availability, such as power blackouts are affecting the Instagram influencer economy. Issues of availability are depicted in the invisible dimensions of the network (Callon, 1986; Mol, 2002). Likewise, issues of affordability also contribute to the messiness that inhibits the growth of Nairobi influencers.

Affordability

The divide of affordability includes factors like insufficient funds to afford a smartphone and internet services (Bukht & Heeks, 2017). It can also be understood as material access, which means the influencer also does not have hardware, such as a computer, or a local area network (van Dijk & Hacker, 2003). The influencers’ monetization strategies, which include material access, both cause and reveal new digital divides beyond the affordability of the phones, the internet, and internet-related services. Sassi (2005) regarded these new divides as “new social cleavages” (p. 686), which simultaneously strengthen old cleavages. For the influencers in this

study, factors of material access included (a) the lack of financial capital to extend and sustain after-access issues; (b) the cost of purchasing critical tools of trade like emerging content creation tools/technologies, props, film permits, and locations; and (c) training in the form of tutorials or skill acquisition needed to survive in the influencer economy. As observed in this study, these extra cleavages—affordability divides—aggravate the already existing availability divide created by internet access issues. Consequently, as Castells (2001) argued, “as soon as one source of technological inequality seems to be diminishing another one emerges” (p. 256), aggravating the digital divide while complicating the messy realities of inclusion, as seen with the rise of the creator economy in Nairobi.

Although Aker and Mbiti (2010) argued that acquiring inexpensive mobile devices contributes to decreasing the digital divide in Africa, the cost of mobile devices significantly remains the biggest impediment to access for Kenyan influencers. All creators interviewed for this study had either a high-end iPhone or high-end Samsung, each costing \$1,000 or more. The fact that the Kenyan influencers spend large amounts of money on phones, a cheaper, less technically sophisticated phone will be the only thing they can afford. Therefore, Kenyan influencers often place themselves in financial jeopardy in the hope of establishing a sustainable career as a content creator on Instagram. In 2009, the Kenyan government implemented a value-added tax (VAT) exemption on mobile handsets,¹³ which significantly enhanced affordability by more than 200% for the majority of Kenyans (Deloitte, 2011). However, VAT removal does not benefit digital content creators seeking expensive, high-end devices. The taxes on airtime and

¹³In June 2009 the Kenyan government, recognizing the importance of enhancing access to mobile telephony, decided to exempt mobile handsets from VAT. This has generated significant benefits for many Kenyans. Handset purchases have increased by more than 200% since the removal of VAT and penetration rates have increased substantially, from 50% to 70%. This successful policy confirms that consumption taxes can have a significant impact on consumer behavior in Kenya (Deloitte, 2011).

mobile internet are regressive, since as Deloitte (2011) argued, Kenya's tax rate is among the highest in Africa.

During the 2022 Mobile World Congress (MWC) in Barcelona, Peter Ndegwa, CEO of the leading mobile network provider in Kenya, Safaricom, acknowledged that despite significant coverage with 4G advancement, one-third of Kenya's population still does not have mobile internet due to an inability to afford the devices needed to access the internet. In most developing countries like Kenya, the average monthly fixed broadband prices are three times higher than in developed countries, and mobile broadband prices are twice as expensive (ITU, 2015). The cost of access pose entry barriers for content creators seeking to monetize the digital platform in Kenya. The essential devices needed to be a digital content creator, such as smartphones, are beyond the budgets of most Kenyans. The findings of this study corroborate the impact of the actor network as multiple actors influence and are influenced by each other's actions. For example, 37% of the respondents used prepaid plans while 63% used postpaid subscriptions. The majority (54%) of creators interviewed confirmed to have spent \$50 to \$100 USD monthly on internet costs while only 3% spent more than \$100 USD. Omondi (2022) reported "the single heaviest item in the middle class' shopping basket ... is hotel boarding followed by airtime" (para. 21).

Donner (2015) expounded on new constraints that complicate after-access issues once people engage with the internet. The high cost of the internet, Donner argued, is a major barrier to its ongoing use. What emerges from the disparaging figures of true access is a tension between the affordability of the internet and internet-related services and other competing needs such as food, as alluded to by my interviewee, Bob, the senior manager of stakeholder engagement for

Eastern and Southern Africa at the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN). Bob explained that most creators are struggling with after-access obstructions:

So, it's a chicken and egg situation. [On] one hand, we have somewhat addressed access and invested heavily in infrastructure. But on the other hand, the talented potential local content creators, that are meant to now monetize their access to these platforms are struggling. A lot of young creators can benefit from [monetizing], but a lot of this capacity goes unutilized. It goes to waste because it cannot be tapped into because of after-access issues. Acquiring the device itself remains a challenge. But when I manage to get that device, what is the cost of bandwidth? What is the cost of one MB of data? And in the scale of my pyramid of needs, the creators in Kenya have consistently questioned on platforms like Twitter, "Should I buy data or should I buy food?" In other words, what is the cost of an MB of data vis-à-vis, the cost of breakfast, or the cost of lunch?

The after-access problem remains largely unaddressed, isolating a significant number of Kenyans who would potentially leverage the internet to earn a living, as observed during my fieldwork. For example, during one of my interviews, Joshua, a 34-year-old male travel influencer discussed his internet experience in Nairobi:

I save my data bundles by mostly taking advantage of free Wi-Fi in cafés, malls, offices, and anywhere with free Wi-Fi whenever I am up and about. But I cannot take this risk when uploading content or going live on Instagram. My Wi-Fi at home tends to act up at times, slowing down uploading content. To play safe, I use my data bundles strictly for uploading content or going live if I am at home. But it gets tricky as I move in the

outskirts of Nairobi where connectivity is erratic [and], at the same time, deplet[es] my data bundles so fast. I think the internet is very expensive for an average Kenyan.

Ninety-eight percent of the influencers I interviewed in Nairobi used the leading mobile platform operator, Safaricom for their data; 75% of my interviewees complained about how quickly internet bundles purchased from this network are depleted. Kyalo, a 27-year-old lifestyle influencer lamented,

Safaricom is the girlfriend you would like to ditch but you may not take the risk as she is the prettiest within your circles. Safaricom internet is very fast, but it depletes faster than lightning, making it quite expensive for me to sustain and run my digital content at ease.

Kyalo's account provides context to a long-standing debate on the cost and longevity of internet bundles in Kenya. The raging dispute, named *kula bundles* (translated as eating data bundles), is a never-ending ending conversation where Twitter followers express anger for Safaricom's greed in the high cost of internet expenses. Safaricom's competitors have been riding on this wave, offering affordable internet packages and sometimes internet loan options with flexible payment plans (Waruguru, 2021).¹⁴ Kenya is ranked 118 in a list of 230 countries worldwide, from the cheapest to the most expensive for mobile data. The costs of access and after-access remain high and out of reach for most Kenyans. According to Kamer (2022a),

One gigabyte (GB) for mobile internet in Kenya cost on average \$0.84 USD in 2021. Out of 46 plans measured in Kenya, the lowest price observed was \$0.24 USD per 1GB, for a 30 days plan. In the most expensive plan, 1GB cost \$4.23 USD" (para. 1).

Influencers' lack of financial capital is a major impediment to the growth of the influencer economy in Nairobi. This aligns with the perspectives of Castells (2001) and Ling and

¹⁴ For the rankings of data bundles in Kenya, see Waruguru (2021).

Horst (2011) on structural capitalistic problems whereby societies are increasingly structured around those individuals who have more powerful positions. Empowerment is strengthened while those without power are excluded from the network. According to Castells (1996),

The global economy restructures the capitalism by its interdependence, its asymmetry, its regionalization, the increased diversification within each region, its selective inclusiveness, its exclusionary segmentation, and, as a result of all those features, an extraordinarily variable geometry that tends to dissolve historical, economic geography. (p. 106)

Funding required by influencers is contingent on their level/category of influence or how much influence they yield. Beginner influencers face the lack of capital to afford a high-quality smartphone—a major impediment to building social capital in readiness for brand deals. Similar to Karen’s experience, who was able to successfully purchase an iPhone 11 Pro Max after 10 months of saving, other creators I spoke to had to delay embarking on their influencing careers until they raised enough capital to afford high-end smartphones. Baha, a 27-year-old male lifestyle influencer explained, “I knew that I wouldn’t be able to execute properly with the cheaper Chinese model of a smartphone that I had.”

Conversely, some elite influencers I spoke to had advanced from using high end smartphones for production of images and videos to sophisticated content production technologies, tools, and equipment, such as cameras, lighting gear, and sometimes drones. Others started off with professional cameras with various lenses, such as award-winning vlogging cameras like Canon G7X Mark III and Go Pro Hero 7. For example, Nancy explained she has been saving for a very expensive Nikon camera that costs over \$10,000 USD because she aims to appeal to international brands and audiences.

Notwithstanding, several elite influencers confirmed high-quality smartphones are needed as part of the starter kit to generate high-level content in an extremely competitive global Instagram environment. Rising influencers explained that despite owning a high-quality phone, they still needed image and video enhancement tools such as a ring light and tripod, which act as major bottlenecks to upscaling their influencer status. Beyond supplemental tools needed to enhance video and image quality, influencers need to secure funding for editing apps (e.g., iMovie, Canva, Photoshop), which require an annual subscription; props; location costs; and sometimes, film permits as required by the Kenyan government when taking pictures or videos of most public spaces. These items, which are a prerequisite to depicting the perceived reality creators are trying to perform and showcase, are needed to depict the life of opulence anticipated by their followers and brands, while allowing influencers to compete on a global scale.

After-access issues also include travel and entry into ideal locations, such as high-end hotels, or exquisite locations, such as parks. However, these prime locations cost money or require connections with influential people, especially if one's background is not well-off. Karanja confirmed he spends \$250 on leasing a high-end Airbnb in the upmarkets of Nairobi every time he creates top-end content for a high-end brand of alcohol. Jacinta, a food influencer, had to remodel her whole kitchen with new and expensive fittings to create the perceived lifestyle of a food influencer; Jacinta believed this is a necessary expenditure to match what she sees with international chef influencers, like Jamie Oliver and Gordon Ramsey, whom she looks up to, and who command a huge following across the globe. Jacinta explained, "I had to take a loan worth \$5,000 to be able to redesign my kitchen." While Karanja and Jacinta paid the price to scale up their influencing activities, some influencers improvised mechanisms to survive the divide of affordability. These influencers confirmed to me that they have gone as far as hacking

editing apps to sabotage the cost of maintaining annual subscription fees. “There is also a particular challenge in securing funding for the creator economy,” Jacinta complained. Most financial lending institutions such as banks, microfinance, and Saccos are skeptical of investing in small, unproven business models, such as the influencing economy. Jacinta was able to secure a loan from her friends to fundraise her content creation career. Influencers aiming to scale higher are burdened with long periods of saving and sometimes fundraising from family and friends to meet the demands of their growth aspirations.

A major problem some influencers encounter is the need to place the demands of their business in competition alongside the day-to-day, and sometimes pressing needs of their family. Nancy lamented, “God forbid something happens to me or my family and I am forced to use the money I have been saving for over a year now to buy the Nikon camera.” Additionally, influencers must consider the cost of health insurance due to safety and security concerns. One influencer I spoke to tripped and fell into a swimming pool while shooting content, resulting in medical and equipment expenses. Given that the brands she works with are contract-based and do not offer social welfare services, such as health insurance or pensions, this influencer had to ask her parents to cover her hospital bills for her work-related accident. Although platforms offer economic opportunities, they do so in the most precarious conditions such as lack of social protection, low pay, and surveillance (Anwar & Graham, 2022).

The examples provided by the participants in this chapter emphasize not only the importance of human capital but also resource capital, welfare capital, and collective agency to meet the demands of content creation that will place influencers at the cusp of the emerging and thriving digital entrepreneurship ecosystem. For most influencers, growth is hampered by a persistent need to buy and maintain sophisticated tools and equipment and other related costs

such as accommodation, transport, and props. It appears that those influencers who can consistently invest in these high-end resources substantially increase their chances of reaping significant economic value. The creation of relevant content requires a dynamic, interactive, and iterative process of collaboration and differentiation among digital content creators that, notwithstanding, materializes slowly. Regardless, the lack of digital and technical competency stagnates the growth of the content creator as is presented in issues of applicability.

Applicability

Applicability is most easily understood as literacy related to technology and its use (Bukht & Heeks, 2017). For my study, applicability means the ability for creators to produce and edit content, including text, images, videos, audio, and live streams using tools of trade like smartphones, computers, laptops, cameras, lighting and editing tools. According to van Dijk and Hacker (2003), the inability to use technology is where the real danger lies because it produces a “usage gap” (p. 316). The idea of the *usage gap* emphasizes individuals’ systematic use of difficult applications either for work or school and benefits gained from advanced digital technology (van Dijk & Hacker, 2003).

The divide of applicability is especially wide for those influencers who lack the capabilities to use particular apps or to undertake particular types of digital work (Bukht & Heeks, 2017). Through my interviews, I found that when it comes understanding the depth of the applicability divide, a lack of technical competency and resource control could also be perceived as a major threat to anyone seeking to join the creator economy. A content creator who is unable to unlock applicability due to a lack of knowledge and technical competency is, by default, excluded from the creator economy. The divide of applicability actually exacerbates the other divides because it impedes adoption of Instagram as a money-making venue, even if the

creator has access to the platform and can afford the tools to operate within the platform. Beyond the influencer's basic literacy, which means the individual is able to use technology and platforms, the influencer must have a digital literacy that allows the individual to use devices to develop a greater understanding and awareness of the value the internet has to offer in their daily lives (Marcus et al., 2015).

In alignment with ANT, influencers who affiliate with the nonhuman actors of technical competency, digital literacy, and resource control become more powerful in the network, a phenomenon that illustrates the bargaining power of various actors working together to move up in the network. This is a critical stage for influencers as it determines how far they can go in the translation process by enrolling other actors within the network to advance their own status. As Latour (1988) argued, the actors in a network can be strong only by associating with other actors; hence, they are able "to spread far without losing coherence." Latour stated, "An actant needs faithful allies who accept what they are told, identify themselves with its cause, carry out all the functions that are defined for them, and come to its aid without hesitation when they are summoned" (p. 199). Actors who are "willing to anchor themselves to the collectors" (Callon, 1986, p. 211) involve other actors in the network to align to the interests defined for them by the focal actor. The fundamental question becomes if these actors (new and old) will stand the trial of the strength test in the process of translation to either empower or disempower the current network (Latour, 1988).

In my observation and interview data, I noted other nonhuman actors who also presented invisible moments of translation (Callon, 1986; Mol, 2022). These hidden actors came in the form of financial and tax literacy and legal literacy. I observed the shift from phone-based knowledge and skills to platform-based literacy practices spurred interesting perspectives on

usage and adoption processes Inasmuch as every influencer in my study had received formal education—63% held undergraduate degrees—only two of the influencers had a college certificate, which is similar to a technical diploma. I observed that technical language literacy constitutes a specific type of language barrier. Terminologies like algorithms, analytics, metrics, and hacking sounded foreign to some upcoming influencers. The disbenefits that emerged from technical language illiteracy included influencers' inability to fully comprehend content creation strategies and interpretation of algorithms, metrics, and analytics.

Invisible moments of translation (Callon, 1986; Mol, 2002) within the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy are implicit assumptions and preconditions associated with platform skills and knowledge flows. In order to operate as digital entrepreneurs on the Instagram platform, Nairobi influencers need to organize and manage their business activities on a day-to-day basis by pitching business ideas to potential clients; managing finances (which includes budgeting, invoicing, calculating CCCoP and ROI; remitting taxes; following up on payments); performing daily administrative work, such as understanding contractual, legally binding documents when signing up brand deals with companies; keeping up with email correspondence on project briefings; and managing their projects, which includes daily reporting on trends and analytics regarding client expectations. In addition, influencers need to have excellent project management skills because their work sometimes includes more than one brand deal at a time. Concurrently, they must understand the ever-morphing Instagram affordability, which includes beating the algorithm; navigating data analytics through metrics; third-party editing apps; using filters to enhance existing Instagram functionalities; and new Instagram features, such as reels and IGTV. These invisible tasks of the Insta-career resonate with Abidin's (2016) idea of "visibility labor" (p. 87). Abidin developed the idea of visibility labor "as the work enacted to flexibly

demonstrate gradients of self-conspicuousness in digital or physical spaces depending on intention or circumstance for favorable ends” (p. 87). Burgess (2021), citing Abidin’s concept of visibility labor, argued that “in order to maintain high levels of visibility, creators have to work out how to engage with each platform’s features, policies, audience analytics, and data tools” (p. 23). I submit, these new, intensified layers of literacy require influencers to possess a complexity of knowledge or financial capital to outsource some tasks to financial consultants or lawyers, tax consultants, and/or personal assistants, again complicating the cost and understanding of what it means to be a successful influencer.

Joy Kendi, a leading Nairobi-based lifestyle content creator explained her mastery on her Instagram page (see Figure 9) while extending advice to upcoming influencers. She reiterated these same sentiments in my interview with her.

Figure 9

Joy Kendi's Instagram Learning Process



Note. Joy Kendi describes for her viewers how to edit professional photos (December 21, 2021). Retrieved January 19, 2023 from <https://www.instagram.com/p/CXvI4gyse6F/>

Joy explained that to edit photos and make them look professional, “I start from the absolute basics of taking selfies and using multiple apps to learn editing, color correction, creation and everything around editing.” A few of my participants, who were beginners, mentioned leveraging peer-to-peer (P2P) networks, such as for apprenticeship with some renowned elite influencers. Some of the participants had benefited from companies like Google, East African Breweries Limited (EABL), TikTok, and a few local influencer agencies who had invested in training local creators by holding regular workshops in Nairobi. I noticed the influencers who had completed online courses or tutorials, regardless of their level of education, yielded more confidence while speaking about their influencing careers. These creators were

thriving, had survived this career for more than 2 years, and had attracted bigger deals. They are prime examples of actors building their own power within the network by aligning with other human and nonhuman actors who can help the actors advance their own interests through moments of translation (Latour, 1988).

I contend that the shift to an influencer economy demands new platform skills for monetizing and earning livable income. Additionally, digital literacy goes together with expansion into platformization and extends beyond skills to literacy on digital tax education, finances, legal matters, safety, and security, all factors which were primarily unknown to 65% of the influencers I interviewed. As a Ministry of Information, Communication, and Technology senior officer argued during an interview at his office, “With proper ICT skills, it means creators can be able to tackle arising issues such as DST.” After acknowledging these gaps in ICT skills, the Kenyan government sponsored Ajira, a digital skills empowerment national program funded by the Mastercard Foundation. Through the program, young creators can learn digital skills, online safety, and compliance using five building blocks: transcription, content writing, content creation, virtual assistants, e-commerce, and digital marketing, as a strategy to help rising digital entrepreneurs bridge the digital divide. The Ajira program takes a technocratic approach, which ignores the complex, multi-faceted reality of including Nairobi influencers into the global creator economy.

Within the Instagram economy, it is the influencer’s sole responsibility to quickly learn, unlearn, and relearn the platform’s technicalities and features at their own expense. In the developing world context, creators encounter a problem with the notion that with “self-directed learning comes self-responsibility” (Arora, 2019, p. 149). The evolving nature of Instagram as a fire object, as stated in Chapter 1, is highly unpredictable and constantly subject to new

iterations, requiring all actors in the Instagram influencer network to align and realign with other actors in order to not only survive but thrive in the economy. Alliances between various actors (Latour, 1988) grow the network at lightning speed, as the combustible elements ignite more aspects of the fire object (Law & Singleton, 2005).

In many ways, Nairobi creators' motivations, ambitions, and practices differ. Furthermore, many aspiring influencers remain held back from the potential that the platform economy has to offer because they are deprived of adequate access to both foundational and specialized knowledge as well as internet access tools and the internet. In turn, inequality rises and, most likely, excludes rather than empowers the budding Nairobi influencer population.

Worse still, Nairobi influencers in my study had an inability to discern digital harms from benefits, such as privacy invasion, safety, and security, as well as ways to manage technical glitches, like mastery of the art of hacking, escalating incidents to Instagram, or pursuing legal action in case of contract breaches with brands and sponsorships. It is easy to assume that because of the participants' level of education, they are sufficiently skilled to deal with the ever-evolving platform features and terms of service, policy restrictions and, specifically, content moderation regulation; however, Nairobi influencers confirmed these teething challenges as a nightmare of problems. It is safe to argue that platform skills and competency are not primarily related to educational level. Instead, creators needed adaptability—the motivation to find and learn, and the ability to keep up with the rapid succession of changes that are inherent to the Instagram platform.

Therefore, I contend that when it comes to the Instagram influencer economy, platform literacy relies heavily on the state of influencers' interactions with nonhuman actors, such as digital skills, motivation, and their ability to learn on the go, especially about the ever-changing

affordances and features of Instagram. As Poell et al. (2022) stated, “unlike Instagram end users, cultural producers such as influencers, as platform dependents, must remain carefully attuned to the platform’s ever-evolving business models, tool documentation, interface standards, guidelines, and moderation regimes; after all, their livelihood depends on it” (p. 180). To this list of requirements of platform literacy, coupled with influencers’ need to survive, I add the ability to manage finances from brand deals, draft contracts, create budgets that factor in CCCoP versus ROI, and understand a set of diverse and capable policies to govern the digital workplace. I also concur with Abidin (2016b), who found that influencers must possess the ability to comprehend their followers’ engagement with their content, and produce the replication of their content through their followers’ loyalty. Abidin stated, “Followers become a network of advertorial [advertising commentators] capillaries by duplicating, amplifying, and multiplying the influencer content to their own circle of followers and personal friends” (p. 89). These invisible tasks, from which the visibility of their influence is attained, require influencers to possess an aptitude that may not be acquired through formal education.

I interviewed two different influencers who quit their newly acquired influencing careers due to psychological barriers, also known as a lack of psychological access, such as platform anxiety or platform phobia. Psychological access is “a lack of any digital experience caused by lack of interest, computer fear, and unattractiveness of the new technology” (van Dijk & Hacker, 2003, p. 1). Anxiety toward the use of technology has the capability to decrease a user’s likelihood of engaging with technology (Dutton & Reisdorf, 2019; Reisdorf & Groselj, 2017; Van Dijk, 2005). During an interview with Becky, a former 23-year-old hair influencer, she proclaimed,

I took a hiatus from influencer activities after 24 months of a few brand deals here and there. Under the conditions of constantly creating content, and the strange algorithmic design, the labor, the cost, and the time, I [just] could not keep up. My numbers were not growing, despite the hard work. My energies depleted so fast, even though I was making a little every month.

Becky's testament suggests a barrier to access that van Dijk and Hacker (2003) called skills access: "a lack of digital skills caused by insufficient user-friendliness and inadequate education or social support" (p. 1). Due to the tenacious power of algorithms, failure to possess technical literacy renders some Nairobi influencers subject to experience high levels of frustration, hence exacerbating the divide. On a more macro level, there is also a danger of unfair distribution of brand deals and sponsorship work between the elite influencers and aspirational influencers, strengthening the already existing asymmetries between the regarding opportunities to monetize the platforms. I observed that since aspirational influencers are relatively new to the creator economy, they tend to suffer more as they lack platform skills, literacy, and patience to gain experience when compared to elite influencers. Compared to aspirational influencers, elite influencer interviewees expressed feeling more competent and confident in their practices, demonstrating the fact that precarity is highly uneven. Some aspirational influencers expressed technophobia, especially with algorithms, supplemental editing apps, and lighting tools. They turned to experienced influencers for support and were sometimes turned down given that influencing is a very competitive market. My findings revealed that within Instagram's glitz and glamor, it is easy for aspirational influencers to forget or get carried away with the notion of *Insta-celebrities* (Frier, 2020). In turn, they fail to understand that Insta-fame comes with human resource and capital labor, as well as sometimes precarious working conditions as another layer

of exclusion, and mental health implications as I will elaborate in Chapter 5. As I observed, the degree of precarity accelerating the digital divide is different based on the influencer level, becoming more aggravated at the entry-level than established levels. As Nairobi influencers continue to grow, expand, and rise through the ranks, building a more recognizable personal brand for themselves, the more difficult and complicated it gets for them to manage their mushrooming audience, projects, revenue streams, and daily operations.

The level of sophistication required for influencers to start, create, maintain, and grow their monetizing craft is a multifaceted, vicious circle that aggravates the divide. This level of sophistication intensifies over time as influencers grow from aspirational to elite, gaining prominence, and increasingly demanding suitable tools, such as high-end phones or cameras, and faster and high-speed internet, high-end locations, food, and lifestyles, with the objective of generating further socioeconomic growth from a demanding cult of followers. These intangible and tangible resources intrinsically introduce new kinds of digital divides. As a result, many influencers like Becky, who are not able to stand the pressure drop out and return to employment-seeking, leaving the craftsmanship they have invested in over time without any appropriate economic reward. Although there are multiple apps and platforms that creators can access to help with the management of tasks, each requires membership subscriptions with annual fees, which most of rising influencers cannot afford.

To summarize, inclusion and exclusion are predicated on three forms of divide, which exist in the Nairobi context and exacerbate the negative consequences of the influencer economy as part of the messiness (Law & Singleton, 2005) and moments of tension (Mol, 2002) the emerging economy is producing, when compared to the Global North. The divides of availability, affordability, and applicability are not mutually exclusive; they are intrinsically tied.

Creators must produce a balancing act among the three divides to sustain their success. This enmeshment of the divides is what creates the moments of tension (Mol, 2002), resulting in messiness (Law & Singleton, 2005), complicating the ability to disentangle one divide's influence from another. Furthermore, the divides are part of the invisible moments of translation (Callon, 1986; Mol, 2002) that obscure the realities associated with becoming and sustaining an influencer career in the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy. Influencers find themselves in a variety of challenging situations, such as choosing between buying food or data bundles, experiencing fluctuating energy supply, enduring heights of digital labor, pay gaps, constantly improving Instagram platform literacy, and dealing with growing vulnerability as they attempt to leverage the influencer economy.

The discussion of divides has shown that although platforms convince us that access is free, available to anyone, and is easily attainable, the most successful creators come from a place of the most privileged, challenging the dominant framing of democratization through technological access. Therefore, there appears to be a causal link between digital connectivity and the development argument. As clearly established, the complexity is present with differentiated socioeconomic dynamics that challenge Nairobi content creators' authenticity, both in terms of being and doing. Creators face unique risks and vulnerabilities, gaping global comparative dimensions, and fundamentally different conditions (i.e., infrastructural challenges that include expensive data bandwidth, rapidly depleting data bundles, Wi-Fi dead zones, power interruptions, and defeating platform literacy challenges (technical such as production skills like editing skills, financial and legal skills) compared to content creators in the Global North. Nairobi influencers are representative of the realities of the digital divide that affect the broader population of influencers attempting to join the creator economy in the Global South.

Additionally, Nairobi influencers endure precarious policies that legitimize and protect their trade, as is further examined in Chapter 5.

The multi-faceted interplay between human and nonhuman actors within the politics of inclusion and exclusion complicate the already messy reality Nairobi content creators endure. Altogether, the relationships between actors heighten the risks of authenticity and exacerbate existing socioeconomic divides. In specific, even though few people actually thrive economically in the Insta-career, a profound power differential between those who do thrive is evident. The gap widens between aspirational and elite creators as content creation is an enormously expensive venture demanding human, financial, material, and intangible capital investments. The influencer economy is taking root across the socioeconomic landscape of Nairobi, accentuating new possibilities, ambivalences, vulnerabilities, and realities for understanding digital divides when it comes to platformization. While the broad lived experiences of content creators and their content monetization feel inclusive, other challenging factors are exclusionary in nature, conflating the creative economy in Nairobi. In a resource-limited environment such as Nairobi, connecting influencers with high-end smartphone access and the internet is not an end goal given the increased degree of precarity and the uncertainty of how the influencer economy fits into the greater economy. In contrast, the perceived sense of stability easily obscures the complex set of digital divides, heightening instability as opposed to a substantiated form of emancipation (digital inclusion), as claimed by most interviewees. Over time, as the influencer economy opens pathways to fame and “micro-celebrities” (Abidin, 2016b, p. 87), the incongruities of digital content creator lifestyles in Nairobi beyond the barriers of cost and access of the internet start becoming clear. The accounts discussed here explicate the simultaneous competing interests of the various visible and invisible actors (human and nonhuman) in their roles in the translation

process. The Global South continues to impede persons' rights to access these new media technologies and, when it comes to content creation, deprives persons a chance to monetize and earn a livelihood off platforms, whereas in platform-ready and economically-advanced countries, users enjoy these rights amidst a few digital divides.

Conclusion

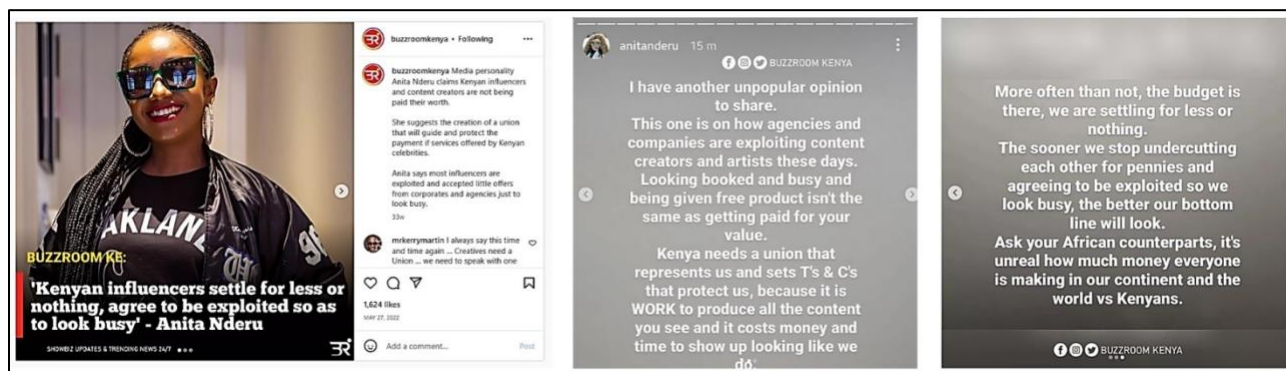
This chapter highlighted the challenges Nairobi digital content creators face as they enter an already mature creator economy industry. Nairobi digital content creators experience little to no autonomy, let alone control of their careers, bringing to question the idea of professionalizing and commercializing commodification of self for economic sustainability. Findings on the digital divide in the creator economy are undoubtedly a compelling account, demonstrating undercurrents and particularities of the platform creator culture in the emerging market context. These findings align with other platform scholars (Duffy, 2015, 2017; Poell et al., 2022) who warned against generalizations and called for a deep understanding of platformization from particular geographical, cultural, and structural contexts, and also the experiences of individuals. Despite these obstinate challenges, young creators are undeterred to enact themselves in platform livelihoods just like their counterparts in other parts of the world. As the process of the translation of the Instagram influencer economy proliferates the city of Nairobi, causing excitement but also disillusionment among actors, creators reconfigure their relationships with each, as established in Chapter 1. If platform livelihoods (Caribou Digital & Qhala, 2020; Donner, 2021) are anything to go by, three divides exist and impact the future of influencer work in Nairobi, reinstating the fact that creator livelihoods are more interesting when viewed as an illustration of digital societies, rather than as a driver of widespread poverty alleviation and growth, within the development frame in emerging markets like Nairobi. Individual, national,

and platform divides illustrate that Nairobi creators live in unequal circumstances and in precarious conditions of labor that are getting enacted within the Instagram influencer economy. The challenge is to determine What can be done, and by whom, to support better and sustainable conditions for creators' career pathways as they professionalize and commercialize their passions, and to mitigate the politics of inclusion and exclusion so prominent in the Instagram influencer economy. Given the messy realities embedded in emerging markets like Nairobi, I broadly question, how do we bridge the three divides for creators in the Global South to socioeconomically contribute and compete fairly on global digital platforms like Instagram? The idea of "we" captures all the main actors identified in Chapter 1. I made attempts to answer this question in Chapter 3 where I considered and interrogated the intricate network formation and power dynamics of actors highlighted in Chapter 1, and the interplay between economic and sociocultural tensions.

CHAPTER 3: NAIROBI INSTAGRAM POWER PLAY: THE PATH TO DIGITAL COLONIALISM

Colonialism, a concept with strong roots in the African landscape, wields power in the 21st century in the way Kenyans view, interact with, and monetize social media. According to Bulhan (2015), “colonialism is often misunderstood or narrowly defined” (p. 240). Bulhan argued that “colonialism from the very beginning was therefore economic, political, cultural, and psychological” (p. 241). The economic and political facets of colonialism were widely recognized from the beginning, but the cultural and psychological facets developed and intensified throughout the years. As Bulhan stated, “the fallout of colonialism is multiple and pervasive; its development and expansion affected the thought, behavior, and generally the life of colonized peoples” (p. 241). The evolving permeation of colonialism in Kenya is notably present in the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy. The Nairobi Instagram influencer economy stands as a prime example of how power is unevenly distributed amongst actors in a network, concentrating power in the hands of one or a few actors while binding others to the will of the few. The Instagram economy reproduces existing power structures within both the global and Nairobian cultural landscapes and is a force that is both opportunistic and constraining for aspiring Kenyan influencers. In May 2022, one of Nairobi’s leading influencers and radio hosts, Anita Nderu, implored Kenyan influencers to unionize themselves to fight for their pay rights (see Figure 10; Buzzroom Kenya, 2022).

Figure 10

Anita Nderu Calls for Kenyan Influencers' Union

Note. Buzzroom Kenya reported on Kenyan influencer, Anita Nderu’s comments regarding Instagram influencer pay rates. Adapted from Buzzroom Kenya [@buzzroomkenya]. (2022, May 27). ‘Kenyan influencers settle for less or nothing, agree to be exploited so as to look busy’—Anita Nderu [Story]. Instagram. Retrieved January 19, 2023, from <https://www.instagram.com/p/CeDQt3bos9s/>

As Nderu stated, “Kenya needs a union that represents us and sets T’s and C’s [terms and conditions] that protect us, because it is WORK to produce all the content you see and it costs money and time to show up looking like we do” (Buzzroom Kenya, 2022, Image 2). Nderu called out large companies for exploiting the aspiring influencer through minimal compensation, such as giving out free household items (Buzzroom Kenya, 2022). Leading Kenyan blogger, James Wamathai (2020), tweeted a statement that illustrates the type of conversations creators and influencers are having about their Insta-careers (see Figure 11). The tweet was retweeted 144 times and liked by 306 Twitter users.

Figure 11

Tweet Discussing Poor Pay Rates for Kenyan Influencers



Note. James Wamathai publicly denounced Kenyan influencers' pay rates in a tweet on the Twitter platform. James Wamathai [@Wamathai]. (2020, July 22). *Kenyan influencers are not paid enough. If you can, charge as much as you can* [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/Wamathai/status/1285861716799238145>

Nderu's (Buzzroom Kenya, n.d.) remarks and the Wamathai's (2020) tweet corroborate grievances voiced by Nairobi influencers during my interviews with them regarding pay gaps, exploitation (see Appendices A and B), bribery, cartels, and blacklisting. The comments by respected Kenyan influencers illustrate how powerless aspiring influencers are, to an extent. They are willing to take any deal, no matter what the reward is, thereby worsening the existing poor payment conditions and causing a race to the bottom for the rest of the influencers. While Nderu's remarks suggest there is *power in numbers* when influencers come together to form a union to galvanize their rights, Wamathai advocated for influencers to charge brands as much as they can to yield value and navigate exploitation revealed in the influencer economy. Burgess (2021) argued that "platforms have the power to make or break the careers of creators" (p. 23). Drouillard (2017) contended that digital platforms also have the effect of redistributing "power and control" among actors (p. 105) while Poell et al. (2022) declared that power "produces

particular worker subjectivities and responsibilities, forms of inequality, regimes of visibility, types of logics, and modes of meaning making” (p. 187). Indeed, the two social media examples, together with the findings from my interviews, bring to light the power struggles among actors within the influencer economy in Nairobi.

As previously discussed, the Instagram platform promotes digital inclusion while, at the same time, is a prime example of digital colonialism and exploitation occurring through digital labor and personal data extraction for profit. As argued by digital colonial theorists, the goal of capitalist colonization is to include everyone in the digital commodification (Arora, 2019; Kwet, 2019). The Instagram platform focuses on data gathering; whereas the products sought by traditional colonialism were labor and natural resources, today’s digital colonialism seeks data. According to Couldry and Mejias (2019a), “human beings become not just actors in the production process but raw material that can be transformed into value for that production process” (p. xvii). Instagram needs data from/about its influencers and their followers. The platform cultivates data about its users (clicks, swipes, likes, comments, reposts, number of friends following), trending topics, and hashtags, and ride on users’ content virality so that it can sell targeted ads. The social media environment, especially through which influencers communicate, socialize, and monetize has an economic incentive to continually produce content. As Cunningham and Craig (2019) argued, platform features and affordances facilitate influencers’ activities for optimal commercialization of content and communication through data gathered for targeted online advertising. Zuboff (2019) argued that Google and Facebook make money through selling behavioral data to people or organizations that turn the data into a valuable commodity so users’ actions can be manipulated either through voting (Cambridge Analytica) or targeted advertising. In addition, DICs’ algorithmic advertising patterns are not

discriminating; advertisements of all kinds are used to seduce young people toward an extravagant lifestyle in every country, on every continent, regardless of the economic realities in which many young adults live (Arora, 2019). The concern is commodification of people's lives, not their personal improvement (Arora, 2019).

The process of digital inclusion foisted by DICs reintroduces various digital harms through commodifying the so called "poor" in the name of "inclusivity" (Arora, 2019, p. 70). This is especially problematic when social media platforms justify their growing expansion in the Global South under the banner of "connecting the unconnected" (Arora, 2019, p. 202). DICs camouflage their services as bringing new opportunities to the marginalized, yet benefit significantly from opening new markets, yoking people into their platforms, and tapping sources of data (Solon, 2017). Low-income communities in most developing nations have "weak institutions, few privacy and data protection laws, and vast semiliterate populations where there are few checks and balances" (Arora, 2019, p. 202) to govern the collection and computation of digital data. To accumulate profits, tech giants design digital technology to ensure their own dominance over critical functions in the tech ecosystem through exercising control over the flow of information, such as through news distribution and streaming services; social activities like social networking and cultural exchange; as well as other political, social, economic, and military functions mediated by their technologies (Kwet, 2019). In the case of Instagram in Kenya, there is the added element of foreign control (political, economic, cultural) and a limited capacity to resist due to extreme poverty, a relatively young ICT policy framework, and power disparities.

As an example of the aspirational economy (Arora, 2019), DICs prey upon individuals' desires to belong socially, commercially, and even environmentally by presenting products and lifestyles that are highly attractive to young Kenyans, convincing these young consumers that

adopting the lifestyle offered by influencers they idolize will irrevocably change their own lives. For example,

Throughout the Global South, visibility is intrinsically tied to intimacy and romance. Sites like Facebook enjoy special status as romance sites for low-income communities, encouraging more publicness among the young as they go about self-manicuring their image and their activities to attract true love. ... Romance appears to be the big trade-off for relinquishing privacy. (Arora, 2019, p. 181)

The type of deceit exemplified by this quote feeds the aspirational economy as DICs attempt to lure the poor with choices beyond their means with a promised of unlimited returns for their sacrifice such as freedom, inclusivity, and democracy, as discussed in Chapter 2.

In this chapter, I explore the uneven distribution of power in the Instagram influencer economy network, recognizing Mwangi's (2022) failure to identify the historical and systemic implications of Nairobi's colonialist genealogy. I identify how platformization restructures and redistributes power differently in Global South markets. Koskinen et al.'s (2019) suggested that due to general societal characteristics, such as weaker infrastructure, weaker institutions, information availability, and quality, the impact of digital platforms is necessarily dissimilar in the Global North and Global South. Therefore, I argue Nairobi's Instagram power play is, to a large extent, a consequence of digital colonialism in the context of Kenya's history. Specifically, my fieldwork showed focus on ownership power, that is, the power embedded within Instagram's algorithms and metrics, brand power; individual influencers' power; and the power play between elite and aspirational influencers. Due to the magnitude of the government's role in the economy, I will examine government power in Chapter 5. Here, I analyze actors, emerging tensions, contradictions, and the power imbalances of the Instagram culture in Nairobi. I

specifically focus on economic power; that is, I trace the network of who owns, controls, and benefits from Instagram in Kenya. I address the question: “How do systems of power reproduce, influence, and shape the Kenyan influencer Instagram economy and its beneficiaries?”

This chapter has four sections. First, I present various theoretical frameworks of power (Foucault, 1998; Castells, 2009, 2011; & Latour, 1988), drawing on ANT (Latour, 1988) as a backdrop. Second, I define power in the context of digital colonialism in Kenya (Kwet, 2019). Third, I expand on the concept of power by leveraging Castells’ (2011) four distinct forms of power to conceptualize and analyze how power gets exercised through the empirical exploration of the actors in the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy. In the fourth section, I argue that the Instagram network in Nairobi replicates a social and economic power structure that is all too familiar to Nairobi citizens. While power resides in all levels of the network, it is concentrated at the top. Meta continually pushes power down, while also demanding an extreme loyalty from the other actors that continues to feed its own colonizing power. In essence, Kenyans are trading one form of colonialism for another under the guise of being technologically advanced and upwardly mobile in the influencer landscape.

Theories of Power

Foucault (1998) understood power as “the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they constitute their own organization” (p. 92). For Foucault, power is a force of relations, which we might not be able to observe directly, but can feel its effects. Foucault argued, “Power is everywhere and comes from everywhere, so in this sense, it is neither an agency nor a structure” (p. 63). In this sense, power is a force of relations that operates independently of each individual. Foucault explicitly claimed:

By power, I do not mean ‘power’ as a group of institutions and mechanisms that ensure the subservience of the citizens of a given state. By power, I do not mean, either a mode of subjugation which, in contrast to violence, has the form of the rule. Finally, I do not have in mind a general system of domination exerted by one group over another (p. 92).

The exercise of power, according to Foucault, “is not by one person or group against another, nor [does Foucault refer] to physical domination” (Boudreault, 2012, para. 2). This is in opposition to how Castells’ (2009, 2011) defined power as individual agency. Foucault’s perspective aligns with ANT (Latour, 1988), which does not privilege human actors against nonhuman actors. In ANT terms, power is at the center of the actor network. Power is the ‘potent,’ the ability to create a desired result (Latour, 1988). According to ANT, power, domination, and structure are processes resulting from actor-network relationships (Law 1992), making it possible to understand (power) relationships between the multiple actors (Latour, 1988) as established in Chapter 1. While Castells (2009) argued against Foucault’s perspective, Castells (2009) considered Latour’s conceptualization of power within ANT—that is, that power is at the center of any network—an ingenious idea. For Castells (2009), power is a product of the actors’ relationships within the network. Castells (2009) wrote,

Thus, I suggest that in many instances *the power holders are networks themselves*. Not abstract, unconscious networks, not automata: they are humans organized around their projects and interests. But they are not single actors (individuals, groups, classes, religious leaders, political leaders), since the exercise of power in the network society requires a complex set of joint action that goes beyond alliances to become a new form of subject, akin to what Bruno Latour (2005) has brilliantly theorized as the “actor-network” (p. 45)

Although ANT does not give clear guidelines about how to study power, it is very much about power relationships between the actors in the network, as Castells (2009) argued. For instance, Latour (1988) asserted actors' power increase the more associations with actors they have. Regardless, every actor has some form of power, which can be leveraged to enlist other actors and grow the network. Enlistment, enrollment, and interresment (Callon, 1984) are all acts of power that help to construct a network. If actors do not reach an agreement, there are power struggles and resistance, and the network fails to form. For example, the threats to platformization discussed in Chapter 1 are power struggles that destabilize the formation of the Nairobi Instagram economy network. This destabilization was clearly seen in Callon's (1984) illustration of different human and non-human actors and their interests in the domestication of the scallops and fishermen of St. Brieuc Bay I presented in Chapter 1. Although Callon did not directly allude to power struggles, the four aspects of the translation process have power dynamics; power is generated in the relationships between actors leading to the phenomenon of translation (Latour, 1988).

Foucault's (1998) "immanent" (p. 92) feature of power influenced Latour's (1988) own understanding of power. Latour argued that "power is never possessed. We either have it 'in potentia,' but then we do not have it; or we have it 'in actu,' but then our allies are the ones that go into action" (pp.174–175). Similarly, the idea of multiplicity (Foucault, 1998), can be found in the ANT concept, multiple realities (Law & Singleton, 2005; Mol, 2002). Following Foucault's argument that power is omnipresent at every level of the social body, Latour (1988) stated that "nothing escapes from a network, least of all know-how, but who doubts that a network which pays the price can extend itself?" (p. 226). Both Foucault (1998) and Latour (1988) theorized power as immanent, multiple, and ubiquitous.

As much as Castells (2009) agreed with Latour's idea of the network as power, his views on the characteristics of power were somewhat different from Foucault's and Latour's. Power, according to Castells (2009), "is the relational capacity that enables a social actor to influence asymmetrically the decisions of other social actors in ways that favor the empowered actor's will, interests, and values" (p. 10). Although Castells' (2009) definition is underpinned by dominance, aggression, and manipulation, it resides in the context of what Castells (2009) called a network society. A network society is any society where the main social structures are organized and processed as information through networks. Unlike Foucault (1998), who postulated that power does not manifest in a top-down kind of structure, Castells (2011) argued that power is exercised by means of coercion, and power relationships are framed by domination. Castells (2011) explained that power in itself is the most fundamental process in society because society is created around values and institutions that are defined by power relationships. Castells stated (2011), "All networks of power exercise their power by influencing the human mind predominantly (but not solely) through multimedia networks of mass communication. Thus, communication networks are the fundamental networks of power making in society" (p. 774). Castells (2009), Foucault (1978), and Latour (1999), as well as Callon (1984), agree that within power structures, resistance is a way to sustain or transform power. As Foucault (1978) maintained, "Power is tolerable only on condition that it mask a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms" (p. 86). Likewise, Castells (2009) contended, "When resistance and rejection become significantly stronger than compliance and acceptance, power relationships are transformed" (p. 11). Callon described the struggle between actors as a form of resistance occurring in the interrelationship process, as actors negotiate

to accept the focal actor's definition, a concept that Latour (1999) supported through the translation of interests.

A key distinguishing factor between Foucault, (1998), Latour (1988), and Castells (2009, 2011) in the theorization of power is Castells' (2011) four forms of power—networking power, network power, networked power, and network-making power that classify power into categories within network structures. However, Castells' (2009, 2011) theorization fails to explain if categories of power can be held independently, at the same level as others, and complementary to others, or are always hierarchical in nature. As the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy illustrates, every actor (human or non-human) has the means to be *potent* (Latour, 1988; Law, 1992). Power itself is not limited to economic prowess or social standing; it is only in the manifestation of an actor's power that its degree of potency is made known. It is possible, then, that a sociotechnical system, such as Instagram might embody more than one of Castells' (2011) forms of power, which spurs the ANT concepts of multiple realities (Mol, 2002) and messy and complex situations (Law & Singleton, 2005). Actors must be viewed as having different intentions, strategic opportunities, threats, and risks. However, since Instagram morphs and transforms on a daily basis, studying it as an actor-network is challenging. An ANT analysis then, is a snapshot in time of a continually evolving technological landscape.

Given the growth of the network society, including the centrality of platforms for content distribution (Allen, 2013; Barassi & Trere, 2012; Beer & Burrows, 2007; Fuchs, 2014), networked power relations have only deepened since Castells' (2009, 2011) remarks. Burgess (2021) observed that platforms “have a lot of power within the information sector and creative content industries” but also “their *logics*—their ways of operating and their systems of value—are more deeply reshaping our society and culture” (p. 22). Platforms create what Andrejevic

(2007) called *digital enclosure*, which traces “the relationship between a material, spatial process, ... the construction of networked, interactive environments,” ... [and the] “private expropriation of information” as critiqued by Schiller (2007, p. 297). Within the digital enclosure, all traffic and interactions are monitored and invested as interactive “enclosures” which turn out to be “fantastically productive” (p. 298), and which generate and store a great amount of personal information that can be later used by corporations. At the time of Andrejevic’s writing, platforms had not yet come into existence per se, but digital enclosures encapsulate what platforms have come to be as social media has burgeoned across the digital landscape. In addition, Burgess contended,

[Through] *datafication*—the extraction and collection of digital traces of cultural practices and social interactions so that they can be sorted, aggregated, analyzed, and deployed for strategic purposes ... these data are exploited and shared, not only internally by single platforms like Facebook and YouTube, but also across a far more extensive ecosystem of social media companies, advertisers, and third-party intermediaries. (p. 23)

The proliferation of platforms has given rise to a new form of distributed power. Studies about the political economy of digital platforms (Bechmann, 2013; Gillespie, 2017; Haucap & Heimeshoff, 2014; Srnicek, 2018) highlight the uneven playing field in which platforms already operate. For example, Facebook’s far-reaching lack of corporate transparency and accountability, as argued by Neiborg and Helmond (2019), means that no one outside of the Meta conglomerate understands the company’s inside operations. This invisible moment of translation (Callon, 1986) cannot be contested because corporate ownership and control of the flow of data are obscured from third-party checks and balances (Cohen, 2021; Kwet, 2019; Popiel, 2021; Stilinovic & Hutchinson, 2022) by the very structure of Meta’s operations. As Poell et al. (2022)

claimed, “In many cases and contexts, platforms seem to reproduce and even intensify existing inequalities. It is worth asking why one would expect U.S.-based commercial platforms to deviate from the script” (p. 160). Most worryingly, as a global society, we are becoming platform dependent, meaning we are empowering and permitting the platforms owned and managed by the digital international companies (DICs) to become the operating system of lives, as echoed by Vaidyanathan (2018). For influencers, platform dependence is aggravated with the idea of prosumption (Beer & Burrows, 2010; Ritzer, 2010) and the commodification of self-afforded by influencers in the Instagram economy.

Ownership power is core to digital colonialism. In my study, power starts with the U.S.-based transnational corporation, Meta, who owns the platform and controls its power by virtue of ownership. Meta is privatized; it is designed for profit and not the public. Ownership power is difficult to contain because of the open nature of the internet, network effects, and economies of scale, which include the physical infrastructure to host data, administer, and develop platforms, and hire expensive talent (Kwet, 2019). The entrenched power that Meta holds is the pathway to digital colonialism in the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy.

Power in the Context of Digital Colonialism

Digital colonialism is a structural form of domination exercised through the centralized ownership and control of the three core pillars of the digital ecosystem: software, hardware, and network connectivity (Kwet, 2019). It bears a resemblance to what Couldry and Mejias (2019) referred to as data colonization. Digital colonialism theorists (Couldry & Mejias, 2019a; Kwet, 2019; Thatcher et al., 2016) established the disturbing nature, historical continuity, and asymmetrical implications of the role of data exploitation for economic pursuits in the Global South, distinguishing the way the digital ecosystem in the Global South differs from the Global

North. Mwangi (2022) contested the concept of digital colonialism arguing that, “it obscures the agency of the ‘colonized’ populations and further marginalizes them” (p. 74). Hence, according to Mwangi, the current framing of the effects of digital colonialism “denies us the opportunity to examine the functions that digital platforms serve in different contexts, and to critically assess the distribution of power within the specific set of relations concerned” (p. 74). Rather than labelling digital platforms and the companies that own them (i.e., DICs) as propagators of digital colonialism as Kwet (2019) suggested, Mwangi argued that we should analyze the distribution of power between the platforms and the content creators with the idea of revealing possible law amendments to increase economic opportunities for both entities. The weakness of Mwangi’s position, however, is that it downplays how Instagram concentrates its wealth within the influencer economy model, which further entrenches Instagram’s power by creating content creators’ reliance on the platform for revenue generation. Additionally, Mwangi’s assertions ignore the role of power interrelations between all actors in the Instagram influencer economy (Castells, 2009, 2011; Foucault, 1998; Latour, 1988).

Cunningham and Craig (2019) suggested that a platform like Instagram introduces features that facilitate influencers’ activities while also circumventing potential regulatory concerns. This might explain the heightened obscurity of the economic incentive that encompasses the influencer model, as discussed throughout my study. My findings revealed that influencers in Nairobi confront inconsistencies related to ethics and social justice, such as pay gaps, exploitation, and blacklisting, while simultaneously are faced with highly misunderstood tax implications (i.e., the DST). Hart (2013) recognized reasons to be concerned about platforms and the enormous power they hold, including tax avoidance, privacy, anticompetitive behavior, and national security. Along with the prerogative for regenerative policies to govern digital

platforms operations, governments also face the “threat of losing investments in their countries” (Fuchs, 2014, p. 104); as a result, government entities must implement company-friendly policy measures that favor tax incomes, employment, and publicly-funded internet infrastructure expansion projects, as I will further explain in Chapter 5. Castells (2011) affirmed that the internet precedes state power, which inevitably conditions the rules of profit-making, thus superseding money as the supreme value; DICs are then empowered to operate the switch in their favor. Further, the rapid and sweeping development of the internet has left most governments struggling to catch up to the technology. Inextricably, this dilemma aggravates the “big data divide” (Andrejevic, 2014, p. 1675), a power imbalance between those who collect large amounts of data and those whose data are being collected.

The current state of power struggles between actors involved in the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy, as revealed in my findings, is aligned with Castells’ (2011) four types of power. Although there are other conceptualizations of power that could frame my findings, such as Foucault’s (1978) model of power operating together through microlevels, and Latour’s (1988, 1998) idea that power is at the center of the network, I chose Castells’ (2011) relatively distinct understanding of power because it addresses the how power spreads itself throughout the network, letting the messiness of the empirical realities in my study emerge and unfold. Castells’ (2011) forms of power—networking power, network power, networked power, and network-making power—illustrated with examples from the Kenyan Instagram influencer economy, provide a framework to guide the discussion on how power unfolds within the Kenyan Instagram economy, allowing for a representation of the rise of digital colonialism. The history of colonialism in the Kenyan culture, with its unequal distribution of power, remains a pivotal force within Kenya today. Digital colonialism is a natural consequence of a system in which

domination through knowledge, infrastructure, and control “keep the [Global] South in a situation of permanent dependency” (Kwet, 2021, “What is Digital Colonialism?”, para. 6).

Four Forms of Power

For Foucault (1988), power operates at the microlevels of social relations, and does not privilege human or nonhuman actors (Latour, 1998). In contrast, Castells’ (2009, 2011) four forms of power demonstrate how power is at work within networks and is driven by decisions made at various intersections of the network (see Table 4). In the translation process of the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy, actors embody ownership power, platform power, brand power, and influencer power to serve their own interests.

Table 4

Castell’s Forms of Power Aligned With the Instagram Influencer Economy Divides

Castell’s Form of Power	Description	Instagram Influencer Economy Power Structure
Networking Power	The power of the actors and organizations included in the networks that constitute the core of the global network society over human collectives and individuals who are not included in these global networks.	Ownership Power
Network Power	The power resulting from the standards required to coordinate social interaction in the networks. In this case, power is exercised not by exclusion from the networks but by the imposition of the rules of inclusion.	Instagram Platform Power
Network-Making Power	The power to program specific networks according to the interests and values of the programmers, and the power to switch different networks following the strategic alliances between the dominant actors of various networks.	Brand Power
Networked Power	The power of social actors over other social actors in the network. The forms and processes of networked power are specific to each network.	Individual & Elite Influencer Power

Note. Adapted from “A Network Theory of Power,” by M. Castells, 2011, *International Journal of Communication*, 5(2011), p. 773 (<http://ijoc.org>). Copyright 2011 by USC Annenberg Press.

Ownership Power

In the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy, Castell's (2011) *networking power* can be understood as ownership power. Castells (2011) defined networking power as "the power of the actors and organizations included in the networks that constitute the core of the global network society over human collectives and individuals who are not included in these global networks" (p. 773). Ownership power is the basis of digital colonialism. Ownership power is the foundation that paves the way for the other forms of powers to manifest themselves.

Meta, the overarching conglomerate in which Instagram as a platform resides, holds ownership power in the Instagram actor-network. According to Kwet (2019), Meta, is part of the handful of technology companies, namely Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple, and Microsoft (GAFAM), that dominate the world, not only for data mining and extraction but also by controlling digital infrastructures. Kwet (2019) argued,

When only a select few companies have access to the largest sets of valuable data, they have a supreme advantage over competitors, ultimately controlling that market and deciding who gets access, both presently and in the future, while making the most profit (p. 69).

The control over the processes of data collection gives special power to whoever owns the hardware and software that collects and analyzes the data (Couldry & Mejias, 2019a). This power is "in the hands of a small number of conglomerates and their surrogates and partners," which allows for "consumer choice, but within a range of predefined products and presupposing consumption, rather than through coproduction" (Castells, 2009, p 781). Ownership power grants tech giants like Meta the right to disperse the other forms of power (i.e., networking, networked, network-making) throughout the digital landscape. Similar to the actions of other digital media

platforms, like Google, Apple, and ByteDance, Meta dictates what social media platforms can be introduced, and how each platform behaves within the broader social media economy. Because of this supreme power and control, Meta's cultural footprint becomes imprinted within each platform, and guides the rules of play, regardless of whether the platform is Facebook, WhatsApp, or Instagram. Meta exercises centralized ownership and control of the software, hardware, and network connectivity that make the Instagram platform possible. Thus, Meta is the representation of digital colonialism for the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy. Mwangi (2022) cautioned that an accurate analysis of any Meta platform requires an examination of how power is distributed by Meta. While Meta holds the ultimate power, it distributes power to Instagram as a platform which, in turn, returns power to Meta as it behaves within the colonialist rules established by Meta.

Like Castells (2009, 2011), I submit ownership of the platform is the most important power, because Meta determines what this thing called Instagram is and how people behave inside of it, who makes money off it all of those things are based upon, how the system is designed, which is based upon a model which allows private ownership. The distribution and reuptake of power in the digital colonialist space of the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy is a vicious cycle of lower forms of power receiving power from Meta, while returning that power through practices that maintain and advance Meta as the premier tech giant for social media. For example, influencers in my study discussed their perceptions of success through brand deals, monetary and product payments (see Appendices A and B), and global notoriety, while at the same time demonstrated how little power they actually possess to determine their actual success. Becky, a former hair influencer, talked about her continuous struggle to fit into the influencer industry, citing the incessant pressure to post new content in order to access Instagram's

algorithmic models that reward activity. Becky finally left the influencer space because the time and labor involved to create and monitor her content did not match the compensation she received from her efforts.

The extension of Instagram's reach into Nairobi and other African countries echoes the rise of the informational network that Castells (2009) called the "new economy" (p. 161), whose motive is to achieve profitability through extending reach, integrating markets, and maximizing advantages. The relentless search for profit as a real force that fuels capitalism (Castells, 2009) is clearly visible upon examining the platform's planetary ambitions, agendas, and strategies, while concurrently introducing new forms of capitalist command and exploitation (Hardt & Negri, 2006). The kinds of technical and social relations advanced by the empire would gradually create the conditions for the empire's demise (Hardt & Negri, 2000). The globalization of Instagram business model entrenches its capitalistic endeavors whilst introducing new conditions for the actors in the Nairobi Instagram influencer network to abide by or miss out on the global platforms. Instagram has become part of a convergent, integrated, multiplatform ecology that is designed for optimal commercialization of content and communication (Cunningham & Craig, 2019). In Castells' (2009) conceptualization, Instagram can be seen as a global multimedia business network that is "among the global media giants and other media organizations. The digitization of information and the expansion of networks of mass self-communication have facilitated a preoccupation with how to monetize these networks in terms of advertising" (p. 80).

The Instagram influencer economy is grounded on "platform capitalism" (Srnicek, 2018, p. 3), whereby users' activities become the material for DICs to grow their user bases and expand into new markets. Instagram as a platform is "an economic actor within a capitalist mode of production" (Srnicek, 2018, p. 3). Data are the new form of capitalist accumulations used as a

business model by tech giants to maximize profits (Couldry & Mejias, 2019a; Kwet, 2019; Srnicek, 2018; Thatcher et al., 2016); data are used by Meta to exert its power into the Instagram platform, which in turns pushes power to brands through data-driven analytics. Brands then extend power to individual content creators and influencers by enticing them to promote the brands in exchange for reward, which is sometimes simply more *likes* and *follows*. Yet even this simplistic use of data returns to Meta in the form of greater power by which to exploit each lower level of the pyramid.

Mwende, an influencer in my study, was hired by Coca-Cola for the Coke Studio Project to craft and post recipes that can be paired with Coke. The Coke Studio Project was an awareness campaign; therefore, Mwende's performance was measured solely in terms of views, comments, and likes. Inasmuch as Coca-Cola achieves exposure for their campaign, and Mwende receives a commission from Coca-Cola for her part in the project, Meta alone holds the analytical data, and it is unclear how that data are processed beyond the three other actors—Mwende, Mwende's followers, and Coca-Cola as the brand. Ultimately, Meta's ownership power to manipulate content exposure obscures the ability of the influencer and the brand to hold agency for their work, and affects the outcomes by which Mwende and Coca Cola derive their success.

The Instagram economy underlines Fuchs' (2014) new spirit of capitalism, where capital is generated through the sale of individual lifestyles to accumulate profits for the DICs. People produce enormous volumes of data every day, which stay around indefinitely. Indeed, social media platforms operate targeted advertising as their capital accumulation model. Fuchs (2014) explained:

In this model, all online activities on a specific platform and on connected platforms are stored, assessed, and commodified. So, users not only produce the just mentioned use-

values, but also a data commodity that stores data about these use-values and is sold to advertising clients, who in return get access to the users' profiles, where they present advertisements tailored to user interests. Users are productive consumers who produce commodities and profit—their user labor is exploited. (p. 112)

On a global scale, influencers have shifted from being users of the platform to *workers* who commodify their data in the form of likes, comments, shares, and reposts for monetary value. The penetration of Instagram in Nairobi allows the platform to collect, retain, and use increasing amounts of personal data for its own commercial gain. Influencers like Karanja must post several posts every day, promotional and otherwise, because digital work is considered *work all the time* (Abidin, 2016b; Abidin & Thompson, 2012; Duffy, 2015; Fuchs, 2014; Wissinger, 2015). Indeed, time is an important dimension of the capitalist economy because “all hours spent online by users of Facebook, Google, and comparable corporate social media constitute work time, in which data commodities are generated, and potential time for profit realized” (Fuchs, 2014, p. 116).

According to Fuchs (2009) “the power relationship between the corporate media and the creative users that Castells described is an asymmetrical one that privileges the first” (p. 102). Nieborg and Poell (2018) found an existing power asymmetry between a platform, its users, and its partners. Nieborg and Helmond (2019) examined how power is enacted and negotiated among platform stakeholders in the process of platformization. According to Nieborg and Helmond, the process of platformization has deep-seated political, economic, and infrastructural implications. The first implication is that the application programming interfaces (APIs) interoperability by the DICs at an internal level with competing platforms and third-party web services and apps. Interoperability is the ability of software to programmatically communicate

and exchange data (Tiwana, 2013). The second implication is the third-party developers' acceptance of interoperability and commodification of end users' connectivity and personal data, which automatically leaves the users with what Andrejevic (2014) called a "sense of powerlessness" (p. 1675), while entrenching the DIC's power even further. Cunningham and Craig (2019) agreed with Nieborg and Helmond that the rise of third-party data and technology firms has been fueled by the explosive growth of social media platforms because they are reliant on access to platforms' data and their APIs. Unfortunately, Instagram, unlike Facebook and Snapchat, offers influencers' information to third-party data firms, as Cunningham and Craig (2019) verified. Akin to Couldry and Mejias (2019a), I observed that as influencers gain new subscribers, the platforms and third-party data firms gain more power through data cultivation and acquisition, improving their ability to track consumers' behavior and predict it.

Instagram Platform Power

Network power is defined as "the power resulting from the standards required to coordinate social interaction in the networks. In this case, power is exercised not by exclusion from the networks but by the imposition of the rules of inclusion" (Castells, 2011, p. 773), emphasizing again Meta's domineering role in how Instagram operates within the pyramid of power. Castells (2009) claimed that "whoever has enough money, including political leaders, will have a better chance of operating the switch in its favor" (p. 52). As Andrejevic (2007) argued, much depends on who owns and controls the networks and who sets the rules or terms of entry. Instagram, exercising by proxy Meta's ownership power, "operates the switch" (Castells, 2009, p. 52) by setting these rules of entry through algorithms and metrics, thus giving the Nairobi Instagram platform a type of network power as it imposes its rules for inclusion and exclusion. According to (Castells, 2009), network switchers, such as Instagram are the holders of

power in the network society because they connect and ensure the cooperation of different networks by sharing common goals and combining resources, while fending off competition from other networks by setting up strategic cooperation. Although platforms like Instagram do not produce or commission any content, “they make important choices about that content: what they will distribute and to whom, how they will connect users and broker their interactions, and what they will refuse” (Gillespie, 2017, p. 1) because they own the resources and finances to host and organize use content for public circulation.

Instagram platform power, which is shaped by Instagram’s algorithms, is the first structural power granted by Meta, and is, perhaps, the most dangerous of the powers. Instagram platform power co-evolves from increasingly greater interactions between ordinary Instagram users/followers, influencers, influencer agencies, and brands. Platforms are designed and orchestrated not only to invite but also shape participation toward particular ends (Gillespie, 2010). Through algorithmic mechanisms, platforms incessantly tweak their designs, capturing troves of data about how users respond to these changes (Gillespie, 2017). As alluded to by most of the Nairobi influencers I interviewed, the algorithms, as non-human actors in the network hold the power to determine which posts circulate prominently. While Law (1992) argued that “almost all of our interactions with other people are mediated through objects of one kind or another” (p. 381), Bucher (2018) stated that life is not only infused with media, but prominently takes place in an algorithmic environment. Thus, the cost of not posting consistently is dire as the algorithms drown the influencer’s presence. Abidin (2016a) stated that Instagram’s power of the algorithm is deployed through endless modification of the platform algorithm which, in my observation, works to the advantage of the obfuscated economic incentive.

Karanja, a 37-year-old male car enthusiast and influencer argued that a successful influencer must post consistently, or at the bare minimum, three to four Insta stories per day to stay attuned to the constantly changing, challenging, and conditional algorithmic logics set by Instagram. During an interview with me, Karanja repeatedly warned,

You do not want to get erased by the algorithm so you must keep appeasing the gods of Instagram with rituals of posting authentic, trendy, hot, and high-ranking topics with hashtags that actively engage your followers. I think of it like some form of sacrifice as it comes at a huge price and severe punishment for the days I slack.

The days Karanja did not post any content to his profile he received no visits, no new followers, and his performance deteriorated, according to the page analytics that track his performance. In addition, Karanja surmised, “In order to have an ever-growing account, it is important for me to not only post content on peak times but also know my audience, their sociodemographic knowledge, such as gender, age, location, and monitor impressions and engagements.”

Sheila, a 25-year-old hair and make-up influencer complained that despite posting well-curated, trendy content daily, whether reels, stories or regular posts, her reach has somewhat stagnated for the last few years, putting her at a disadvantage with her brand partnerships. Sheila explained,

I currently have 859,000 followers; I barely get 1,000 likes for any of my posts despite spending hours and sometimes days working on content. My followers complain that they barely see my posts unless they use the search button to find me. Four years ago, I used to get as many as 10,000 likes, even with just a mere photo of myself. The algorithm change gives Instagram all the power to show us whatever they think we aspire to see but

not what we want to see. Navigating the algorithm debacle has hit most influencers like a ton of bricks.

Sheila's sentiments represent the intensifying public outcry with the algorithmic struggles petitioned on *change.org* in 2016 as influencers across the globe resisted the shift from Instagram's reverse chronological presentation of posts to posts based on users' history and popularity. Although Instagram regarded this move "meaningful" with the idea of providing a better user experience, researchers such as O'Meara (2019) and Frier (2020) showed that the reorganization thwarted the productivity of influencers whose livelihoods depend on visibility given their reliance on numbers that inform value for brand partnerships. The reconfiguration does not help those brands measure the success of their influencer campaigns based on number of likes, comments, and reposts, an effect that would arguably depress emerging influencers, who mostly lack the understanding of how algorithms work. Yet, Instagram did not explain this "problematic and unsustainable" new algorithmic change (Frier, 2020, p. 196). The fact that influencers are expected to adjust their operations at a whim (Poell et al., 2022, p. 185) to keep up with the ever-evolving algorithmic changes (Bishop, 2018; Cotter, 2019; Klawitter & Hargittai, 2018; O'Meara, 2019) means they are constantly vulnerable with less bargaining power and high uncertainty to sustain their influencing endeavors.

Despite the majority of Nairobi influencers regarding Instagram as a tool for freedom of expression, inclusivity, and democracy, as explained in Chapter 2, in subsequent conversations interviewees such as Karanja and Sheila contradicted this view, lamenting that the algorithms were impeding their growth. Researchers (i.e., Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung European Union, 2021; Raychoudhury, 2021; Stoica et al., 2018) demonstrated that algorithms used by social media platforms to rate, manage, and moderate posts expose societal biases, especially for marginalized

groups. In addition, social media platforms have been accused of racism, sexism, and homophobia (Poell et al., 2022). In his interview, a top travel influencer who is also a lawyer in Nairobi questioned why the Instagram feed does not automatically recommend content from African content creators by ranking them highly as it does with those from the West. The influencer argued that the analytics he gets as a creator are very limited and he does not comprehend the logic behind the rules of inclusion or exclusion. For example, the influencer can find no explanation for why his audience drops off or his growth stagnates by looking at his analytic reports. These examples of blurring or locking out activities of some African creators behind the scenes indicate Instagram's capitalistic tendencies and platform power that dictates who gets access to what information (Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung European Union, 2021; Raychoudhury, 2021; Stoica et al., 2018). The algorithmic process aggravates the digital inequalities of already marginalized users and shows the coloniality of the algorithms.

According to Duffy (2017), the social media economy is framed as meritocracy, encouraging often indistinguishable aspirational labor to rise through the hierarchical ranks of influencing concealed as "making it" (p. 96). Instagram logic is set on this premise where technological affordances and metrics (likes, comments, shares, saves, and reposts) on the platform imply value is being generated in real time, all the time, anytime, and every time. In the economies of interactive media such as Instagram, "metrics are the *de rigueur* currency: the number of comments/likes/retweets a post receives is used to benchmark blogger achievement and status" (Duffy, 2017, p. 78). Influencers who have mastered the aesthetic representation of the self (Lorenz, 2019), are regarded as a business because being a business increases their value on the platform as they inherently gain more economic benefit from brand deals and sponsored ads (Slutsky, 2020).

As demand for quantification within the digital cultural industries soars, Beer (2016) coined the term *metrics power*, asserting that “metrics are a form of data through which value can be measured, captured, or even generated. Metrics are the means by which data can be used to ascertain value” (pp. 9–10). Poell et al. (2022) defined “*metric logic* as the proliferation of platform-based measures in all aspects of cultural production and distribution” (pp. 143–144). Indeed, through my interviews, I observed that the higher the rank, the higher the commercial value of the influencer’s yields in influencing services. Therefore, metrics power is another way the power of platform is yielded through the infamous coveted bluetick. The coveted bluetick is a mark that shows the account is authentically proven by Instagram. Out of the 35 influencers, 14 (40%) had a verified or authenticated account with a recognizable blue check on the right-hand side of their names. Nairobi influencers argued the bluetick is an approval of their influence and a sign of popularity. Agnes told me that more brands have given her work with bigger budgets since she got verified. Specifically, Agnes gains more power as she moves up the influencer ranks, a distinctive feature of power that both Latour (1988) and Castells (2011) established.

My observations show that authenticated influencers have the power and autonomy to pick and choose which brand deals will give them the highest profit. Somewhat, as Domingues Aguiar and van Reijmersdal (2018) and Pedroni (2016) alluded, individuals with the blueticks are not only assumed to be professionals but also celebrities with a wide reach; thus, they are verified to monetize their Instagram accounts. Abel, a struggling starter influencer understands that his position as a less well-known Instagram influencer with fewer followers could be the reason his performance is low when it comes to attracting brand deals. Those who thrive, like Agnes, are elevated to social star status, making their activities appear authentic.

The number of followers an influencer has is not always the best indicator of their success (Solis & Webber, 2012). Instead, the true measure of an influencer's success, according to Solis and Weber (2012), is the extent to which they can convert their social capital into measurable actions and outcomes from brand partnerships. Gaining social capital is manifested through "performativity" that allows creators to climb up the hierarchies of influencers who are authenticated by metrics like bluetick, brand deals, and visibility (Frier, 2020). Influencers who perform to catch public attention and incite consumerism for the brands they work for bolster connections with followers and agencies. Sometimes this involves proactively creating and posting content for brands and tagging them without being signed up as a promoter. This is particularly a reality for the emerging influencers in my study who, by creating brand affability and familiarity, deployed all kinds of *free* brand content to cajole and seduce brands to sign them up with the possibility of a *happy ending*. The happy ending means that these brands would see the influencer's *productive* work, sign them up, and compensate them for future brand deals on Instagram, while the brand deals would simultaneously keep the emerging influencers' users engaged.

In contrast, while the Instagram metrics model is giving influencers some of kind power to access information about their performance to improve their earnings, it does not instill influencers with power and autonomy to gain more brand deals. Instead, the metrics seem to be working against influencers and in favor of Instagram platform logic as a control surveillance tool. The monitoring of influencers in the Insta-world strikes semblance to the Foucauldian idea of the panopticon as an artifice of power that works as a "tool of discipline" (Solove, 2004, p. 30). In some ways, the Instagram metrics model works as a tool of discipline. Without question, Instagram's obsession with measurement and trend analysis (Frier, 2020), algorithmic

infrastructure, and business economic model asserts a deeper level of control as it significantly determines influencers' success or failure. Platforms get to decide the rules of engagement (Cotter, 2019) by privileging some forms of participation on platforms more than others (Bucher, 2017), because as owners, the platform holds the ultimate power (Burgess & Green, 2008; Castells, 2009, 2011; Hearn, 2010; Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2015; Van Dijck, 2013) to dictate the “the institutional conditions of influencers' labor within platforms” (Cotter, 2019, p. 901).

This is because, according to Poell et al. (2022), the *metric logic* is not only used by platforms but also a larger part of the ecology that includes advertisers, marketers, influencer/talent agencies, and data intermediaries, hence asserting a level of pressure on influencers to augment their visibility in order to succeed. Instagram derives its success from the idea that the “more people who [are] successful on Instagram, especially by building brands that [make] the human experience more visually interesting, the more successful and important Instagram [will become]” (Frier, 2020, p. 245). To achieve profit maximization, the platform is on a rigorous endeavor to “increase the frequency of advertising, notifications, and more personalized recommendations [about] whom to follow” (Frier, 2020, p. 277). These strategies were forged by Zuckerberg, Meta's CEO, to fight TikTok and Snapchat as Instagram's threat, a move that has continued to fail, according to a recent article by the Wall Street Journal¹⁵, indicating power struggles and competition between platforms themselves.

Platforms like Instagram exert their mechanism of power through the phases of the creation, distribution, monetization, and marketing of culture, but they also furnish space for negotiation and contestation (Nieborg et al., 2021) as seen with performance-based tactics like

¹⁵ Instagram Stumbles in Push to Mimic TikTok, Internal Documents Show Reels faces formidable competition from the leading short-video platform; creators follow the views (Rodriguez, Bobrowsky & Horwitz, 2022)

algorithms and metrics. Clearly, this model cultivates asymmetrical power relations while creating new modes of exploitation and control. For example, a study of content creators in Chile (Arturo & Ibáñez, 2020) showed that “when platforms tend to make changes to improve their commercial viability, content creators have to adapt their brand subjectivities and practices across platforms and affordances” (p. 2). Consequently, the routines and economic pressures that digital workers endure in the social media economy today are susceptible to the power of infrastructures and economic forces.

My overall observation among Nairobi creators is that the balance between implicit communicative dimensions with the economics of authentic performance are desperate moments of content production, which puts a strain on their creativity while advancing labor. This is because, as part of their performativity, the creators must pay attention to metrics, audiences, and platform algorithms that stimulate the adaptation of experimentation with content. Bucher (2017) regarded this as “algorithmic imaginaries,” whereby content creators “imagine, perceive, and experience algorithms and what these imaginations make possible” (p. 12). On the downside of “algorithmic imaginaries,” (Bucher, 2017, p.12), is the fact that it further strains creativity, inviting controversy and speculations on algorithmic discrepancies, and imposes a psychological toll on the creator, especially for those who cannot cope with the algorithmic-related pressure. Nairobi creators find themselves in a constant state of exhaustion, as burnout generates from working long hours; but, more importantly, burnout comes from having to handle the unscalable nature of production labor on their own. Although these interactions are deeply personal and performative, I submit algorithms and metrics are not about empowering influencers to know their audience. Rather, metrics-based and algorithm performance privileges are designed to create and generate more traffic for the platform. Andrejevic (2014) put forth that “the forms of

‘knowing’ associated with big data mining are available only to those with access to the machines, the databases, and the algorithms” (p. 1676). That sense of interest in giving is oriented toward the platform and, to a lesser extent, to generating insights for the creators. These economic mechanisms are building on profits to support platform capitalism where the entire creator community is prioritizing scalable production on the labor. Instagram’s algorithmic power functions as a socio-technical environment that structures user experiences (Bucher & Helmond, 2018), dictating how Nairobi influencers behave.

To survive and negotiate their everyday lived experiences while sustaining their budding careers, Nairobi creators have devised tactics to deal with indomitable metrics and algorithms by adapting forms of online and offline resistance and conformity. Resistance and subversion of power (Castells, 2009; Foucault, 1978, 1998) tactics include metadata manipulation, e.g., putting hashtags, words, and key phrases to “appease the algorithms,” as my participant, Karanja argued. Other tactics include buying followers (Odipo Dev, 2019); clout chasing through staging scandals and controversial antics, such as break-ups and financial crises to remain relevant (Kanuri, 2022; Ngina, 2021); and playing the visibility game through formation of engagement pods (O’Meara, 2019), which involve small groups among the elite networks that promote each other’s work in their networks through tagging, collaborations, and cross-posting within Instagram and other platforms like Facebook, or offline during events. The concept of engagement pods illustrates the power influencers can have over each other in the tight race for exposure and Instafame. Influencers have learned how to manipulate the Instagram platform to their own advantage by forming these loose coalitions and alliances between themselves, a practice that illustrates Castells’ (2011) networked power, which Castells (2011) also considered a form of *counterpower* (p. 773). Counterpower protects the interests of those who have been

subjected to another's power. As Foucault (1998) argued, where there is power there is resistance. Even though users have the counterpower capacities to use platforms against the interests of the corporations, platform owners have the power to switch users off the networks or to switch off entire networks (Fuchs, 2009). Simultaneously, platform owners, according to Fuchs (2009), have an interest to permanently control the users' online behavior and personal data to accumulate capital with the help of targeted advertising, once again illustrating the colonizing control of ownership power that permeates the power pyramid. However, Galloway and Thacker (2007), suggested users can find ways to subvert the authoritarian forms of network by developing a way to break the network. Galloway and Thacker proffered that users can think typologically, which is "an approach that compares the abstract spaces of different structural or architectonic systems. Pyramid hierarchy and distributed networks, for example, have two different typologies of organization and control" (p. 13). Galloway and Thacker argued there must be a new form of exploitation created by users to resist the colonized control exercised by the platform owners through algorithms and metrics. Galloway and Thacker called this new resistance an "anti-web" (p. 22). According to Galloway and Thacker, the anti-web is an "exceptional typology" (p. 22).

Brand Power

Castells' (2011) third type of power is *network-making power*, which is "the power to program specific networks according to the interests and values of the programmers, and the power to switch different networks following the strategic alliances between the dominant actors of various networks" (p. 773). Castells' (2011) network-making power is reflected in the ways brands work in conjunction with the Instagram platform. Brands are the companies who advertise on Instagram through their contracted influencers. Brands are made up of private sector

influencer agencies. According to Castells (2009), network-making power is the “paramount form of power in the network society” (p. 47), because it has the power to decide who is in or out of the network. Network-making power is in the hands of the programmers and switchers, who have partial control over the objectives for which networks are created. In contrast, switchers have the power to link networks and ensure cooperation between them by sharing common goals and resources to establish and maintain cooperation. Castells (2009) provided numerous examples of programmers and switchers who gain power and counter power, including media companies, public institutions, publishers, editors, and technicians. Brands are the key programmers who control the influencer economy for their interests. Together, programmers, switchers, and brands coalesce to leverage algorithmic power as they each seek to favor their own capitalistic endeavors.

As actors, brands take the place of campaign-based employers who temporarily partner with influential social media personalities to achieve a set brand objective. It is when influencers fulfill these obligations that brands pay them directly or through intermediary agencies, such as Wowzi or Affluence who are designated to mediate “endorsements, sponsorships, and social media marketing campaigns” (Abidin, 2018, p. 75) on behalf of influencers. Brands spend millions of dollars on Instagram for sponsored posts (Duffy, 2017). Similar to other Instagram economy researchers (e.g., Becker, 2016; Eltringham, 2018; Kleintjes, 2017; Njathi & Lee, 2021), I observed local and international brands are increasingly leveraging the platform to market their products to an African audience through the influencer model. International brands contracted with the majority of the influencers I interviewed included the luxury champagne brand, Moët et Chandon, Tom Ford, Coca Cola, Hennessy, Remy Martin, L’Oreal, Netflix, UNICEF, and local brands like Safaricom, Tusker, Betika, Peptang, DSTV, Raha premium flour,

and state ministries and departments. This trend accelerated as millions of people across the globe became “platform-dependent” during the global lockdown necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Poell et al., 2022).

Most Nairobi business activities shifted to digital platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic (BrighterMonday’s Impact of COVID-19 Report and the Future of Jobs Report, 2020). Ehud and other influencers in my study confirmed the influencer economy was not left behind by these modifications. When the supply chains were broken and most businesses were not able to use traditional marketing approaches during the lockdown, there was a surge in brands leveraging digital content creation to reach their audiences. For example, Netflix launched a tiered subscription plan with partial free access for Kenyans using Android phones and added local Kenyan content as part of increasing its market share during the pandemic. Netflix recruited local influencers to advertise for the company on social media platforms.

Before the pandemic, “brands in Kenya [were] barely scratching the surface,” as Mike, cofounder of Wowzi influencer marketing, stated during an interview with me. Mike shared that there is a sizeable opportunity for the marketing industry. Many brands lack an understanding of how influencer marketing works and how to generate a return on their investment. Alternately, influencers feel they are underpaid because brands do not understand them and their craft. Combined, these conflicting observations expose the underlying moments of tension (Mol, 2002) in the coordination process of the Nairobi Instagram economy.

Although all influencers I interviewed claimed to have pushed brand deals mostly in the pandemic years of 2020 and 2021, with short- and long-term contracts, they also raised an avalanche of complaints, from unfair distribution of brand deals (directly by brands and through agencies) to lack of clarity on the value of their services amidst other issues, such as contract

breaches, payment delays, undercutting, and cartelization. The issue of influencer compensation is one of the biggest hurdles influencers in Nairobi must endure, as seen from my interviews and alluded to by Nderu's and Wamathai's remarks earlier in this chapter. Most influencers I spoke to had difficulty explaining Instagram payment gaps. A third of my interviewees were disgruntled with the exploitative promise of "exposure" that brands used, expecting them to create content for free or sometimes for freebies. Some influencers did not understand who they would complain to given that only some influencers would get a few brand deals assigned to them, and some premium and international brands only dealt with the elite influencers. Wambui, a 33-year-old lifestyle influencer complained that brands, especially high-end brands, recycle the same crop of influencers repeatedly, denying the aspirational influencers a chance to work with the brand. This idea of "recycling of influencers" (Ndungu, 2022, para. 3) came up with at least 80% of my respondents and resurfaced on Twitter during Rihanna's Fenty beauty business official launch in Kenya as part of the global brand expansion strategy in Africa (Matiko, 2022; Ndungu, 2022). Odhiambo (2021) argued that the recycling of influencers kills authenticity and loses sight of the consumer. Odhiambo (2021) contended that most corporate brands in Kenya are misinterpreting the concept of influencer marketing because they

have tended to fall over one another for the same small clique of paid influencers, losing sight of the fact that consumer perception evolves over time and soon questions may crop up on the authenticity of the campaigns some of these people ran. For example, we have seen instances where some influencers attempt to drive up to five campaigns on totally non-related issues. This kills authenticity and trust because consumers can pick out the fact that one person cannot be "the face of everything" and still anticipate to achieve solid trust from consumers across the board. (para. 7)

None of the influencers in my study could ascertain the economic value they were generating for the brands and, consequently, the ROI they possibly might have garnered from their influencing endeavors. Andrew, a 35-year-old influencer lamented,

International companies are underpaying us because we are from the so-called poor continent of Africa. They think we are so desperate but somehow, I think they are right. And to make it worse, they exploit our labor, claiming to be giving us “exposure.” There is no way to reach out to Instagram to complain. The Instagram escalation process is on the platform. It involves no phone calls or visits to their physical offices that one can walk to. It can take forever with no resolution in the end.

The payment discrepancies are real and constitute an example of the messiness (Law & Singleton, 2005) of the Instagram economy in Kenya. The messiness constitutes pay gaps both locally and with international brand deals, discrimination of brand deals between the elite and aspirational influencers, overexploitation, delayed payment, lack of structured commission for intermediary influencer agencies, payment in kind, and undercutting and cartelization between influencers and influencer brands. Instagram’s relationality in Kenya, as a fire object (see Chapter 1; Law & Singleton, 2005) is two-pronged. First, content creators create and monetize content. Well-experienced influencers sponsored by high-end brands earn as much as \$10,000 USD per month; up-and-coming creators, most of whom work for micro-, small-, and medium-sized enterprises, can make up to \$100 USD a month (see Appendices F and G). Influencers with smaller followings often receive PR packages containing free products and services instead of money. In comparison, the elite influencers earn significantly more money, despite spending the same amount of time and sometimes resources making videos and posting pictures. As I observed, influencing is a pyramid scheme harbored within a structure of inequality, with a small

percentage of people collecting disproportionately more pay. Thus, the elite influencers are incentivized not to speak about the inequality. When asked about the pay gap within the influencer ecosystem, most of the elite influencers I spoke with disputed these claims, contending they had worked hard for many years to reach high levels of pay. Clearly, these elite influencers will never challenge the unequal system; instead, they will continue to endorse it, thwarting opportunities for further critical perspectives.

The issue of influencer pay and whether it translates to livable Income seems to be a global concern. The livable income concern sits outside of other concerns, such as brands expecting free labor or paying for digital content through freebies, branded swag PR packages (see Appendices F and G) instead of monetary value, all of which are consummate to their digital labor and efforts. According to Duffy (2017), “Only a fraction of content creators rise above the din to achieve major success. For the rest, the ideal of *getting paid to do what you love* remains an unfulfilled promise” (p. 16). A report compiled by Sokolov (2022) on the creator economy confirmed that globally, “most creators don’t even make enough money to reach the U.S. poverty line of \$12 an hour” The creators who are making money are “the 1% ... who have been at it for a very long time and have accumulated very large audiences” (“Advertising,” para. 2). In developed countries like the United States, there are varied and contradictory indications of how much influencers make when they monetize their Instagram platform. Chenkov-Shaw (2020) explained that U.S. firms pay up to \$3,500 per post depending on the influencer’s engagement and number of followers. Darma (2020) stated that an influencer with 100,000 followers makes \$2,700 per post, while influencers with four to 20 million followers make \$6,000 to \$17,500 for each sponsored post. Johnson (2020) stated that influencers make \$10 per 1,000 followers. Influencers who have attained celebrity status earn higher than regular rates (Mileva, 2022). In

contrast, Crain (2018) suggested that micro influencers might get compensated with free products or up to \$150, while a macro influencer with more than one million followers can command up to \$15,000 per post. In markets like the United States and Europe, influencers are raking in millions to the extent of becoming actual celebrities and being classified in the same league as famous movie stars and musicians (Oludimu, 2019). Specifically, creators based in the United Kingdom, United States, and Canada gathered the highest rates for content creation in the year 2020 (Mileva, 2022). If these indications are anything to go by, there is a huge remuneration disparity between the Global North and the Global South. Seemingly, this unequal revenue distribution and financial implication suggests the highly misunderstood idea of influencers earning livable income is a global concern but on different scales, according to the economic context of each country.

Some studies have addressed the problem of huge remuneration disparity and Andrew's assertions by noting the challenges of being underpaid by international brands or in comparison to their counterparts in developed countries. For example, Caribou Digital's (Mozilla, 2017) report on Meta/FB ad sales suggests that U.S. impressions (price to sell an ad) are worth 20 times more than a Nigerian impression. More recently, a report Pelkey (2022) prepared on revenue generation on content creation platforms, such as TikTok, Instagram and Twitch, YouTube showed that Africa falls far behind other continents when it comes to revenue. For example, on YouTube, Africa's "richest" channel is Egypt's Creative Crafts in 5 Minutes, which generated close to \$9M. When viewed from an African market perspective, it appears to be relatively good revenue, but all other continents presented in the report have channels above \$40M. The report indicated that four out of the only eight African channels that generated above \$1M are located in North Africa. YouTube content creators, including Nigeria's Mark Angel (\$4M) and Uganda's

Masaka Kids (\$1.3M) are part of the content creators generating revenue, but Kenyan top channels do not make it on this report. Like Adeleke's (2021) argument on revenue generation on platforms in Africa, Pelkey's report suggests that YouTube in Africa also suffers from a lack of advertising inventory. Ads are cheaper in Africa than elsewhere, which means less revenue for creators. Altogether, these three scholars (Adeleke, 2021; Mozilla, 2017; Pelkey, 2022) showed that despite the fact that some African creators have recognized the monetization opportunity within the creator economy, the reason for the lower pay for Kenyan influencers (relative to Western influencers) versus creators in other parts of Africa across different platforms is due to economic reasons, such as lower market rates for impressions and/or sponsorships, lack of advertising inventory where creators solely depend on brand deals and sponsorships from companies, and the fact that disposable income is low in most African countries, making it difficult for the creators to substantially monetize their audience directly on platforms.

In Nairobi, it is therefore possible that the huge remuneration disparity is because the brand deals and sponsorship are paying less (and creators are being paid less for ad impression) because the whole market is different. Currently, as observed during my fieldwork, there are no empirical data and statistics on what percentage of a creator's revenues are from brand deals on platform and brand deals off platform, versus advertising shares, contributing to the messiness of the influencer remuneration. Neither is there a standard rate card to reference influencer payment. Each brand remunerates hired influencers on their own terms, dictating forms and amount of payment. In addition, as discussed by all the Nairobi influencers I interviewed, the size of the pie is relatively small, with few brands outsourcing influencer campaigns, leading to unhealthy competition among creators, "recycling of influencers" (Ndungu, 2022, para. 3), and some influencers not getting contracted for an extended period. However, hyper-exploitation of

the Global South is especially grotesque (Adeleke, 2021; Kvangraven, n.d.). In addition, there is lack of legal recourse against exploitation specific to the creator economy in emerging markets such as Nairobi, as shall be discussed in Chapter 5.

Many of the influencers I interviewed did not want to mention brand names in our conversations, especially when they were expressing grievances. Those influencers who discussed their negative experiences with brands and agencies warned me not to disclose any of these *sacred details* as it would be like committing career suicide. Luke expressed his fear of disclosure,

I hope that this confidential information stays with you. I do not want to look like I am biting the hand that feeds me, especially now when it is an election year, and most brands will downsize their overall advertising budgets.

Influencers also complained about influencer agencies taking the majority of the pay in the form of commissions from brands. Wanza, a local policymaker, contended that upcoming local influencer agencies such as Wowzi, which have emerged due to the rising Instagram economy, should be fighting for influencers' compensation rates to match international standards. However, as I observed, influencer agencies are caught between capturing their own slice of the pie and servicing influencers, bringing forth another moment of tension (Mol, 2002). Agencies, embroiled in an unregulated influencer market, are taking advantage of the situation by milking commissions between brands and influencers, as claimed by 60% of the influencers I interviewed. The influencer agencies, marred with payment irregularities, reflect the nascent stage of platformization in Kenya, specifically, and Africa at large. Problematically and quite dangerously, absent policy interventions and union organization, the unequal pay structure yields an opportunity to cultivate malpractices such as cartelization, undercutting, and overexploitation

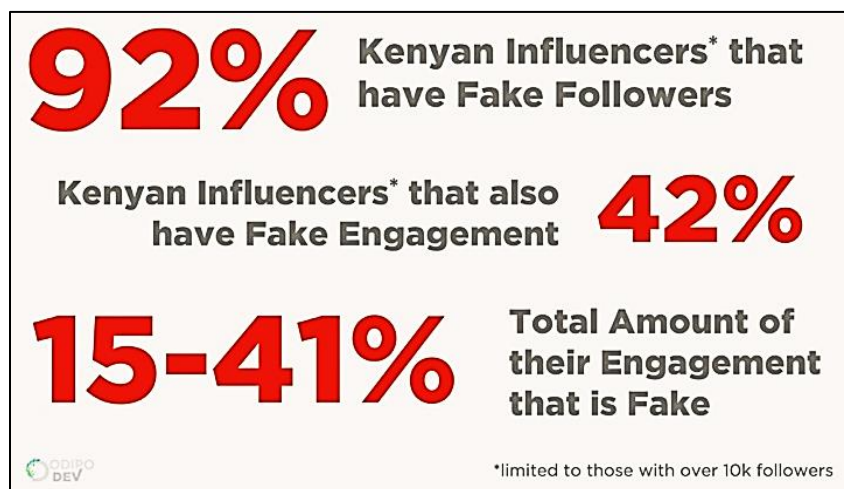
of digital creators. The private sector, too, is getting entangled in this unregulated industry where some influencers are engaging in unscrupulous methods, such as influencer fraud (e.g., inflating follower numbers using online fake accounts) to attract advertising income (Odipo Dev, 2019).

Unsurprisingly, there is a crop of Nairobi influencers engaging in influencer fraud to attain power. At least 45% of my respondents confirmed to have “bought followers,” amplifying the messiness Law and Singleton (2005) posited within the influencer economy malpractices, while at the same time worsening the conditions of the influencer economy in Nairobi.

According to a study conducted in Kenya by Odipo Dev (2019), influencers inflate the numbers of their followers (Figure 12), using online fake accounts to attract advertising income. In Kenya as well as internationally, there are firms dedicated to selling fake accounts to influencers seeking to build “enough fame to qualify for brand deals or to attract more follows from real humans” with a few hundred dollars. These fake accounts, in the form of bot accounts, can even be dictated to comment on influencers’ posts to increase visibility (Frier, 2020, p. 174).

Figure 12

Fake Account Engagement with Kenyan Influencers’ Presence and Content

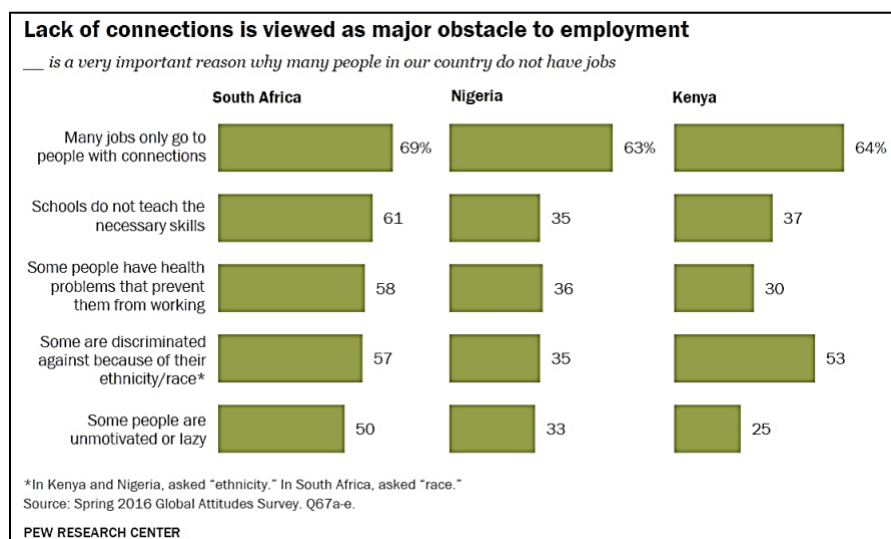


Note. Adapted from *Have Brands Been Paying Leading Kenyan Influencers for Fake Engagement?* By Odipo Dev, July 17, 2019 (<https://odipodev.medium.com/have-brands-been-paying-leading-kenyan-influencers-for-fake-engagement-c9d4591bcd60>). Medium. In the public domain.

Most disturbingly, elite networks run like cartels, especially when it comes to distribution of brand deals by agencies. Having negotiating power creates a dynamic that allows them to have a greater say over activities of the platform. Elite networks command large followings, so siding with them is more enticing to agencies since they will get a cut of the profit generated through the elite influencers' posts. Thus, elite networks become a fertile and thriving ground for influencer agencies to push deals solely to their networks for kickbacks. The 2016 Global Attitudes Survey conducted in Kenya, South Africa, and Nigeria by Pew Research Center (Wike et al., 2016) showed that economic rewards and opportunities mostly go to the privileged and the unequal distribution of employment opportunities is due to favoritism and nepotism (see Figure 13). In Kenya, 64% of respondents to the Pew Research Center survey believed that many jobs only go to people with connections (Wike et al., 2016).

Figure 13

Kenyan's Beliefs About Employment Opportunities



Note. Adapted from *In Key African Nations, Widespread Discontent With Economy, Corruption*, by R. Wike, K. Simmons, M. Vice, and C. Bishop, November 14, 2016, Pew Research Center, p. 5 (<https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2016/11/14/in-key-african-nations-widespread-discontent-with-economy-corruption/>). Copyright 2016 by Pew Research Center. Reprinted with permission.

Individual & Elite Influencer Power

In Castells' (2011) model, networked power is “the power of social actors over other social actors in the network. The forms and processes of networked power are specific to each network” (p. 773). Foucault (1998) proposed that people are the carriers of power rather than the point of application, which can be seen through influencer power, or the rule of inclusion/exclusion (Castells, 2011). In the case of the Instagram influencer economy, influencer power is the “power ... [of] certain nodes over other nodes [inside] the network (Castells, 2011, p. 781), manifested as socioeconomic divides between the elite influencer networks and aspirational networks. Influencer power can be examined from two sides: (a) the individual power of the influencer to cultivate themselves into “social stars” (Chen, 2017, para 3) or “instacelebrities” (Frier, 2020, p. 11) by charming users into followers; and (b) the elite power networks, which occur based on access. As seen with politics of inclusion in Chapter 2, when only a few influencers have consistent digital access reliable connectivity, and adequate digital competency to create and produce captivating content and the privilege of parents who went to college, then only they have an upper hand to succeed at the craftmanship of influencer marketing over those without these privileges. The ownership of these privileges inevitably gives “supreme power” (Castells, 2009) to influencers positioned in the elite networks, cultivating asymmetrical power relations on which they thrive.

In the case of individual influencers, Instagram gives its users what Frier (2020) called a “slice of power” (p. 158) to determine their destiny by using pictures as tools and seeking to be understood and validated by the rest of the society through likes, comments, and money.

Inadvertently, this changes the hierarchy of power within social structures. The reality is that even with equal *opportunity* the system is structured to produce *winner*s (large social base of followers) and *loser*s (aspiring elite influencers). Instagram has a pyramid structure (Mileva, 2022) that is inherently unequal; it produces inequality as a matter of its structural form.

Another way Castells' (2009) networked power manifests itself is through socioeconomic inequalities. In this new regime, high-performing influencers manifest themselves into the Nairobi elite network of influencers where they connect collaborate, share, socialize and circulate brand deals with their equals. A network becomes bigger as it enrolls other actors (Latour, 1988). In other words, elite influencers' privileges get multiplied as their popularity soars. As some influencers continue to have control of many resources (i.e., money, jobs, status, and notions of appropriate roles), they gain the ability to scale up and become more powerful. In other words, there is a feedback effect where the rich get richer. Additionally, elite influencers benefit from intangible value, or what Friederici (2019) called cognitive benefits, created through the establishment of a network where the creator's celebrity position benefits them in terms of social status, notoriety, freebies, and access to various brands and opportunities. As Arora (2019) argued, power asymmetries reproduce and reinforce social and economic divides. While influencers across the globe are subjected to the same logic of platform power, it is differentiated in Nairobi because of weak or nonexistent regulatory policies, systems and structures., including remnants of colonialism, and an entrenched digital divide.

Elite influencers also wield power, often through their own elite networks, as sympathetic representatives of the platform companies. The elites create a network for themselves that is mutually reinforcing and crowds out the voices of individual influencers. As Castells (2009) argued, "The new economy affects everywhere and everybody but is inclusive and exclusionary

at the same time, the boundaries of inclusion varying for every society, depending on institutions, politics and policies” (p. 161). Law (2006) cautioned that in any translation process there is *trahison*, which means betrayal, where some actors lose something as they attempt to connect, to displace, to move, to shift from one place, one modality, or one form. The betrayal of aspiring influencers in the network has, of course, affected how the influencer network in Nairobi operates. Elite networks tend to have large amounts of funding or capital, or political will and connections, which gives them negotiating powers with brands and the Instagram platform.

In my fieldwork, I noticed that brands often trust people who have a large following; the influencer’s capital is their group of followers, who, within the context of this imparted trust, will not publicly challenge the exploitative *winner takes all* structure of the system from which they benefit. It might be an unconventional currency, but it is one, nonetheless. According to De Veirman et al. (2017), “Instagram influencers with high numbers of followers are found more likeable, partly because they are considered more popular” (p. 798). These individuals have attained social capital, which “is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 248). Since the value of this capital accrues by being included in privileged groups, depending on “who you know” (Sadowski, 2019, p.4), influencers must possess reach, relevance, and resonance in order to engage with and influence their followers successfully (Okuah et al., 2019). A study of influencers in Portugal conducted by Dhanesh and Duthler (2019) concurred with this notion by adding that elite influencers are more powerful and attract high consumer buying intention because followers regard them as more credible and more relatable.

It is important to note that the formation of Nairobi elite power networks aligns with the concept of multiple realities (Law & Singleton, 2005; Mol, 2002). The ranking of influencer categories has the potential to lead to an inequitable distribution of brand deals, which exacerbates the existing digital divide and widens economic inequality. Within my pool of respondents, influencers primarily came from privileged backgrounds with parents who owned businesses or were in politics. These influencers had studied abroad in places like the United Kingdom, United States, Canada, or Australia, or in top international schools in Kenya. Their status as international students positioned them as part of both the Global North and the Global South. They were highly networked and well-connected locally and around the globe; thus, when it came to brand deals, they were the beneficiaries of the cartels that run the city of Nairobi. Instagram gave influencers from wealthy backgrounds a platform to showcase their privileged lifestyles, while further reinforcing their place of power in Nairobi society. In essence, the *rich get richer while the poor get poorer*. Duffy (2017) stated the idea of “it’s who you know” (p. 117) replicates itself within digital platforms similar to traditional media where successful bloggers tap into existing networks for existing business. High-end influencers consume, or at least have exposure to, lavish lifestyles and speak with a Western English accent, making them ideal candidates to work as influencers for upscale brands and media outlets as presenters, models, and voice-over artists. Therefore, premium brands such as Moët and Tom Ford reward privileges enjoyed by elite influencers over aspirational influencers, thereby reinforcing discrimination in the influencer economy and examples of old-fashioned imperialism.

There is another group of influencers who are hardly recognizable but have creative and marketable talents, such as comedy, fitness, make-up, dance, cooking, fashion, and style. These

influencers have upscaled their content creation fame on Instagram. During an interview, Mwende, a 27 year-old lifestyle influencer, argued,

Look at our very own Majimbo, she now lives abroad appearing in almost every international TV show such as Ellen Degeneres Show, rubbing shoulders with celebrities like Rihanna, Lupita Nyong'o, and Steve Harvey, whilst appearing on elite magazines like Elle and ranking globally on *Vogue top 30 under 30*. She was just the girl next door posting satirical monologues videos on Instagram and TikTok during the pandemic, growing to 2.5 million followers, winning awards, with top brands such as Valentino signing her up. With my dancing talent, I could be the next Majimbo.

Mwende's sentiment were echoed by all the participants in my study during various moments of their interviews, which indicates a high level of commitment on the part of Kenyan Instagram influencers to create a thriving digital economy in Kenya. Influencers like Mwende, often outside of the elite network, see Majimbo as a beacon of hope, who amassed power through her comedy talent. They believe that through hard work and merit, they will achieve such kind of insta-fame.

Some Kenyan influencers might have succeeded as influencers without having privileged backgrounds. These influencers are typically drawn from a class of Kenyans who aspire to be in the *cool kids'* ivory tower and are willing to *fake it 'til they make it*. To do so, these aspirational influencers often raise money for body enhancement procedures, as highlighted in Chapter 1, or briefly obtain formal employment to raise capital to start influencer gigs. While some of the aspiring influencers make attempts to amass power through continuously building critical influencing skills and knowledge, and sometimes adopt unconventional tactics such as skin

brightening to ensure continuous improvement in their livable incomes, most eventually give up the fight and quit their influencing careers.

Although my findings show that through Instagram, a new class of power and wealth is created as ordinary Instagram users become social stars (Frier, 2020), those who do not make the coveted status or who are struggling to make it are displaced within the social radar of influencers. The rise of the elite network in Nairobi works against existing aspirational influencers who are further rendered powerless as power concentrates and, in turn, becomes a fertile and thriving ground for elite influencers. For instance, within the Nairobi influencer economy, those who are not part of the elite network miss out on high-end and sometimes international brand deals and access to VIP events that take place in the city. Sometimes only the elite influencers are paid to attend brand events.¹⁶ For example, for Rihanna's Fenty beauty brand launch into Kenya, only Nikita Kering was paid to attend, while the rest of the influencers were shamed by Kenyan netizens for attending for free¹⁷ just to be associated with Rihanna's brand.

Similarly, in places like Nigeria, only a handful of YouTube creators/influencers generate revenue in comparison to their counterparts in the United States and Europe, who make millions of dollars through their Instagram influencer roles. Despite heavy capital investment in high-quality video production, most of the Nigerian market cannot afford to stream videos online due to high internet costs and intermittent connections. This means low views and less money off

¹⁶ "Kate Actress Only Attends Paid Gigs." <https://www.the-star.co.ke/sasa/word-is/2022-05-30-kate-actress-only-attends-paid-gigs/>

¹⁷ "Nikita Kering was the Only Kenyan Paid by Fenty! Eric Omondi Shames Influencers who Attended!" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y2zdCJIP-qc>

YouTube for Nigerian YouTube creators/influencers (Oludimu, 2019), a dynamic that applies across the Global South.

It is worth noting that sometimes the class divide characteristics intersect with the elite group. Having both privilege and talent is a powerful combination, and those born into privilege have more resources to develop their talents. Conversely, many of the aspirational influencers may not come from a place of privilege but are talented. However, they do not have the accumulated opportunity to develop their talents into a marketable skill.

Nairobi Instagram Influencer Economy Pyramid of Power

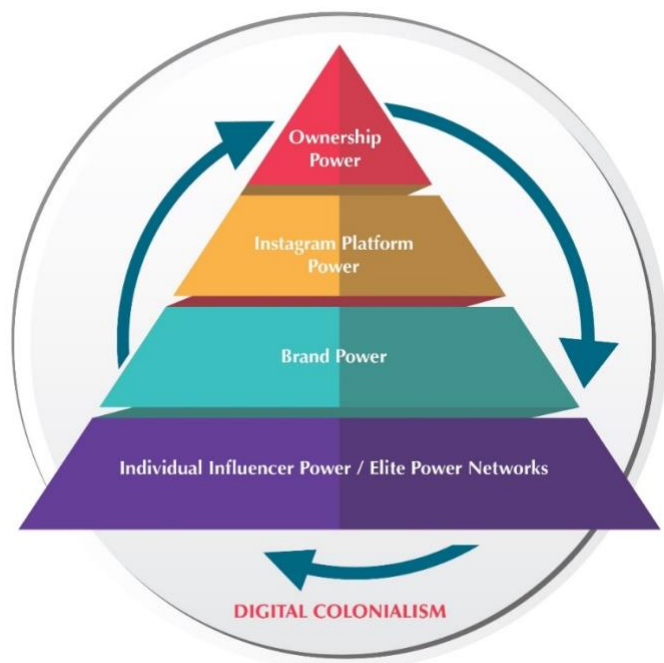
Castell's (2011) four forms of power provided a framework to discuss the influence of power in the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy. Each form of power is linked to a facet of the power structure in Nairobi, envisioned by ownership power, platform power, brand power, and individual and elite influencer power. When examined together, the four forms of Nairobi Instagram influencer power coalesce to build a pyramid of power that has at its apex, Meta's ownership, and ultimate control over the influencer economy.

The pyramid of power catapults the proliferation of digital colonialism throughout the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy as illustrated in Figure 14. In Castells (2011) view, power is manifested through coercion, and power relationships are framed by domination, which in the case of the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy, is digital colonialism. In the pyramid, power is concentrated at the apex, where Meta holds the ownership power. The economy loosely distributes the other forms of power throughout the pyramid between Instagram, brands, and the influencers themselves. The breadth and magnitude of this colonized power reduces proportionately toward the lowest echelon of the pyramid, where individual influencers imagine

themselves as having great power, but in actuality are awarded a pseudo-power, which is ultimately governed, granted, and retracted by Meta through its business model.

Figure 14

Nairobi Instagram Influencer Economy Pyramid of Power



Note. My conceptualization of how power is distributed within the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I provided a description of economic power within the Nairobi Instagram influencer network, mapping out who owns, controls, and benefits from the network in Kenya. Throughout the chapter, I explained the dynamics of the economy, and provided a discussion of who benefits from the economy. I illuminated the struggle for power between four key actors (Meta Ownership power, Instagram platform brand power, and influencer power. These powers all fall within the shadow of a status quo set by Meta, which constructs the rules of the global

Instagram economy, including the legal apparatus behind Instagram's operations. This chapter demonstrates that power is a force that displays itself in both empowering and disempowering ways. Power has the ability to promote freedom or subjugation. Instagram originated in the United States and quickly spread across the globe through Meta's branding power. There is the economic element, which is that kind of double form of inequality, where you have the platform owners, the corporation the investors, they're the ones who benefit the most. I would take a normative position in noting that Instagram influencer economy, in general, does not benefit the public in Kenya, but rather, it benefits first and foremost Meta (especially its rich owners and executives), and secondarily it benefits elite influencers. Although what is going in Kenya is not distinct from the exploitation that goes on in the Global North, the platform owners have a degree of political control because they can control narratives, they can censor they have censorship power they can set policies. They can shape what is seen and what is not seen. Therefore, there is an element of governance that's built into this a privatized form of governance, which will be discussed in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 4: THE CHAINS THAT BIND US: THE HIGH PRICE OF CULTURAL CAPITAL IN THE INSTAGRAM CULTURE

Introduction

The practices of Instagram influencers in Africa are deeply rooted in Western ideologies. Attention-seeking tactics, which influencers from the North have mastered over time, include the commodification of self and self-branding to construct an online persona and build social and cultural capital. Not surprisingly, influencers from the South are striving to replicate Northern influencers' approaches and construct the same culture of self-commodification in their emerging digital markets. Successful social and cultural capital translates into monetary capital, which is a temptation difficult to avoid in developing nations.

Commodification of self and self-branding are two concepts intrinsically tied to the influencer economy. Giddens (1991) characterized the commodification of self as an attempt to present oneself in a certain lifestyle and adopt practices to promote a particular image. Marwick (2013) took the concept of commodification of self one step further to include the idea of self-branding, calling it a "self-preservation strategy that requires viewing oneself as a consumer product and selling this image to others" (p. 140). Self-branding is conceived on the premise that everyone has the power to be their own brand (Peters, 1997). Self-branding requires the individual to merge their self-image to match aspects of the target culture, which they then exploit to create personal gain and reproduce "cultural value" (Hearn, 2008, p. 164).

The burgeoning rise of the U.S. creator economy has catapulted many influencers to fame, allowing them to achieve mega-influencer status and become household names (Frier, 2020). Their success is setting the standards and trends which the rest of the world follows. In Nairobi, the example set by U.S. creators is profoundly changing and shaping the tactics Nairobi

influencers adopt to commodify themselves and produce relevant, timely, and trendy content. The U.S. ideal implicates how Kenyans perceive and interpret culture in the identity-making and appropriation of a Nairobi Instagram content creator. The commodification of self and self-branding is essential to how Nairobi influencers perform the aesthetic representation of self to activate and reinvent content. Nairobi creators mirror their influencer tactics against most successful influencers from the North, using the examples of Western influencers as *templates* or “cultural scripts” (Abidin, 2016b, p. 87). They “draw from global networks to choose trends, fashions, and fads they want to follow, sometimes overshadowing local connections” (Marwick, 2013, p. 362). The goal is to attain the status of what Marwick (2013) called “micro-celebrity”, referring “to persons that have achieved fame among a niche group of people” (p. 140). According to Poell et al. (2021), the emerging cultural practices embedded within platforms encompass shifts, continuities, and tensions in practices of labor, creativity, and democracy in the cultural industries, which are all critical processes of platformization since they involve institutional changes in markets, infrastructures, and governance. However, there remains a need to better understand how culture is reproduced through digital platforms, and the extent to which this reproduction affects culture as a whole, specifically in nonwestern contexts.

The literature is inconsistent in showing the significant role Instagram plays in the production of culture, exposing a need to identify how Instagram influences local culture, a shortcoming de Kloet et al. (2019) alluded to when criticizing Nieborg and Poell’s (2018) definition of platformization. De Kloet et al. argued that Nieborg and Poell overlooked platforms’ social and cultural aspects. Only a handful of studies (e.g., Abidin, 2016b; Arriagada & Siles, 2020; de Kloet et al., 2019; Leaver et al., 2020; Ligaga, 2020) demonstrate that Instagram influences culture differently; in fact, cultural reproduction based on influencers’ and

users' behavior on Instagram is largely ignored. Likewise, only a few studies (e.g., Duffy et al., 2022; Frier, 2020; Marwick, 2015; Nieborg & Poell, 2018) specifically focused on the influence of Western creators' commodification of self and self-branding practices on the rest of the world. Consequently, cultural reproduction within digital platforms, such as Instagram, is understudied, especially in emerging market contexts like Nairobi.

The reality is, however, that digital platforms are established and maintained as sites for cultural reproduction (Abidinb, 2016; de Kloet et al., 2019; Frier, 2020; Ligaga, 2020; Marwick, 2015; Nieborg & Poell, 2018). For example, Ligaga (2020) studied popular culture in Kenya, arguing that the internet is a "vibrant site of cultural production in Africa" (p. 11). Spencer et al. (2018) concurred by stating that the internet is a "valuable site" (p. 3) to expose the social and political values of individuals by exaggerating otherwise hidden cultures of "muted, underrepresented, or misrepresented" (p. 6) groups. In this chapter, I build on prior literature that acknowledges the cultural reproduction factors of the internet, extending the discussion to Instagram. I borrow Ligaga's theorization, offering that Instagram as a platform can be viewed as an extension of the internet, while at the same time is a valuable cultural industry site where "cultural practices of labor, creativity, and democracy" are present (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. X).

I follow the findings of a few non-Western-centric studies, which attempted to fill the gap related to Instagram and culture reproduction. For example, Sheldon et al.'s (2017) comparative study of Croatian and American cultural differences in motives for Instagram use revealed that individualistic and collectivistic orientations have an influence on how people use Instagram in these two countries. Whereas individualistic connotations focus more on the promotion of self, the collectivist view is more concerned with developing and maintaining strong interpersonal

connections. In essence, “culture serves as a moderator, and cultural members thus ascribe symbolism to the acts of uploading, sharing, and tagging personal images (Sheldon et al., 2017, p. 649). Within the evolving Instagram culture, there are varying cultural practices that deploy rather different norms to encompass the Instagram culture or community (Leaver et al., 2020). In a 2020 study on diverse cultures represented in social media, Leaver et al. described how Instagram alters communication tactics and marketing approaches, yet did not give account of the cultural reproduction that is taking place in online environments and the driving forces behind this practice.

In this chapter I examined the process of cultural reproduction that happens with Instagram in Nairobi guided by the ANT concept of making visible the invisible moments of translation (Callon, 1986; Mol, 2002). These invisible moments are most clearly identified through day-to-day commodification of self, practices, particularities, experiences, realities, and lifestyles of Nairobi influencers. I attempted to answer the research questions: (1) How do Nairobi influencers produce themselves as commodified subjects to fit the Instagram operating model, and (2) how does this commodification influence cultural reproduction in Nairobi?

The decolonial theorists (Escobar, 2012; Mignolo, 2011; Ngugi wa Thiong’o, 1993) emphasize the need to disentangle the chains of colonialism that still bind the Kenyan culture. The chains of colonialism are threaded throughout the culture in such a way as to permeate all aspects of Kenyan life, including the way Kenyans interact with digital technologies and platforms. Various factors discussed in the previous sections contribute to the combustible environment in which the Instagram influencer economy resides. Remnants of colonialism (e.g., Escobar, 2012; Mignolo, 2011; Ngugi wa Thiong’o, 1993); embodied, objectified, and institutionalized capital (Bourdieu, 1984); the commodification of self (Giddens, 1991); and the

hybridized aspects of the influencers' adopted culture (Appadurai, 1996; Bhabha, 1995) are catalysts whose combustion feeds the fire object. In the minds of Nairobi influencers, these catalysts empower and advance Kenyans to a higher standing on the globalized stage, and thus bring about a perceived sense of emancipation. However, a deeper analysis reveals a reproduction of "Americanized" (Owong'a et al., 2021, p. 588) culture that has emerged as another, more modern form of colonialism. According to Owong'a et al. (2021), the term *Americanized* is a way of straying away from certain aspects of native ethnic identity by internalizing an American cultural identity and becoming deeply embedded into American culture.

This chapter is divided into four sections. First, I define culture contextualized in the Kenyan setting by briefly giving a historical overview of the colonial implications of Kenyan culture. Second, I explore the notion of cultural reproduction and how Nairobi influencers are becoming cultural producers through Bourdieusian cultural capital theoretical frameworks (Poell et al., 2021). In the third section, I examine the formation, embodiment, and performative aspects of commodification and self-branding by Nairobi influencers. The final section addresses Instagram as a fire object (Law & Singleton, 2005) that is ignited to either enflame corporate colonialism (Jandt, 2017) or emancipation.

The Role of Colonialism in the Postcolonial Nairobi Instagram Culture

The definition of culture is problematic. Given that culture is a broad and deep component of life (Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1972), defining the term becomes "one of the most difficult and controversial tasks for all those involved in its study" (Minkov et al., 2013. P. 1094). According to cultural theorists (Bhabha, 1995; Jandt, 2018; Kraidy, 2002; Runciman, 2005) culture is a dynamic aspect that morphs through hybridity based on individuals'

experiences with and knowledge of other cultures. In ANT terms and based on the epistemic understanding outlined here, culture appears to be a fire object (Law & Singleton, 2005), prone to change based on an individual's interactions with persons, places, and things in the environment. With this understanding, this chapter is confined to the production of the Nairobi Instagram influencer culture.

Kenyan culture is rooted in colonial ideologies. My interview with Dr. Getao, former ICT Authority CEO in Kenya highlighted some of this concern, "Kenya [has] marked 61 years since the country gained independence from Britain, but the Kenyan culture largely remains in a disenfranchised position, with a long-embedded history of being disrupted and shaped by the British that colonized the country for centuries." In *Decolonizing the Mind* (1993), Ngugi wa Thiong'o reverberated Dr. Getao's sentiments:

Its most important area of domination was the mental universe of the colonized, the control, through culture, of how perceived themselves and their relationship to the world. Economic and political control can never be complete or effective without the mental control. To control a people's culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others. (p. 16)

Colonization is often assumed to have only influenced economic development and governance. However, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's (1993) argument emphasizes the profound impact colonization had on the culture and the minds of Africans.

Similarly, in their critique of Bhabha's (1994) book, *The Location of Culture*, Fay and Haydon (2017) admitted, "Colonization was not just an economic, military, or political process, but one that radically affected culture and identity across the world." (p. 5). Colonial ideologies infiltrated cultural practices related to hair, attire, language, education, and religion (Ndege,

2009). As a result, Western cultural ideologies and languages are still considered superior—*de riguer*—to African culture and languages. For example, a BBC News (2019) article argued that Kenyans are conditioned to mirror the White colonialists in speech, look, and behavior. While the effects of colonization are felt in other parts of the world, Ndege (2009) emphasized that British imperialism “had a powerful and lasting impact on Africa” (p. 2), suggesting the specific influence of Western ideologies in Africa led to the collapse of the indigenous culture and unique precolonial history of the continent. Drawing on Crawford Young’s (1995) assertion that remnants of colonialism still influence African cultural practices today, Ndege argued that the destruction of the African culture was fostered by Christian missionaries who preached against African cultures, leading to an abandonment of traditional cultural practices through the introduction of the preferred British education. This overriding of the African culture was a strategy for the colonial project “to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 101) subjugated on the colonized people.

However, even after the independence, the majority of African governments did not alter colonial structures and practices (Cabral, 1973; Fanon, 1961; Nkrumah, 1965; Rodney, 1972). As a result, the negative impact of colonization still lingers in the postcolonial context, including the adoption of new technologies imported from developed countries, and new economies, such as the creator economy. The effects of colonization are clearly recognizable in the ways Nairobi influencers access the Instagram market, and in their appropriation of the influencer economy through their emulation of American celebrities and adoption of individualistic ideals.

Fundamental aspects of the complex colonial legacy were evident in my interview findings and depicted numerous intersecting and simultaneous moments that revealed the legacy’s embeddedness, which has influenced the Instagram culture in one way or another. By

conceptualizing Nairobi creators as cultural producers (Poell et al., 2021), we can interrogate how their emergent practices embody, objectify, and institutionalize cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), how they form new narratives to recast themselves, and how these actions challenge or reinforce the already existing culture.

Throughout my interviews, I found that the colonial logic was frequently replicated on the Kenyan postcolonial cultural context through Americanized ideologies of how Nairobi influencers presented themselves aesthetically. Colonization emphasizes foreign culture as superior; its ideals and technologies are viewed as preferable than anything offered in Kenya. Mojo, a 28-year-old male lifestyle influencer, discussed the lure of the *American dream* when he stated:

We have grown being exposed to Hollywood movies, American hip-hop, and [were] sold the American dream both on radio, TV, and pirated movies from the tender age of Cartoon Network and Sesame Street. Also, think about the Kenya airlift program where some of our older relatives went to study and came home rich or bought property worth millions. The American dream has since been entrenched as the ultimate dream. It is worse today with the social media apps with massive information available online and at the click of a button. Look around you right now. Our music, fashion, food, language, almost everything is underlined with the pervasiveness of the glamorous American lifestyle. Show me one Kenyan who does not want this kind of American life.

According to Giddens (1991), people construct their identities based on their exposure to mass media and consumer goods. Giddens theorized identity as a *project* that people embark on to differentiate themselves from their peers. According to my interviewees, foreign cultures, whether U.S. American or British, have been inculcated in their minds since childhood,

displacing what was regarded as the Kenyan culture. In the postcolonial context, mannerisms were reinforced where “African women pioneers at university went through systematic training on how to dress and how to use knives and forks. They were even taught how to curtsy beautifully in case the British monarch came to visit” (BBC News, 2019, “Braiding was Banned,” para. 1). My participant Mojo alluded to the Kennedy Airlift program, which was started in 1959 by Kenyan Tom Mboy. Mojo stated,

[The program] selected students to [attend] universities in the United States. ... [Among the students who participated in the program were] Barack Obama, Sr., the father of former U.S. President Barack Obama; Dr. Wangari Maathai, the first African woman to win a Nobel Prize in 2004; and Hilary Ng'weno, Nairobi's first African newspaper editor-in-chief and a man who would play a pivot role in advancing the visual arts in Kenya at several levels” (Swigert, 2011, p. 68).

Kenyans struggle for authentic cultural identity. Even when they recognize the efforts of their predecessors who fought for freedom, they do not fully understand what being authentically Kenyan means, as revealed in my study. Influencers in my study blamed this lack of appreciation for and lack of value toward Kenyan cultural identity on the political regime that inherited the education system introduced by the British colonialists without consideration of the history and culture within Kenya that existed long before colonization. This omission of Kenya's cultural identity created a vacuum of low cultural self-confidence and pride. Omondi vehemently argued,

During the Moi era, there were a lot of retrenchments and there were lots of Kenyans running towards the States, and others were airlifted for further studies, so greener pasture movement begins. So, we never even value our own selves in our own country because we believe where we are at is *ni shamba la mawe* (land full of stones) and

greener pastures are when you go to the U.K., U.S. I believe that is why most Kenyans who relocate, who are in those spaces, end up thriving. So, growing up with such notions, reinforced by our education system, knowing that we are not good enough and that the Western side is the better option is, obviously you want to do, and go where the better option is. You cannot blame content creators, and demand of them to authentically represent a culture that is already infiltrated by westernized standards. It is a deeper problem.

Arriagada and Bishop (2021) argued that social media influencers are in a constant need to negotiate between commerciality and authenticity as they enact themselves into cultural producers. Borrowing from Bourdieu, Poell et al. (2021) defined the term, *cultural producer* as the “broad range of actors and organizations engaged in the creation, distribution, marketing, and monetization of symbolic artifacts” (p. 9). Kenyans must make a choice between presenting an already accepted and successful commercialized Instagram model through mimicry, or representing themselves as their authentic selves, which may be a far cry from what is typically portrayed on Instagram, and which may be rejected or resisted by brands, the wider Instagram global community, and even by Instagram itself through its algorithmic profit-driven practices, a concept discussed in Chapter 3. Studies have shown that “commercial platforms are geared toward maximizing user activity by algorithmically privileging trending items over content that generates sustained social engagement.” (Poell, 2020, p. 654). Hence, as observed with Nairobi influencers, social media influencers are perpetually negotiating between *Kenyanness* and the global Instagram iconic culture.

Wellman et al. (2020) deemed the notion of self-advertising to an audience while retaining an authentic credibility a difficult balance to strike. This is especially so in a global

platform like Instagram, presenting a messy and complex reality (Law & Singleton, 2005) or a situation Mol (2002) would call a moment of tension. Nairobi influencers have to deal with a tension in their everyday practices: on the one hand, they are under the influence of external colonialism, and on the other hand they attempt to produce an authentic Kenyan culture, which they are not fully able to articulate. Not only do Kenyans struggle against the remnants of colonialism that woo them toward emulation of Americanized ideals, Kenya is also comprised of 70 unique ethnic groups (Onwong'a et al., 2022), each with their own idea of what cultural identity looks like. There is a messiness involved in even describing how Kenya should present itself to the world. Kenya, as a single, coherent nation-state is itself a product of the colonial and postcolonial boundary drawing and the replication of British political and educational institutions and language. In 2004, a debate raged in Kenya about whether there was a distinctive Kenyan “look” drawn to Kenyan roots and heritage (VOA News, 2010). This intense conversation took place as a country-wide competition was held among local designers to design a Kenyan *national dress*. The project did not take off; the main reason given for its abandonment was that it was challenging to single out a specific design given the diversification of Kenya's population. In general, the question of Kenyan cultural identity whether it is dress code (personal appearance), food, language, recreation (music, film), family and social relationships, government and government systems, and general lifestyle has been contentious and contestable by many including the government, media, public, culture conservatives, and activists sometimes tourists. The indestructible debate often exhibits an awkward and troubling tendency that portrays Kenyans as persons out of touch with their originality, but instead fuses Kenyan and U.S. American styles. Whichever angle one chooses to look at this contentious debate, the question of what the true authentic Kenyan culture remains largely misunderstood and unanswered.

Onwong'a et al. (2022) sought to understand the unique experiences of Kenyan immigrants in the United States through a phenomenological study. These actions are seen by some Kenyans as a way to "further disconnect from [the immigrants'] Kenyan culture" (p. 588). Furthermore, when Kenyan immigrants attempted to assimilate, their Kenyan peers criticized them, but when they displayed their Kenyan culture in the mainstream U.S. society, they were discriminated against by their African American peers. The rejection coming from both sides left Kenyan immigrants confused about embracing their authentic Kenyan identity. Utsey et al. (2015) referred to the ancient colonialist practice of "divide and rule" (p. 197); Kenyan ethnic groups were posed against each other as either conforming or not conforming to the colonial rule, which colonists used to systematically deconstruct the indigenous culture and existing power structures (Utsey et al., 2015). Onwong'a et al.'s participants cited feeling subjected to the divide and rule idea when their African American peers rejected their expression on Kenyan culture. Therefore, a mixed message is presented to Kenyans about the value of uplifting an authentic Kenyan culture. In my study, I observed Nairobi influencers struggling with this very concept. I observed that influencers practiced mimicry as a way to fit into the Instagram culture, which is highly influenced by American ideals, yet found themselves criticized by their own Kenyan natives for abandoning Kenyan values. In ANT terms, the dichotomy between authentic and reproduced representation constitutes a moment of tension (Mol, 2002). To accentuate how this moment of tension functions, I examine Bourdieu's (1986) analysis of cultural capital and relate the concept more fully to Nairobi Instagram influencers' commodification of self using Americanized ideals, and attempts to connect the everyday influencer lived experience to what it means to be authentically Kenyan in a highly competitive global influencer economy.

Bourdieu's Analysis of Cultural Capital

According to Bourdieu (1986), cultural capital is related to one's knowledge, skills, and differing types of educational qualification. Bourdieu further divided cultural capital into three subtypes: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized. These three types of cultural capital are reflected in Nairobi influencers' strategies to produce themselves as commodified subjects on Instagram. When framed from an ANT perspective, the three types of cultural capital privilege both human and nonhuman actors (Latour, 1993; Law, 1992). Furthermore, this cultural capital brings to fore invisible moments of translation (Callon, 1986; Mol, 2002) between the various actors engaged in the network.

Embodied Capital

Embodied capital includes an individual's dress code, accent, dialect, posture, and mannerisms. It also includes preferences, such as one's taste for music, art, and literature. Embodied capital is acquired through socialization, a process of learning socially acceptable behaviors, and self-improvement (Bourdieu, 1986). Embodied capital is important because more powerful social classes tend to differentiate themselves from others by how they look and behave. The majority of my interviewees' profiles resembled American influencers *mannerisms*. For example, they published similar trending topics, used similar languages, poses, fashion/clothing, and music. A participant, Mueni, explained how she draws her inspiration from global influencer icons:

I look up at big influencer names, mainly from the U.S., whom I religiously follow, such as JaLisa Vaughn-Jefferson and Jackie Aina. Through regularly scanning of their profiles, I tap into global trending topics, hashtags, and ride on the virality of these trends. I pay attention to how they talk, what they wear, where they hang out, how their

homes look, hair, dress code, the kind of parties they go out to, the music, background, props—every single minute detail to empower me to replicate the same.

Mueni's comments reveal her reliance on Vaughn-Jefferson and Jackie Aina as an ideal public figures to emulate in her pursuit to take her influencing career to global heights, demonstrating the sociocultural capital that influencers like JaLisa Vaughn-Jefferson carry. Mueni's comments also illustrate Instagram as a global cultural platform. Emulation is a form of mimicry, which Bhabha (1994) defined in cultural terms. According to Bhabha, mimicry involves more than just seeing another culture as a role model; mimicry is an attempt to replicate and adopt another culture's practices, often resulting in a complex entwining of cultural values, as the "group uses [the ideal culture] culture to reassert its own beliefs or ideas" (p. 11).

In the United States, for example, content creators have arguably enjoyed greater success in the creator economy (Cunningham & Craig, 2019; Frier, 2020). Ranking lists such as Visual Capitalist's The World's Top 50 Social Media Influencers (see Appendix H; Wallach, 2021) and the annually published Instagram Rich List (Hopper, n.d.; Wandera, 2021) create believability that it is possible to garner numbers on Instagram and build a full-time career through brand sponsorship deals. Such kind rankings lists are replicated by local Kenyan media and blogs, validating that there are local influencers thriving in their influencing careers like their counterparts in developed countries like the United States. Marwick (2015) argued,

Instagram represents a convergence of cultural forces: a mania for digital documentation, the proliferation of celebrity and microcelebrity culture, and conspicuous consumption.

Insta-fame demonstrates that while micro-celebrity is widely practiced, those successful at gaining attention often reproduce conventional status hierarchies of luxury, celebrity, and popularity that depend on the ability to emulate the visual iconography of

mainstream celebrity culture. This emulation calls into question the idea that social media are an egalitarian, or even just a more accessible, way for individuals to access the currency of the attention economy. (p.139)

Marwick (2013) argued that users like Mueni can potentially learn anything virtually; given the variety of resources available on the internet, users tap into it “to construct, perform, and mobilize identity, [making] it possible to try out different lifestyles and subjectivities” (p. 362). The story of Empresal Sally’s skin brightening experience, which was described in Chapter 1, further illustrates Marwick’s (2013) assertion. When viewed through Marwick’s (2013) argument, practices such as liposuction, BBL, body piercings, and tattoos reveal how embodied capital is performed by Nairobi influencers as another form of mannerism within the Nairobi Instagram culture. Mehita Iqani (2016) referred to embodied capital as commoditized beauty in the Global South. Ligaga (2020) cited Nairobi influencers such as Vera Sidika, Huddah Monroe, and Bridget Achieng as examples of embodied capital, and argued that Sidika’s lightened skin and augmented breasts emphasize what Gill (2007) termed the “sleek, toned, controlled figure [considered] essential for portraying success” (p. 4).

Gender Roles

Some forms of embodied capital seem to be culturally problematic, at least when viewed from the Kenyan context. As a collectivist culture, Kenyans hold high standards for individual expression as a reflection of national identity (Onwong’a et al., 2022). Kenyans believe strongly in the role of family, such that even among various tribal differences, the notion that they are “part of a clan” (p. 573) supersedes their desire for individual attention (Hofstede, 1980). Additionally, in collectivist cultures, power distance (Hofstede, 1980; Jandt, 2018) is high, meaning equality between groups is more accentuated, and even within groups, there is a high

degree of authority given to those perceived to have power (Onwong'a et al., 2022). For example, Minkov et al. (2013) claimed there are differences around the world for what is an accepted amount of nudity, acknowledging those differences extend along gender lines. In most African cultures and communities, there are various societal norms and expectations for women and younger girls with regard to decency, modesty, and the ethos of hard work (Mukhongo, 2014). For example, Nyabola (2018) stated that decency,

is a code word for social mores or norms. It implies that a woman has an obligation to protect others—men especially—from sexual thoughts inspired by her choice of clothing. ... “Decency” in this formulation is not simply protecting men from sexual thoughts, but is tied to the idea of women’s public sexuality as provocation. A woman can only permissibly exist public if she is completely asexual to a standard determined by men. The underlying philosophy is a return to purity that distorts the reality of Kenyan history in favor of a puritanical, Victorian—and thus colonial—perspective on women’s sexuality (pp. 131–132).

A tension arises as young Kenyan female internet users construct their own gendered narratives online, sometimes imitating U.S. American personalities’ lifestyles with large number of followers on social media. Celebrities like Kim Kardashian set up a standard for social media usage by constantly updating their profiles with controversial and (often) nude selfies. When Nairobi women emulate, adopt, and embed the practices of another culture into their own practices, they are met with criticism within their own culture (Mukhongo, 2014) because they are failing to uphold the collectivist ideas of group interest over individual interest (Jandt, 2018), and patriarchy, which gives men the ultimate authority to decide how women behave (Nyabola, 2018). According to Nyabola (2018), “Patriarchy wants women to remain unseen in the public

sphere; and women's issues to remain subordinate to the concerns of men" (p. 136). Ligaga (2020) described the tension that erupts as Nairobi women seek to reinvent themselves according to the practices of Western culture:

An Instagram image of Huddah Monroe posing naked and circulated in mainstream platforms will cause outrage because it demands that the public confronts the meaning of her body as deviant. Equally, a video of Vera Sidika twerking in her bathtub is meant to provoke. Akothee posts several pictures of herself in skimpy clothing, either dancing by herself or rubbing herself against her boyfriend. The comments such posts receive show the extent to which these women maintain their public notoriety through controversies. (p. 140)

Ligaga's comment strengthens Mukhongo's (2014) assertion that even though the Nairobi influencers behavior may be controversial and have negative connotations, it advances their social capital. Ligaga (2020) studied three young Kenyan female influencers and celebrities, Vera Sidika, Huddah Monroe, and Esther Akoth (Akothee), examining their "exhibitionist performances and self-representations online" (p. 126), which go against the cultural understanding of an African woman. Ligaga highlighted the way Kenyan tabloids position the three popular Kenyan based socialites as closed narratives of sexual immorality, but adamantly argued that "these women are breaking moral boundaries and making it possible for women to recategorize themselves as public subjects who can speak for themselves and control how their narratives circulate" (p. 139). Ligaga's findings reveal the tension between the adoption of the pseudo-culture represented by Western ideals, which are perpetuated by the role models Kenyans strive to emulate, and the strong desire of Kenyans to maintain their unique cultural values and morals within the highly competitive influencer economy.

My findings explicitly reflected this notion of embodiment and the subsequent tension it invokes. Some of the female influencers I followed challenged the deconstruction of stereotypes through everyday performances of their identity as they alter their dress code and participate in nudity, challenging the dominant and traditional conservative context within the Kenyan culture that women should not expose their bodies. However, the majority of female influencers in my study had been trolled or cyberbullied by their followers for going against Kenyan social and cultural norms.

As Mukhongo (2014) explained, “African cultural settings are still patriarchal and the general gender constructions are therefore in conflict with the emerging gender constructions as construed in online settings” (“Reconstructing postmodern narratives,” para. 1). Mukhongo illustrated the juxtaposition of Kenyan women’s offline behavior versus their online behavior. In offline settings, Mukhongo argued, women still maintain the traditional and patriarchal cultural norms of propriety. In online settings, however, the same women are “afford[ed] an opportunity to adopt varied identities” (“Reconstructing postmodern narratives,” para. 1). While in “offline settings” women often behave in ways that they interpret as being determined by the gender constructions as dictated by the patriarchal culture, in contrast, “online settings” afford them an opportunity to adopt varied identities in virtual environments” (Mukhongo, 2014, p. 4). By calling out nudity, borderline trolls and cyberbullies demonstrate the display of public consciousness that wages an online war of what is culturally acceptable according to Kenyans and their understanding of culture (Njathi & Wambui, 2023).

Njathi and Wambui (2023) articulated several case studies demonstrating the aggressive scaling-up of online gender-based violence (online GBV) on platforms in Kenya with misogynistic focal points, such as online hate, body shaming, trolling, cyberbullying,

stereotypes, discrimination, and gossip about female content creators aimed at silencing, shaming, embarrassing, and belittling them. The self-appointed online followers who hold influencers accountable by calling out their inauthenticity, utter deception, and idealistic portrayals of *real life* are known as “anti-fans,” according to Duffy et al. (2022, p. 1660). On several occasions within the Kenyan context, the concept of anti-fandom is primarily carried out by men acting as moral cops (Njathi & Wambui, 2023). These male anti-fans act against indecently dressed women in online and in offline public settings. For example, in 2014, a group of men attacked a woman in the street of Nairobi and stripped her naked because she was wearing skirts that were too short, claiming she was acting in an immoral way (Stoll, 2018).

This cultural conflict is a moment of tension is seen in the way Kenyans commodify self according to Western standards, which is implicit in the Instagram context. The backlash against Kenyan women who seek to embody the practices of other cultures has resulted in violence and political protests, not only by anti-fans, but also by proponents of women’s choice (Kochi, 2021). Nanjala Nyabola, a Kenyan writer, researcher, and political analyst, confirmed the violent acts, stating they are a result of the patriarchy that is “very strong in Kenyan society” with “unspoken morality codes about how women should dress in public and the consequences not being legal but actually harassment, abuse, and violence” (Kochi, 2021, para. 18). The offline, in-person acts of bullying are seemingly being replicated on platforms like Instagram as trolling. Hazardous, anti-fandom transgressions are mostly perpetrated on women, people of color, and the LGBTQ+ community. Fleichman (2022) lamented, “The higher up the food chain you are, the more open to criticism—and worse—you become” (para. 7). The price Nairobi Instagram influencers are willing to pay for the opportunity to adopt the mannerisms of the Western lifestyles they so admire is the direct effect of their pursuit of embodied capital.

Language

Other ways the embodied capital is visible within the Nairobi Instagram culture is *accent*. Since, “colonial experience trained people to regard ethnic accents as a sign of lack of sophistication” (Nyairo, 2004, p. 96), Nairobi influencers, especially the elite, use foreign accents as language conveniences to suit their performative roles. As observed in my study, the conscious decision by Nairobi influencers to switch between U.S. slang and accent is an attempt to achieve a level of sophistication by displaying their prowess. This code switching, popularly known as the *twang*, is a conscious decision used by Nairobi influencers who are trying to impress their followers with the English language, especially when they hold live sessions or use Instagram features that require voice. According to Bhabha (1994), as a form of mimicry, the adoption of a different accent is an attempt to present a higher social status (p. 11). The imitation of the *twang* (Ngwiri, 2020; Owong’ a et al., 2021), especially by media personalities and famous celebrities, is a heavily contested topic in Kenya. Aspirational influencers speak in accents of local street language slang, *sheng*, a fusion of English and Swahili, which is vastly acceptable by majority of the youth in Kenya. Yet, in an article in the *Daily Nation* newspaper titled *Spare Kenyans Foreign Accents; There is Little Prestige in “Twang,”* Ngwiri (2020) criticized the attempts by Kenyans to sound like *Wazungu* (White people) by arguing that “there is nothing as counterfeit as an African born and bred in the continent trying to ape an American or Briton in speech mannerisms” (para. 4). Terming the mimicry as “irritating,” Ngwiri emphasized it was time for Kenyans to deeply reconsider Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s (1993) intent when he spoke about the need to decolonize Kenyan’s minds since “no language is superior to another, and no accent is inferior to the other.” (para. 19)

To gain full acceptance requires that Nairobi influencers display internalized behaviors that define them as influencers with global reach. Acceptance requires Nairobi influencers to extend beyond the aspects of embodied capital, like qualities of the mind or body, and embrace the gathering and display of material possessions. This form of cultural capital is known as objectified capital.

Objectified Capital

Objectified capital are the material belongings that have cultural significance (Bourdieu, 1986). Nairobi influencers exhibit objectified capital in glamorized visuals of cars they drive, neighborhoods they live in, the restaurants they wine and dine in, and the clothes and accessories they wear. In their highly performative nature, each of the Nairobi influencers I interviewed embodied a personal brand depending on their influencer area of specialization. They demonstrated their online personas, flaunting their material wealth by posing pictures such as cars, mansions, travel, high-end events, and using backgrounds of exquisite locations, such as high-end restaurants, holiday destinations or first-class flight experiences for their videos and images. To build and secure their commercially viable personal brands, Nairobi influencers perform a lifestyle different from their realities. Nairobi influencers, especially the elites and mega-influencers, produce unique Instagram content that exudes lavish lifestyles from music, photography, fashion, hair, make-up, food, and travel. Women, specifically, uphold standards of beauty: light flawless skin, small waist in fashionable clothes, long expensive human hair, designer shoes, bags, and purses. Data gathered through my app-walkthrough method revealed Nairobi women influencers travel to countries like France and shop in designer stores in the richest shopping districts, like Champs Elysees Paris and the iconic Fifth Avenue in New York, where they go live on Instagram or take videos of themselves walking in and purchasing items.

When the influencers go *live* on Instagram, they unbox expensive handbags and shoes, such as Hermes, Louis Vuitton, Louboutin, Balenciaga, Chanel, and Gucci or *wining and dining* in top end restaurants based in world renown holiday destinations such as Santorini, Maldives and Dubai. Hearn (2008) asserted that self-branding involves,

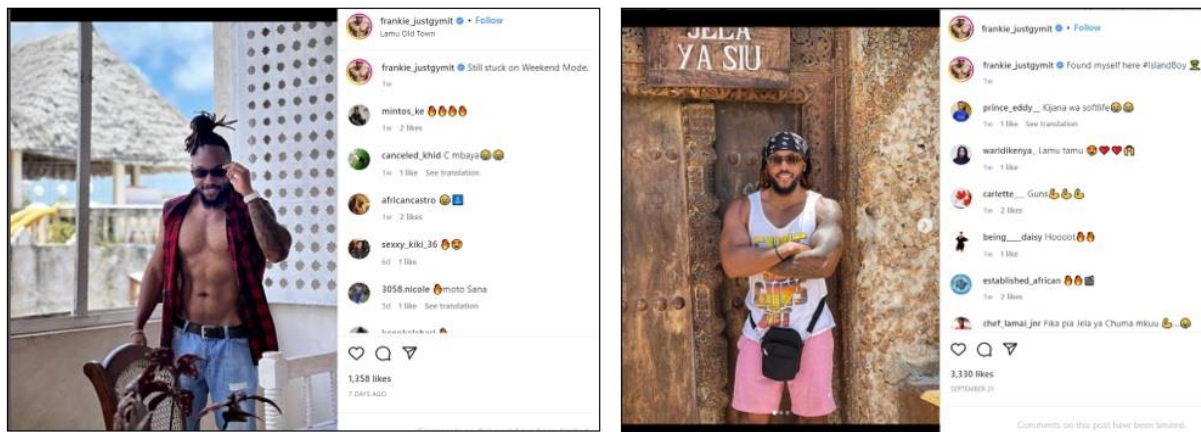
the self-conscious construction of a meta-narrative and meta-image of self by cultural meanings and images drawn from the narrative and visual codes of the mainstream culture industries. The function of the branded self is purely rhetorical; its goal is to produce cultural value and, potentially, material profit. (p. 164)

Ligaga's (2020) study found objectified capital presenting itself as "common images [that] include photos of women next to, or inside, luxury vehicles, in beautiful homes, inside the first-class sections of airplanes, in faraway resorts next to beaches, and so on" (p. 130). Marwick (2015) argued that "the Instafamous tend to be conventionally good-looking, work in 'cool' industries, such as modeling or tattoo artistry, and emulate the tropes and symbols of traditional celebrity culture, such as glamorous self-portraits, designer goods, or luxury cars" (p. 139).

A Nairobi based male fitness influencer, @frankie_justgymit exemplifies Marwick's (2015) comment with posts showing his muscles and tattoos, which are meant to exude sexiness and confidence (see Figure 15).

Figure 15

Objectified Capital: @frankie_justgymit



Note. Left Picture: Coach Frankie [@frankie_justgymit]. (2022, September 26). *Still stuck on weekend mode* [Photograph]. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ci9vlzetsLi/> Right picture: Coach Frankie [@frankie_justgymit]. (2022, September 21). *Found myself here #IslandBoy* [Photograph]. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ciwn15QLY1p/>

Some of the Nairobi influencers epitomize the emulation of the visual iconography of mainstream celebrity culture (Marwick, 2015, p. 139).

For example, a local influencer, Milly WaJesus and her husband recreated and personified Rihannas's baby bump outfit (see Figure 16), drawing mixed reactions from her followers, who thought the mimicry was overdone and she could try to be *original*, while other followers argued she looked better than Rihanna (Cartel, 2022; Opera News, 2022; Wambugu, 2022).

Figure 16

Objectified Capital: Milly WaJesus Posing Like Rihanna



Note. In these pictures, Milly WaJesus (in red coat on left), attempts to mimic Rihanna (in pink coat on right) because of the pop star’s celebrity status. Adapted from *Reactions as Milly WaJesus recreates Rihanna’s pregnancy look* [Photos], by D. Milimo, (2022, March 3). Pulse Live Kenya. <https://www.pulselive.co.ke/lifestyle/relationships-and-weddings/reactions-as-milly-wajesus-recreates-rihannas-pregnancy-look-photos/mhj45yt>. In the public domain.

Another female lifestyle influencer, Maureen Waititu, was called out by her followers for wearing fake designer brands (see Figure 17). Her posts went viral, attracting public criticism from her followers who trolled her for wearing a fake Chanel dress. Netizens made fun of Maureen’s dress, on which was written *CAHENL* instead of *Chanel* (Milimo, 2021), while pleading for Maureen to “stay in her lane,” meaning live within her means if she cannot afford the real Chanel dress.

Figure 17

Objectified Capital: Maureen Waitutu



Note. Left Photo: Maureen Waitutu sports a fake Chanel dress. Right photo: Millychebby, Waitutu's friend also wears a fake Chanel dress. Both influencers were criticized for their choice of clothing by netizens. Adapted from *Maureen Waitutu claps back after being trolled for wearing fake designer dress (Photos)*, (2021, January 21) Pulse Live Kenya (<https://www.pulselive.co.ke/entertainment/celebrities/maureen-waitutu-claps-back-after-being-trolled-for-wearing-fake-designer-dress-photos/vp0538z>). In the public domain.

In another incident, an influencer couple, Diana B and her husband Bahati were forced by their followers to address the fake expensive lifestyle they showcased on social media platforms. According to Milimo (2021), Bahati gifted his wife Diana B a new Toyota Parado TX, a four-bedroom mansion, and a piece of land listed for sale at \$223 million USD (see Figure 18), all in a period of one week. Bahati's actions were subject to public scrutiny through trolling as their followers questioned their source of wealth.

Figure 18

Objectified Capital: Diana Marua and Bahati



Note. Pictures of Bahati’s gifts to Diana Marua posted on Instagram on February 17, 2022 by Diana Marua (https://www.instagram.com/diana_marua/?hl=en).

From these case studies, it is clear that Nairobi influencers try to embody Instagram visual culture based on Americanized values in how they dress, shop, and socialize. Everything should be glamorous. Mukhongo (2014) argued,

On social media platforms, image is often more important than experience or knowledge. Users spend a lot of time to just get the perfect “selfie” for their social media page. How one looks on their social media page translates to money in the bank, and therefore, they are willing to spend a lot of time and money to get that perfect look for their followers. (para. 12)

In contrast, Damean (2006) contended that the media offers ready-made identities, inviting people to identify themselves “with certain figures, images, or positions. In our culture individuals learn to see themselves through the eyes of the others. They discover that their image is more important than their experience or knowledge. Since online users will judge the famous

personalities by their outfits and products they own, the personalities adopt an over-the-top, theatrical view of their own online presence or what can be described as “performance.” (p. 90)

Another exemplification of objectified capital is Jacinta’s story, which was highlighted in Chapter 2. Jacinta is a food influencer who took out a loan to remodel her kitchen to match her international chef role model influencers, such as Jamie Oliver and Gordon Ramsey. Monroe, another Kenyan influencer, posted pictures of her expensive designer luxury fashion items that included jewelry and shoes, such as Christian Louboutin white pumps, and a Louis Vuitton bag (Mukhongo, 2014). Items such as Monroe flaunted are far beyond the reach of the majority of Kenyans, who struggle with the ever-increasing high cost of living and rising poverty, as Mukhongo (2014) argues.

While the examples provided in this section might sound like typical commodification and self-branding strategies, some of interviewees I spoke to admitted to living beyond their means and showcasing a borrowed lifestyle, sometimes taking loans to afford a *fake* lifestyle, as in the case of Jacinta. To these Kenyan influencers, wearing fake designer brands; posing with borrowed clothes, houses, or cars that do not belong to them; and taking loans to finance a lifestyle they cannot sustain is one way of attaining the coveted micro-celebrity status. This fake persona gives anti-fans a reason for trolling, as seen in the case of Maureen and Bahati.

To distinguish the depth of the influencer ideology that drives the embrace of objectified capital, Kenyan influencer, Manzi wa Kibera’s (meaning a girl from Kibera) interview titled, “Broke and famous! Inside Manzi wa Kibera’s house in Kibera!” on Eve Mungai’s (Mungai Eve, 2021) YouTube channel confirmed the influencer moved back to Kibera from an upmarket Nairobi estate due to the high cost of living. Kibera is arguably regarded as the biggest, largest, and poorest slum in Africa (Desgropes & Taupin, 2011). As an arising influencer, Manzi wa

Kibera relies on friends for make-up and clothes to maintain her Instagram lifestyle, as she cannot finance the coveted lifestyle herself. Manzi wa Kibera was unable to secure a single any brand deal, a fact that her interviewer, Eve Mungai found quite disturbing during the interview. Ironically, Manzi wa Kibera's 63.3k followers interact with an Instagram page that showcases a life of opulence concealed with lies and deceit. Manzi wa Kibera previously admitted to having lied to her fans (see Figure 5), claiming to have bought a brand new Toyota Prado TX.

On *Techmoran*, a local blog in Kenya, Waithera (n.d.) discussed the idea of *being super fake* (para. 5) in "5 Things Kenyan Female Influencers Need To Stop Doing." Being "super fake" (para. 5) is a notion Waithera obstinately resisted, arguing that being fake goes against the very culture of Kenya. Waithera argued,

Kenyan female influencers always seem like they are trying too hard to be something they are not. For one, they would rather have a fake accent, fake hair, fake everything but rarely promote being your authentic self, which then makes other women feel as if you need to be fake or look a certain way to be liked as people; is this promoting the right culture? (para. 5)

Many of my interview participants fit the description of being super fake by presenting a life of perceived opulence, flashiness, a perceived sense of stability (as discussed in Chapter 2). Duffy et al. (2022) regarded the idea of *fakery* as the illusion of "having it all" (p. 1661) in terms of career, family, and femininity. Ironically, the concept of *fake it till you make it* is widely accepted by Nairobi influencers as the pinnacle of the attention-seeking economy; therefore, they view being super fake is worth the risk and potential cost, both monetary and social. A glance at my interviewees' profile pages on Instagram provides a clear example of Waithera's (n.d.) notion of *fakeness*. Nairobi influencers wear fake designer jewelry, clothes, lashes, and have

modified bodies, as shown with Maureen's case (see Figure 3). Other forms of fakeness witnessed in this study, although heavily contested as Kenya's struggle with its national identity, include wearing of human hair weaves and wigs, and having chemically relaxed hair. According to Roberts (2015), hair alterations are "un-African," (para. 1). According to BBC News (2019), hair is considered part of the Kenyan identity and cultural expression. The hair debate is a colonial experience that spilled over into independent Kenya where White colonial teachers did not allow Kenyan women to braid their hair. Instead, Kenyan girls were told they should tie their hair with ribbons and brush it, a practice that was a struggle for the Kenyan girls, given that kinky African hair will not straighten and hold in the same way as Caucasian hair (BBC News, 2019). Consequently, such experiences resulted into demeaning the African kinky hair. It is no wonder female Nairobi influencers boldly wear human hair weaves and wigs that sell for as low as \$110 USD to as high as \$4,000 USD for virgin human hair (Omondi, 2017) depending on levels of income. The hair industry in Kenya is worth \$99,300 USD (BreakingKenyaNews, 2022).

As an illustrative example of authenticity, Waithera's (n.d.) article invokes the debate on the notion of *fake vs. real*. The deliberation demands accountability on the undesirable standards and practices of Nairobi Instagram female influencers, while showing how they are entrapped in a socioeconomic and cultural bargain as they strive to enact themselves, to gain Insta-fame, and build their social capital to legitimize their digital entrepreneurial power in a globally competitive platform such as Instagram. Waithera's remarks question the authenticity of Kenyan female influencers while touching on the dynamics of cultural subversion embedded within the production of online cultural identities, potentially promoting the *wrong* culture. Nyairo (2004) argued that the media in Kenya plays the role of cultural gatekeepers, which often is harmful to

the development of cultural producers. Influencers on social media are not just navigating material success but also forging social networks that increase their immaterial assets (Ligaga, 2022, p. 298), a concept known as social capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Nairobi influencers leverage social capital by presenting themselves as experts who present their knowledge through their content. Bourdieu (1986) labeled this type of cultural empowerment as institutionalized capital. In this study, the interviewees exercised institutionalized capital by uplifting themselves as highly qualified to promote their brands.

Institutionalized Capital

Institutionalized capital, or cultural capital exists in the form of academic qualifications, which certify individuals with cultural competence and give individuals different levels of prestige and authority to individuals (Bourdieu, 1986). Institutionalized capital refers to things like credentials and qualifications; even seemingly small things, such as the title Doctor can give a person a large amount of institutionalized cultural capital. In the context of Nairobi influencers, credentials, qualifications, and titles like the highly coveted blue tick, content creator, or influencer give Nairobi influencers institutionalized cultural capital. The influencer titles and labels on their Instagram profiles display and underline the equivalent aura of a *Who's Who in influencer economy* meritocracy and give recognition of an individual's success in the influencer economy. With regard to profiling strategies, Nairobi influencers' profiles constitute self-proclaimed titles, like the immensely popular global Instagram hashtags: #bossbabe, #bosslady, #president of single mothers, #founder, #entrepreneur, #kenya's finest, #queen, and sometimes accolades like "Top 100 women in Africa," "award winner", asserting the influencers' cosmopolitan well accomplished self and alluding to the desire to belong to a certain distinguished class in the labyrinth hierarchy of Instagram.

Some of my interviewees bore titles like *CEO, founder, manager, and pioneer*, specifically because as, Njathi and Lee (2021) asserted in their study of social media influencers (SMI) in Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa, Tanzania, and Ethiopia, “SMIs are doubling as entrepreneurs with their own brands” (p. 106). Most of my interviewees spoke highly of their entrepreneurial spirit, inspired by their Western-based influencers, such as Kylie and Kim Kardashian, who have built multimillion dollar business empires (Frier, 2020). My interviewees spoke of running side gigs, hopeful to upscale their influencing gigs into full-time, small- and medium-size enterprises. Some of the influencers I interviewed had launched hair and beauty/make up products, hair salons, clothing lines (e.g., fitness wear), authored cookbooks, developed podcasts, practiced gaming, offered workshops and training on content creation and branding, operated boutiques, and engaged in public relations (PR)/ad agencies, leveraging their online presence to grow their business. From Ligaga’s (2022), Akothee, the president of Single Mum, runs a thriving tour and travel company, while concurrently acting as an assigned influencer for local brands like Peptang and Unga (Ligaga, 2022). Akothee represents “an icon of freedom for women. ... She is an important cultural icon whose use of social media, show ways in which women in Kenya can (re)invent themselves through digital media” (p. 298).

Disturbingly though, Nairobi influencers’ extravagant display of wealth has raised eyebrows, not only with the KRA (Njeru, n.d.), but also their followers who question their source of wealth and demand to know how they have quickly climbed the social hierarchy. Some influencers, such as Betty Kyalo, a leading influencer in Kenya, have had their source of wealth linked with the rising practice of money laundering (Opera News, 2021). Figure 19 depicts a tweet from @Benmorkea (2021) alluding that Betty Kyalo is a famous influencer and business entrepreneur who is engaging in this illegitimate trade famously known as *wash wash* (Plugged,

2021), having upgraded from what Kenyans call *clitocurrency*, which means sleeping around with rich men for money.

Figure 19

Institutionalized Capital: Betty Kyalo



Note. @Benmoreka [@obara_ben]. (2021, August 30). *Wait I left Betty Kayalo doing pussy laundry nowadays she also does money laundry and wash wash* [Tweet]. Twitter. https://twitter.com/obara_ben/status/1432238010347753473

Betty Kyalo, among other famous Nairobi influencers, such as Vera Sidika, has been accused of siphoning laundered money through her beauty parlor businesses while posing as an influencer or using her influencer gigs as decoy (MVI, 2021). According to the annual International Drug Control Strategy report (Shiundu, 2021), Kenya ranks high among global money laundering hotspots due to the growth in the country's mobile money. As a result, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has probed Kenyan commercial banks' transaction activities over money laundering cases (Musalia, 2022). Interestingly, beyond Kenya, the debate over influencers' money laundering endeavors has been a topic of interest in other parts of the globe, like Indonesia (Llewellyn, 2022). Additionally, the famous Nigerian influencer, Hushpuppi

pleaded guilty to money laundering more than \$24 million in total in a California court (BBC News, 2021; Clifton & Princess Abumere, 2021). He was sentenced to 135 months in federal prison (BBC News, 2022). Altogether, “money laundering is a complicated issue that has become a greater threat in the age of influencer culture” (Alobaid, 2021, para 7). These incidents raise eyebrows on the legitimacy and future of work of the creator economy.

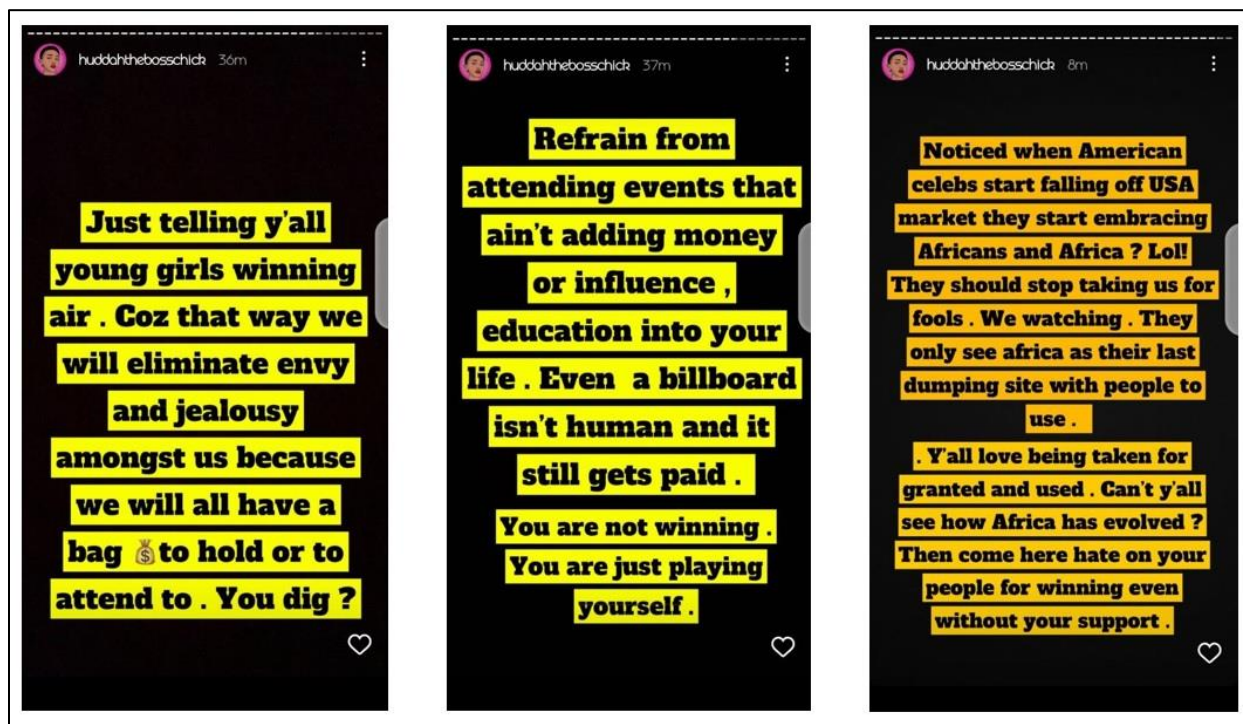
Institutionalized capital also manifests as identity constructs. Nairobi influencers often hinge their status with their educational achievements, such as lawyer, actuarial scientist, women in STEM, and engineer among other highly valued societal titles. Sometimes, institutionalized capital is achieved through social connections—networks, mentors, role models, and famous and renowned personalities, such as rich businessmen, media personalities, politicians, and celebrities. Nairobi influencers pose for pictures, post videos, or create live videos hanging out with these famous individuals as proof of their social capital cultivated from their networking skills. Mugambi, a 29-year-old male fitness influencer explained to me how he does this:

Whenever I see a high-profile person, I try to take pictures with them for the 'gram. I may not know them personally, and I do not have business directly with them, but posing with business elites in top end hangouts helps me build my brand.

Mugambi, like some of my interviewees, confirmed hanging out in high-end gigs, such as the premier annual events like Kenya International Polo Tournament, Concours d'elegance, Safaricom Jazz Festival, golf clubs, and premier private city clubs such as the Capital Club. Many of my interviewees stressed the need to work with prestigious international brands, which ostensibly they described as “making it,” a term referring to regularly emerging as a global brand and becoming as successful as the highly coveted Majimbo, who was discussed in Chapter 3. Top American influencers are associated with the good life. While social class beliefs are

nevertheless indeterminate, this populist view naturally encourages Nairobi influencers to emulate their brands' influencing tactics. A quintessential example is Fenty Beauty, Rihanna's brand, which was recently launched in Kenya (Matiko, 2022). The majority of influencers attended the Fenty launch for free (Ndungu, 2022) just to be associated with the launch of an international brand owned by an international artist, Rihanna. 34 years old Rihanna is the youngest self-made billionaire in America with a net worth of \$1.4 billion (GMA Team, 2022). Attending such events is likely to induce future work, while at the same time exposes influencers to richer brands of the same or higher caliber. Most importantly, attendance positions influencers as high caliber people in the society who received an invite to attend an "invite only" event, a top product launch in a high-end restaurant in Nairobi. The majority of Kenyans on Twitter and leading influencers like Huddah Monroe and actress Kate on Instagram "were not impressed with the influencers who did the gig for free, maintaining that they were being used" (Elnino, 2022, para 2). The event sparked a heated debate on the level of desperation influencers are willing to go to appear "bougee" with an American brand by a famous globally acclaimed artist, such as Rihanna. Huddah Monroe (Instagram handle: huddathebosschick) expressed her frustration (see Figure 20), warning, "Refrain from attending events that ain't adding money or influence, education into your life. Even a billboard isn't human and it still gets paid. You are not winning. You are just playing yourself (Enino, 2022, para. 4)." In general, the event received major backlash from content creators and beauty and make-up influencers, particularly in Kenya, Nigeria, Zambia and Zimbabwe, for gatekeeping (Onukwue, 2022).

Figure 20

Institutionalized Capital: Fenty Launch

Note. Adapted from *Huddah Monroe Throws Shade at Kenyan Celebrities Attending Events Like Fenty Launch for Free (Screenshots)*, by D. Elnino (2022, May 31), ghafla! (<https://www.ghafla.com/ke/huddah-monroe-throws-shade-at-kenyan-celebrities-attending-events-like-fenty-launch-for-free-screenshots/>). In the public domain.

In their day-to-day self-presentation, Nairobi influencers as cultural producers exemplify three forms of Bourdieusian cultural capital and social capital to achieve economic capital, to become heterogeneous practices in the Nairobi Instagram network (Mol, 2002; Law, 1992). It is important to note that cultural capital varies in all societies (Bourdieu, 1986). Within the Nairobi Instagram culture, I encountered the three forms of Bourdieusian cultural capital, embodied, objectified, and institutionalized, revealing a range of global and local influences that characterize the Nairobi Instagram culture as a hybrid. At one end of the Nairobi Instagram culture spectrum are neoliberal, capitalist ideals, which are deeply entrenched. The desire for Nairobi influencers to be seen, heard, recognized, and commercialized determines, to a large

extent, the actions they take to commodify themselves into sellable beings. Despite both ideologies (commodification of self and self-branding) being conditions where Nairobi influencers are completely entangled with infinite labor, they are also the single most important apparatus that distinguishes content creators from ordinary users on Instagram.

The cases in this section highlight the colonial ideologies (see Grosfoguel, 2008) from which Nairobi influencers enact themselves. At the other end of the spectrum are cultural practices influencers gather from locally embedded realities, manifestations, and ties to the cultural histories of both Nairobi and Kenya. Both aspects of the spectrum become entangled, enacting one another, aligning, re-aligning, disrupting, conflicting, and converging as sites of cultural hybridity (Bhabha, 1995), where Nairobi influencers commodify themselves, which contributes to the messiness (Law & Singleton, 2005) and multiple realities (Mol, 2002) contested in the platformization of the Nairobi Instagram network, another aspect of Instagram as a fire object. In the next section, I use Bhabha's (1995) notion of cultural hybridity to examine the implications of Nairobi cultural production on the greater Instagram culture.

Nairobi Instagram Culture: Hybridized and Commodified

Hybridity is understood as “the idea that identities are made up of all the different cultures with which they have contact. When two cultures or nations meet, ideas, language, and material goods are shared between them. That process of sharing forces them both to adapt and change. For this reason, there can be no “pure” Western or Eastern culture or nation. The act of creating a division creates an “Other” to engage with and to integrate (a process that denies it its identity)” (Fay and Haydon, 2017, 1995, p. 11). Although Bhabha's (1994) theory on hybridity and its analytical relevance has been criticized as “entirely insufficient for theorizing contemporary global power” (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 146), because the world is beyond the

kind of binary thinking of colonial/postcolonial antagonisms analyzed in Bhabha's conceptualizations (Hardt & Negri, 2000), I derive valuable lessons critical to making my argument of the intersection between the Instagram global culture and the Nairobi culture. My hypothesis stems from other global cultural studies theorists like Kraidy (2002) and Pieterse (1995), who defended Bhabha's notion of cultural hybridity, especially when contextualized in a global perspective. While Kraidy argued that cultural hybridity "[offers] foreign media and marketers transcultural wedges for forging affective links between their commodities and local communities," (p. 148), According to Fay and Haydon (2017), Pieterse stated that "an interpretation of globalization as hybridization shines a light on the presence of 'Other' cultures already at the core of metropolitan cultures. In this way, Pieterse challenges the idea that globalization is a one-way act of 'Westernization.'" (p. 60). Both cultural logics are crucial to a study on globalization based because they focus on common cultural blends. In contrast, Hardt and Negri (2000) explained that a globalized and technologically interconnected world had "absorbed the lessons of mobility, indeterminacy, and hybridity" that postcolonialism made so much of" (p. 76). In my study, I noticed that adapting hybridized and commodified features by Nairobi influencers is a form of survival tactic, to attain social and cultural capital, which is critical to their growth in the highly competitive global influencer economy. Ligaga (2022) emphasized the survival tactic notion stating, "The cultural entrepreneur is, therefore, the ultimate risk-taker, able to push back against societal expectations, innovative, visionary and intriguing yet elusive" (p. 290). Poell et al. (2021) submitted that "platforms allow cultural workers to find new avenues to audiences and visibility" (p. 7).

To fit into the global Instagram culture and be transformed into a viable commercial commodity that transcends geographical boundaries, young Nairobi content creators are

ingeniously and creatively adapting and reworking a symbiotic relationship with global trends to suit their sociocultural contexts. In ANT terms, Instagram, as a fire object (Law & Singleton, 2005), becomes a site of global cultural intersection, and thus, a site of multiple realities (Mol, 2002). The notion of identity, as Bhabha (1994) conceptualized, is one that is not fixed or static but flexible, a formation infused with cultures, nations, religious ideologies, and philosophies. Bhabha challenged the notion of a stable sense of self, either for individuals or countries, arguing that identity should be understood as hybrid. Benyera (2017) cited Ndlovu-Gatsheni's book, *Coloniality of Power in Postcolonial Africa. Myths of Decolonization*, in which Ndlovu-Gatsheni stated,

Western values and concepts coexisted uneasily with African concepts, partly because colonialism manipulated and deployed both Western and African concepts as tools of control, domination, and subjection, destroying some of the concepts and values originating in precolonial Africa and reinventing others. (Benyera, 2017, p. 63)

My conclusion, based on the writings of Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Bhabha (1994), is that the hybridized Nairobi Instagram culture is fraught with tensions and contradictions, which are combustible elements that feed the Instagram fire object, making the Nairobi Instagram influencer network volatile. Instagram's perpetuation is partly fueled by the creators' survival strategies and the need to stay relevant in their performative identity acts, which are tied to global Instagram economies. Cultural deficiencies in the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy are triggered by the notion of cultural hybridity, or the competing forces governing influencer behavior, sometimes by indigenous principles and practices, and sometimes by the sway of Western ideologies and cultural behaviors.

Several layers of messiness (Law & Singleton, 2005) are discernable within the concept of cultural hybridity. As demonstrated by the examples of embodied, objectified, and institutionalized capital in this chapter, the domination of American culture is visibly present among Nairobi influencers' content, which is causing a widening disconnect with the local culture to take root. Influencers' attempts to infuse American values into the Kenyan cultural space creates a messy reality (Mol, 2002) of poorly defined identity and confusion about what it means to be authentically Kenyan. The infusion of foreign culture by influencers, who desire to compete on a global stage, is contested by other Kenyans who argue that emulation waters down the true Kenyan cultural values and identities (i.e., using foreign accents, mimicking clothing styles, reproducing visual content, body modifications). For example, Were (1982, p. 7) contested,

The criticism here is that Kenyans are wholesale, nay blind, imitators of the West. And like the Westerners themselves, Kenyans have become first-rate worshippers of materialism, but with a difference. For, unlike the Westerners whom they adore, Kenyans are not creative which is not surprising since they spend all their time trying to ape others. And by definition caricatures have no need for originality and innovation.

Vander Casaqui (2015) argued that "a ubiquitous American presence, through the dissemination of goods, commodities, and the American way of life, as a new form of colonization, supported by a spectacular society, where the symbolism of consumption is seen as a form of power." (para. 3). While I argue that hybridity of culture bears inescapable elements of the local and Western cultures that establish their core affinity in the production of a Nairobi Instagram culture, to which influencers (un)consciously perform and give new meaning to, other scholars, like Appadurai (1996) would view Nairobi Instagram practices as "a fear of cultural

absorption by polities of larger scale” (p. 48). The resentment and contestations with cultural hybridity are that Kenyan culture is being lost in between, or assimilated into the American influencer culture, a concept known as cultural colonialism (Jandt, 2018). Kenyans are experiencing a tension related to the preservation of their culture while promoting a stronger and more realistic perception of their country by outsiders, as alluded to by some of my interview participants. This tension is heavily influenced by the perceived need to create a certain image within the Instagram platform that will propel Kenya’s standing in the world as a developed, modern, and individualized nation. Interviewees in this study attempted to present the commodification of self as a positive step toward greater economic and cultural freedom. The findings of the study, however, challenge the notion that commodification of self leads to greater freedom; instead, there is evidence that suggests a new type of colonialism is taking root in the Kenyan culture and infiltrating the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy. Therefore, it is important to analyze whether the commodification of Nairobi Instagram influencers, as expressed in cultural reproduction, should be viewed as colonialism or emancipation.

Nairobi Instagram Culture: Colonialism or Emancipation?

Jandt (2017) defined the concept, “cultural imperialism of colonialism” (p. 381) as another form of colonialism, stating that cultural colonialism is “the practice of a more powerful nation to impose its culture over less powerful societies” (p. 983). According to Jandt, “some [scholars] argue that the cultural imperialism of colonialism continues in many ways today, including military occupation, corporate colonialism, and media” (p. 959). Specifically, Jandt (2017) discussed “corporate colonialism” (p. 883), which is the process where a foreign business comes into a country and essentially takes over an industry like oil production; or large international companies like McDonald’s and Apple have influence throughout the world by

promoting language, customs, icons, and products heavily labeled with their brand to other cultures. Cultural icons from the United States are also diffused through the U.S. television and movie industry into the cultures of many countries around the world. Similarly, as Instagram continues its ubiquitous insertion in the lives of its users across the globe, it forges a new position in the lexicon as a verb, as in *I need to Instagram that*. The way Instagram has uniquely ingratiated itself into the daily lives of so many users from markets beyond the United States can arguably be viewed as corporate colonialism. Some scholars, like McCullough (2019) are pushing back on this argument, attesting that imported media is consumed by other societies because they *want* to consume it. These societies develop what Jandt called a “cultural dependency” (p. 899) with the imported media. Jandt added that media carry important cultural values; thus media can capture and dominate international markets to serve the originating country’s intention. I assert that as Instagram persists and multiplies, its originating country’s culture and artifacts diffuse throughout the host culture (e.g., Kenya) and become integral parts of the host culture’s identity. As Instagram continues to dominate all social media entertainment or creator economy facets of life, its iconic characters are recognized around the globe, demonstrating the presence of corporate colonialism.

The diffusion of cultural icons also contributes to the modern version of colonialism (Jandt, 2018). Cultural icons are products, activities, or people that are idolized or are highly important to a group of people or a culture. Viewed from this perspective, cultural icons fit the definition of cultural colonialism because the local culture can be suppressed or overshadowed by the infusion of the cultural icons the local culture embraces.

However, there are other factors to consider, as evidenced in the examples shared in this chapter. First, I understand the importance of recognizing that the Instagram reproduction of

culture in Kenya is emerging against the backdrop of a disheveled British colonial regime entwined with indigenous culture and the influence of Western media across Kenya. Fuchs (2014) stated, “Social media play a role in the acceleration of the economy, politics and culture” (p. 119). In an era of globalization, new cultural articulations emerge in Kenya as the practices and subjectivity of Instagram influencers in Africa demand reproduction of self, as global commodified subjects, to suit the new configurations that are globally competitive on the Instagram influencer economy model. Shem, a 32-year-old Nairobi lifestyle influencer I interviewed stated,

There is no such thing as being Kenyan on Instagram. When I get on the 'gram, it is proliferated with multiculturalism but mostly dominated by Eurocentric content. How do I compete with that? Especially when brands want borderless influencers with authentic trending topics

Another interviewee, Sheila, added,

I am transacting culturally on this app first as Kenyan, an African before anything else, but for me to compete globally I have infused Western culture into my content creation style. Western content is what trends. I think there is a balance that needs to be achieved but I think it is quite elusive when historically, Kenyans have not appreciated local content.

Shem's and Sheila's sentiments suggest that Nairobi influencers are culturally aware with *Kenyanness* but are compelled to find a balance between it and the global aspects of competing on Instagram as they act as selling points (i.e., commodities) on a global stage. This breeds new set of problems and concerns where social technologies become a pathway to “context collapse” (Marwick & Boyd, 2011, p. 122), where sustaining a verifiable online identity varies from self-

presentation of the authentic self based on the environment or audience. Stated another way, although digital creators exist in varying geographical and cultural contexts, they coexist in a single social global platform like Instagram, negotiating cultural realities differently but maintaining a global mindset. Poell et al. (2021) asserted that “platforms allow cultural workers to find new avenues to audiences and visibility” (p. 7). Appadurai (1996) elaborated about the new transnational global culture within global flows whereby everything from cash, people, and ideas to commodities, credit default swaps, and garbage become *de-territorialized* to such an extent that their movements tend to transcend national borders. This is certainly a reality among Nairobi Instagram creators who create content on a global platform influenced by U.S. trends on commodification practices. In this sense, Instagram has generated a new global cultural order by giving Nairobi creators an opportunity to “unleash the imagination” (p. 46) through affordances of being “de-territorializ(ed) persons, images, and ideas” (Appadurai, 1996, p. 74). Due to globalization, “more persons in more parts of the world consider a wider set of possible lives than they ever did before” (Appadurai 1996, p. 53) through what Appadurai (1996) called *mediascapes* and *ideascapes*.

Zawadi, a 24-year-old female part time influencer who lives and works in Nairobi stressed the idea of cross-pollination between the Kenyan and American culture:

And we got a long way to go, because you know we are associated to poverty and all the things the so-called shithole countries like ours attract. So doing an influencer gig and you’re just showing the *kibanda* (mostly impoverished local food kiosks) type of situation, I think it just furthers the poverty narrative and that is what most influencers run away from. I think they want you to experience Kenya the posh way. Even us, we could be fashionable! We do not walk around in lesos, hides, and skins and live on trees,

as they think. In the long run, not showcasing our Kenyanness could be bad unless we rise above appreciating our culture, then we could start showcasing this. Surprisingly, I see White people, who are settling in Kenya, advertise Kenya better than we do.

Zawadi's counter argument to Americanization of culture echoes Becker's (2016) statement that the "use of Instagram by many Africans [is] a counter strategy to images of 'Afro-pessimism: death, war, disease, famine, and wild animals'" (p. 105). The notion of Afro-pessimism, according to Becker (2016) and Enwezor (2006), is grounded on the use of visual photography to counter hegemonic narratives propagated by the global media industry from the Global North about Africa's socioeconomic disadvantages. A resounding example of Afro-pessimism is the Black Travel Movement (BTM), a group of African travelers and storytellers who have been capitalizing on Instagram's affordances to negate neocolonial narratives that depict Africa as poor and needy, waiting to be rescued by White saviorism (Arthur, 2022). Circulation of these kinds of Afro-pessimism ideologies can be viewed as a form of technological appropriation where young Kenyans use "new things in new ways" (Bar et al., 2016, p. 626) on Instagram to sell a positive story of Africa. Perhaps this action should be viewed as the new articulation of creating new modes of agency, unfortunately one that is undermining specific local cultural identities and values thus becoming a fertile breeding ground for Bhabha's (1994) notion of hybridity. Zawadi's sentiments also point toward departing from the common assumptions of emerging countries like Kenya as a third world/developing world (Mignolo, 2011) which is merely defined through a series of "lacks and a catalogue of 'deficits'" (Escobar, 2012, p. viii).

Contrary to Zawadi's idea of cultural cross-pollination, other influencers in my study were concerned about the ownership, preservation, and control of Kenyan culture. For instance, Makao, a 33-year-old food male influencer claimed,

It is an even deeper concern to see our cultural values getting eroded every day on platforms like Instagram & TikTok. Kenyan content creators should join the likes of Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Rasna Warah as cultural advocates of reviving Kenya's culture identity. They should in the business of preserving, conserving, and promoting the diverse culture to the world, utilizing the power of their Instagram influencer to organically promote the Kenyan culture, as opposed to imitating their Western counterparts.

This claim resonates with Bhabha's (1994) idea of colonized people as actors in their own identity and destiny, who can respond to the colonial discourse with possibilities of resistance to colonialism (p. 28). Nairobi influencers can take ownership of their culture and respond to the disturbing effects of the global Instagram culture by resistance of the Americanization of the Nairobi Instagram economy. More specifically, this call to action echoes the increasingly called upon decolonial theory suggested by some scholars (i.e., Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1993; Mignolo, 2011) to play a central role in addressing the challenges and crises of modern-day Kenya's complex, uncertain, and volatile cultural infiltration which if adapted could open up possibilities of an alternative future. The most common way of permuting decolonial theory is through Mignolo's (2011) concept of *delinking*, which is the need for developing countries to epistemologically delink from Western ways of thinking. Mignolo argued that one way to delink is by denaturalizing concepts and conceptual fields that totalize a reality. Similarly, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's (1972) decolonizing the mind entails fracturing the hegemony of

imperialistic existing traditions and legacies, such as English as a Western language and knowledge.

Despite the decolonizing framework, I observe that there is significant overlap; all three approaches (cultural hybridity, cultural colonialism, decolonialization) assert the asymmetrical power a global platform like Instagram yields and share a general consensus of the so-called digital colonialism as discussed in Chapter 3. Hence, Makao's quasi idea of cultural sovereignty on platforms like Instagram feels like a pipe dream, more than a stretch of imagination of what a Kenyan Instagram culture would ideally be. At the heart of the platform are deeply rooted structural affordances that complicate and transcend cultural independence of any state or community. Take, for instance, Norway's photo law that bans social media influencers and advertisers from using filters due to proliferating unrealistic beauty standards and mental health (Nargi, 2021). The law is considered ineffective and likely to cause more harm than its intended good (Chiu, 2021; Nargi, 2021). Whereas the emphasis for this chapter has been cultural reproduction, and the evolving ways in which Nairobi influencers commodify and brand themselves, rather than cultural competence for Nairobi influencers, the critical consciousness needed to foster cultural preservation or decolonization may be beyond the scope of this chapter. It is I to blame content creators for the erosion of the Kenyan cultural values, or to place responsibility of rebuilding it on them and completely ignore critical external factors that have contributed to its erosion, such as colonialism, poor governance, education power dynamics, the power of the DICs, and politics of inclusion.

Conclusion

It is impossible to the isolate the Nairobi Instagram culture from the Nairobi or Kenyan culture. Aspects of the Nairobi Instagram economy are interwoven with the infrastructure of the

capital city of Kenya, the diverse ethnic cultural backgrounds represented in Nairobi, and the desire of Nairobi influencers to replicate what they deem as successful ventures by Western content creators, particularly in the United States. Specifically, the ways in which the Nairobi Instagram culture occurs, is practiced, and enacts itself, are coproduced by the everyday lived reality, first and foremost, of being a resident of Nairobi. This chapter contained an examination of the practices and subjectivity of Instagram influencers in Africa as commodified subjects of a global cultural phenomenon of platformization. The starting point for the discussion was the continued role of colonialism in the postcolonial Nairobi culture of the 21st century. Because remnants of colonization remain embedded in Kenyan culture, Nairobi Instagram influencers constantly negotiate between authenticity and commercialization as they seek to appeal to a broader, global social media audience. The messy and complex reality (Law & Singleton, 2005) of being an Instagram influencer in Nairobi constitutes a moment of tension which the influencers struggle to negotiate.

Bourdieu's analysis of cultural capital provided a backdrop to explore how Nairobi influencers display embodied, objectified, and institutionalized capital in their pursuit of Instagram fame. The desire of Kenyans to hold traditional Kenyan values (i.e., dress, body appearance, and behaviors) was juxtaposed against presenting Nairobi influencers as modern and globally appealing, resulting in an entanglement of postcolonial ideologies about individualism and deeply embedded philosophies of collectivism based on Kenyans' long-standing history as colonial subjects. When discussing cultural hybridity, Nairobi influencers live in a constant state of alignment and re-alignment between the two opposing ideologies, attempting through commodification of self to bring a convergence of old and new into a hybridized Instagram culture. It is this drive for commodification that ultimately illuminates a new type of colonialism,

“corporate colonialism”. As Nairobi influencers chase the dream of becoming global players in the Instagram culture, they ultimately sacrifice the freedom they gained when colonialism ended in Kenya. They trade their emancipation as a culture for the corporate colonialism of Instagram, where they conform and reform their identities to appeal to both Kenyans and the world. Nairobi influencers fuse local cultures with global representations to produce themselves as commodified, viable persons who are innovative, adaptable, inventive, and original digital entrepreneurs. Inherently, the global flows of Instagram simultaneously influence the modes of local cultural production. Hybridization occurs in the adaptation of an imported culture of Instagram, which depicts a confluence of cultures as well as provoking questions on cultural infiltration, and (im)possibilities of decolonizing the Nairobi Instagram culture.

CHAPTER 5: WILLING BUYER-WILLING SELLER: THE PLIGHT OF INSTAGRAM INFLUENCERS IN AN UNREGULATED CREATOR ECONOMY

Introduction

In Nairobi’s Instagram influencer network, the messy complexity of platformization is comprised of incongruous layers of resistance and acceptance, in part an indication of the challenged regulatory and policy frameworks that aim to legitimize and regulate the overall digital creator economy in Kenya. Kenya holds the coveted title *Silicon Savannah* (Akamanzi et al., 2016; Donner & Locke, 2019; Friederici et al., 2017; Marchant, 2018). The image is primed by perceptions of M-Pesa¹⁸ and Ushahidi¹⁹ as technological powerhouses (Nyabola, 2018), which are similar to technological solutions designed by GAFAM²⁰ in the United States (Kwet, 2019). The Kenyan government “is desperate to maintain Kenya’s reputation as a technological mecca” (Nyabola, 2018, p. 209); however, as the interviewees in this study agreed, Kenya has yet to emphasize and enact policies that will guide the platform economy and impose across-the-board standards for individuals who desire to capitalize on the economy through content creation. This chapter exposes the messiness, tensions, and invisible moments of translation (Callon, 1986; Mol, 2002) of the unregulated digital creator economy in Kenya that Nairobi content creators must navigate if they wish to be successful in the global Instagram economy. I raise concerns about the globalization of platforms, the lurking role of the platform governance, and the role of Kenyan government as an actor and a regulator in the Nairobi platformization translation process. The discussions in earlier chapters about the politics of inclusion (Chapter 2), power dynamics (Chapter 3), and the entanglements of a hybridized culture (Chapter 4) set the

¹⁸ Africa's most successful mobile money service for over 51 million Africans in seven countries

¹⁹ Kenyan nonprofit crowdsourcing platform that facilitates data collection for a variety of purposes

²⁰ Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, and Microsoft

tone for this chapter's examination of the dichotomy between the glitz of the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy and the dark side of an unregulated and haphazard architecture that supports the economic ventures of many Nairobi citizens. The findings are set against the backdrop of the unique Nairobi context in which platformization unfolds within the larger Kenyan socioeconomic, cultural, and political landscape.

Nairobi content creators hold a misperceived sense of stability, freedom, and democracy, which they derive from potential avenues for economic empowerment and growth. As the Instagram economy entrenches itself, this illusion is like an enticing bauble that beckons Kenyans to examine its glitz and glamour. However, a dark side lurks in the shadows as invisible moments of translation (Callon, 1996; Mol, 2002) that hide an obfuscated payment structure, which only benefits those at the top of the power pyramid as described in Chapter 3. Nairobi influencers experience distinct pay gaps when compared to their counterparts in developed countries. Additionally, the shadows obscure the messy realities (Law & Singleton, 2005) of overexploitation, double taxation, precarious labor, pay gaps, social justice and fairness issues like algorithmic bias, privacy intrusion, cyberbullying, trolling, shadow banning and exclusion, and other harms, such as those relating to breaches of digital security and privacy. Altogether, the dark side of the Instagram influencer model, illustrated by these messy realities, leads to the development of multiple moments of tension (Mol, 2002). As study participant, EHUD, Ajira's project director, suggested, "a million [Kenyan] young people [were] earning decent wages from digital and digitally-enabled work by the year [2021]," an alluring facet of the glitzy and glamorous bauble which is the Nairobi Instagram economy. Yet, the darker and invisible moments of translation (Callon, 1996; Mol, 2002) hidden within the structure of the economy challenge the Kenyan government's vision for the future of online-mediated work. Hence, the

emergence of the platform economy calls for novel, well-thought-out, and sustainable regulatory approaches if substantial economic benefits are to be witnessed for some or all actors in the network. The government, as one of the five major actors and regulators in the Nairobi Instagram network along with Instagram, influencers/content creators, brands, and the internet, can also be viewed in terms of Castells' (2011) networking power. Networking power is power over who and what is included in the network, and is sometimes manifested through state, political, or military power (Castells, 2011). Platform scholars (de Kloet et al., 2019; Gillespie, 2018; Gorwa, 2019; Poell et al., 2019; Van Dijck, 2020, 2021) argued there is a need for government intervention in platform regulation to ensure all actors receive the full benefits from platforms they are entitled to have. Specifically, de Kloet et al. (2019) emphasized there is a pressing need for governments and other regulatory bodies to intervene and regulate the industry amid the fast platformization of emerging markets. In the process of datafication and platformization, digital platforms are fostering the reconfiguration of existing business models (Cohen, 2019; Srnicek, 2017; Zuboff, 2019). Therefore, this chapter answers the research question: "How can the Instagram influencer ecosystem be governed in a way that is equitable, inclusive, and sustainable to all countries while mitigating the challenges, threats, and opportunities of digital content creators in an emerging market?"

The chapter is structured into three parts: platform governance, Kenyan government as an actor and regulator, and Kenyan government as a black box. In the first part, I define and conceptualize platform governance within ANT. Messy, complex, and multiple realities (Law & Singleton, 2006; Mol, 2002) threaten platform governance with both national and global jurisdictions. Second, I delineate the role of the Kenyan government as actor and regulator through an analysis of the emerging legal and policy-related concerns raised by this study's

participants. Their concerns include five threats to platformization in Kenya: the digital service tax (DST), infrastructural gaps, digital pay gaps, data protection and privacy, and content moderation. Together, these threats represent points of convergence and divergence within digital entrepreneurship that dictate the creator economy in Kenya. Finally, in the Kenyan government as a black box (Callon & Latour, 1981) I analyze the inner workings of platform governance, specifically for the creator economy. I offer policy recommendations through the concept of cooperative responsibility (Helberger et al., 2018) and coregulation (Lodge & Wegrich, 2012) as a feasible approach that could legitimize and regulate the Nairobi creator economy to equitably benefit all actors through platform governance and policy. The chapter concludes with the need for the Kenyan government to provide a legal and social framework by which the principles and standards for the creator economy are set.

Platform Governance

New business models, which are emerging around the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy, present an opportunity for greater platform governance. These new models challenge any existing regulatory frameworks, posing a problem for the Kenyan government. The Kenyan government is struggling to keep up with rapidly developing platform logics, a factor that strongly stood out as I conducted my fieldwork in Nairobi. In part, this is because of the nature of platforms, which extend their data infrastructures into new markets while entrenching their datafication of human activities through “rating, paying, searching, watching, talking, friending, dating, driving, [and] walking” (Poell et al., 2019, p. 6), arguably complicating their already obfuscated model. According to Couldry and Mejias (2019b), data colonialism uses “social quantification” (p. 4) to turn social relations into data relations as a process of capitalist/colonial resource extraction. The growth of the Instagram influencer economy model in Nairobi feeds

Meta with new data. As demonstrated in previous chapters, the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy creates new opportunities for digital entrepreneurs to earn money through the commodification of self. Likewise, the economy presents new advertising avenues for brands and payment models; new opportunities for the government to tax workers in the digital workplace; and new challenges for tech Think Tanks, policymakers, civil society, government, academia and media to explore the field of labor rights and the platform economy. Altogether, the rise of the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy prompts the possibility of new pathways for sustainable regulation and policies to legitimize the new digital workplace when viewed as a viable creator economy.

While challenges and threats embedded in platformization (e.g., precarious labor, DST, pay gaps) continue to sprout and permeate the creator culture economy, Gillespie (2018) claimed few scholars have taken time to probe platform governance. The lack of scholarly inquiry into this important topic is especially keen in emerging markets where issues of ownership and regulation, as seen in previous chapters of this dissertation, tend to be heightened. The majority of existing literature on platform governance consists of general international policy discourse and reports from technological think tanks, policymakers, and civil society actors. Anecdotal evidence is presented in the media but empirical data to support the anecdotal claims are lacking.

The existing literature on platform governance includes the writings of Helberger et al. (2018) and Popiel (2021). Helberger et al. argued that it is of high importance for platforms to take up their role as organizational and regulatory actors who monitor key public values, but all actors in the network must collaboratively share the risk of determining and operationalizing public values, such as “transparency, fairness, equal treatment, consumer protection, safety, data protection, and labor rights protection” (p. 5) which are a “result of the dynamic interaction

between platforms, users, and public institutions” (p. 10). Popiel’s content analysis of the current international policy debate surrounding datafication and platformization included policies from developed world regions, such as United Kingdom, Europe, and North America, and underrepresented regions, including Latin America (e.g., Mexico) and South Asia (India). However, Popiel did not address policy formation in emerging markets like Africa. Specifically, Popiel identified problems and challenges ranging from the definition of policy boundaries and coordinating a comprehensive policy response to policy problems like market dominance and privacy risks to the spread of disinformation, perpetuated by digital platforms. As the policy debate rages on, there is contemplation of legal and regulatory tensions that question the role of the state in clear articulation of policy goals and values to advance public interests on interventions like data rights and privacy, information access and freedom of expression (Popiel, 2021).

Western scholars have taken an interdisciplinary approach in examining the tensions and potential harms of the platform economy. Their efforts emphasize the gap at the intersection of social media studies, governance, and law, focusing specifically on marginalized actors within the social media platform’s ecosystem. Vulnerable actors include digital content creators and consumers of social media (Duffy, 2017; Frier, 2022). Recent academic conferences also confronted the pernicious topic of platform governance. For example, the Global Perspectives on Platforms and Cultural Production in Amsterdam (June 1–2, 2022), the Reimagining Platforms conference in Edinburgh (October 31, 2022), the Social Media Monetization: Legal Tensions and Influencer Perspectives in Amsterdam (October 4, 2022), and IT4Change’s Feminist Perspective

on Social Media Governance Roundtable in India (April 19–20, 2022)²¹ considered new business models emerging within social media platforms to underscore the challenges faced by influencer creator economies. Actors who develop regulatory frameworks are struggling to keep pace with managing emerging tensions and potential harms in these economies, such as overexploitation, precarious labor, and monetization. Attendees at each conference venue grappled with the emerging critical discourse between digital media cultures, platforms logics, and law, and interrogated how to catalyze the creator economy that remains highly understudied, from an interdisciplinary perspective. At the Utrecht University workshop on the legal considerations of social media monetization, van Es et al. (2022) specifically argued that content creators “are a newly crystalized category of attention aggregators” (para. 2).

In Africa, the conversation around platform governance is largely ignored. On November 9, 2022, the Alexander von Humboldt Institute for Internet and Society sponsored a multi-stakeholder dialogue session dubbed *Workers’ Rights and Platforms’ Responsibility: Towards a Fairer Online Platform Economy in Kenya*, one of the first formal conversations on the topic for the continent (Alexander von Humboldt Institute for Internet and Society, 2022). Organizers emphasized that the majority of online workers in Kenya are under the age of 35 years old and live in urban areas. These workers use platforms for a range of income needs, sometimes as supplemental income, but often as the primary source. One session attendee asked whether

²¹ Global Perspectives on Platforms and Global Production <https://globaldigitalcultures.uva.nl/content/news/2021/12/conference-global-perspectives-on-platforms-and-cultural-production.html?origin=GZy4KhLQR%2FmpfzDpeAeQog>
 Reimagining Platforms <https://blogs.ed.ac.uk/reimagining/>
 Social Media Monetization: Legal Tensions and Influencer Perspectives <https://www.uu.nl/en/events/social-media-monetization-legal-tensions-and-influencer-perspectives>
 Feminist Perspective on Social Media Governance Roundtable <https://itforchange.net/sites/default/files/2188/Roundtable%20Synthesis%20Report.pdf>

stakeholders have a responsibility to ensure online workers' rights are secure, and practices toward workers remain just and fair. The attendee advocated for balance between the needs of all stakeholders, both platform owners and online workers, which the attendee stated can only be accomplished through regulation. Other attendees emphasized the challenges associated with regulation: nebulous hierarchies, an inability to substantiate the number of online workers, and difficulties in determining both the scope and marketing share of the workers' activities. One attendee argued for more empirical findings prior to forming regulations, which would give Kenyans more opportunities to establish their livelihoods on the platforms and prevent premature policies that might thwart the industry's growth. What is needed now, this attendee put forth, is policies that will provide social protection, especially for women who engage in online work, to prevent further violence toward online workers, both on and offline. The conclusion reached at the session was a need for collective action toward platform sustainability, and more empirical research into the social and legal implications of the creator economy.

Platform governance entails two intertwined forms: *of* platforms and *by* platforms. Gillespie (2017) differentiated between the two forms, arguing that governance of platforms includes past policies designed to delineate the government's obligations toward any content the government generates. In contrast, governance by platforms refers to the autonomy of the platform to determine content, interaction, and brand influence (Gillespie, 2017). Poell et al. (2022) summarized the two forms as the difference between who can, "set the legal boundaries of what can be exchanged on platforms and who can determine how content can be created, distributed, marketed, and monetized online" (p. 81). Both Gillespie and Poell et al. drew strong demarcations between general oversight and specific content regulation. Governance *by* platforms, although most admittedly the recommended way to best regulate platforms (Gillespie,

2017; Helberger et al., 2018) is theorized as a very complicated process because of the deeply enmeshed factors involved in regulation, which include the domination of online platforms by U.S.-based corporations that impose globally-reaching decisions based on global data, which is primarily concentrated in the GAFAM corporations; the obscured nature of platform architecture, which includes algorithmic processes; the ways in which labor is divided between platform owners and online workers, including the promotion of public values (Helberger, 2018). This final factor of responsibility is a glaring reminder of the inequality that exists in the power structure of the platform, which Helberger stated would be “notoriously difficult” (p. 2) to overcome. Helberger’s comments echo those put forth by attendees at the Alexander von Humboldt Institute multi-stakeholder dialogue session in late 2022, where attendees wrestled with who is primarily responsible to set the socially fair standards for online work (Alexander von Humboldt Institute for Internet and Society, 2022). Platform governance concerns are a prime example of the messiness and complex nature posited within the global digital creator economy.

Messy and Complex Realities of Platform Governance

Platform governance, from an ANT perspective, was conceptualized by Law and Singleton (2005) as messy and complex realities, and by Mol (2002) as moments of tension and multiple realities. The reality of the two parallel activities—the Kenyan government’s agenda for platform governance and the speed at which the creator economy is developing in Kenya—underwrites the messy, complex, and multiple realities (Law & Singleton, 2005; Mol, 2006) of the creator economy in Kenya that at a global scale complicate the notion of platform governance. The messy and complex realities (Law & Singleton, 2005) most relevant to the notion of platform governance are the ideas of platform capitalism (Snricek, 2018), multiple

platform roles (Nyabola et al., 2022), policy silos and trade-offs (Popiel, 2021), and different global strategies (Snricek, 2018).

As the first messy and complex reality (Law & Singleton, 2005), platform capitalism (Snricek, 2018) erodes the idea of platform governance, which happens to be intricately embroidered by platform power as discussed in Chapter 3, creating moments of tension (Mol, 2002) between policy, design, and the business practices of platform owners. Additionally, Popiel (2021) argued that “datafication, platformization, and platform power exceed national jurisdictions, challenging existing policy paradigms and traditional legal frameworks” (p. 32). According to Gillespie, “The governance of platforms is marked by, and struggles with, this middle-ness, and the thorny questions of convenience and responsibility that come with it” (p. 3). The platform’s commercial interests interfere with the welfare of its users and public institutions as well as its regulatory actors (Helberger et al., 2018). Gillespie (2017) stated that platforms do generally police content and monitor user behavior for economic purposes. Likewise, platforms offer governments an enticing option for further involvement in users’ lives, which is attractive to some policy makers (Gillespie, 2017).

Platform capitalism is illuminated by the opaqueness of Instagram content moderation principles through algorithmic bias. For example, if we revisit the comments offered by my participants, Abdulla and Andrew, which were illustrated in Chapter 3, we find that the discontent Abdulla and Andrew felt with the Instagram platform centered on the escalation process by which user issues are addressed. Andrew complained, “There is no way to reach out to Instagram to complain.” Abdulla spoke to the analytical complexities related to algorithmic decisions, citing dissatisfaction with the platform’s control of content availability. The frustrations offered by my two participants echo the concerns of many consumers of social

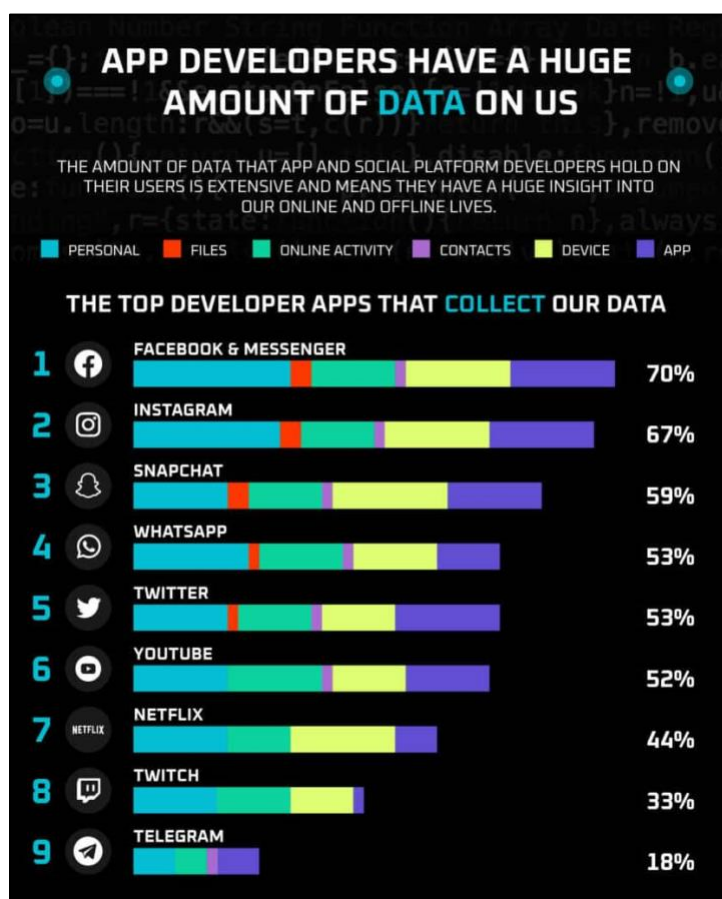
media. Even when consumers find the necessary channels to elevate their concerns, they are often met with a reminder of obscure community guidelines and content moderation policies embedded in fine print and technical language. Researchers have discussed how platform companies camouflage their content moderation policies using human rights lingo to conceal their profit-driven models (Arun, 2021; Díaz & Hecht-Felella, 2021). The carefully crafted models pose threats to government regulation and shield the platforms from the pressure exerted by the public and mainstream media.

In Instagram, platform capitalism thrives around extracting and using particular kinds of raw materials (i.e., data) where influencers' activities become the raw data (Srnicek, 2018), as discussed in Chapter 3. According to Barassi and Treré (2012), Web 2.0 "is understood as being based on users' participation" (p. 1270). The data of Web 2.0, therefore, is comprised of an increasing number of users engaging with platforms. With the onset of Web 2.0, the pool of potential data significantly expanded and new industries arose, with the goal "to extract these data and to use them so as to optimize production processes, give insight into consumer preferences, control workers, provide the foundation for new products and services, and sell to advertisers" (Srnicek, 2018, p. 41). The goal resonates with the commodification of freedom, which Castells (2011) saw as providing free communication and selling people access to global communication networks in exchange for surrendering their privacy and becoming advertising targets. Inasmuch as platforms like Instagram are free-to-access and leveraging user-generated content (Beer & Burrows, 2007), the role of influencers, such as Abdulla and Andrew, in Instagram's business model is what Newell and Marabelli (2015) labeled as a "24/7 walking data generator" (p. 5). As Zuboff (2019) argued, we often imagine we are getting services by Google and Facebook for free. Rarely do we think of ourselves as the raw material, but our lives are

being appropriated as the raw behavioral material that is being used to manipulate us in ways we can barely understand. Internet algorithms currently harvest more data every second than were stored in the entire internet just 20 years ago (Newell & Marabelli, 2015). Figure 21 illustrates Instagram's ranking as the second-highest consumer data holder among developer apps.

Figure 21

Personal Data Acquisition by Platform



Note. From *Hacker Hotspots: The Apps Most Vulnerable to Cybercrime*, by TechShielder, n.d. (<https://techshielder.com/hacker-hotspots-most-vulnerable-apps>)

Boateng et al. (2017) claims that tech giants are coming to Africa to harvest data. Such claims are stained with colonial undertones similar to the historical scramble for Africa's

resources (i.e., humans, minerals, raw materials). To accumulate profits, tech firms like Google and Facebook have encroached into consumers' private lives and are pursuing surveillance capitalism, whereby "we [consumers] are the objects from which raw materials are extracted and expropriated for Google's prediction factories" (Zuboff, 2019, p. 94). Zuboff (2019) argued that surveillance capitalism seeks to monetize the routines of consumers' daily lives through collecting excruciatingly minute data about their every interaction, which is used to modify consumer behavior and lead consumers toward a particular financial outcome. The tech firms make money through selling behavioral data to people or organizations that turn ordinary users' private data into valuable data in two ways: (a) selling that coveted information to other companies, and (b) using the data to directly intervene in users' daily lives and influence behavior for the tech firms' own ends (Couldry & Mejias, 2019a; Zuboff, 2019), as seen in the case of Cambridge Analytica during the Kenyan general election in 2013 (Nanjala, 2021). As proposed in Chapter 3, digital colonialism and data colonization marred with monopolization and information asymmetry as messy realities thriving with the spread of DICs to new uncharted markets. Once the tech giants fully operationalize their processes locally in an emerging market like Kenya, with weak institutions, few privacy and data protection laws, and a vast semiliterate population, this system will reproduce and reinforce social and economic divides (Arora, 2019). The question of how to regulate digital platforms while enhancing ethical use of the platform and preventing overexploitation is a struggle. Data regulation requires contesting "not only corporate ownership and control structures but also licensed flows of data" (Cohen, 2021, p. 11), "which are often obscured and [show up] where significant data collection occurs" (Popiel, 2021, p. 35) thwarting platform regulation internationally (Stilnovic & Hutchinson, 2022).

The second messy and complex reality (Law & Singleton, 2005) that complicates platform governance, according to Nyabola et al. (2022), is derived from the complex multiplicity of the roles platforms play in the societies that include harms associated with the rise of platforms from the interference with elections, mis and disinformation, harmful and hate speech, as well as siloed epistemic communities and economic inequalities. In the case of my participants, Instagram and social interactions become inseparable; both influencers and ordinary users became “24/7 walking data generators” (Newell & Marabelli, 2015), documenting almost every aspect of their everyday life. Social media platforms are deeply engaged in every sphere of communication, from the intimate and mundane to the public, professional, and political (Microsoft Research, 2021). Hence platforms’ nature of heterogeneity aligns with that of the actor-network where networks are the end product of diverse and distinct materials (Law, 1992). This kind of visualization of the Nairobi Instagram economy outlines the complexity of the network that thwarts the policy effort of tracing the actors and relations. Instead, it presents every moment of tension and coordination (Mol, 2002) that is occurring continuously and sometimes constitutes an invisible moment of translation. This nature of multiplicity (Mol, 2002) has led governments around the world to attempt “to develop a strategy to govern the digital public sphere, converging on what might be called a platform governance agenda” (Nyabola et al., 2022, para, 2). However, dealing with the problematic issue of platform governance is further compounded by the “radically different policy, economic and historical contexts in which platforms must be governed” (Nyabola et al., 2022, para. 5). Platform governance is not simply the responsibility of each individual nation, Nyabola et al. argued. Some policies are best implemented and upheld by national governments, including policies related to speech. Other policies, such as who has the right to accumulated data, transparency in advertisement require a

global response. Further, standards related to the use of programming such as artificial intelligence are best coordinated by collaboration between all nations to ensure uniformity and consistent implementation (Nyabola et al., 2022). However, the political, military, and economic legacies of colonialism prevent this from happening. UN agencies have tried to address the consequences of colonialism for decades to no avail (Kwet, 2019).

Inasmuch as various scholars argued for platform regulation, answering the question of who is responsible for platform governance remains complicated (Kwet, 2020a, 2020b; Khan, 2017; Pasquale, 2018; Srnicek, 2018; van Dijck et al., 2018). First, a determination must be made about whether it is governance *of* platforms or governance *by* platforms (Gillespie, 2017). Helberger et al. (2018) argued the need to understand who bears the responsibility to hold platforms “accountable, legally, and morally, for what is ‘shared’ through them” (p. 2). The “fundamental mystification of the role of platforms” Gillespie (2017) offered, is compounded by the fact that platforms present themselves as mere actors who facilitate public expression impartially, and are hands-off hosts, with an “information will be free” ethos (p. 4). Additionally, laws to govern platformization must be the responsibility of multiple actors in the network as the business of platformization is to “stimulate and capture user activity,” which Gillespie argued places platform governance in a different position than other laws that “allocate responsibility to one central actor” (p. 2). Likewise, Helberger et al. (2018) concluded that platform governance is a “problem of many hands,” (p. 3), and the solution to the problem must consider platform owner, users, and policy makers. Helberger et al.’s “problem of many hands” (p. 3) affirms Mol’s (2002) idea of multiple realities, which exposes the complexity of platform governance, especially in the context of the Nairobi Instagram influencer network described in Chapter 1. In the translation of the Nairobi Instagram network, different actors work in silos while pulling in

different directions. This reality complicates the notion of whose sole responsibility it is to legitimize the creator economy.

The third messy and complex reality (Law & Singleton, 2005) that complicates platform governance is what Popiel (2021) termed the “unequally distributed” (p. 35) attention to policy interventions perpetuated by policy silos and tradeoffs within international platforms. Popiel defined policy silos as,

Disconnects and imbalances between policy areas and jurisdictions, which sometimes persist even when policy experts attempt to bridge them. These silos manifest as either (1) a lack of or unequal attention to policy areas implicated in datafication and platformization or (2) as narrow bridges between policy areas that privilege one policy approach over another at the expense of more comprehensive interventions. (p. 35)

The important question to ask is whether analyses and solution recommendations are adequately designed to handle the entirety of the addressed problem (Popiel, 2021). Some policy areas, including competition policy, big data, and content issues are connected with major public concerns: big tech’s market power; data scandals like Cambridge Analytica; and content problems, from hate speech to political and health disinformation. Popiel argued that silos ultimately thwart robust policy interventions and, as a result, lead to deprioritizing critical policy goals and values.

In the context of this study, when I raised platform policy concerns regarding access, data protection, and overexploitation to a senior official in the Kenyan Ministry of Information Communication and Technology, Innovation, and Youth Affairs (MoICT), the official quickly defended the government. First, the government empowered young people with very “affordable” internet access and connectivity; the official emphasized it is the users’

responsibility to be cautious of what they do online. Second, the government has bigger problems to address, such as education and health, including the COVID-19 pandemic. Technology is not a government priority, according to this MoICT official. Third, the government-sponsored Ajira program (Ajira, n.d.) aims to make Kenya a leading freelancing hub by creating digital and digitally enabled work for nearly 1 million young people. The hope is that these young adults will use digital spaces to create sustainable income. Furthermore, the government hopes to bring significant value to businesses and society at large as part of elevating the platform economy. The aim of the Ajira program is to make Kenya a leading labor destination choice for business process outsourcing work globally. This is a classical colonial situation, where local leaders vie to position themselves advantageously in relation to global infrastructure and power—e.g., by administering the railroad and shipping infrastructures, and the population, during the colonial and postcolonial period to allow for more efficient resource extraction (Larkin, 2008). Ironically, although the government prides itself in how it is empowering young people through Ajira, the few government officials I interviewed could not share any success stories from Ajira when I asked for the success rate of those who had enrolled in the program.

The response from the Kenyan MoICT official underpins that the government ignores some critical policy issues. Most importantly, the official's comments show there is an imbalanced dimension of policy priorities arising from platformization, whereby competing socioeconomic-political perspectives dictate government policy interventions across various actors in the network. Since this imbalance presents incongruities, it may involve tradeoffs between government policy priorities and resources, further amplifying silos (Popiel, 2021)

within the network. Popiel (2021) disapproved of such temporal concerns, arguing that introducing tradeoffs has the potential to constrain policy interventions. Popiel argued,

Aside from temporal tradeoffs, the inquiries often lack sequential thinking about policy design, potentially contributing to temporal silos, namely disconnects between policy interventions, at different time points. Such silos can manifest as false tradeoffs between policy options that appear as substitutes but can become complementary on a temporal plane. (p. 39)

Altogether, the inconsistencies becoming a breeding ground for moments of tension (Mol, 2002) among actors, undermining any policy responses to problems arising from platformization.

The fourth factor that complicates platform governance is the fact that although platform companies have common interests, they tend to expand to different markets, affecting country-specific regulatory frameworks. Therefore, formulated policies may overlook some market and operational differences (Srnicek, 2017) due to varying business models (Masnick, 2021). For example, Instagram Lite launch to people in over 170 countries (Meta, 2021) might mean varying policy interventions between the affected countries. Additionally, Meta's stock price plummeted in 2022, resulting in layoffs and hiring freezes (Roose, 2022), which might lead to a change of business strategy in different markets.

The reality of policy variance between countries underscores the concept of platforms as fire objects (Law & Singleton, 2005) that keep evolving, taking different shapes and format based on prevailing contexts and circumstances. Although the "pace of technological change needs to be matched by the pace of policy review" (Australian Competition & Consumer Commission, 2019, p. 3), it is nearly impossible for policy enactment to keep up with the dynamics of the changing technology. Indeed, platforms are continually changing at

unprecedented speed (Cunningham & Craig, 2019; Microsoft Research, 2021). Examples of the rapidly changing platform environment include Instagram's constant iteration of features and affordances (Cunningham & Craig, 2019), such as the highly contested, ever-evolving algorithmic changes discussed in Chapter 2; the Kardashian uproar, which highlighted Instagram complaints on reels changes that appeared to copy TikTok (Vanian, 2022); and creator portfolios Hutchinson (2022). Although these iterations are designed to give a competitive edge to Instagram against other social media platforms, they can be frustrating to keep up with for policymakers, researchers, and influencers.

The platform governance complications outlined here convey different policy implications but also indicate multiple and varied consequences for all connected actors, demanding policy interventions that align with the scope of potential threats, opportunities, and challenges, depending on the context. In response to Helberger et al.'s (2018) concern about where the responsibility lies to hold platforms "accountable, legally, and morally, for what is 'shared' through them" (p. 2), my interview findings revealed the government is the dominant actor that holds the financial, executive, legislative, and judicial powers to bring all actors together through platform governance.

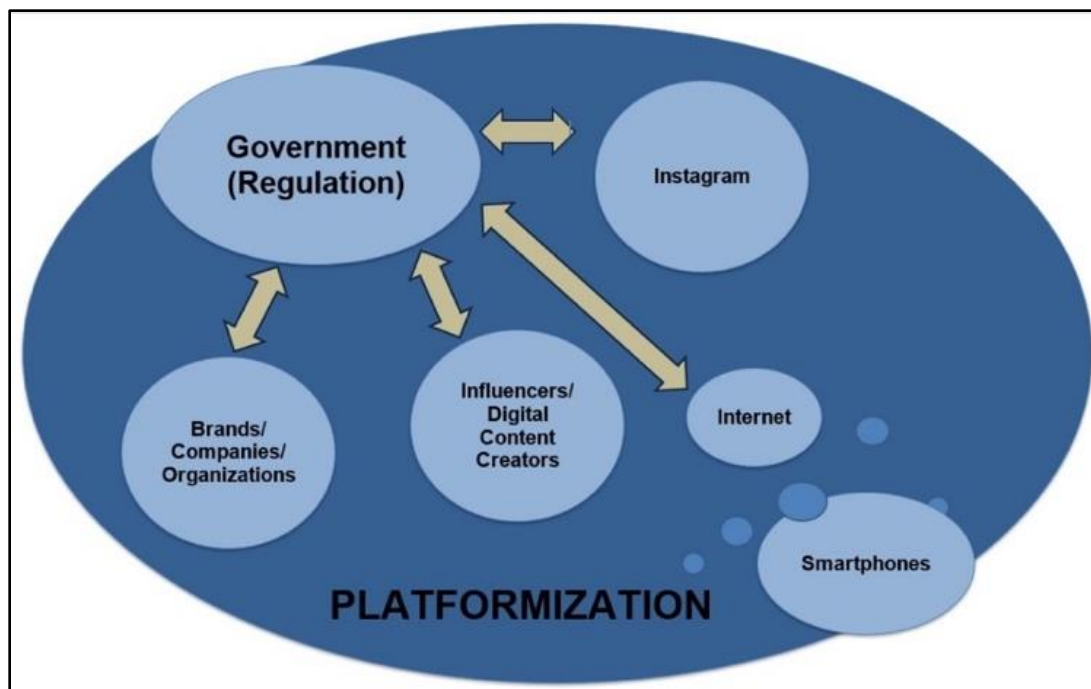
Kenyan Government as an Actor and a Regulator

As both an actor and a regulator, the Kenyan government is at the epicenter of the Instagram economy platformization struggle. The Kenyan government is pivotal to how each other actor in the platform conducts itself. The actors' roles on the platform and the government's need to regulate commerce and internet activities creates a messy and complex (Law & Singleton, 2005) interplay between all actors associated with the platform, in which the bidirectional relationship both affects and is affected by the other actors. In Figure 22, the

government is shown as the primary actor related to this discussion to emphasize their regulatory power. The findings in this study revealed that the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy's challenges, threats, and opportunities meet at the intersection of governmental involvement.

Figure 22

Intersection of Platformization and Government Involvement



Note. In this figure, I depict how the various actors involved in platformization intersect with the government.

The MoICT is the authoritative body that makes ICT laws and regulations in Kenya and implements them through government parastatals and agencies. The MoICT has the core responsibility for formulating, administering, managing, and developing Kenya's information, broadcasting, and communication policies. Kenya's FY2021/2022 national budget allocation sets aside 20.9 billion Ksh (US \$210M) to facilitate ICT sector activities such as ecommerce, delivery of public services, ICT training and equipment (ITA, 2020).

The legal framework that regulates the entire ICT spectrum in Kenya is highly diverse and relatively young. This fact supports my conversation with Adhiambo, a senior policy official at the Communications Authority, who demonstrated the Kenyan government is naïve, ill-equipped, and still playing catch up with platformization, impeding its ability to deal with the implications of the economy it produces. Adhiambo's comments somewhat indicate the limitations or weaknesses of salient policies and initiatives written specifically for the digital creator economy. Part of the regulation intersects and sometimes harmonizes with other regulations; the conflicts arise specifically between data localization laws and Big Tech regulation and activities. The government's biggest failure has been adopting technologies introduced by Big Tech without considering the benefits, if any, to Kenya and her people. In regulating the DICs, the government has introduced policies such as the Data Protection Act (DPA), established in 2019 by the Office of the Data Protection Commissioner (ODPC; Bowmans, 2020); the Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act of 2018 (Indokhomi & Sykei, 2020); and the DST, established by the KRA in 2020. These relatively new and contentious regulations do not serve in the interest of cultivating careers within the creator economy. They are general policies, mirrored from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and European Union (EU) law on data protection and privacy, collectively known as the GDPR (Safari, 2016). The replication of these policies is another example of the way Kenya continues to subject itself to a form of colonization, even though it claims to be an independent state with its own sovereign power. According to my interviewee, Ahmed, the OECD and EU laws tackle general matters predominantly from a Eurocentric perspective without addressing the scathing issues facing creators in Nairobi, such as pay gaps and overexploitation. The copying of GDPR privacy laws by some developing nations places

much faith that “this new rights-based framework will empower these regions and protect them from North–South exploitations as well as internal privacy violations” (Arora, 2019, p. 718) but mostly ends as failure as Arora (2019) concluded.

Dr. Getao, former ICT Authority CEO, regarded the idea of African copying policies as another failed attempt at internationalization of values. Dr. Getao argued, “To me, total disregard of our local values in tech policy formulation is a lie to our own selves.” Epistemologically, Dr. Getao regarded the notion of copying a deeper problem due to the lack of psychological infrastructure in Kenya. Dr. Getao defined the psychological infrastructure as a state of being in which Africans generally have very low self-esteem, a crisis that stems from systemic and historical experiences born from the shambles of colonization. It is a general African way of looking down upon themselves and thinking Western notions of anything, including policies, are a blueprint of success, while indigenous practices are archaic. According to Dr. Getao, Kenyans are unable to rebuild the psychological infrastructure to sustain threats from the outside that challenge the country’s independence.

Along these lines, a burning problem arises, illustrating the concept of the fire object (Law & Singleton, 2005). Nyabola (2018) argued, “The GDPR implemented by the EU on 1 June 2018 has done more to protect the privacy of internet users in Kenya than any regulations issued by the Kenyan parliament” (p. 207). Nyabola questioned, “Where will the sensible regulation come from? ... It seems that Kenya will have to wait for regulation in the countries where these technologies are developed to rein in their excesses” (p. 207). Nyabola’s uneasiness affirms the concerns raised by my participants, Ahmed, Dr. Getao, and the MoICT official. As Arora (2019) explained, the colonization mentality continues to plague Kenya’s policy formation and implementation.

The incumbent policies and lack of other needed regulations related to platform governance in Kenya elicited mixed reactions from various actors I interviewed within the nascent platform industry in Nairobi. Some countries (i.e., the United States, United Kingdom, Ireland) and some regions, including South Africa and the Middle East (Njathi & Lee, 2019) have existing creator economy regulations, such as full disclosure of gifts and services received from advertisers (Duffy, 2017). According to Cunningham and Craig (2019), the U.S. Federal Trade Commission's 2015 Enforcement Policy Statement on Deceptively Formatted Advertisements and the United Kingdom's 2014 Code of Non-Broadcast Advertising, Sales, Promotion, and Direct Marketing provide detailed and precise guidelines for creator disclosure of payment for brand promotion. In other parts of the world, countries in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), such as Saudi Arabia, have enacted a rule under which a social media influencer must obtain a media license for accountability purposes to deal with malpractices, such as money laundering associated with the proliferation of the influencer culture (Alobaid, 2021). However, my participants revealed the ways in which Kenya is still grappling with how to regulate a thriving creator economy while navigating the arising concerns associated with platform work, even though digital marketing is a considered a high-demand job in Kenya (Mueke, 2022; Ruto, 2021; World Economic Forum, 2020).

In Africa, there are few, if any, regulatory bodies equivalent to the U.S. Federal Trade Commission, International Consumer Protection and Enforcement Network, and the United Kingdom's Enforcement Network. When regulators do exist, they do not understand how to regulate digital platforms to protect the interests of the various actors in the Instagram influencer economy and other digital platforms. Actors' interests include protection from data breaches, privacy issues, over-taxation, unfair competitive practices, cyberbullying, and social justice and

fairness. Influencers interviewed in this study expressed frustration with the government's lack of platform regulation to support their career ventures. As discussed in Chapter 4, Kenya does not have licensure requirements for persons willing to join the influencer economy. During his interview, Mike, a founding director at Wowzi, a leading local influencer agency in Nairobi, stated there are an estimated 80,000 Kenyan youth leveraging the influencer economy. The majority of influencer participants in this study were disturbed by the government's lag in protecting influencers' online trade through licensure, while also legitimizing influencers' work by instituting the DST to gain revenue from online workers. Kimani, a 35-year-old lifestyle influencer, lamented his experience, "KRA wants my money! They are not more concerned about what am I doing online." EHUD, another participant, stated that the government's commitment to onboard a million young people into the digital workplace seems disconnected to the regulatory prerequisite that would see this dream come into fruition. Five emerging concerns and threats to platformization raised by influencers that require policy attention are the DST, infrastructural gaps, pay gaps/exploitation/unfair competitive practices, data protection and privacy issues, and content moderation.

Digital Service Tax

The first threat to platformization, which must be addressed by the government, is the highly contentious and contradictory new DST, a frustration expressed by 95% ($n = 33$) of my interviewees. Out of all arising tensions and concerns expressed by the influencers I spoke to, the DST stood out as a thorn in their flesh. Kenyan digital content creators accused the government of failing to engage in public consultation, as required by Article 10 of the Constitution (Kenya Law Reform Commission, n.d.), when creating policies like the DST. When Kenya's Finance Act of 2021 (KPMG, 2021) was published, the National Treasury expanded the scope of the

DST to include income from Youtubers, influencers, bloggers, online teaching, and online marketing (Nyawira, 2021). This new, sudden, and disconcerting tax regime created confusion and concern among Nairobi influencers, who felt their input had been disregarded (see Figure 23). Nyabola (2018) argued,

Many governments find themselves stuck in a paradox. On one hand, there is tremendous pressure to control social media and the internet. On the other, there is significant pressure to keep up with other countries by moving key government services online and to leave space open for “innovation.” (p. 9)

All actors in the platformization network questioned the roles held by the government, digital platform, and policymakers in legitimizing and regulating the creator economy.

Figure 23*Declaration of DST Requirements for Influencers*

Note. From KRA Care [@KRACare]. (2021, January 18). *Social media influencers will be liable to pay digital service tax* [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/KRACare/status/1351153132475195400>

KRA directed its officials to surveil social media activities, paying close attention to influencers who post images of their houses, cars, and other flamboyant activities (see Figure 24; Mwangi, 2021). Moraa, a 33-year-old lifestyle influencer explained,

KRA just ambushed us content creators with the DST, expecting that we now just jump on board to DST causing a lot of confusion with the already existing withholding tax. As a matter of fact, we do not mind paying taxes, but we barely make enough to be taxed. We do not understand why we are being subjected to double taxation.

Figure 24

KRA's Surveillance of Kenyan Influencers



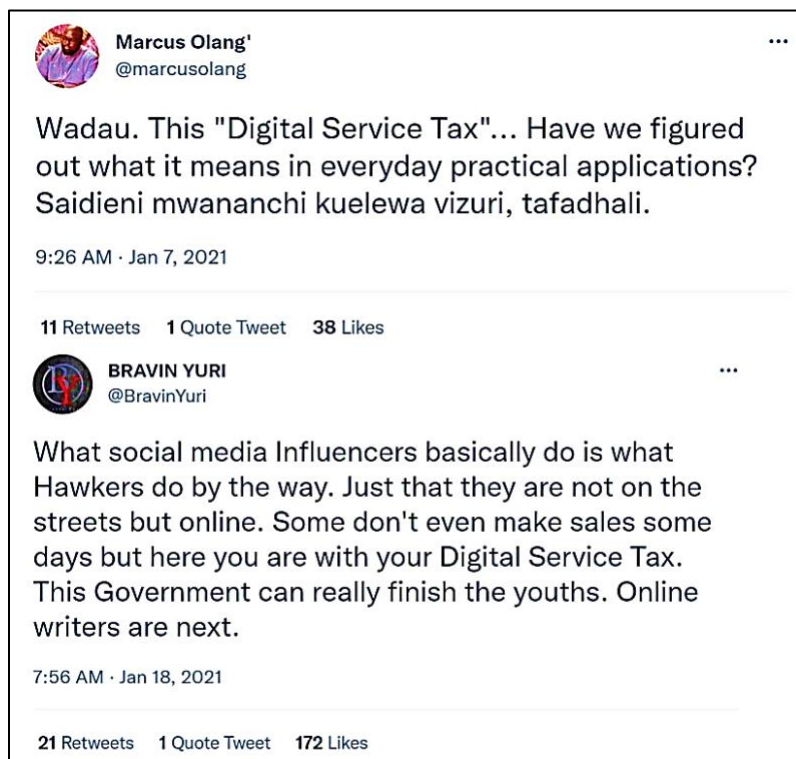
Note. Several news outlets in Kenya reported KRA's plans to surveil Kenyan influencers for tax purposes. In this tweet, Nation Africa asked followers for their thoughts on the topic. The post gained 41 replies and 64 Re-Tweets, including "Social media is for showoff, the luxuries shown are either one off, borrowed cars and fulizad sherehe (loans from mobile apps to go party)." From Nation Africa [@NationAfrica]. *KRA officers are spending time on social media, trolling Kenyans* [Tweet]. Twitter.

<https://twitter.com/NationAfrica/status/1457603795916148738>

The DST debate elicited mixed reactions (see Figure 25) for influencers, especially with Kenyans on Twitter (#KOT), who tweeted memes of all kinds on the social media platform, questioning and simultaneously ridiculing the highly misunderstood tax regime.

Figure 25

Twitter Rants About DST



Note. Saidieni mwananchi kuelewa vizuri, tafadhali translated means, “Please help citizens to understand DST well enough.” Adapted from Marcus Olang’ [@marcusolang]. (2021, January 7). Wadau. This “Digital service tax”... Have we figured out what it means? [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/marcusolang/status/1347202892546060289>, and Bravin Yuri [@BravinYuri]. (2021, January 18). What social media influencers basically do is what hawkers do by the way [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/BravinYuri/status/1351166543862919168>

Participants in this study expressed concern about the government’s transparency regarding the DST. Similar to Marcus Olang’s Tweet, Bob Ochieng, the senior manager of stakeholder engagement for ICANN, argued,

One concept that DST has completely missed, when I look at who the tax should focus on is the platform owner, but what we have ended up implementing is the platform user. Those are two different people to me. If you want to tax Meta, Google or even Safaricom, what am I as a user do it with it? So, what our government has done is taxing us for using the platforms in the name of taxing the platform owners.

In addition, a government official who requested to remain anonymous argued,

If you ask the government how much Google remitted in taxes in 2021, they won't tell you, but it is zero! Not even for a second can someone tell me that an African government can stand up against Google or BigTech, for that matter. They would rather tax its citizens for using these platforms, like in Uganda, the government came up with the social media tax for platform users in their attempt to tax BigTech.

In the Global South, as Arora (2019) argued, most governments and elites do weaponize laws against their own people to be able to sustain their regimes. For example, one policymaker I interviewed stated, "The Kenyan government is unable to regulate these platforms and is painstakingly instead passing the burden, especially the tax burden, to ordinary users" (Ahmed, 2021). DST has the greatest impact on young creators, even though it was intended to collect taxes from digital platforms. Awinja, a CEO in a leading local think tank, argued,

I doubt the Big Tech pays any taxes in Kenya besides the normal standard statutory deductions such as PAYE [Pay As Your Earn] for their employees. Ironically, the Big Tech will continue to provide platforms where brands use our digital content creator as a form of cheap labor, sometimes below the minimum wage stipulated by the Labor Act to produce content which these platforms will then harvest and sell as data.

In contrast, Bob argued that while BigTech would be willing to pay taxes, the quest to objectively quantify what is the fair share of taxation Google or Facebook due to the Kenyan government, and what rules determine that amount would be an exercise in futility since the government does not want to enforce tax policies. Bob argued, "the government has adamantly refused to go through the due process, but it is a difficult task to quantify the revenues BigTech generates from Kenya. Kenya would need BigTech to disclose these details. Bob emphasized,

And there is no way of knowing this information because these players are not willing to give you that information; that is why you find, for example, China has taken the drastic measures of this by locking these players out of their market and creating their own market for their own product. Taxing BigTech has completely flopped; the results have been taxing more as a citizen for using those services, so I wonder why it is, it is expensive to use social media platforms more than local online government services like KRA.

According to Hart (2013), tax avoidance is regarded as one of the reasons to be concerned about platforms and the enormous power they hold. In contrast, Fuchs (2014) argued that governments perceive they will lose investments in their countries. The fear of loss becomes a stumbling block for governments, whereby they implement company-friendly policy measures that favor tax incomes and employment. Based on the above examples, the issue of tax avoidance and cajoling BigTech with favorable tax policies such as DST is explicitly present. In an interesting turn of events, Nigeria's Advertising Regulatory Council (ARCON) became the first ever African country to push back at BigTech, calling BigTech's advertising actions illegal and unlawful. Nigeria is seeking N30 billion (\$68 million USD) in damages. The goal is to regulate advertisements on Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp (Oparada, 2022). To specifically regulate the influencer economy, ARCON recently mandated digital content creators in Nigeria to seek approval from the organization before sharing advertising and marketing content, as majority of the content was unethical and violates Nigeria Code of Advertising Practice (Olaigbe, 2022)

Meanwhile in Kenya, despite the barrage of confusion about the DST, on October 27, 2022, KRA took the DST enforcement a notch higher by collaborating with Facebook to gather

online traders' data for tax defaulters (Mwenda, 2022). According to Mwenda (2022) "WhatsApp and Instagram have updated its terms allowing the tech giant to share information with tax and investigative authorities from January, handing the taxman a new tool to net businesses using its platforms to make money" (para. 1). Mwenda (2022) added that KRA's increased surveillance on Kenyans who display lavish lifestyles on social media but file little to no taxes is aimed at collecting Sh13.9 billion (\$114 million USD) from the DST initiative over the next 3 years. As an invisible moment of translation (Callon, 1996; Mol, 2002), this new mandate works as a "tool of discipline" (Solove, 2004, p. 30) where digital workers are *watched* by Big Brother and tracked down for defaulting on their taxes. According to Larkin (2008), the national government is a key element of the digital colonial apparatus, akin to the days of when colonialism was active in Africa.

Policymakers and think tanks in Nairobi have found few enacted checks and balances to regulate digital platforms, revealing the complex and messy realities (Law & Singleton, 2005) in the unfolding of platformization in Kenya. Dr. Getao, former ICT Authority CEO in Kenya, argued that risks of data misuse and commercialization and digital harms/dangers are not only nurtured by lack of regulation, but also by internationalization of values. "Instagram, just as other digital technologies, are designed to influence global thinking. The end goal is profit!" Dr. Getao explained,

To make it worse, Africans consume content that has been designed to change their psychological infrastructure to one where they are just a pure market and not a producer. If we cannot localize our own policies including tax policies for a formidable creator economy, then who is to blame?

Coincidentally, all the government officials I spoke with did not directly answer the DST question, either referring me to the KRA or quickly stating, “No comment.” To date, I have been unable to secure an interview with a KRA tax representative. Various lawyers and policymakers with whom I spoke perceived the DST tax structure as rushed, without due diligence, without a clear stance, and contradictory to the traditionally known withholding tax, signifying the multiple realities (Mol, 2002) experienced by various actors in the network. Nzau, a Nairobi based policymaker explained,

We do have gaps in law. The intent in this spirit of the DST is far from the freelancing ecosystem and it's not until then there is proper measures, that the government puts in place, as well as interventions that then will allow the freelancers including influencers and digital content creators, to benefit equally even as they pay tax.

A senior government official in the MoICT argued that by introducing the DST, Kenya is keeping up with international digital tax reforms introduced in 2021 as part of the OECD, which requires large companies in 136 countries to pay a global minimum tax rate of 15% as an attempt to put an end to decades of tax competition between governments to attract foreign investment. The DST case shows that any translation process is always partial, and includes some kind of betrayal (Law, 2006). During the emergence and evolution of the DST to the Nairobi Instagram economy, some actors and their roles were betrayed in the process of translation. The first instance of betrayal was the Kenyan government's failure to align its tax structure with Big Tech. The lack of identification and deployment of a proper top-down tax structure that trickles down to relevant actors, such as platform, brands and influencers divulged unsuccessful interessement (Callon, 1986) and betrayal (Law, 2006) of these interdependent actors during the translation process. In addition to revealing betrayal, the government's lack of transparency revealed stunted

mobilization (Callon, 1986), an impediment to the translation process, which was discussed in Chapter 1.

The problem of digital economy policy and regulation is not unique to digital content creators in Nairobi, Kenya. In the past years, the gig economy workers have endured a fair share of the struggle with government and regulation. For example, on the same day that KRA agreed with Facebook to collect tax defaulters' data, Kenyan gig-taxi drivers (e.g., Uber, Little Cab) held peaceful demonstrations to contest high commissions, which are currently charged at high 25–30% of the taxi service's fee. Taxi drivers petitioned to lower the commission to 18% through Ministry of Transport and the National Transport and Safety Authority (NTSA; Citizen Reporter, 2022).

The call for unions, compensation, and tax regulations by both content creators and Kenyan digital taxi drivers points to the grave danger of the need to address digital economy policy and regulation. Digital economy policy and regulation is a critical concern that Kenyans are hopeful and optimistic the new cabinet Secretary of ICT and digital economy, Eliud Owalo, will make a priority upon assuming office. The newly elected Nairobi governor, Johnson Arthur Sakaja, used regulation of the creator economy as a key political agenda in the 2022 general elections. Sakaja waived the costs of film and photography permits for content creators in Nairobi but did not attend to the contentious issue of the DST (see Figure 26).

Figure 26

Sakaja's Statement on Creator Permits



Note. From Sakaja Arthur Johnson [@SakajaJohnson]. (2022, April 23). *Until we raise the creative economy to the levels it can be, Nairobi County will NOT charge content creators* [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/SakajaJohnson/status/1517818039500214273>

Infrastructural Gaps

The second threat to platformization concerns infrastructural gaps present in Nairobi. Although technological and internet access, availability, affordability, and applicability are not mutually exclusive to unlock opportunities for influencers in Nairobi, they significantly contribute to the politics of inclusion (see Chapter 2). After access issues serve as barriers that exclude the majority of youth who might want to venture into the creator economy. In Africa, internet speeds are much lower than the global average (Ngila, 2022). Power grid concerns also impede the ability of Africans to form a sustainable digital economy (Augustine, 2022).

I was made aware of several government initiatives aimed at closing the divide during my interviews with government representatives. For example, the universal service fund (USF) for increased connectivity to ICT services, which will promote “capacity building and innovation” in

Kenya (Communications Authority of Kenya, n.d., para. 1), is being rolled out all the way to the ward (subcounty) level in the villages of Kenya. This project by the government's communications authority is budgeted for Kshs. 2 billion (\$16 million USD). The goal is aimed at providing cellular mobile network infrastructure to an approximately 635,000 Kenyans living in rural and remote parts of the country. The Kenya ICT authority also revamped its master plan 2022-2032, a 10-year plan aimed at enhancing the ICT potential Kenya holds in the global digital economy (Abuya, 2022). Although commendable, the plan is derived from a technocratic approach (Sassi, 2005), a concept highlighted in Chapter 2. Bob expounded on the problem with the government's technocratic approach, arguing,

Most of government flagship projects have suffered from a focus on cost of initial access. After that, Kenyans are on their own. Some of it has been laughable, for example, on the school digitization project, government will issue the laptops, where Internet was probably delivered by an ISP and it is in a server room there, then that project is ticked as complete. Or you go the constituency level, they build very big innovation centers through the USF, buy a few computers, and bring ISP for the internet. Parliamentarians will go back and write reports to the auditor general claiming these as complete projects with 290 innovation centers across Kenya. Walk there today and you will find a room full of dust. Because for them, the tender was there for them to do that but not to operate them daily. All these centers are shut down! There is no electricity! Also, who pays for the installed bandwidth monthly? Who maintains the computers put in there? After one month that center is closed because of their lack of continuing operations and maintenance.

Bob's comments demonstrate that most policy guidelines or policy measures are still addressing infrastructure as the answer to the politics of inclusion. In the case of Kenya, the assumption is that by putting in place public spaces and having WIFI connectivity so there is Internet access literally everywhere typically will reduce the divide. However, policymakers should look beyond the technocratic approach of providing available/affordable devices and internet connectivity, but also think about after access issues such as Kenyans' unique infrastructural challenges and digital competency deprivations that are not experienced by content creators in the Global North.

Pay Gaps, Exploitation, and Unfair Competitive Practices

The third threat to platformization in Kenya is related to pay gaps, exploitation, and unfair competitive practices within the Instagram influencer economy. The Kenyan government does not recognize the creator economy as an industry; therefore, creators are not included in the national Employment Act and thus, are excluded from government protection from exploitation by brands who have widely disparaging pay gaps and unfair competitive practices. In an article commenting on Africa's creator economy, Adeleke (2021), a journalist and media analyst, stated, "The creator economy, already worth over \$100 billion, is taking off globally. But it seems like Africa is an afterthought in formulating the frameworks for thinking about it" ("Africa is an Afterthought in Conversations About the Creator Economy," para. 3). Adeleke further commented,

In theory, the Internet gives us access to a global audience. In reality, this isn't always the case. More often than not, for African YouTubers (and creators), their content will mostly be consumed by a local audience. That means they can't generate as much as they'd like from ad revenue because of their audience's location. It also means they'll need to amass

large followings before brands even consider them for partnerships. (“Unequal Outcomes,” para. 2)

Chapter 2 revealed that Nairobi creators struggle to articulate their value as digital workers. Additionally, Nairobi creators have little understanding of compensation terms, contract duration, and how brands translate creators’ work into pay. According to Adeleke (2021), assigning value to digital creator and influencer work is a problem in many developing countries, where “it’s tough [for creators] to translate their social capital into cash” (“Africa is an Afterthought in Conversations About the Creator Economy,” para. 1). The result of such ignorance leaves creators with little to no room for negotiation with powerful brands who hold the power to dictate how the creator economy operates. Additionally, influencer agencies, who are the intermediaries between brands and creators, have no government oversight to regulate their practices. Brands and influencer agencies are free to set compensation rates and commissions at will. Without any government protection, Kenyan influencers are vulnerable to the imbalance of power where brands and influencer agencies have supreme control over the influencers’ career, leading to exploitation (Adeleke, 2021). Less than 5% of my interview respondents had signed contracts with brands for sponsorships and less than 2% had an existing rate card stipulating their payment terms. Kenyan creators’ unregulated and complicated digital economy fosters a stunted mobilization in the translation process (Callon, 1986), and illustrates the messy reality (Law & Singleton, 2005) of platformization.

A popular 20-year-old influencer with 1.5M followers, Azziad Nasenya, became the first Kenyan creator to leak her rate card to the public (see Figure 27). Fellow Kenyans were highly agitated, stating Azziad’s rates were quite outrageous (Mbaru, 2022; Onamu, 2020; Otengo, 2022). The negative outcry went viral on Twitter and was eventually picked up by mainstream

media. Azziad's rates included \$1,000 USD for a single post on Facebook, Tik Tok, or Instagram. According to Ruto (2021) and Muriuki (2021), Azziad charges \$2,500 USD for a one-week package, and \$5,000 USD for a monthly package that includes two to three posts on each of her social media accounts. Kenyans' contention centered on what they felt was an exorbitantly high level of income for a social entertainer. The majority of Kenyans could not comprehend how Azziad could justify such high rates of pay for simply posting pictures and making videos of herself dancing while advertising a brand's product. In contrast, the interviewees in my study received a fraction of Azziad's fees for their content, and some even get paid only "in kind," with product instead of monetary compensation, as discussed in Chapter 1 (see Appendices A and B).

Figure 27

Azziad's Rates



Note. From *Azziad's Unapologetic Money Moves*, by W. Mbaru, July 23, 2020. <https://bnn.ke/azziads-unapologetic-money-moves/>

The problem of income disparity distribution is not unique to Kenya; however, little data exists to support claims of income disparity. What data are available come from anecdotal information gathered by news sources and gossip columns (Wandera, 2021). According to Mileva (2022), the income disparity distribution in the creator economy is concerning even in developed countries like the United States where the FTC is engaged in regulation of the platform industry. Mileva cited the 2020 wealth distribution figures for one platform, Teachable, which offers online courses generated by its creators. According to data gathered by Influencer MarketingHub (Mileva, 2022), the vast majority of Teachable creators ($n = 11,747$) made over \$1,000 USD in 2020. In contrast, only 4,385 creators made over \$10,000 USD, while two creators actually earned over \$10 million USD. Mileva's discussion of income disparity in the creator economy, in which she cited industry studies,

paint[s] a clearer picture in terms of wealth distribution among creators in general, notwithstanding gender and age demographics. These studies indicate a disproportionately top-heavy economy, with only a small percentage of creators getting bigger paychecks. The 80/20 rule is actually pushed up to 95/5 where 95% of the revenues go to only 5% of influencers. (para. 26)

Moraa, an interviewee in my study, argued the influencer economy in Nairobi is

worse than the animal farm where influencers tend to believe they live in a free digital space, yet they are overworked, underpaid 'animals' and the master is still reaping it all. Given the one-way nature of communication from brands to creators, it is inconceivable to enforce stringent terms of engagement as most creators are 'thirsty' for jobs that are already rare and highly competitive. As a result, issues to do with economic security are

nonnegotiable that includes risks vs. rewards livelihood, savings social benefits income distribution. As contract workers they do not know what benefits they are not entitled to. Another interviewee, Nzau, who is a policy maker in Kenya shared, “Without a Freelancers ACT or Influencers Act in place as seen with FTC, then it is hard to make these decisions.” Simply stated, the Employment Act (National Council for Law Reporting, 2012) works in favor of organized/unionized professions, such as engineers, architects, doctors, nurses, teachers, or lawyers, but does not protect emerging economies like the creator economy or any other freelancing jobs. Nzau added,

The law in Kenya does not require a contract to be in writing, especially a temporary work arrangement or gig work, leaving the contract workers at the mercy of the contractors. But it helps both parties if it is in writing to avoid future disputes.

Ahmed, a lawyer, stated,

As a company issues brand deals to creators, one can rely on known wage rates per sector, witnesses to the agreement, or arbitration through a labor officer and finally courts as a last resort. Generally, the amount in dispute determines next course of action so majority of creators I have dealt with just tend to walk away if dissatisfied and abandon the claim for wages. An example is part time lecturers. Many have abandoned their dues rather than seek court action.

Even though most influencing gig contracts are negotiated online and have a communication trail that can be used as evidence for enforcing the terms of the contract, when there is a breach of contract, influencers face great challenges. My interviewee, Kimani, vehemently argued,

Going through our courts can cost more than you are owed with no guaranteed outcome. The judgments lack legal coherence. Look at the election petitions at the supreme court for instance. One year they say the process is paramount, the next they say it is the vote numbers that matter. I have got better headaches to deal with.

A finding from my interviewees revealed that influencing gigs, no matter how precarious, are survival ways to earn a living, a concept supported by Adeleke (2021), who stated “there is no systematic path to success” (“Africa is an Afterthought in Conversations About the Creator Economy,” para. 2). Wanjiku shared,

We all know about minimum wage for example, but often desperate people settle for less to get a job. Such persons are unlikely to complain that they are underpaid when in actual fact they are glad to get the job however poor the conditions. It boils down to theory vs practice ... an activist driven agenda vs survival of marginalized persons and/or businesses/employers.

Additionally, Fatuma explained,

Even if we continue to challenge the unjust pay and other issues that deprive the influencer economy and create the unions that Anita Nderu [see Chapter 3] and other creators have suggested, how far can we go if we do not have the government buy-in and when the majority of us are willing to take any amount offered, sometimes working for free in order to just build their brands?

The Nairobi Instagram influencer network is about the concept of *willing buyer-willing seller*, as evidenced in these interviews. Unfortunately, the Instagram business model specific to the influencer advertising version does not regulate the relationship between influencers and brands. While less than 10% of the influencers I spoke to had rate cards, they all had endured

contract breaches; however, none of the influencers had escalated their case to the legal realm. Similarly, 80% of the influencers in my study operated on trust basis and no legally binding contracts or engagement of legal entities like lawyers before taking up jobs. Legal implications are catching up with influencers when payment is not met. Disparities exist within the same campaign where some influencers are given higher pay rates while other influencers do not receive as high a rate. Those influencers who do receive high pay have signed contracts, but the influencers who receive lower rates do not have contracts with brands, either at the local level or internationally. Instagram, as the platform, does not take responsibility for differences in pay rates; the platform transferred any liabilities it might face in violation of rules set up by the FTC for pay disparity to influencers and advertisers themselves. Instagram's refusal to become entangled in pay rate issues is based on its standing as a U.S. business. As Instagram spreads to other countries, their lack of involvement in pay regulation becomes a fire object (Law & Singleton, 2005) in spaces like Kenya, where the government also does not recognize the platform industry. Instagram's inability, or lack of interest in, regulating at the national level is an aspect of coloniality (Couldry & Mejias, 2019a).

In response to the FTC's (2017) requirement to specifically state the endorsement of products by influencers, Instagram designed a tool that would permit brands to turn influencers' posts into adverts with an explicit label, #sponsorship (Frier, 2020). A senior Nairobi-based Facebook manager in charge of policy who refused to be cited in the study because she had not requested clearance from her head office to participate in the study, alluded to Instagram's *hands-off* stance,

The understandings of influencer-brand contractual agreement do not concern Instagram. We have provided the platform and empowered them to leverage the powerful tools designed to help them. As to who pays who, when, and how is not within our jurisdiction. As the Facebook manager's statement implies, Instagram has outrightly avoided any legal obligations binding them to the monetization of influencers, which begs the question: who is actually responsible for the governance of platforms, as Helberger et al. (2018) posed.

Data Protection and Privacy Issues

The fourth threat to platformization is readily seen in data protection and privacy issues. Even though data protection and privacy issues have received overwhelming global attention (Couldry & Mejias, 2019a; Kwet, 2019; Zuboff, 2019), and despite the fact that Kenya's Data Protection Act (Bowmans, 2020) is a pioneering piece of legislation on the African continent, 99% of the Nairobi influencers I interviewed did not know how their personal data details are commercialized. Their ignorance concerning data protection and privacy issues is quite disturbing. Nairobi influencers did not seem bothered with showing pictures and videos of personal things, such as houses, spouses, or children, and neither did they question where the data they were uploading on Instagram was going or how it was being used. Privacy invasion and data mining were the least of these entrepreneurs' concerns. Troublingly, the influencers in my study had little interest in the regulatory fine print provided by Instagram's terms and conditions and had never heard of the Kenyan Data Protection Act. This raises the question of how willing influencers are to subject themselves to a life of public scrutiny in order to partner with various brands and have a high earning potential. In an interview with Fleischman (2022), a reporter for the *Cornell Chronicle*, platform scholar Brooke Erin Duffy, argued, "I think it's important to take seriously what it means to be visible on social media when your career

demands it, as the work of influencing does. ... In many cases, such visibility involves considerable vulnerability” (para 5). According to TechShielder’s (n.d.) study on the “communication, social, and entertainment apps ... most likely to be hacked, and the types of data that would be compromised,” (para. 2), “60% of apps and platforms store data on the content we create, and 50% have access to photos and videos from our camera roll” (“How Social, Communication and Entertainment Apps Could put Your Conversations and Private Content at Risk,” para. 1). The study further revealed that Instagram ranks second among the most frequently hacked apps around the world, with an average of 246,000 searches each month.

Such moments of tension (Mol, 2002) between privacy and income were illustrated by the Nairobi influencers who were the subjects of this study. Their enterprising efforts were vested in how much they could make as a living wage by posting on behalf of brands. George, a 34-year-old lifestyle male explained to me, “If anyone paid me a million dollars, I would not care [about exposing] every aspect of my life to the world live on Instagram 365 days a year.” Karani, a 29-year-old male lifestyle influencer stated,

I would take the money, do whatever they want me to do, and then change my address, my identity, literally everything by moving to a complete[ly] new part of the world. Do you have an idea how much a million dollars in Kenya shillings [is] and what [it] would do to change my life? To me, that would be a risk worth taking.

George and Karani’s tradeoff of privacy for a million dollars captures how complicated the issue of data privacy is (Abidin, 2014; Flew, 2019), especially when it comes to influencers who are willing to trade their privacy for the economic incentive. As Fatuma and Moraa, two other influencers in my study, shared, Nairobi influencers are “thirsty” (Moraa) for jobs and become *willing buyers-willing sellers* of their private lives in exchange for Instagram fame.

Abidin (2014) conducted an ethnographic study of commercial lifestyle bloggers in Singapore. Abidin (2014) identified a high-status blogger, Irene, who deemed privacy as a tradeoff for her successful career. In contrast, Eltringham's (2018) study in South Africa revealed Gina was a less successful influencer with fewer followers, partly due to separating her professional life from her Instagram persona. Overall, both studies revealed that low status influencers not only commoditize, but also manipulate and perform their privacy to advance their careers (Abidin, 2014; Eltringham, 2018). As Andrejevic (2014) stated, "The average American finds a very healthy acceptable balance between privacy and convenience; they give up some privacy and get a lot of convenience" (p.?). The Nairobi influencers' stories of their willingness to sacrifice privacy go beyond Andrejevic's (2014) notion of convenience, which points toward the adoption of survival tactics to earn livable income. Rather, George and Karani's confessions align with Newell and Marabelli's (2015) claim that individuals seem to be conceding to the "dark side of datafication through digital traces (always there) and constant monitoring through sensors because they are persuaded that the benefits outweigh the costs" (p. 9).

Admittedly, loss of privacy is one of the risks associated with using digital platforms whereby the consumer uses their personal data for access but does not decide how their data will be used once released onto the internet. Consequently, a consumer may find it difficult to challenge any data decisions taken by the platform (Andrejevic, 2014). Pariser (2011) aptly stated, "Moreover, because the transformations applied to your data are often opaque, it's not always clear exactly what decisions are being made on your behalf, by whom, or to what end" (p. 117). Nevertheless, the question of how existing laws and regulations about privacy and data collection is long debated, even in advanced countries like the United States. Andrejevic (2007) argued anti-discrimination and privacy laws are set in place; however, they are not released to

the larger network system. In addition, Andrejevic and Burdon (2015) argued there is possibly no law designed to handle the vastness of data collection and analysis as envisioned by the sensor society. For example, Zuboff (2019) affirms that Google and Facebook and others are well grounded in surveillance capitalism, a new form of capitalism that is underpinned by lawlessness.

The fact that the majority of Nairobi influencers in my study did not rank data privacy as one of their top values is appalling. Most of the influencers I interviewed did not know that Instagram amasses 67% of users' data (TechShielder, n.d.), and furthermore, did not care. This finding is an indication that the depth of data privacy implications are not well understood. Most importantly, there is a need for the government to consider civic education on data privacy a priority, given that the Data Protection Act (Bowmans, 2020) is an existing regulatory framework that should protect the interest of Kenyan content creators. Furthermore, the government should consider communication transparency a core value for their citizens' online safety.

Content Moderation

The final threat to platformization concerns content moderation. As seen in Chapters 2 and 3, Instagram's algorithmic adjustments have negative consequences for the visibility of Nairobi influencers, directly impacting creator revenue. In this study, it became clear that the invincible algorithms are ungovernable given that Instagram's unpredictable advertising policies only work to harness algorithms, creator guidelines, and moderation practices for the company's profit interests. Poell (2020) argued, "Commercial platforms tend to develop their interfaces and algorithmic systems in correspondence with business models that revolve around systematic data collection, user profiling, and personalized advertising services" (p. 654). During my interviews,

creators complained their content was not prominently showing up in their feed or was sometimes taken down by Instagram. In Chapter 3, Abdulla, a top travel influencer who is also a lawyer recounted how his content was getting shadow banned. Platforms algorithmic practices (see Chapter 4) are driven by the need to privilege trends and trending topics more than “content that generates sustained social engagement” (Poell, 2020, p.654) when it comes to maximizing value out of user activities. However, Gillespie (2022) argued that whether platforms choose to combine “algorithmic reductions, moderation removals, and design adjustments platforms” (p. 9) when it comes to content moderation, the question of who is included and excluded, “must go beyond mere calculations of profit, for sure ... beyond unspecified notions of public interest, beyond reassuring notions of openness and meritocracy” (p. 9).

Gillespie (2022) implored journalists, critics, policymakers, industry stakeholders, and academics to look beyond the overwhelming focus on content deletion or user suspension and instead emphasize the dangers of inclusion/exclusion. Other scholars, like Díaz and Hecht-Felella (2021) contend that content moderation policies and practices by platforms do inhibit freedom of expression for the certain groups, including people of color, women, LGBTQ+ communities, and religious minorities who are simultaneously exposed to the risk of over-enforcement, since harms affecting them are largely ignored. These sentiments align with the discussion posed in Chapter 3 that highlighted how algorithmic bias heightens digital inequalities of already marginalized users (Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung European Union, 2021; Poell et al., 2022; Raychoudhury, 2021; Stoica et al., 2018). Altogether, these unprecedented dynamics taking root at a global scale challenge the notion of the original rhetoric of the internet as a networked space, which would foster fair public self-expression beyond socioeconomic, political, and cultural differences. According to the United Nations’ (n.d.), Universal Declaration of Human Rights,

Article 19, “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers” (para. Article 19). Article 19 argues that the rights individuals have online should be the same as their offline rights (United Nations, n.d.). Instagram’s algorithmic bias toward Nairobi content creators is a direct violation of both the United Nations’ Article 19 resolution (Article 19, 2022) and Kenya’s Constitution of 2010 (Comparative Constitutions Project, 2022), which stipulates freedom of expression for all citizens.

Another content moderation challenge observed in Chapter 4 concerns the cases of trolling and OGBV (Njathi & Wambui, 2022). Some Nairobi-based female creators have been bullied online on Instagram and the platform takes no action to protect the creators from the cyber-bullying attacks (Njathi & Wambui, 2022). In Kenya, the majority of trolling and bullying incidents occur primarily on Twitter as responses to creators’ Instagram content. The attacks quickly expand across other platforms, such as WhatsApp. The cases of OGBV highlight the volatile nature of online content, which is itself a fire object (Law & Singleton, 2005), igniting a cyberstorm of human rights violations within the Instagram space. Even though some creators are aware of the Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act of 2018, as revealed in my interviews, none of my participants had bothered to escalate known issues of cyberbullying. Kenyans on Twitter (KOT) ranks at the top of online bullying, according to a survey conducted by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC; Ndonge, n.d.). The Twitter account has not only bullied individuals, especially female content creators, but also famous celebrities, media personalities, and news outlets like CNN and Al Jazeera, countries like Nigeria, South Africa, and China, and Kenya’s own politicians, including the former president Uhuru Kenyatta and

Chief Justice David Maraga. During an interview with Forbes (Gichovi, 2022), Kenyan social media star, Elsa Majimbo vowed she is never going back to Kenya due to the kind of trolling she endured via Twitter. Ironically, the untamed KOT was regarded as “an unforgiving but a necessary force” (Nyabola, 2018, p. 114) and “the most vicious bullies” in the same UNODC report and evaded regulation in 2018 when the Kenyan judiciary dismissed the government’s attempt to regulate KOT as unconstitutional (Ndonye, n.d.). The lack of responsiveness and accountability is yet another indication of the inadequate platform regulation in Kenya both by the government and the platforms themselves.

Shockingly, Meta’s content moderators, an outsourced agency called Sama, is located in Nairobi and has come under heavy criticism following the exposure of their poor working conditions, pay discrimination despite being subjected to mentally torturing content moderation that includes child abuse images, videos, and posts (Perrigo, 2021, 2022). The Kenyan government has allowed Meta to run its exploitative working conditions for content moderation in Nairobi without enforcing human rights working conditions, a disturbing finding revealed in my study. The lack of recourse from legal institutional frameworks and the normalization of business standards set by the DICs hearkens back to the discussion of asymmetrical power relations that foster digital colonialism as discussed in Chapter 3.

Some not-for-profit organizations are gearing up to reduce online abuse. For example, through an EU-funded project titled *Social Media 4 Peace* (UNESCO, 2022), UNESCO implemented a research project aimed at building resilient societies against potential harms caused by harmful content spread online, protecting freedom of expression, and enhancing the promotion of peace through social media platforms in Bosnia, Herzegovina, Indonesia, and

Kenya²². However, content moderation on digital platforms is rife with complexities that are different from issues encountered in the mainstream media, as Poell (2020) explained:

Fixing content moderation is particularly difficult, as it is not altogether clear how the responsibility for platform communication should be distributed among different stakeholders. Clearly, platforms play a pivotal role, but not in the same way as mass media, given that potentially everyone can share content through a platform. While there have been proposals to give platform corporations similar responsibilities as media companies, it is highly questionable whether it is a good idea to give corporations, with little editorial expertise or understanding of particular political-cultural contexts and histories, full editorial responsibility over what is shared through their platforms. (p. 653)

The issues raised in this chapter related to the consequences of the DST, infrastructural gaps, pay gaps, exploitation, unfair competitive practices, data protection and privacy issues, and content moderation are examples of the messy realities Law and Singleton (2005) referred to, bringing to fore the emerging legal, policy-related tensions and concerns that complicate platformization in Kenya. The failure of the Kenyan government in upholding and regulating the creator economy is a black box (Callon & Latour, 1981), which must be opened and examined if fair practices are to be established and enforced in the Nairobi Instagram creator economy.

Kenyan Government as a Black Box

Callon and Latour (1981) stated that black boxes contain “that which no longer needs to be reconsidered, those things whose contents have become a matter of indifference” (p. 285). In ANT terms, analyzing black boxes is useful to uncover how networks are constructed through

²² *Content moderation and local stakeholders in Kenya*. <https://www.article19.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Kenya-country-report.pdf>

the relationships between actors. The Kenyan government is a black box that can be opened using an ANT lens to expose how the unregulated creator economy forces influencers into the position of being willing buyers-willing sellers.

Many influencers from my study felt the government does not understand the digital workplace. Influencers believed this lack of understanding drives the irony of the government's reluctance to support policies like a minimum wage while being simultaneously eager to tax influencers without offering any help for producing a livable wage. Ignorant of existing government regulations, the young creators lacked confidence with the Kenyan government in addressing digital harms they encounter daily, such as cyberbullying, copyright and piracy issues, data breaches, and privacy concerns. As a result, none of the influencers I interviewed had sued their trolls, or reported malpractices by the brands or influencer agencies, such as unfair competitive practices they experienced online.

In my conversations, influencers were quick to discredit any government support or understanding of their digital trade. Susan, a 29-year-old female lifestyle influencer expressed her skepticism:

Out of all my frustrations I experience with my influencing career, I am less frustrated by the government because I figured out a long time ago that the Kenyan government does not care what unemployed youth like myself do with their lives, whether online or offline. In fact, I would be surprised if they offered any kind of support. I doubt what that would be given their lack of interest.

Jacinta, a 31-year-old fashion and lifestyle influencer argued:

Why would I take my issues to the same government whose entire judicial system is corrupt? Unless you are well connected or have a lot of money, a court case in Kenya

could take over 10 years to get a court hearing and still not get a fair verdict. Kenya is for the rich; some of us are just passing by.

Beyond a disenfranchised judicial system, a Nairobi policymaker and lawyer I interviewed contended that the whole law enforcement and legal system is ill-equipped to handle technology and internet matters because they have no training in tech law.

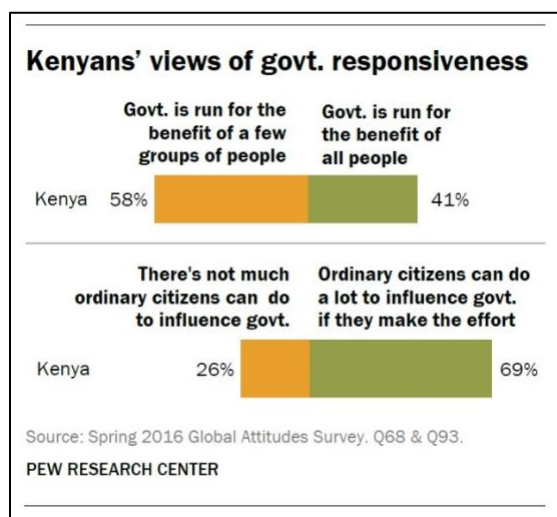
Despite the high number of sign-ups and a confirmed average of 5,000 monthly digital-enabled opportunities, and the fact that the Ajira program is now in its third year since implementation, Ajira is not closely enough linked to the influencer economy. This is because of a lack of critical curriculum/assimilationist agendas and indoctrination, where ironically, a digital skills empowerment national program is funded by the Mastercard Foundation, pushing its own agenda of what digital skills program, such as Ajira should look like. To my surprise, none of the influencers I interviewed were aware of Ajira or knew anybody who had benefited from the program, suggesting a disconnect between the government's vision of empowering young people from the young people's agenda and activities. The youth in Kenya, especially in urban areas, have lost faith in the government, as revealed during the interviews. Oscar, a life fitness and nutritionist influencer, argued that the government is the enemy to progress, failing to create job opportunities and creating hurdles for young people to gain meaningful employment. Therefore, Oscar and other young Kenyans do not pay attention to government services or activities. He continued:

I lost hope in the government. I do not vote. Even this year [2021], I will not cast my vote in the coming election in August. What for? To elect more leaders that loot and take billions of dollars' worth of loans from the Chinese government, IMF, and World Bank, leaving us and the generations to come to pay for their lavish lifestyles? No! Never.

Perhaps Oscar's perception and lived reality mirrors most young Kenyans' experiences with the government. None of the influencers I spoke to had positive things to say about the government. Their responses could explain the limited reach of government initiatives such as Ajira in a city like Nairobi. The lack of trust in the Kenyan government, as evidenced in the statements provided by Susan, Jacinta, and Oscar, align with Wike et al.'s (2016) argument that widespread corruptions seem to be taking a toll on the nation's economic status (see Figure 28).

Figure 28

Kenyans' View of Government Responsiveness



Note. Adapted from *In Key African Nations, Widespread Discontent With Economy, Corruption*, by R. Wike, K. Simmons, M. Vice, and C. Bishop, November 14, 2016, Pew Research Center, p. 40 (<https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2016/11/14/in-key-african-nations-widespread-discontent-with-economy-corruption/>). Copyright 2016 by Pew Research Center. Reprinted with permission.

Findings from this study, however, also refute Wike et al.'s (2016) claim that young Kenyans between 18–34 years of age are more optimistic about Kenya's financial outlook than older Kenyans. Additionally, my findings contrast with the findings of the 2016 Global Attitudes Survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, in which 69% of Kenyan respondents indicated a belief that ordinary citizens can influence the government. A closer inspection of the findings

reveals that while 92% of Kenyans in the 35–49-year-old range and 95% of Kenyans who are age 50 years and older have confidence they can have an effect on the government’s actions, only 59% of the adults in the 18–34-year-old range, of which my influencers are a part, have faith in their ability to make a difference concerning the government’s responsiveness to citizens’ issues (see Figure 29).

Figure 29

Young Kenyans’ Confidence in Government Wanes

Large age differences in political action in Kenya					
<i>% of Kenyans saying they have ___ in the past</i>					
	TOTAL	Age			Oldest - youngest gap
	%	18-34	35-49	50+	
Voted in an election	74	59	92	95	+36
Attended a campaign event/speech	49	42	58	60	+18
Participated in a volunteer organization	40	36	40	52	+16
Posted comments on political issues online	13	16	11	6	-10
Encouraged others’ political action online	13	14	13	11	-3
Participated in an organized protest	10	10	10	9	-1
Signed an online petition	8	10	8	6	-4

Note: Statistically significant differences in **bold**.
Source: Spring 2016 Global Attitudes Survey, Q92a-g.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Note. Adapted from *In Key African Nations, Widespread Discontent With Economy, Corruption*, by R. Wike, K. Simmons, M. Vice, and C. Bishop, November 14, 2016, Pew Research Center, p. 41 (<https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2016/11/14/in-key-african-nations-widespread-discontent-with-economy-corruption/>). Copyright 2016 by Pew Research Center. Reprinted with permission.

The Kenyan government places faith in the digital economy blueprint (Republic of Kenya, n.d.) to resolve the unemployment menace facing the country. One way the government seeks to empower the digital economy blueprint is through programs like Ajira. In spite of a national focus on transforming Kenya into “a digitally empowered citizenry, living in a digitally enabled society,” (Republic of Kenya, n.d., p. 7), the Kenyan government does not recognize the

creator economy as an industry and make no attempts to legitimize or regulate it, as mentioned by Ahmed, a policymaker in my study. Kenya's failure to regulate the creator economy is divergent from other countries, who have decided to regulate it (Njathi & Lee, 2019), creating policies about disclosing the types of compensation received from brands (Duffy, 2017; Frier, 2020).

Currently, policymakers and think tanks in Nairobi have enacted few checks and balances to regulate digital platforms, revealing the complex and messy realities in the unfolding of platformization in Kenya. From my conversations with both government officials and policymakers, I deduced that the Kenyan government continues to be unable to regulate the tech giants because they are too powerful, and the Kenyan government lacks sufficient capacity to fight this type of power. There is also a lack of alternatives to digital platforms that would allow Kenya's digital sovereignty for data colonization rules. These interoperable social networks are conceptualized as alternatives to commercially profit-driven platforms offered by the DICS. Alternatives include "Fediverse—a set of interoperable social networks based on free and open-source software. Fediverse platforms include Mastodon (akin to Twitter), PeerTube (akin to YouTube), and PixelFed (akin to Instagram)" (Kwet, 2020a, para, 24). For example, Kwet (2020b) stated that Mastodon has over 4 million registered users and is built on the premise of allowing its users to freely connect across different decentralized, nonprofit, self-governed platforms.

However, the alternatives to digital platforms are faced with major challenges born from the current platform ecosystem, as Poell (2020) argued. Leading platform corporations have developed an intricately woven infrastructure that alternatives must interact with in order to be functional. Cultural content is made visible and accessible through search engines, messaging

apps, cloud storage, and content-sharing services, which are operated by the same platform corporations that hold power over the creators who supply the content that spurs continued platform use. Poell argued, “Given that platforms within corporate ecosystems are closely entangled and mutually reinforcing, it is very much the question whether it is feasible to develop standalone alternative services or platforms” (p. 264). Likewise, Bob, an interviewee, complained, “We are captured by BigTech, the monopolies. Anything that would attempt to come up, as an alternative would not be able to survive because the normal wananchi (citizens) are also very difficult to change.” As an example, Bob described Airtel’s introduction of free phone calls and the Kenyan government’s launch of number portability in 2011, which was hailed as a benefit to citizens. Kenyans continued to use Safaricom despite complaining about the high cost associated with using Safaricom’s service. Bob added,

The government has also sort of become captured by the BigTech and there’s very little they can do to change that fact unless they do something completely unorthodox and radical, and force everyone to change or make some of these products illegal like in China. Then people will have to force people to look for alternatives, a radical way of forcing people to support local technologies which has not happened to date.

However, Bob also stated that even the alternatives or accessing better service are impossible tasks:

Let someone come up with a better service provider, but how do you come up with a better service if for all these years, Google, for example has been reinvesting billions in research and development to make the service better. And to make it worse, when our electricity is unreliable, whereby even government services are barely available all the time.

To affirm the point that Kenya is in captivity to BigTech, Bob stated, “By the way, BigTech can do without Africa, if Kenya decided to block BigTech today, there will be not even an indication in their bottom line, it won’t register. But can Kenya or other African countries do without them?” Bob’s sentiments reflect the idea of digital colonialism (Kwet, 2019) discussed in Chapter 3. When I asked Bob why the Kenyan government could not collaborate with other African countries to challenge current tech policies and forge better policies with the BigTech as in the case of GDPR for the EU, his reply reflected the fact that Kenya is still operating as though it is a product of colonialism. Bob stated,

The most divided continent in the world is Africa. For example, today a Kenyan passport cannot access half of Africa without a visa. A U.S. passport can access, maybe 90% of Africa, without a visa. Now who makes rules on who can access a can a country? Because Africa can never stand or speak as one. That is why you have a country that is a member of Africa union, but as a citizen, I need a visa to South Africa and Kenya is a member of the African Union and the other way round. EU citizens don’t need visas or passports to move across the EU. So, what is the purpose of the African Union (AU) if even something that is completely within our control as African governments, we cannot collaboratively do? So, Africa unity is a mirage and Big Tech has leveraged on that very well. So, Kenya can never have a common position when they’re fighting Big Tech alongside country members of AU; we will go down to contradict ourselves. That is how Africa has remained at the at the mercy of the predators.

Having provided evidence on issues and challenges in the Nairobi creator platform economy, my goal is to advocate for what Helberger et al. (2018) call cooperative responsibility among key actors to craft strategies and policies that promote healthy equal platforms that do not

deepen power struggles and exacerbate the politics of inclusion. Because platform governance is a messy reality (Mol, 2002), cooperative responsibility (Helberger et al. 2018) may be a more appropriate approach that can be guided by a governmental strategy termed as coregulation (Lodge & Wegrich, 2012). Cooperative responsibility (Helberger et al., 2018) is an adaptive strategy to hold platform work to the promise of leveling the playing field by allowing Kenyans entry into a global digital workplace and marketplace of tasks and jobs, despite their socioeconomic backgrounds. In a cooperative responsibility (Helberger et al. 2018) model, platform corporations open up the overall operations and development of platform architectures and moderations practices to democratic assessment and control by citizens and public authorities. Designing such a model requires not just technical and legal expertise, but also insights from media studies scholars into how platform affordances and user practices mutually affect each other.” (Poell, 2020, pp. 653–654). The concept of co-regulation (Lodge & Wegrich, 2012), whereby the Kenyan government embraces multi-stakeholders (Stockmann, 2022) like brands (private industry) through KEPISA, influencer agencies, CSOs among others that are non-state regulatory regime but hold interest to the influencer economy. While co-regulation offloads costs of setting standards and monitoring, at the same time incentivizing the industry, to conform to the needs and interest of the public for accountability reinstated by the government (Lodge & Wegrich, 2012), cooperative responsibility (Helberger et al. 2018) upholds public values. In this dissertation, the goal for cooperative responsibility is to connect the Kenyan creator economy with the regulatory framework by legitimizing it as a recognized industry by creating a shared understanding: increase comprehension and meaningful engagement across all the actors. I envision cooperative responsibility as a model that if implemented correctly will bring together

all actors in a unified effort to legitimize and regulate the Instagram influencer economy in Kenya.

Conclusion

This chapter addressed the policy threats to platformization in Kenya which include: the digital service tax (DST), infrastructural gaps, digital pay gaps, data protection and privacy, and content moderation. In addition, the chapter examined the visions that Kenya aspires to realize with regulation of the DICs through platform governance. My interviewees revealed a sense of lost agency regarding platform governance by airing their grievances which are largely unattended to by the government. An example of this lost agency is the imposition of the DST by the same government that fails to legitimize their digital trade while protecting them from digital harms. In order to further analyze the Kenyan government policy and regulation, I analyzed the roles of the various actors in the Nairobi Instagram influencer network, such as influencers monetizing the platform and the brands seeking to advertise their products and services. These actors wrestle with governance contradictions—which I identified as messy and complex realities (Law & Singleton, 2005)—such as the digital service tax. My conversations with various actors, such as influencers, policy makers and government representatives showed that most network actors assume the platform economy will create new jobs in Kenya. They believe it will not only mitigate the problem of unemployment, but also legitimize digital entrepreneurship for equitable benefits. However, there are lurking regulatory frameworks that threaten to harm Nairobi content creators' endeavors, while continuing to protect platform agents. These frameworks are fair and favorable tax policies, regulated influencer incentivization model, data protection laws and content moderation policies attuned to the influencer economy model. A major implication of this lack of governance is impending the equal participation of all

actors in the digital creator economy. I suggest platform governance is a significant step the Kenyan government should take to better support and protect the interests of its citizens, especially the marginalized and vulnerable digital content creators in the country. New governmental regulatory policies will offer many young Kenyan Instagram influencers an opportunity to build a sustainable lifestyle. If successfully implemented, these policies will handle messy and complex platform governance issues discussed in this dissertation and establish the legal and policy framework to enable and enforce the digital creator economy. As a result, the Government of Kenya will have a detailed, transparent, and open understanding of the creator economy that will allow it to maximize national economic opportunities, such as tax revenue and increases in the employment base. In addition, content creators will gain knowledge, and be empowered, without fear for their safety and privacy.

DISSERTATION CONCLUSION

The purpose of this dissertation was to study platformization from a nonWestern perspective, the lens from which the majority of platformization studies has taken place. Most existing studies on platformization are from developed nations, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, as well as European environments. The cultural and societal norms that govern the understanding of platformization in developed countries are vastly different than those whose influence guides the development of platformization in countries like Kenya. However, platformization, as an emerging new media economy, is taking root through its infrastructure, technological affordances, influencer model, and ascendancy in Kenya, a developing economy, in a rather different shape and format, but strikingly not dissimilar from the influencer economy in the West. My dissertation is a research intervention and response to the rallying call made by various scholars (Khan, 2017; Kwet, 2020a, 2020b; Pasquale, 2018; Srnicek, 2018; van Dijck et al., 2018). De Kloet et al. (2019) argued that platformization is not to be understood as a uniform process, but rather one that follows different trajectories along the paths of infrastructure, governance, and practice. Therefore, the primary goal for this dissertation was to trace the unfolding of platformization through mapping out the Nairobi Instagram influencer network, its actors, and their interrelations.

As I studied platformization using literature from a Western-centric perspective, I found unique gaps in understanding related to specific aspects of platformization as it plays out in Kenya. The severity of obfuscated payment systems and other conditions, such as unequal gender pay, invisible labor, tax burdens, and mental health issues are greater in developing countries like Kenya due to the deepening digital divide. Thus, my findings are critical to

understanding how platformization unfolds in different markets and among heterogeneous entities within any given network.

I started the dissertation by asking this overarching research question: *How does the Instagram economy get reproduced and/or restructured in an emerging market, and specifically in an African space?* To further fulfill the broad research objective, I asked five specific research questions:

- How does platformization, as an emerging new media economy, take root through its infrastructure, technological affordances, influencer model and ascendancy in Kenya, a developing economy?
- How do the politics of inclusion and exclusion, embedded into an entrenched digital divide, reproduce, influence, and shape the Kenyan influencer Instagram economy and its beneficiaries?
- How do systems of power reproduce, influence, and shape the Kenyan influencer Instagram economy and its beneficiaries?
- How do Nairobi influencers produce themselves as commodified subjects to fit the Instagram operating model, and how does this commodification influence cultural reproduction in Nairobi?
- How can the Instagram influencer ecosystem, which is a global economy system, be governed in a way that is equitable, inclusive, and sustainable to all countries while mitigating the challenges, threats, and opportunities of digital content creators in an emerging market?

I answered each research question by demonstrating the larger technological, structural, messy, complex, and multiple realities of the process of platformization in a Global South

context. As I have demonstrated through a combined approach of ANT concepts, qualitative ethnographic methods, and detailed examples, we can gain a better understanding of emerging markets like Nairobi, and the distinct yet challenged roles Nairobians play on the construction of platform economies.. In addition, I engaged a wide variety of local and global issues, making an important contribution in pointing not only scholarly works, but also activists, policy makers, and governments to help supplement and deepen the platformization discourse from an emerging market perspective. Often, despite the pervasive inequalities in the social media creator economy, the everyday implications of, and the solutions to platform challenges, threats, and opportunities are left for Western scholars, platform owners, or governments to study with the intent of creating policy.

Actor-network theory provided the theoretical, methodological, and analytical framework to map out the network of multiple actors involved in the Instagram economy. I analyzed Instagram as an evolving platform, a *fire object*, recognizing the dynamic and networked relationships between its existing actors in the local cultural/political context in Nairobi, such as users (influencers), the Instagram platform, DICs, advertisers, policymakers/government, civil society, academia, and nonprofit organizations.

I interviewed 35 influencers within a period of 2 months (December 2021–January 2022). Beyond the interviews, I deployed guided tours of the influencers' Instagram accounts through the app walkthrough method and reviewed relevant documents with the goal of illuminating the obfuscated influencer model adopted by Instagram through mapping out the actors, nuanced complexities, and interconnections. I traced connections and mapped out the Nairobi Instagram influencer network that includes heterogeneous bits/actants, including human actors, such as policy makers, government officials, Meta representatives, and Think Tank representatives; and

nonhuman actors, such as brands, government, influencer agencies, the internet, smartphones, policy documents, and algorithms. The process of tracing connections, an approach called “following the thing” (Marcus, 1995, p. 106) led me to other human actors involved in the network, whom I interviewed to lend more insights into the research findings. Further interrogation of the institutional processes and interrelationships between actors emphasized how each identified actor contributes to the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy network. Through the translation process, the Nairobi Instagram influencer network emerged as heterogenous, complex, and messy, with multiple realities. These numerous realities are vital to understanding platformization in an emerging market like Nairobi.

Contributions

Throughout this dissertation, I demonstrated the need to acknowledge platforms as sociotechnical elements that take the form and shape of the specific socioeconomic, political, and cultural contexts in which they operate. Through Nairobi influencers’ “little stories” (Law, 2006, p. 62), I presented the everyday lived experiences, practices, and subjectivity of Nairobi influencers as commodified subjects of a global cultural phenomenon of platformization in emerging markets, whose practices and culture are thoroughly differentiated. Instagram is a fire object in Nairobi. It is a constantly evolving platform that is a ubiquitous, networked, sociotechnical system comprised of the dynamic and interactive relationships between its users in the local cultural and political context of Nairobi. The infrastructural properties of the platform play a significant role in shaping the way that Nairobi influencers interact, create, distribute, and monetize content on the platform. The specific idiosyncrasies of the sociocultural, economic, and political context of the city of Nairobi become combustible elements that render the platform both empowering and disempowering (Cunningham & Craig, 2020) to Nairobi

influencers. Instagram is becoming a primary, new workplace that offers innovative, unique tools and features that empower young people in upcoming cities like Nairobi to monetize the platform to make a living. However, the size of the total addressable market within the Nairobi creator economy is unknown, which signals the need for deeper inquiry into the creator economy in Kenya. The prospect of sustainable income creates hope, but only to the extent that Nairobi influencers can convert their commodification of self strategies into social capital. This social capital must then be translated into measurable actions and outcomes from brand partnerships with tangible return on investments, which demands new forms of digital skills, labor, infrastructure, tools, and regulatory frameworks that are already scarce in emerging markets. The process of developing the Instagram influencer economy also has a dark side as it introduces new and heightens existing various digital harms, such as a deepening digital divide, privacy invasion, and digital colonialism through commodifying the so called “poor” in the name of “inclusivity” (Arora, 2019, p. 70). Additionally, the developing economy is reconfiguring power imbalances and complicating the concept of technological development in the global framework of capitalism.

My dissertation makes a significant contribution to the academic literature on online digital platforms as digital workplaces in an emerging market. Topics of interest ranged with discourse from the peculiarities of platformization in the Global South, politics of inclusion/exclusion, power systems and digital colonialism, cultural hybridity, and platform governance. Taken together, each finding presented idiosyncrasies brought to life through the implications of platformization and explicitly demonstrated through empirical and theoretical approaches.

My findings underpin researchers' (i.e., de Kloet et al., 2019; Gillespie, 2017, Helmond, 2015; Poell et al., 2021; van Dijck et al., 2018) recognition of the distinct need to study platformization within the context it unfolds. I organized each of the five major findings as distinct chapters to expose the platformization process in answer to the research questions. Most importantly, my findings contribute to the existing body of platformization knowledge in theory and practice from a Global South lens to spur future research for the benefit of all actors in the network.

Instagram Platform as a Fire Object

Platformization in an emerging market like Nairobi is unfolding in a strikingly different way than in developed market contexts. My analysis revealed the complicated interplay of socioeconomic, political, and cultural dynamics embedded within the platformization process in Nairobi's emerging market. A major finding in this study revealed through each individual actor's moments of translation is that the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy is an amorphous network where human and nonhuman actors, varied ambitions, agendas, and strategies are incompatible, creating a multiple, messy, and complex reality as described by Law and Singleton (2005).

As revealed throughout this dissertation, the global Instagram influencer economy is a fire object in an emerging market like Nairobi. Globally, Instagram, as a nonhuman actor, in its design and function remains static, but in Nairobi, it acquires mutable properties, reshaping itself into the space in which it is contained (Law & Singleton, 2005; Mol, 2002). This morphing changes Instagram into a fire object. Its mutable properties become apparent in the form of threats, challenges, and opportunities as combustible elements that ignite the platformization process. As the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy network mutates, heterogeneous actors

attempt to translate it into functioning order, to mobilize, juxtapose, and bind the elements of the network (Law, 1992,). The process of binding involves negotiations, emplacement, and displacement of some actors (both humans and nonhumans).

The failure of Ajira to provide sustainable modes of income attainment for thousands of digital natives is a prime example of how the challenges Kenyan influencers face contribute to the expansion of the fire object. Some of the hidden moments and invisible actors, such as the DST controversy, digital labor on the platform, and the new Instagram economy in Nairobi characterize and differentiate the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy from the global Instagram model, which on the surface appears uniform. Altogether, these critical moments of translation within the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy involve institutional changes in markets, infrastructures, and governance that thwart the process of platformization. The implication of this finding underscores that platformization is not a uniform process (de Kloet et al., 2019) and there is a dire need to study platformization from the “other” perspectives with varying socioeconomic, political, and cultural contexts. Similar to Latour’s (1996) study of Aramis that highlighted missing actors, I recognize that the Nairobi Instagram influencer network also has missing actors that affect the failure of the network to meet its stated goals. Some of these missing actors include policy gaps, tax burden, cultural dynamics, and the role played by infrastructure challenges, such as consistent access to connectivity. These actors’ roles should be explored more fully to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy. Additionally, there is a need to recognize social media platforms as legitimate workplaces for the many unemployed youths in Kenya. However, this acknowledgment also raises questions about the platform’s legality, legitimacy, power, general

operations, and the role of the government in regulating and legitimizing the digital creator economy.

Politics of Inclusion/Exclusion

Nairobi's digital content creators/influencers strive for technical, social, and business autonomy while encountering other actors that cultivate resistance or acceptance in their digital entrepreneurship endeavors. The Nairobi Instagram influencer economy magnifies and replicates the politics of digital inclusion/exclusion through inherent power structures that undergird socioeconomic, political, and cultural dynamics within Nairobi by "strengthening existing inequalities [even while] creating new ones" (Sassi, 2005, p. 694). Although the various politics limit full and equal participation by all Nairobi digital content creators, influencers remain undeterred from creating, producing, distributing, and monetizing highly engaging and relevant content. As evinced throughout this dissertation, the story of the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy is a multidimensional perspective (Sassi, 2005) of the digital divide, which presents various implications. While the creator economy is regarded as democratizing the production and consumption of content to allow individuals to earn sustainable income, it also deepens the digital divide by excluding people, especially the poor, and infiltrates the local culture, which is still grappling with survival in many arenas. Increases in the digital divide take place in the form of invisible moments of translation (Callon, 1996; Mol, 2002) and moments of tension (Mol, 2002), further complicating the messiness of the Nairobi Instagram network. Nairobi digital content creators face a complex struggle as they attempt to professionalize and commercialize the commodification of self to enter an already mature global creator economy industry.

The implication of these findings are that the glitz and the glam of the Instagram model contribute to the highly misunderstood idea that influencers can earn livable income, a global

concern that functions on a varying scale according to the socioeconomic, cultural, and political context of each country. Consequently, my findings strongly support Castells' (2009) argument that, "the new economy affects everywhere and everybody but is inclusive and exclusionary at the same time" (p. 161). While Nairobi influencers' perspectives implied that the new economy offers increased and positive opportunities for their financial standing, when combined the politics of inclusion and exclusion, the tenuous economy actually disrupts the Nairobi Instagram network's stability. The politics of inclusion and exclusion threatens Nairobi digital entrepreneurs' perceived sense of hope, stability, and growth-producing opportunities while subverting their dreams of becoming Insta-celebrities (Frier, 2020, p. 11) beyond African boundaries. Within the individual, national, and platform divides that Nairobi creators live in lies the dangers of marginalization. Nairobi's digital content creators are excluded from global benefits, opportunities, and outcomes embedded in the Instagram digital entrepreneurship model.

It is a daunting task to uncover any justifiable claims of sustainable influencing careers when entangled into the messiness of the never-ending politics of inclusion and exclusion. Instagram is idolized as the tool for freedom, inclusivity, and democracy by Nairobi digital content creators; their overly optimistic perspective obscures the complex set of digital divides. My study revealed the heightened optimism held within ICT4D and M4D paradoxically exacerbates existing social, political, and economic divides within Kenya. The question of what can be done and by whom to nurture sustainable conditions for creators in Nairobi that will allow them to contribute and compete fairly on global digital platforms like Instagram, remains largely unanswered as these hidden moments of translation—the undercurrents and particularities of the platform creator culture—remain overlooked.

Reproduced Platform Power

Throughout this dissertation, the issue of the obfuscated influencer model adapted by Instagram demonstrated the messiness of the Instagram economy in Kenya. The cost of becoming an influencer includes endless digital labor, and a relinquishment of privacy as a tradeoff to monetize one's life. Influencers endure overexploitation by brands, influencer agencies, and cartels, and share their profits as kickbacks, a form of bribery tactics, so their networks will favor them with brand deals. Hence, influencers are pushing for unions to lobby and fight for their payment rights. In contrast, Instagram is understood as a "slice of power" (Frier, 2020 p. 158) with a substantiated form of emancipation (digital inclusion), presumably seen as the ticket out of poverty, as influencers seek to carve a career out of Instagram. Within the global and Nairobi cultural landscapes, the Instagram platform is a force that is both opportunistic and constraining for aspiring Kenyan influencers. In the process of platformization, power is enacted and negotiated, fostering power asymmetry between the platform, the influencers, the brands, and the government.

Within the Nairobi Instagram network, power manifests itself as immanent, multiple, and omnipresent (Foucault, 1998; Latour, 1988). While power exists at all levels of the Nairobi Instagram network, it is concentrated at the top. Meta continually pushes power down, while also demanding extreme loyalty from the other actors that continue to feed Meta's colonizing power. Simultaneously, influencers are platform dependent (Poell et al., 2022), yet they lack agency and autonomy over their digital labor because algorithmic power manipulates content exposure and obscures the ability of the influencer and the brand to hold agency for their work. This process aggravates the digital inequalities of already marginalized users in an emerging market like Nairobi.

The implication of this finding is that Meta's entrenched power is the pathway to digital colonialism in the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy. It breeds heightened instability of the network whereby it maintains a power imbalance between those who collect large amounts of data and those whose data are being collected globally. In the Global South, where weak regulatory frameworks exist and the effects of unequal distribution of power from colonialism still linger, the ubiquitous collection of data poses serious problems. The severity of these conditions is even worse in Nairobi due to heightened layers of access, a lack of or inadequate digital competencies, and incomplete or nonexistent digital policies. Kenyans are trading one form of colonialism for another under the guise of being technologically advanced and upwardly mobile in the influencer landscape. Fuchs' (2014) new spirit of capitalism is evident in the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy where platform workers commodify their data for a living; in trade, they are constantly vulnerable, have less bargaining power and higher uncertainty to sustain their influencing endeavors. Meta imposes its rules for inclusion and exclusion through algorithms and metrics, asserting a deeper level of control as it significantly determines influencers' success or failure.

Ultimately, the four forms of power evident in the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy coalesce into a pyramid of power with Meta's ownership and ultimate control over the influencer economy at the apex. Meta's power dictates how the expressions of power from the other forms operate. Influencers, brands, and Instagram itself are at the mercy of Meta's colonialistic domination. Individual influencers imagine themselves as having great power when in reality, any power they possess is meted out by Meta's business model. The implication is that the Instagram influencer economy does not benefit the public in Kenya, but rather benefits first and foremost Meta and, secondarily, elite influencers.

Hybridized Influencers' Adopted Culture

One of the key objectives for this dissertation was to question aspects of the globalization of culture using global technological dimensions of Instagram that are circulating within the influencer model. The influence of colonialism and the negotiation of authenticity and commercialization are central to the Nairobi Instagram culture. Through commodification of self, Nairobi influencers try to bring old and new ideologies together, resulting in corporate colonialism.

Nairobi influencers draw from global influencers to commodify themselves and self-brand, sometimes overshadowing their own local culture. The rise of the U.S. creator economy and the success of American influencers has greatly shaped the tactics used by Nairobi influencers. Nairobi influencers adopt the same aesthetic of self representation as their American counterparts in an effort to attain fame and status as microcelebrities among a niche group of followers. This cultural emulation of American influencers has a profound impact on how Kenyans perceive and interpret culture, particularly in the identity-making and appropriation of a Nairobi Instagram content creator.

The implication of this finding is that overall, the practices of Instagram influencers in Africa are deeply rooted in Western ideologies that breed corporate colonialism and result in a tension between authenticity and commercialization. Concurrently, the reproduction of Americanized culture described by Owong'a et al. (2021) results in a loss of authentic Kenyan cultural identity and a form of cultural colonization, inviting concerns about cultural infiltration and the possibilities of decolonizing the network. The idea of cultural sovereignty on platforms like Instagram is difficult to achieve, as the structural affordances of the platform are deeply rooted and complicate cultural independence of any state or community.

Platform Governance

As the Instagram economy continues to lure Nairobi youth in unprecedented ways, it is critical for the Kenyan government to analyze how the few, weak consumer protection policies and laws (Arora, 2019) produce gaps that aggravate existing conditions of unequal digital rights and increase digital vulnerabilities within digital platforms in emerging markets like Nairobi. However, emerging tensions and concerns raised by influencers about the DST, infrastructural gaps, pay models and exploitation, data and privacy protection, and content moderation must be addressed if the digital creator economy is to be realized.

The Kenyan government is struggling to stay ahead of the rapidly growing challenges, which is partly due to the nature of the platform. Platforms extend their data infrastructures into new markets, entrenching the datafication of human activities. Think tanks, policymakers, civil agents, government officials, academicians, and the media are confronted with new payment models and a need to explore labor rights within the platform economy. The rise of the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy invokes a mandate for sustainable regulation and policies to legitimize the new digital workplace as a viable creator economy, but the question of whose role and responsibility within the platform ecosystem it is to govern platform and close the discussed policy gaps remains a highly contested debate (Gillespie, 2017; Helberger et al., 2018; Poell et al., 2022). My analysis of all the actors in the Nairobi Instagram network revealed that the Kenyan government is the dominant actor holding the financial, executive, legislative power and the ability to regulate platforms and its users. However, the legal framework that regulates the entire ICT spectrum in Kenya is diverse and relatively young, which can impede the ability of the government to effectively deal with the implications of the platform economy. The government's decision to mirror laws created for the Global North regarding data protection and

privacy has left Nairobi creators without direction about the specific challenges they face in an emerging market. While regulatory bodies do exist in Kenya, they do not understand how to regulate digital platforms to protect the interests of the various actors in the Instagram influencer network.

The Kenyan government is a black box (Callon & Latour, 1981) that can be opened, exposed, and dissected to provide insight into how the relationships between actors in the network, including the government, shape the unregulated creator economy. To potentially mitigate these challenges, I propose that policymakers and key actors in the Nairobi Instagram network should work together to develop a governance model of cooperative responsibility (Helberger et al., 2018). This approach, guided by the concept of coregulation (Lodge & Wegrich, 2012), could promote healthy, equal platforms that do not deepen power struggles and exacerbate the politics of inclusion. It is also important for the government to develop strategies and policies that align with the scope of potential threats, opportunities, and challenges in the context of the Nairobi creator platform economy, in order to promote equal access to a global digital workplace and marketplace of tasks and jobs, regardless of socioeconomic backgrounds. The potential benefits of successful regulation and implementation include economic gains for the government and social economic benefits for content creators. By adopting this model, the Kenyan government can better support and protect the interests of its citizens, especially marginalized and vulnerable digital content creators in Kenya, and maximize economic opportunities for the government and society as a whole. However, the actual implications will depend on the successful formulation, adoption, and implementation of these regulations.

Study Recommendations on Main Actors in the Nairobi Influencer Network

While this dissertation accounts for the Nairobi Instagram influencer network, its actors, and their interrelations, I briefly reflect on implications, recommendations, and things to think about for the five major actors identified in this case study: (a) Meta/Instagram, (b) influencers, (c) brands, (d), the government, and (e) the internet

- **Meta/Instagram:** Perhaps Meta and other platforms need to reevaluate their creator economy models and tailor the dynamics to market specific dynamics. Specifically on monetization, which was presented as a major challenge in study, Meta's revenue model needs to meet the demands of the different socioeconomic and political dynamics of an emerging city like Nairobi, as opposed to presenting the alluring facet of the glitzy and glamorous bauble, which is merely visible in developed markets, yet not as visible in the Nairobi Instagram economy. The goal here is to allow the creator economy to democratize the production, consumption, and monetization of content to allow individuals to earn sustainable income. The objective is to nurture sustainable conditions for creators in Nairobi that will allow them to contribute and compete fairly on global digital platforms like Instagram. I think the uniform approach of Meta's revenue model may not be favorable for all markets across the globe.
- **Influencers:** While it makes sense for young millennials and digital natives, especially the unemployed ones, to join the luring Nairobi Instagram economy in order to improve their socioeconomic standing by leveraging recognition, fame, respect, and influence, it is also highly suggested that they conduct proper due diligence of understanding the attention economy, its promise for a better life, and the day-to-day demands of digital labor. This is because the perceived sense of freedom, democracy and inclusivity blur the

precarious position for Nairobi creators, existing conditions of poverty, and already existing digital vulnerabilities, and the fact that only a disproportionately few are making any tangible financial benefits, not just in Nairobi but across the globe, as discussed in this study.

- **Brands:** It is highly advisable that the process of monetization or strategies brands use to incentivize influencers should be matched against the arising challenges presented in this dissertation. It is hoped that the motivations of the brands to influencer economy match not only the need to assess adequate returns to justify their investment in the influencer industry but also to build sustainable careers as a content creator on Instagram as Nairobi millennials and Gen Z/digital natives attempt to leverage the digital workplace for sustainable income.
- **Government:** The Instagram influencer ecosystem, which is a global economy system, should be governed in a way that is equitable, inclusive, and sustainable. The goal is to support better and sustainable conditions for creators' career pathways as they professionalize and commercialize their passions. As the Kenyan government hopes to form a sustainable digital economy, the rise of the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy can be viewed as one of those main contributors to the digital economy. Hence, the influencer economy prompts the possibility of new pathways for sustainable regulation and policies to legitimize the new digital workplace when viewed as a viable creator economy.
- **Internet:** The internet is an obligatory passage point (OPP) of the network. Internet access, adoption, and usage remains low, with a distinct role in sustaining the platform economy. Africa's digital creators are held back by persistent issues with connectivity as

this study has shown. While connectivity brings equal and inclusive participation it also remains a lingering barrier of entry for most people who would like to foster careers in the creator economy. The government's role includes partnering with platforms like Meta to increase growth rates in internet penetration in the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy to sustain content production, management, distribution, and monetization.

Study Limitations

The purpose of my qualitative study with an ethnographic approach was to interrogate the dynamics and nuances of platformization in a developing nation context. Qualitative methodology is subjective rather than objective, and concerned with experiences and perspectives rather than quantifiable observations (Anderson, 2010). I embraced a qualitative methodology to allow the experiences and perceptions of multiple actors to come forth to describe and analyze the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy. The use of a qualitative methodology over a quantitative methodology limited the analysis of the data gathered. While I presented numerical data to support the findings related to monetization strategies adopted in the Kenyan influencer economy, my goal was not to produce quantifiable results (Anderson, 2010). Rather, numerical data supported and validated participants' perceptions of the Instagram influencer economy in an emerging market.

From a methodological perspective, the combined use of ANT and qualitative ethnographic methods created a challenge and posed a second limitation for this study. First, as expressed by various platform scholars (e.g., Baym, 2021; Cunningham & Craig, 2019), platforms are constantly changing at unprecedented speed, so to theoretically and conceptually study and analyze platform practices is a daunting task. Instagram reorganizes and programs the features of the platform mostly through algorithmic editing, meaning that the platform itself may

“transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry” (Latour, 2005, p. 39). Inasmuch as ANT helped me map out the platformization of Instagram in Nairobi, it has an epistemological shortcoming whereby it solely focuses on how networks are formed and sustained but does not answer the question of why (Law, 2006), especially in terms of political and power aspects. Therefore, I used qualitative methods to understand the influencers’ motivations for the commodification of self and questioned what globalization of technology actually means for Africa, uncovering how empowering or disempowering it is to the African people and the digital economy. However, it is imperative to examine alternative possibilities research methods and approaches that conceptualize platformization in the Global South differently.

The sample size for this study was small, posing a third limitation. I only interviewed a select number of influencers, policy makers, and government officials. I could have interviewed more actors in the Nairobi Instagram influencer network but I kept the participant pool small to ensure depth of findings (Vasileiou et al., 2018) and to manage the copious amounts of data produced in the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Although Denzin and Lincoln (2011) advocated for multiple perspectives, researchers who use ethnographic approaches must make decisions about what data should be included or disregarded to stay aligned with the purpose of the study. In terms of ANT, the data presented multiple realities and heterogenous practices (Mol, 2002) within the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy. However, the constraints of the study limited my ability to analyze each reality in depth. Therefore, I applied the concept of follow the thing (Marcus, 1995) to reduce the scope to a manageable amount of data. Consequently, the generalizability of my findings is limited, as my focus remained on Kenya,

and specifically Nairobi. I recognize this limitation means the results may not be representative of all countries and cultures in Africa.

A fourth limitation was my positionality as the researcher. I am a Kenyan but I live and study in a Western environment. My lived experiences, which are informed by my Kenyan heritage, exposure to the historical and systemic colonial legacy of the Kenyan culture, and my involvement in Western studies had the potential to distort my understanding of the Nairobi Instagram influencer economy. Contrastingly, this unique positionality allowed me to examine the problem from multiple angles. I recognized the potential for participants to regard me as both a person too close to the data, but also an outsider due to my experiences in a Western culture. Therefore, I acknowledge that participant responses may have focused on more negative aspects of the influencer culture to gain sympathy, or on more positive aspects of the influencer culture to maintain personal and national pride.

A final possible limitation involved the use of an ethnographic approach. From a positivist perspective, ethnography and ethnographic approaches consider all data valid, seeking to establish comparability and translatability as a “crucial ... application of ethnographic research” (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982). This study sought to incorporate a wide range of data sources to establish both comparability and translatability (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982) while also seeking the confirmability and dependability of each data piece. Using careful documentation, I sought to avoid observer bias (Gold, 1997; LeCompte & Goetz, 1982) and emphasized the development of relationships rather than detailing the number of responses to questions (Gold, 1997). Additionally, I avoided a “holistic representation” (Marcus, 1995, p. 99) of one “cultural formation” (p. 99) in favor of an examination of the system in which the cultural formation resides.

Study Delimitations

I purposely bounded my research with specific criteria to manage the data, and to bring into sharper focus the aspects of the study problem I wished to explore. These delimitations were critical to the production of results that fully met the purpose of the study and answered the research questions. First, the study was conducted primarily from the influencer's perspective. The emphasis on the influencers as the focal point might lead to over-privileging their sentiments over those of other actors, including the consumers and nonhuman actors, such as brands, government, internet, and smartphones, policy documents, algorithms. Although my findings are dense, extensive, and important, critical dimensions and nuances of each actor might have been largely overlooked. This approach left out an important part of understanding how other actors' roles lead to the perpetuation of inequalities that reinforce the status quo, stunting the mobilization process.

Second, I only focused on Instagram and no other social media platforms, like TikTok, where influencing and monetization are popular. In addition, I focused on platform monetization but not on other aspects of brand power, measurement of influencers' performance. I used the follow the thing (Marcus, 1995) approach to keep the focus on the monetization of the influencer economy; other researchers may want to examine other "things," such as the process of monetization or strategies brands use to incentivize influencers. For example, from another analytical perspective, a consumer or brand outlook would show a differential perspective in understanding the unfolding of platformization, which could be the aim of a future study.

Third, the typical duration of qualitative studies using ethnographic approaches is characterized as long-term fieldwork of at least 12 months or more in the field. Due to time constraints, I collected data only for 2 months (December, 2021; January, 2022). Assuming the

privilege of time, I could have developed a larger sample size and fostered deep and long-term relationships with the digital content creators and other actors, which would have increased the validity and reliability of the results gathered in this study.

Future Research Recommendations

The recommendations offered for future research emphasize the need for further interrogation and research of the creator economy by scholars who have a keen understanding of platformization and the digital creator economy in emerging markets. The topic of platform governance for the creator economy is an important subject for future research, as it will expose policy gaps and help shape policy formulation. I offer several recommendations for future research on platformization in emerging markets.

- Although I charted different realities of the messy and complex (Law & Singleton, 2005) influencer economy in the context of the emerging markets, including how it is unfolding from the broader concept of platformization, the scope of the creator economy could stretch beyond the Instagram influencer economy, encompassing a set of emerging digital business models in other platforms, such as TikTok.
- Another way of expanding the study within the broader creator economy is to move beyond the influencers as the focal point and offer an in-depth analysis of the rest of the actors, such as brands, in relation to their interests in the network.
- It might be interesting to further explore the simultaneous relationships and correlations of influencer compensation against a multiplicity of factors, such as gender, income, education, and age to further test the validity of the obfuscated model.

- Additionally, researchers might compare the influencer economy model in emerging markets with Westernized nations to operationalize and measure whether influencers earn livable income off their digital entrepreneurial gigs.
- Alternatively, researchers might examine how influencers' relationship with their followers or consumers affect their earnings.

One of the most crucial questions of this dissertation related to understanding who exactly is benefiting from the digital creator economy in the context of emerging market.

Therefore,

- Future studies might benefit from long-term ethnographic research to be able to ascertain the true beneficiaries and mechanisms put in place to cope to arising threats and challenges from the dark side of the creator economy.
- Longitudinal studies might consider the career trajectories of creators who engage in various brand deals and sponsorships.
- Researchers could focus on the motivations of the brands that leverage the influencer economy and the need to assess adequate returns to justify their investment in the influencer industry.
- Applying an interdisciplinary approach in tandem with other disciplines, such as economics, would help researchers ascertain the measuring impact or return on investment versus the human and capital investment influencers put into their digital trade as they commodify themselves.
- An investigation of platformization's socioeconomic features would develop a more sophisticated and comprehensive analysis when it comes policymaking to identify those

messy and complex (Law & Singleton, 2005) areas, such as the DST, that need intervention.

- It is essential to measure the creator economy through an examination of the interrelationship between human and financial capital investment to understand and address both social and digital inequalities that explicitly stood out in this study.

Given that the influencer economy phenomenon is rapidly spreading across the entire globe, the platformization field might benefit from the following recommendations:

- A comparative study of mostly country-specific research, such as South Africa or Nigerian-based Instagram influencers would be interesting to compare differences and similarities between countries on the same continent.
- Researchers might consider the benefits influencers in other countries can gain from influencers in Kenya. Accordingly, these distinct variables might produce significant results in each of these specific contexts, which is important for investigating different socioeconomic stratifications of the influencer economy in an emerging market.

If any recommendations on legitimizing the creator economy are to be realized, the economy needs broader definitions, concepts, and measures of the creator economy by adding more evidence from academic literature on the digital creator economy across Africa. These scholarly endeavors would reduce the paucity of academic research and fortify the readily available industry-based and anecdotal evidence from the media. Possible research considerations include,

- Undertaking studies that trace the unfolding of the creator economy amongst various actors to generate lessons and best practices for countries where platformization is unfolding.

- More research needs to be conducted around platformization in the Global South. Such inquiry can derive research gaps from the synthesis of main themes, such as the messy, complex, and multiple realities revealed in this dissertation, which could help bring more clarity to better equip researchers to investigate the phenomenon and implications of platformization relevant in the context of emerging markets.
- In terms of platform governance, a separate investigation will be required to give policy recommendations on the creator economy's opportunities, barriers, and good-practice interventions required to realize its full potential to deliver the promise of the digital workplace that most young people are turning to for full- or part-time employment.
- Future researchers might delve even further into the nuances of what components of influencers' socioeconomic status yield financial effects given the preexisting inequalities in Internet access, adoption, and usage.

My research raised three very critical questions that remain unaddressed that future research may attend to:

1. Should there be an influencer creator economy, and if so, how should it be organized?
2. From a decolonial perspective, what are the reasons for a system of double-wealth concentration?
3. Should there be a policy strategy to advocate for reforms of the creator economy in order to alleviate suffering and weaken the existing inequalities?

My findings offer a possibility for future investigations to account for politics of inclusion, future of work, power systems, globalization of technology and digital colonialism, cultural hybridity, and platform governance as scholars assess platformization in the Global South. I also hope the

study raises questions of subjectivity through the commodification of self, the legitimization of platforms as digital workplaces, and the growth of the creator industry.

Final Thoughts

The Nairobi Instagram culture is closely intertwined with the city's infrastructure concerns, such as access to energy sources, internet, telecommunications, and transportation; socioeconomic, political, and cultural climate; and the desire of influencers to replicate Western content. This dissertation exposed the Instagram economy's heightened participation in Kenya through influencers' perceived sense of freedom and democracy, yet barriers to entry into the economy are still present. Aspiring influencers face issues of access, participation, and circulation in producing, creating, distributing, and monetizing content. The root causes and consequences of digital inequalities as deeper and more difficult politics of inclusion and exclusion are complex and must be carefully deconstructed if an accurate understanding of platformization is to be realized. It is my hope that this dissertation's foundational work will inspire platformization scholars and practitioners in Africa and around the world to leverage my findings as a starting point for future research on the benefits and costs of the creator economy for various actors in emerging markets contexts. I add my voice to other platform scholars as together we advocate for greater understanding of platformization to ensure the work produced by individuals on digital platforms is empowering, equitable, and efficacious for all actors in the network.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A:
Participant Flyer

SHARE YOUR EXPERIENCE ON BEING A NAIROBI
INSTAGRAM INFLUENCER/CONTENT CREATOR



We are looking for a diverse group of Nairobi Instagram Influencers/Content Creators to participate in a global study seeking to understand the emerging Nairobi Instagram Economy. This study interrogates the Instagram economy in Nairobi as part of a global cultural phenomenon to identify, understand and learn implications of platformization for better interventions on emerging opportunities, threats as well as other critical measures required to understand, leverage, and regulate digital platforms across emerging markets.

To participate in an anonymous demographic online survey and a 30-minute interview, please,

CLICK ON THE LINK BELOW TO REGISTER
and tell us your availability.
Or text via WhatsApp + 1 919 744 1379

* Participants will receive the equivalent of Kshs 500 in credit in airtime or data bundle on their preferred cell phone provider.

Thank you very much for your support!

Appendix B:

Invitation to Participate – Influencers

North Carolina State University Script for Research Participation (December 2021)

Title of Study: The Glitz and Glamour Platform Economy: Issues for Instagram Monetization for Influencers in Emerging Markets

Principal Investigator: Anne Njathi

Script

Hello, my name is Anne Njathi, and I am a researcher at North Carolina State University in the United States (in the USA) and a curious tech enthusiast. I am interested in studying the emergent digital platforms such as Instagram that are increasingly taking center stage in Nairobi, Kenya. The purpose of this study is to find out how social media influencers experience the Instagram economy in their everyday lives, the practices and experiences surrounding access, usage, and adoption of Instagram and how these influences their lifestyle. In so doing, the study hopes to gain a greater understanding of digital platforms and culture to reveal social economic outcomes through the choice's influencers make when adopting influencer activities. If you are at least 18 years old, live in Nairobi, Kenya, have (a) at least 1000 number of followers; (b) actively worked or devoted yourself to influencer marketing activities such as creating engagement, driving conversation (products or services sales) with an intended target audience over a period of one year on Instagram; (c) have received formal or informal incentives you're your activities on Instagram; (d) post everyday whether posts are promotional or not then you are eligible to participate in our study. Participating in the study will include 30–45-minute physical semi structured interview at your convenient location and a app walkthrough tour giving details of influencing experiences in Nairobi. If you are interested or have questions about the study, please contact Anne Njathi at awnjathi@ncsu.edu or send your name and contact details via WhatsApp to + 1 919 744 1379. Those who agree to participate will receive the equivalent of \$5 (USD) in airtime or data bundle on their preferred cell phone provider.

Appendix C:

Consents to Participate

North Carolina State University Informed Consent Form for Research (December 2021)

Title of Study: The Glitz and Glamour Platform Economy: Issues for Instagram Monetization for Influencers in Emerging Markets

Principal Investigator: Anne Njathi

We are asking you to participate in an ethnographic research study. This study will deploy ethnographic research qualitative techniques to explore Social Media Influencer (SMI) everyday lives, actual practices and experiences with the Instagram Economy in Nairobi, Kenya. In so doing, the study hopes to gain a greater understanding of digital platforms and culture to reveal social economic outcomes through the choice's influencers make when adopting influencer activities.

Study eligibility:

There will be approximately 50 participants in this study in Nairobi, Kenya

In order to be a participant in this study you must be an Instagram influencer:

At least 18 years of age or older

Live in Nairobi (Kenya) for at least one year

At least have 1000 number of followers

Actively worked or devoted yourself to influencer marketing activities such as creating engagement, driving conversation (products or services sales) with an intended target audience **over a period of one year** on Instagram

Have received formal or informal incentives for their activities on Instagram

Post every day or more than once a day whether posts are promotional or not

You cannot participate in this study if you do not meet all the prerequisites above.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to:

Read and agree with this consent to participate (5 minutes)

Complete an anonymous demographic survey online (5 minutes)

Answer individual semi structured interview questions either face-to-face or online (30-45 minutes)

App walkthrough observation of your experiences to understand how you interact and “monetize” with Instagram into your everyday lives and practices

AUDIO AND VIDEO

If you want to participate in this research, you must agree to being audio or video recorded. If you do not agree to being audio or video recorded, you cannot participate in this research.

RISKS

The interview and the App walkthrough will ask questions about Instagram influencer and your actual everyday lives, practices and experiences through the app while 'influencing'. There are minimal or no risks associated with participation in this research.

BENEFITS

Your participation in this study will help us to understand how people interact with Instagram economy in Kenya, and your answers might help to improve policies surrounding access, usage and adoption of the digital platforms.

COMPENSATION

Participants will receive the equivalent of US\$ 5 (American Dollars) in credit in airtime or data bundle on their preferred cell phone provider.

CONFIDENTIALITY

To protect you, all your information will remain confidential and we will remove your name from any information collected during the interview. Any information gathered from the participants during study or responses to the survey questions will be held in confidence. All data will only be labeled with an ID number, no names will be recorded on any of the measures. For analysis, all materials used in this study will be labeled with identification numbers and will not have any information that could link a participant's name or other identifying information to the materials. Data will be stored in the principal researcher's Google drive.

**North Carolina State University
Informed Consent Form for Research (December 2021)**

Title of Study: The Glitz and Glamour Platform Economy: Issues for Instagram Monetization for Influencers in Emerging Markets

Principal Investigator: Anne Njathi

We are asking you to participate in an ethnographic research study. This study will deploy ethnographic research qualitative techniques to explore Social Media Influencer (SMI) everyday lives, actual practices and experiences with the Instagram Economy in Nairobi, Kenya. In so doing, the study hopes to gain a greater understanding of digital platforms and culture to reveal social economic outcomes through the choice's influencers make when adopting influencer activities.

Study eligibility:

There will be approximately 50 participants in this study in Nairobi, Kenya

In order to be a participant in this study you must:

At least 18 years of age or older

Live in Nairobi (Kenya) for at least one year

Should have worked with the policy making company (Instagram/Facebook or Government of Kenya) for at least the three years

Nominated by the company to represent it in this study

You cannot participate in this study if you do not meet all the prerequisites above.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to:

Read and agree with this consent to participate (5 minutes)

Answer individual semi structured interview questions either face-to-face or online (30-45 minutes)

AUDIO AND VIDEO

If you want to participate in this research, you must agree to being audio or video recorded. If you do not agree to being audio or video recorded, you cannot participate in this research.

RISKS

The interview will ask questions about policies shaping Instagram influencer activities and their actual everyday lives, practices and experiences through the app while 'influencing'. There are minimal or no risks associated with participation in this research.

BENEFITS

Your participation in this study will help us to understand how people interact with Instagram economy in Kenya, and your answers might help to improve policies surrounding access, usage, and adoption of the digital platforms.

COMPENSATION

Participants will receive the equivalent of US\$ 5 (American Dollars) in credit in airtime or data bundle on their preferred cell phone provider.

CONFIDENTIALITY

To protect you, all your information will remain confidential and we will remove your name from any information collected during the interview. Any information gathered from the participants during study or responses to the survey questions will be held in confidence. All data will only be labeled with an ID number, no names will be recorded on any of the measures. For analysis, all materials used in this study will be labeled with identification numbers and will not have any information that could link a participant's name or other identifying information to the materials. Data will be stored in the principal researcher's Google drive.

QUESTIONS

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the principal researcher, Anne Njathi via email at awnjathi@ncsu.edu. or via WhatsApp + 1 919 744 1379.

CONTACT

If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact the NC State IRB (institutional Review Board) Office via email at irb-director@ncsu.edu or via phone at 1.919.515.8754. An IRB office helps participants if they have any issues regarding research activities.

You can also find out more information about research, why you would or would not want to be a research participant, questions to ask as a research participant, and more information about your rights by going to this website: <http://go.ncsu.edu/research-participant>.

PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Please check below all that apply with your consent:

AUDIO and VIDEO

I agree to be audio taped. I agree to be videotaped.

ELIGIBILITY

I am over 18 years of age..

Live in Nairobi (Kenya) for at least one year

Should have worked with the policy making company (Instagram/Facebook or Government of Kenya) for at least the three years

Nominated by the company to represent it in this study

CONSENT

I understand the above information.

I have been offered a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study.

Full Name / Date

Appendix D:

Demographics Survey

North Carolina State University

Anonymous Demographic Online Survey (December 2021)

Title of Study: The Glitz and Glamour Platform Economy: Issues for Instagram Monetization for Influencers in Emerging Markets

Principal Investigator: Anne Njathi

Background Information

This is an anonymous survey. We want to collect information about the profile of Instagram influencers in Nairobi. Results of the survey will be anonymous, and we won't connect the information you provide in this survey to your name in any way.

Age

Gender

Education Level

Monthly Income

Which part of Nairobi do you live in?

Which mobile phone do you have (make and model)?

Do you have a pre-paid plan or a subscription?

When did you start using Instagram?

When (year) did you become an Instagram influencer?

What motivated you to become an Instagram influencer? (Explain)

Do you see a future with your Instagram influencer career? If yes, Explain (When, why, where, and how)

How do you normally access Instagram? (WIFI or Data Bundles)

Appendix E:

Interview Guide

INFLUENCERS SEMI STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. When did you start?
2. What are the economic incentives tied to Nairobi Instagram influencers?
 - a. What motivated you to start influencer marketing?
 - i. Monetary
 - ii. Gifts (Merchandise)
 - iii. In Kind
 - iv. Like Economy (to build the numbers/followers) for the influencers
 - v. Side Hustle?

Is this your single source of revenue?

Yes _____ Explain

No _____ Explain

Note to self:

- a) Do you negotiate terms of engagement? The pay? content?
- b) Does the duration determine amount?
- c) Does the product/brand matter? High end vs Low? Risk involved? e.g., condoms,

Cultural Reproduction

- a) Do you consider yourself a successful influencer?

If yes, Explain _____

If No, Explain _____

- b) What is your ultimate goal with influencer marketing?
 - c) Who do you look up to locally and international?
 - d) Are there things you have adjusted to fit being an influencer?
 - a. Physically e.g., liposuction, BBL
 - b. Emotionally
 - c. Spiritually
 - d. Socially
 - e) How do you maintain relevance to continue getting business from brands?
3. How do influencers monetize their activities and practices in the Instagram economy?
 - a. Do you rate card?
 - i. Post
 - ii. Insta-story
 - iii. IGTV
 - iv. Reel
 - b. Contract/Agreement
 - c. Direct or Intermediary (Agencies)
 - d. Do you engage legal entities like lawyers when signing these agreements?
 - e. Have you experienced breach of contract where you have incurred the cost by running a campaign or ad then clients have failed to pay you?

Note to self: Ask about contract duration, content, contract renewal

Is payment made before or after execution

How is success measured? Performance? Are you paid based on sales generated or not? What metrics are used?

Access/Use/Adoption

- f. How do you access IG?
- g. How do you access/afford internet?
- h. How much does it cost you? Which carrier do you use?
- i. What are some of the challenges do you face when it comes to access, use and adoption?
- j. What kind of support would you like to see to help you grow?
- k. Have you used IG lite?

Digital Use and Competencies

- a) What is your digital literacy level when it comes to IG?
 - a. competent
 - b. good
 - c. fair
 - d. poor/ needs help
- b) Do you need help using IG?
- c) Do you work with a team?
- d) What government resources have you used?
- e) Do you know of any government resources to improve digital literacy?
- f) Have you participated/benefited from online digital marketing course from Google, Microsoft, Facebook, YouTube?
- g) Have you invested in any digital skills training to uplift your influencer marketing activities?
- h) How does the algorithm work for you or not? do you see it as a challenge?
- i) do you think it is a lot of digital labor and investment (capital and human)?
 - a. what is your screen time out of 24hrs?

Infrastructure

What are your tools of trade?

- a. How do you create your content?
- b. What are some content creation challenges are you facing? Block? Mental breakdown? - NEW
- c. Which equipment and tools do you use?
- d. How much does it cost you to do a single sponsored post/reel/story?

Does is pay back? Expenditure vs. Income?

Does the amount you are paid pay back? ROI?

what is a good profit margin? out of 100%.

How many brand deals in a month help you meet your monthly bills?

Are there months you go without brand deals?

Emerging Issues

What have been a victim of, from the below? any of these?

- i. Data protection and privacy issues
- ii. Over-taxation
- iii. Unfair competitive practices
- iv. Copyright/Piracy
- v. Cyber bullying

- vi. social justice and fairness.
- vii. DATA- do you know what happens to your data? or the data of your followers?
- viii. Please Explain _____
- l. What action did you take?
- m. Did you approach IG and how did they help you resolve the matter?
- n. Do you have any recommendation of how this can be resolved in case of future re-occurrences?
- o. Do you feel like your trade is understood and protected by the government or by IG? And your activities are legitimate and protected?
- p. Do you have any concerns (follow up to no. e above? - Good, bad or ugly?

Appendix F:
Monetary Compensation on Instagram

Participant Explanation	\$USD		<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
	Least	Most		
Duration of Campaign	0	10,000	4	11.4
First Gig	100	100	2	5.7
Instastories	7	200	4	11.4
Small Brand	10	4,000	5	14.3
Different Brand Deals	7.50	250	1	2.9
Story on IG (Least) and Image Rights (Most)	500	3,000	1	2.9
Guinness Marketing Campaign (Instagram Reels)	0	2,000	5	14.3
Per Campaign	1	3,000	5	14.3
Option 1			1	2.9
2022 Rate Card Per Post (Least) to Client Pay (Most)	5	1,700	2	5.7
Only One Payment Received	30	3,000	3	8.6
No Money Made From Content Creation Yet			2	5.7
Total			35	100

Appendix G:
NonMonetary Compensation on Instagram

Means of Compensation	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Free Product (Clothes, Items, Product/Service)	10	29
PR Packages	6	17.1
Exposure	5	14.3
Trips, Meals, and Accommodations	3	8.6
Barter Trade	2	5.7
None	3	8.6
Branded Merchandise	4	11.4
Total	36*	100

*One participant indicated receiving both exposure and branded merchandise

Appendix H: Instagram Rich List

