

Aspiring and Deprecating Female Influencers

Communicative Capitalism and the Positioning of Women Entrepreneurs

HAELIM SUH

Abstract

Given the relative ease of joining an e-commerce market via social media platforms, expectations have risen about the role of communication technology and social networks in advancing gender equality in economic participation. South Korean women influencers, in particular, are selling various items using their popularity on social networks. They represent themselves as successful, passionate, gorgeous businesswomen with glamorous lifestyles. These individual influencers exemplify neoliberal ideals, branding and marketing themselves as independent and autonomous creators able to fashion their own destinies in the endless competition of the market. Recently however, heated deinfluencing trends against them have grown in strength and intensity, deprecating these women as nonprofessional, mass-deceptive online vendors. It has become common to describe them with the derogatory term “palyi people.” Against this backdrop, the current study questions the ability of digitalized online technology to empower women coming along with the ideas of neoliberalism and postfeminism. Using the concept of communicative capitalism, this study will analyze the images and texts created and circulated within the social media sphere by six popular female influencers and their followers. Through this data, this study aims to grasp how the free communicative activities of female influencers and their

followers on social media negatively position women entrepreneurs in the techno-cultural era.

Keywords: social media, female fashion and beauty influencer, women entrepreneur, communicative capitalism

Introduction: Female Influencers as Successful Entrepreneurs

In 2019, the South Korean fashion and cosmetic brand Bugun FNC, led by renowned influencer Imvely (Jihyun Im) and her husband, announced an annual revenue of approximately \$1.3 billion, double their revenue from the previous year. Leveraging their online popularity, Bugun FNC expanded by opening flagship stores in department stores and hosting market events.¹ The key to their success lies in their dedicated followers, often referred to derogatorily as “handmaids” of Imvely, who number over eight hundred thousand on her social media accounts.

The term *influencer* emerged to describe individuals like Imvely who wield power through digital media. Within their platforms and among their follower networks, digital influencers utilize platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter to establish official yet intimate communication channels. Through these transnational, global media platforms, individuals demonstrate their social influence through quantifiable metrics such as follower counts.

The nature of communication between influencers and their followers has evolved with the advancement of social media. Decades after the rise of social media, individual sellers’ connections with individual consumers has become the primary arena for people to explore and acquire information

1. Yoo Boo-Hyeok, “How Fashion Site Imvely Clicks with Online Shoppers,” *Korea JoongAng Daily*, January 4, 2017, [https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2017/01/04/industry/How-fashion-site-Imvely-clicks-with-online-shoppers/3028247.html?detailWord=.](https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2017/01/04/industry/How-fashion-site-Imvely-clicks-with-online-shoppers/3028247.html?detailWord=)

about products. This shift has emerged as one of the major reasons people engage with social media. According to Instagram Korea, individuals are increasingly inclined to seek out brand information and buy products through social media platforms over other forms of media.²

Possible Changes?

The emergence of female influencers is poised to engender possible positive impacts by providing a platform for identity negotiation, promoting diversified communication, and facilitating women's roles in the fashion and beauty industry. Firstly, from the beginning, emerging fashion blogs and social networking websites have been perceived as significant spaces for the negotiation and performance of identity.³ These digital spaces provide users with the opportunity to curate and present their personal style, thereby constructing and communicating their individual and collective identities. In addition, these digital platforms provide a space for the dynamic interplay between self-representation and audience feedback. These mediated but real-time communicative process amplify the voices of women who are traditionally marginalized or underrepresented in the industry and highlight the performative nature of identity in the digital age.

Secondly, digital communication networks provide an alternative to the traditional top-down communication prevalent in the fashion industry.⁴

2. "Instagram Shopping Helps You Reach New Customers," Meta, accessed February 24, 2024, <https://business.instagram.com/shopping>.

3. See Rosie Findlay, "The Short, Passionate, and Close-Knit History of Personal Style Blogs," *Fashion Theory* 19, no. 2 (2015): 157–78.; Agnès Rocamora, "Personal Fashion Blogs: Screens and Mirrors in Digital Self-Portraits," in *Fashion Cultures Revisited* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 112–27.

4. See Claire Allen, "Style Surfing & Changing Parameters of Fashion Communication: Where Have They Gone?," in *Fashion Forward* (New York: Brill, 2011), 343–51; Susie Khamis and Alex Munt, "The Three Cs of Fashion Media Today: Convergence, Creativity and Control," *SCAN: Journal of Media, Arts and Culture* 7, no. 2 (2010), http://scan.net.au/scan/journal/display.php?journal_id=155.

The advancement of digital communication technologies has raised expectations for the realization of a more democratic system, where values such as participation and access to communicative activities and communities are emphasized and enhanced. Research further indicates that the rise of social network sites has facilitated open discussion and access to the fashion industry, diverging from traditional market structures. For example, a fashion and style blogger was invited to collaborate on a shoe design with the established fashion brand Urban Outfitters.⁵ Instead of a top-down flow of communication dictated by elite industry players, both female influencers' roles as trendsetters and their followers' responses have become significant factors in shaping the industry.

Finally, in responding to the recent evolution of marketing-centered trends in social networking sites and the rise of women influencers and entrepreneurs, it is expected to result in the increased presence of women in this industry, countering the traditional tendency of male-dominated business sectors.⁶ The advancement of female leaders in the fashion industry serves as an inspirational narrative for many women aspiring to succeed in this sector. The success of female influencers and their branding efforts exemplifies the effective utilization of human capital. The core tenet of market-driven neoliberal ideology posits that every individual in society should be regarded as an asset or resource, akin to human capital.⁷ Each person is tasked with developing their abilities and knowledge to amass more capital. Within this hegemonic discourse of neoliberal capitalist society, pervasive and normalized narratives encourage individuals to take risks and endlessly compete with other social actors to increase their value. In this vein, success

5. J. Aldridge, "Aldridge by Sea of Shoes for Urban Outfitters," Sea of Shoes, accessed July 6, 2024, https://seaofshoes.typepad.com/sea_of_shoes/2009/06/j-aldridge-by-sea-of-shoes-for-urban-outfitters.html.

6. Raffaele Trequattrini, Simone Manfredi, Alessandra Lardo, and Benedetta Cuzzo, "Social Media as a New Opportunity for Female Entrepreneurs: An Analysis," *Advances in Gender and Cultural Research in Business and Economics: 4th IPAZIA Workshop on Gender Issues* (New York: Springer, 2018), 287.

7. Michelle Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France, 1978–1979*, trans. G. Burchell (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008).

stories of women are becoming legendary tales, fueled by relentless self-development and passion for their chosen professional domains.

Of particular note is that female influencers have leveraged digital communication technologies, specifically social media platforms, to cultivate their own reputations and brands. They have crafted remarkably successful business narratives through their own knowledge and abilities. On the other hand, unlike the earlier discussion on possible changes brought about by emerging social networking sites and their relationship with the fashion industry, the digitalized communication networks in the cultural sector compel female workers to negotiate their aspirations within the context of traditional authority systems and the notion of neoliberalism.⁸ Do they possibly represent a new entrepreneurial role model for women? Are we witnessing the emergence of new power dynamics catalyzed by the advent of new communication technologies? To investigate these new possibilities, it is imperative to scrutinize the actual communication practices occurring online among female influencers, their followers, and the public sphere. This examination will elucidate whether digital communication networks contribute to the formation and evolution of new dominant forces led by female influencers.

Exploitative Communication and Affective Circulation under Communicative Capitalism

Given the fusion of business and communication, Jodi Dean stressed that deep interrelations between digitalized communication networks and capitalist society would be a key feature of our era. Critical media theorists have traditionally viewed communication as exploitative and designed to serve capitalist society, which operates to maintain hegemonic status. In line with this

8. Brooke Duffy, "Amateur, Autonomous, and Collaborative: Myths of Aspiring Female Cultural Producers in Web 2.0," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 32, no. 1 (2015): 48–64.

notion, Dean highlighted that the realm of communicative interactions in the age of digital communication resembles the neoliberal concept of the market. The digitalized communication network serves as a platform where democratic aspirations and the expression of public will occur, whatever people chose. It seems to protect freedom of expression and transparency. Yet, she argued that this communicative activity as a democratic participation is like “talks without responding” and fails at constructing connectivity, resistance, or counterhegemony.⁹ Rather, as capitalist society exploited the workers to serve monetary purpose, she viewed that these mediated communications are just exploited to serve monetary purposes, as she called it, as communicative capitalism.¹⁰

Within this framework, Dean is concerned with the intertwined nature of communication technology and capitalist society, particularly the manner in which communicative activities circulate. She saw that Internet-based communications take the form of reflexivity rather than creativity or resistance. Since Internet communication involves practices like posting, linking, commenting, reacting, and circulating, individuals are engaged in passive forms of “being made aware.”¹¹ Consequently, instead of discovering or generating original ideas and solutions, most communicative activities tend to reinforce existing beliefs, opinions, and practices. Dean further contends that communicative capitalism operates through affective networks, as communication often carries emotional and personal dimensions. While individuals enjoy participating in communication networks, these affective networks only create a *feeling* of community, not actual community, because mediated relationships cannot be fully accounted for.¹²

If this is the case, then why do we keep participating in these communicative activities instead of engaging in our own creative projects or exchanging substantial ideas? According to Dean, the nature of the new media is

9. Jodi Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 22–25.

10. Jodi Dean, *Blog Theory* (New York: Polity Press, 2010), 4–5.

11. Dean, 122.

12. Dean, 96.

simply to circulate. We, as users of the Internet, are ensnared in its loop regardless of how rarely we expect certain or even adequate information. We experience pleasure while we move from link to link, forwarding, storing, and commenting in a continuous movement forward. In this way, Dean saw that affective networks capture media users in circuits of drive that encompass our fundamental desires and urges, sometimes at an unconscious level.¹³

Dean developed her arguments based on participating in the personal blog culture, but her ideas help us to better understand how social network sites have efficiently connected with the current phase of the capitalist society: e-commerce trends. Multiple studies have investigated how workers in the creative industry experience high levels of precarity and, consequently, have developed various strategies to pursue multiple careers.¹⁴ Thus, cultural workers in similar fields seek to connect and create networks to access potential opportunities and share experiences.¹⁵ Female workers in the cultural industries, such as fashion and media, exemplify this phenomenon, as they often utilize these networks not only for professional opportunities but also for self-expression.

Returning to the previously introduced case, the example of Imvely serves as an illustrative instance. Her career commenced as a fitting model for an online shopping site. Upon joining the online shopping mall business via marriage, she expressed her passion for fashion through social networking sites, which afforded her an unprecedented opportunity to launch a brand and establish stores. Subsequently, she was prominently recognized as a female entrepreneur who rapidly attained success, leveraging her attractive appearance and self-representation online.

13. Dean, 121–24.

14. For example, see Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, vol. 17 (London: Sage, 1992); Deborah Dean, "Recruiting a Self: Women Performers and Aesthetic Labour," *Work, Employment and Society* 19, no. 4 (2005): 761–74; Andrew Ross, "The New Geography of Work: Power to the Precarious?," *Theory, Culture & Society* 25, no. 7–8 (2008): 31–49.

15. For example, see Angela McRobbie, "Holloway to Hollywood: Happiness at Work in the Cultural Economy," in *Cultural Economy: Cultural Analysis and Commercial Life*, ed. Paul Du Gay and Michael Pryke (London: Sage, 2002): 97–114.

Significantly, Imvely adeptly leverages affective communication networks to navigate her business pursuits. Unlike traditional workers in the cultural industry, her network, fostered through social networking sites, is cultivated among both production providers and audiences who engage with her content, establishing an intimate relationship through “temporary” and “mediated” communication channels.¹⁶ Similarly, influencers exert considerable effort to cultivate an image of expertise or celebrity status, transforming their passion, and at times hobbies, into viable businesses. They must devise strategies to monetize their content and engage with their audience, followers, and occasionally fans. Consequently, they continuously negotiate the transparency of their personal lives to sustain and fortify interconnectivity, predicated upon authenticity and relevance to their audiences’ experiences.

In this context, this article investigates the self-representation and communicative activities of female influencers on social networking sites to gain a deeper understanding of how digitalized online technology positions women influencers and entrepreneurs within the frameworks of neoliberalism and postfeminism. To guide the analysis, the following research questions were formulated.

1. In what ways were female power influencers’ brand power and entrepreneurial endeavors displayed and constructed through their Instagram posts?
2. How did the affective communicative networks between female influencers and their followers on Instagram facilitate and relate to commercial engagement?
3. In what manner did female power influencers embody and represent a new entrepreneurial role model for women?

16. Brydges and Sjöholm follow one fashion blogger’s trajectory to understand the aesthetic labor in the fashion industry using social network sites. Taylor Brydges and Jenny Sjöholm, “Becoming a Personal Style Blogger: Changing Configurations and Spatialities of Aesthetic Labour in the Fashion Industry,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 22, no. 1 (2019): 119–39.

Research Methods

South Korean influencer marketing is propelled by the advancement of multiple multichannel network (MCN) corporations specializing in managing individuals who own social media channels and/or accounts, including YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and personal blogs. These individuals, known as “creators,” have gained fame through their personal media. Each creator is introduced by their number of followers to denote their brand power.¹⁷ For example, each influencer’s number of subscribers is displayed alongside their profile picture on the web page of Treasure Hunter, MCN companies. These corporations, including Dia TV, Sandbox Network, and Treasure Hunter, among others, have formed the Korean Influencer Industry Association¹⁸ to both represent their interests and celebrate excellent influencers. According to the South Korean Marketing Association’s 2022 announcement, the top five influencers who have created streaming channels on YouTube are Hamzy (twelve million subscribers), Tzuyang (9.35 million subscribers), Pony (5.9 million subscribers), Heopop (4.2 million subscribers), and Hey Jini (3.9 million subscribers).¹⁹

The focus of this research is on successful female influencers whose social media usage aims to promote and ultimately operate a production chain of commodities related to beauty, fashion, or homemaking. In online communities, the term “palyi people” has been coined by netizens and circulated to derogatorily refer to these influencers.²⁰ “Palyi” denotes an obnoxious salesperson trying to push a product using persistent sales pitches—specifically

17. “Make Your Contents,” Treasure Hunter, accessed July 6, 2024, <https://treasurehunter.co.kr/sub/creator/list.php>.

18. “Home,” Korean Influencer Industry Association, accessed July 6, 2024, <http://kiia.or.kr/>.

19. The numbers of subscribers were checked on February 28, 2024.

20. See the definition of the term explained in a South Korean newspaper. Hyunwook Park, “[A Dictionary of Neologisms] Palyi People,” *Seoul Economic Daily*, November 12, 2020, <https://www.sedaily.com/NewsView/1ZADN7WLQP>. Also, other newspapers used the term in its title. Jimin Shin, “Why Do People Flock to ‘Palyi People’ on

sellers of mobile phones, cars, or insurance plans, which have multiple options and fluctuating prices, aimed mainly at yielding high profits. In contrast, power influencers portray their lives in a glamorous style, often sharing images of “party” scenes, networking with other celebrities, or showcasing exciting experiences to attract public attention and flaunt their upscale lifestyles. Since the term *party* sounds similar to the Korean word *palyi*, the term “palyi people” carries this dual implication. For example, in the Netflix Korean drama series *Celebrity*, the agency initially provided high-end styling services and luxurious dresses to ensure a stunning and sophisticated appearance for attending celebrity parties.

To recruit sample influencers, the list of top influencers compiled by the South Korean Marketing Association’s 2022 announcement was used to identify leading figures in the fashion and beauty sectors. Six influencers were selected based on the following criteria: (1) top influencers or women entrepreneurs operating channels related to beauty, fashion, and domesticity, and (2) those utilizing social media platforms with the highest number of subscribers or followers. The age range of these influencers is between twenty and thirty. Based on the images they posted, they conform to a heteronormative beauty aesthetic, characterized by a relatively young age, slim physique, and feminine appearance, such as long hair and flawless makeup.

The influencers in focus have various roles across traditional and non-traditional media, including appearances on South Korean TV shows and in Netflix series; creating programs on platforms such as YouTube, Bilibili, and Kakao TV; and holding popular social media accounts on platforms like Instagram, Facebook, Treads, and Naver Blog. They consistently seek exposure and interaction with the public. In addition to marketing and promotion through their social network accounts, they hold various positions such as beauty and fashion YouTube content creators, show hosts or entertainers,

Instagram?” *Hankyoreh*, October 7, 2018, https://www.hani.co.kr/arti/society/society_general/864730.html.

Table 1. Overview of focused female influencers.

Influencer nickname on Instagram	Number of followers	Jobs	Official social media platforms
ponysmakeup	9 million	beauty creator, women entrepreneur	Instagram, YouTube
Kisy0729	1 million	model, entertainer at TV and Internet shows, women entrepreneur YouTuber, beauty creator	Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, Threads, Naver Blog
dear.zia	4.7 million	model, YouTuber, entertainer at TV shows, Bilibili creator	Instagram, YouTube, Threads, Tiktok, Weibo, Bilibili
Jiyoon_park	487 thousand	former announcer, TV show moderator, TV show entertainer	Instagram, YouTube, Kakao TV, Threads
Haneulina	998 thousand	YouTuber, woman entrepreneur, beauty creator	Instagram, YouTube, Facebook
Risabae_art	884 thousand	makeup artist, beauty creator, YouTuber, Kakao TV PD	Instagram, YouTube, Kakao TV, Threads

reality show participants, and CEOs of online fashion shopping sites, all while managing social media accounts with millions of followers.

To examine the discourse surrounding female influencers, this research analyzed the social media posts of six popular female influencers, primarily on Instagram, to explore their digital communication activities. It is common for influencers to manage multiple social media networks simultaneously. Based on a survey of about seven hundred marketers and creators, 90 percent stated that they would increase the marketing budget for Instagram influencers in 2024. According to these respondents, Instagram is the most popular channel, followed by TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, and others.²¹ Among South Korean advertisers, Instagram and Naver Blog, a blog service

21. “The State of Influencer Marketing,” Aspire, accessed July 6, 2024, <https://www.aspire.io/guides/state-of-influencer-marketing-2024>.

provided by a local portal site, are the two most popular platforms.²² As of March 2024, Instagram is widely used by twenty-four million South Korean users, particularly those under the age of thirty-five. Its popularity continues to grow among this demographic.²³ Instagram also serves as a platform where influencers publicly engage with their followers, shaping the nature and themes of communication while managing interactions. This visibility makes their interactions easily observable.

A mixed methods approach was employed for this study to provide a comprehensive understanding of the communication dynamics between influencers and their followers. Initially, a content analysis method was applied to code the purpose and objects in visual images into several themes. The researcher examined data up to March 15, 2024, and worked backward from that date, systematically following each female influencer's Instagram account to code approximately the most recent thirty posts. This approach was employed to discern the patterns and themes of their communicative activities.

Then textual analysis was utilized to delve into the complex meanings generated from the interplay between the images, tags, social context, and conversations with followers. This analysis aimed to uncover the deeper layers of interaction and the multifaceted nature of influencer-follower communication. The data for textual analysis comprises profile images and information, representative posted photos, captions, text conversations with followers, tags associated with photos, and users' social networks, including friends and followers of the sample influencers. The emergent categories included intimate information, personality, commodity promotion, travel, and professional life; the expression of reflexivity, creativity, and resistance;

22. "Influencer Marketing Status Survey," Korean Influencer Industry Association, accessed July 6, 2024, http://kiia.or.kr/?page_id=20.

23. "Most Frequently Used Social Media in South Korea as of July 2023," Statista, accessed July 6, 2024, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/763748/south-korea-most-popular-social-media/>.

and the dichotomy of emotion and logic, encompassing both negative and positive emotions.

When conducting Instagram research, the researcher must decide if it is necessary to inform the authors of the Instagram content. Since the Instagram content chosen for this study exists in the public domain, it falls under fair use, and consent is not required.²⁴ Instead, the publicly accessible links, along with the IDs of the influencers, are posted to preserve their copyrights.

The Appearance of Female Power Influencers and Circulating Reflexivity

Power influencers are recognized and ranked based on the number of followers or the strength of their follower networks on social media. It is widely known that even individuals with as few as one hundred followers may receive offers from agencies to promote products implicitly or explicitly by posting about them and creating short marketing videos. The Netflix drama series *Celebrity* (2023) shows a young woman's transition from being a cosmetics salesperson at an online shop to becoming a celebrity, a power influencer, and a successful entrepreneur by operating a fashion online store and pop-up shops. However, her journey as an influencer takes a dramatic turn through unexpected encounters and conflicts with celebrities from wealthy families and those with popular Instagram accounts. Despite these celebrities forming an exclusive social club, each individual's status within the group is determined solely by their number of followers. Consequently, each character competes relentlessly to increase their follower count, using their own resources to gain power both in real life and in the digital realm. Their social and financial influence is shaped by the quantity and, more

24. Nicholas Hookway, "Entering the Blogosphere: Some Strategies for Using Blogs in Social Research," *Qualitative Research* 8, no. 1 (2008): 91–113.

significantly, the quality of their followers—whether well-known influencers or celebrities follow their accounts.

As portrayed in the TV show, the emergence of female influencers proficient in direct public communication and aspiring to become entrepreneurs has instilled a sense of optimism regarding the prevailing gender imbalance within the fashion industry. According to a survey conducted by the Business of Fashion among fifty global brands, male leaders continue to dominate the industry, with only 14 percent of major brands being led by female executives.²⁵ However, many women had found their aspirations for future careers, served as laborers, and engaged as consumers within the realms of the fashion and beauty industry. The majority of the students at top fashion school programs such as Parsons School of Design (85 percent), the Fashion Institute of Technology (86 percent), and Pratt (93 percent) are female.²⁶ As of 2023, about 60 percent of garment workers are women across the global labor market, especially from Asian countries.²⁷ According to 2016 data, millennial women buy more clothing per year than their counterpart male consumers.²⁸ In this context, creating fashion postings shows their passion for the market.

Given this circumstance, it is notable that social media provided a new niche and opportunities for female power influencers in terms of marketing, branding power, and/or production chains. Market-driven power influencers became critical, especially for the young generation who prefer to expose commercial information like a rumor that is circulated via digital media platforms of their in-groups. According to data from the Influencer

25. Helena Pike, "Female Fashion Designers Are Still in the Minority," *Business of Fashion*, September 9, 2016, <https://www.businessoffashion.com/articles/fashion-week/less-female-fashion-designers-more-male-designers/>.

26. Vanessa Friedman, "Fashion's Woman Problem," *New York Times*, May 20, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/20/fashion/glass-runway-no-female-ceos.html>.

27. "How to Achieve Gender Equality in Global Garment Supply Chains," International Labor Organization, accessed February 28, 2024, <https://www.ilo.org/infostories/en-GB/Stories/discrimination/garment-gender#introduction>.

28. Bureau of Labor Statistics Consumer, 2016. <https://www.bls.gov/cex/>.

Marketing Hub, the size of the global market of influencers in 2016 was about \$1.7 billion. By the end of 2024, it is set to grow to more than \$24 billion.²⁹ Influencer marketing has also experienced significant growth in South Korea since 2018. By 2023, it was anticipated that the size of the influencer market would reach \$7 million, more than double compared to 2020. The involvement of influencers has expanded beyond mere marketing. The quantified followers and number of comments quickly translate into monetary values that wield significant power for sellers. Recently, individual influencers' roles have become more specialized, with some actively participating in brand development and launch planning. For instance, the high-end global cosmetic brand Amore Pacific collaborated with influencer Risabae to launch a beauty brand TWO SLASH FOUR³⁰ from the planning stages.

However, influencers do not solely rely on their own efforts for empowerment. Most of influencers' social power is often managed and even manipulated by corporations. As noted earlier, influencers typically enter contracts with MCN agencies. For example, one of the power influencers, Haneul, is known to belong to DMIL, an MCN agency. DMIL is a firm specialized in the beauty sector, engaging with around seven hundred "beauty creators" who generate beauty content disseminated through personal channels and social media platforms.³¹ They provide influencers with programming across various social network platforms, support styling and makeup expenses, offer studio spaces, and may seek to manipulate and sustain the celebrity's popularity while giving them ongoing promotional opportunities. There has been a suspicion that social influencers engage in the practice of purchasing

29. Werber Geyser, "The State of Influencer Marketing 2024: Benchmark Report," Influencer Marketing Hub, last modified February 1, 2024, <https://influencermarketinghub.com/influencer-marketing-benchmark-report/>.

30. See the online shopping site for the brand. "Home," Two Slash Four, accessed July 6, 2024, <https://twoslashfour.com/>.

31. See the online homepage of DMIL, which includes images and SNS information of the creators. "Home," DMIL, accessed July 6, 2024, <https://dmil.kr/>.

followers, augmenting likes and comments via click farms, and systematically reciprocating engagement with one another's posts.³² In this way, individual influencers and agencies mutually benefit from each other to generate profits. Most of the power influencers sampled in this study have their own agencies, but these agencies are not necessarily MCN companies. Upon achieving celebrity status across various media platforms, some individuals entered into contractual agreements with entertainment companies as a model, or an entertainer, while others opted to establish their own enterprises such as an online shopping mall.

As these celebrities began selling or promoting merchandise through social network sites, their relationships with followers transitioned from that of a celebrity and fans to that of a businessperson and consumers. The use of multiple social media channels as business platforms has become increasingly prominent among both platform providers and influencers. From the consumers' perspective, major reasons for exploring social media include brand awareness, giving feedback on products, and maintaining/expanding their relationship with their favorite brands.

The branded power of influencers is quantified by their number of followers. It is noteworthy that social media users can easily find information on the number of followers or the rank of power influencers, which draws even more followers. Dean³³ highlighted the illusion people hold about their involvement in communicative activities within the domain of communicative capitalism. By engaging in the communicative loop via social network platforms, individuals perceive that they contribute to the circulation of content as communicative action. However, without mutual understanding of the message or receiving accountable responses from counterparts, merely participating in communicative activities may result in never achieving full

32. Arvind Hickman, "More than Half of Instagram Influencers 'Engaged in Fraud,' with 45 Percent of Accounts 'Fake,'" PR Week, April 15, 2021, <https://www.prweek.com/article/1712976/half-instagram-influencers-engaged-fraud-45-per-cent-accounts-fake>.

33. Dean, *Blog Theory*, 4.

connection but rather engaging in passive linking.³⁴ Similarly, the number of followers, shares, or replies merely implies its popularity.

Regarding the significance of numbers on social media platforms, while there was a widespread expectation of democratic communicative activities in response to the digitalized communication system, Dean argued that the system's nature, particularly its speed, simultaneity, and interconnectivity, made "massive distortions and concentrations of wealth as communicative exchanges and their technological preconditions become commodified and capitalized."³⁵ Power influencers in a global context are a case in point. For example, depending on the number of followers, nano influencers (followed by about one thousand to ten thousand) using Instagram will be paid between twenty dollars to \$100, but mega influencers (followed by over ten million) will be paid at least \$1,200.³⁶ While the number of followers draws more followers, the number of followers also decides their income. Considering the gap between the marketing cost and the number of followers of the top power influencers in the United States/Western European countries and other countries, it is undeniable that the global digitalized communication network reflects the current imbalance of global hegemony and technological preconditions. For example, the major social media platforms are all located in the United States where most of the media conglomerates are also located. The top ten social media influencers by total followers on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter include four American female musicians, two American reality TV stars, and one American actor who already achieved and established global wealth and fame: Selena Gomez (499 million followers), Kylie Jenner (450 million followers), Kim Kardashian (450 million followers), Dwayne Johnson (435 million followers), Taylor Swift (408 million followers), Katy Perry (395 million followers), and Airana Grande

34. Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies*, 31.

35. Dean, *Blog Theory*, 4.

36. "Average Price Per Post of Instagram Influencers Worldwide in 2022, by Number of Followers," Statista, accessed February 5, 2024, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1250908/price-per-post-instagram-influencers-worldwide/>.

(391 million followers).³⁷ Considering the power of the advanced digitalized media system of the United States and the size of its domestic media market, global media hegemony endures in the new media platforms.

That said, what would the distinctive pattern of communication content between female power influencers and their followers look like? Both female influencers and their followers freely share their thoughts publicly and sometimes privately via direct messages. In terms of the communication channel, this would be an actualization of the democratic communication system in which every individual can freely communicate with any other. Yet, the content of communication between influencers and their followers mainly consists of reflexive comments on commodities, lifestyles, and/or personalities with the hope of reaching and interacting with the craved figure whose likely modified outward representation meets our (un)conscious desires.

Risabae often shares her eventful moments, such as attending fashion shows as a luxury brand ambassador or posing with Hollywood stars. Her messages expressed appreciation to brands like Bulgari for their invitations and mentioned actors like Chris Hemsworth, known for his role in the Hollywood film *Thor* (2022), to express her fandom in these posts. Comments from her followers consistently praise her appearance: “Wow, your posture is amazing! It makes you look even more attractive. So pretty!” “You look like a goddess,” “Too pretty. Sister Risabae, everything is perfect!” The influencers share a couple of attractive images, followed by simple and quick responses in various languages or a mere click of the “Like” button. Both physical and social attractiveness play crucial roles in garnering the fandom of social media users.³⁸ Therefore, it is crucial for female influencers to attract more attention from the public by posting attractive looks, especially since all female influencers typically share sophisticated and beautiful images of themselves.

37. Brian Frederick, “The Top 100 Social Media Influencers World Wide,” *Search Engine Journal*, January 10, 2023, <https://www.searchenginejournal.com/top-social-media-influencers/475776/>.

38. Woo Kim and Ho Choo, “The Effects of SNS Fashion Influencer Authenticity on Follower Behavior Intention-Focused on the Mediation Effect of Fanship,” *Journal of the Korean Society of Clothing and Textiles* 43 (2018): 17–32.



Figure 8.1 Sabae Ri (@risabae_art), a beauty creator, Risabae, posts pictures of her glam life. Left: Instagram photo, March 15, 2024. Right: Instagram photo, May 19, 2019.
Source: Screenshot from Sabae Ri’s Instagram page.

Despite these repetitive communication activities, the content circulated via female influencers’ accounts does not necessarily reflect the actualization of democratic values. Rather, these influencers thrive on materialized values. This primarily involves the freedom to exchange reflexivity or reactions with each other, as opposed to sharing resistance or creativity to address specific issues.

Affective Networks Linking Influencers and Their Followers

As illustrated previously, one of the distinctive differences between traditional mass media and social media in the digitalized communication era

is the latter's individualized and multidirectional communicative patterns. This flattened and immediate way of communication across space and time creates "affective networks" in which very personal and emotional communicative processes happen.³⁹ During the traditional media era, media delivered visual images and text messages to audiences who were enamored with talented celebrities, but they rarely had the opportunity to interact with their favorite stars. Digitalized communication systems have revolutionized media content circulation. Contemporary media users and fans can now receive replies from their favorite celebrities publicly or via direct message. For example, while these influencers directly sold commodities or promoted a brand, followers asked anything they were curious about the images, like a friend.

These messages often incorporate cute, gorgeous, and heartwarming images, video clips, and text messages that easily stir users' emotions and prompt responses. Sharing such content does not harm or upset anyone. Consequently, they are frequently welcomed, shared, forwarded, and replied to within influencers' social media networks.

Previous research on American fashion entrepreneurs' blogs also corresponds with these communication patterns. Three prominent tropes are used to create meaning by (1) portraying their destiny as a fashion influencer as the result of their passion, (2) sharing images of their glamorous lifestyles, and (3) carefully curating personal anecdotes and sharing them.⁴⁰ More specifically, successful women entrepreneurs narrate common themes through the repetitive representation of these tropes. First, they demonstrate their passion for their chosen fashion or beauty field to create resonance among their audiences. Second, they showcase their beautiful heterosexual family members and illustrate how they can successfully manage their family

39. Dean, *Blog Theory*, 4.

40. Brooke Duffy and Emily Hund, "'Having It All' on Social Media: Entrepreneurial Femininity and Self-Branding Among Fashion Bloggers," *Social Media+ Society* 1, no. 2 (2015): 2056305115604337.

lives. Third, they share relatable aspects of their lives, emphasizing their similarity with their followers or fans.

These themes are commonly found in Korean influencers' social media accounts as well. They juxtapose images of their professional workspaces to illustrate their dedication and hard work, often presenting an idealized professional feminine look. These images distinguish them from ordinary users and evoke admiration, envy, and aesthetic pleasure among their followers. This, in turn, fuels continuous engagement through clicks, forwards, shares, and comments by the followers.

While single influencers never share their romantic partners' images or stories publicly on their social media websites, married influencers constantly



Figure 8.2 Left: Jia Song (@dear.zia), Free.zia, displays enviable professional moments wearing and reviewing high-end fashion items. Instagram photo, March 15, 2024. Right: Sabae Ri (@risabae_art), a beauty creator, displays their enviable professional moments visiting Paris, the global fashion city. Instagram photo, May 17, 2020.

Source: Screengrabs from Jia Song's Instagram pages.

reveal their lives as lovely young wives and mothers of child(ren). Kisy0729 (aka Younggi Hong) shared their family trip and an expression of affection in a typical family. Also, Jiyoon Park shared the breakfast she prepared for her son with a cute image of a dog.

Married influencers frequently share deeply personal stories, encompassing heartwarming anecdotes as well as the challenges and tribulations encountered in marital life. Through the posting of images and text capturing both memorable moments and the ordinary aspects of their days, they cultivate an interpersonal environment that invites their followers to virtually experience slices of the influencers' lives. This approach enhances the sense of connection and emotional attachment among followers, consequently increasing their follower count. The communicative interactions within this space resemble those among close friends and fans, yet also engage fashion consumers in discussions that are both personal and relevant to the influencers' expertise. Followers inquire about details such as the brand name of a cap or the size of a handbag, and may even ask why another son was not shown in the pictures, mentioning him by name.

The more dramatic life stories and life changes of female influencers, such as pregnancy, a break due to burnout, or divorce, create a deeper attachment from their fandom, as followers readily relate to the influencers and offer encouragement with warm messages. Additionally, life changes necessitate the acquisition of more commodities with which to navigate, using actual images of these commodities as used in their daily lives. As shown in figure 4, Haneulina shared posts detailing her pregnancy phases, accompanied by images depicting her daily life and various products targeted at expectant mothers, including special tea for weight control, face masks for lifting, wireless vacuums, and more. These new life experiences of female influencers create opportunities to build emotional bonds and generate content to introduce new products, becoming the basis for promoting additional commodities.

On the other hand, when influencers reveal their personal lives, including their living space and family members, and share their emotional



Figure 8.3 Female influencers post the intimate moments of family life. Left: Younggi Hong (@kisy0729), Instagram photo, January 16, 2024. Right: Jiyoong Park (@jiyoon_park), Instagram photo, December 14, 2023. Source: Left: Screenshot from Younggi Hong’s Instagram. Right: Screenshot from Jiyoong Park’s Instagram.

fluctuations during personal crises, people communicate with them as if they were in very friendly and close connection. This openness toward their fans significantly contributes to building strong relationships. Besides their expertise and social and physical attractiveness, the honesty of female influencers has a positive effect on fandom and the intention of maintaining a relationship, as well as purchase intention.⁴¹ Through this process, the relationship between influencers and their followers grows, fostering strong fandom or pseudo-friendship between influencers and their

41. Kim and Choo, “The Effects of SNS Fashion Influencer Authenticity on Follower Behavior Intention-Focused on the Mediation Effect of Fanship,” 17–32.



Figure 8.4 A female influencer, Haneulina, posts images of her daily life as an expectant mother. Left: Neul Ha (@haneulina), Instagram photo, February 21, 2024. Right: Neul Ha (@haneulina), Instagram photo, March 2, 2024.

Source: Screengrab from Haneulina’s Instagram.

anonymous public followers. These female influencers are perceived as somewhere between friends and celebrities, taking great pains to expand and sustain their fandoms in order to thrive. From the followers’ perspective, female influencers are not only desired, adored, and entertaining stars, they are also seen as friends who publicly reply to followers on Instagram. Some followers explicitly express their gender identity by addressing influencers as “eonni”—which means “older sister” in Korean—and request information about the beauty or fashion items they use. Additionally, influencers create nicknames for their followers to establish an exclusive follower identity and strengthen the sense of belonging. For example, Imvely’s fandom is named “Velies,” and Free.zia’s fandom is called “Freeingyideul.”

Negative feelings and responses are also enthusiastically circulated within affective networks, some of which form around the negative experiences of influencers and their followers. A case in point is a recent anti-movement against Korean influencer Imvely and her followers' reactions to it. Imvely, who had an Instagram account with eight hundred thousand followers in 2019, attributed it to the success of her online shopping malls created using the Instagram app. These malls sold juice from moldy pumpkins, marketed for weight loss and beauty. In 2019, critical comments such as "Provide customer service suitable for 170 billion won revenue" inundated influencer Imvely's platform, arguing that Imvely (aka Jihyun Im) should issue appropriate apologies and respond to customer refund requests. A former staff member of Imvely's online shopping mall wrote a post explaining that they attempted to expose the entrepreneur's wrongdoing, akin to being a whistleblower. They encountered interference from the fandom and followers who passionately supported the influencer with high levels of empathy and trust.

On the other hand, once anonymous complaints from online customers began, numerous other complaints surfaced about other products such as cosmetics and clothing, as customers shared their negative experiences. Furthermore, one former follower of Imvely led the anti-movement against her business by collecting and sharing grievances about Imvely's online shopping mall, fundraising to cover legal costs, and eventually becoming involved in a lawsuit against the influencer's company.

Another case of affective networks involves influencer Free.zia (aka Jia Song), who is a popular fashion and beauty YouTuber and a star of a reality show. Her attractive appearance and luxurious lifestyle, featuring high-end fashion items, brought her immense popularity through the Netflix reality show *Single's Inferno*. She suddenly became a top influencer with a huge number of followers and started working as a model for several fashion brands and magazines. Ironically, her portrayal of a young and affluent woman backfired when it was revealed that many of her attractive outfits were adorned with counterfeit luxury goods. The public and news media



Figure 8.5 Left: Jihyun Im (@imvely_jihyun) is holding a banner saying, “Velies [nickname of Imvely’s followers], let’s stay together forever. Imvely loves Velies.” Middle and right: Anonymous (@imvely_sorry_cos_), a former follower of Imvely, created two Instagram accounts to share negative incidents related to Imvely’s shopping mall and also initiated fundraising to hire lawyers and sue Imvely’s shopping mall. Instagram photos, January 14, 2020, and January 13, 2020.
 Source: Left: Screengrab from Jihyun Im’s Instagram. Middle and right: Screengrabs from an anonymous Imvely follower.

began scrutinizing all the accessories she wore on her social media and other programs to determine whether they were genuine products. Fans’ interest and affection toward her turned into ridicule. Free.zia temporarily closed her social media platforms after being devastated by public criticism in 2022.

As Dean explains, there is pleasure in participating in the circulation of affective networks as a user, engaging in pleasant conversations about beauty and fashion. But there is also pleasure to be found in encountering and sometimes engaging with offensive discussions and sharing, producing, and commenting on repurposed images of celebrities. All these communicative activities involve joining as a follower of a female influencer’s Instagram account, engaging in multidirectional conversations about fashion and

beauty as a member of a virtual community, all while swiftly glimpsing into the glamorous lifestyles of female influencers. People may also derive pleasure from observing or participating in the criticism and condemnation of these celebrities, expressing their negative emotions. For example, individuals regularly accuse Free.zia anonymously on the Internet. Someone posted that she deserves execution for bringing shame to the country by using counterfeits on a global reality show on Netflix. Finally, due to the nature of digital communication systems, it is easy to scrape, capture, manipulate, and forge new images to share. Digital media users readily capture video clips and created images to examine whether Free.zia's items were counterfeit, as well as to criticize the quality of clothes Imvely wore to promote and sell in her online shopping mall. As social media users, people are caught in a communicative loop, constantly moving from link to link to explore and leave reflexive comments on emotional conversations initiated by others.

The Limit of Social Media–Based Women Entrepreneurs and the Unshakable Barriers

In spite of the persistence of gender inequalities in the digital media industries,⁴² this research began with the idea of exploring whether the proliferation of social media–based, female-led online businesses would have positive impacts and eventually empower female workers and aspiring women entrepreneurs. Specifically, it focuses on the communicative activities of female influencers who utilize social media as a springboard to boost their online-based businesses or professional identities. These influencers specialize in traditionally gendered domains such as fashion, beauty, and domesticity, whether as celebrities or mom-preneurs. The concept of working from home has become increasingly common due to the development of communication

42. For example, see Gregg's research. Melissa Gregg, "The Normalisation of Flexible Female Labour in the Information Economy," *Feminist Media Studies* 8, no. 3 (2008): 285–99.

technology and the adjustments made during the pandemic. Furthermore, the idea of self-enterprise became a desirable form of labor in response to the characteristics of the neoliberal economy, such as contract-based work, gig economy part-timers, and flexible labor. Middle-class female workers embraced the idea of working from home as it allowed them to combine domestic and professional responsibilities while continuing their career paths. Noting the merger of information communication technologies with the neoliberal economy, possible changes that were brought about by the advance of the digital communication network, were actively examined in terms of the nature of the communication and the empowerment of women in traditionally feminized business sectors.

Firstly, social media-based, female-led businesses or marketing face limitations regarding the nature of communicative content for advancing communication within the fashion industry. Considering the impact of top power influencers in both local and global markets, it is undeniable that significant resources of power among influencers across cultures are social, encompassing financial and physical attractions that must be visualized, circulated, shared, and commented on to reach more followers and social media users. This inherent condition of networked influence limits the ability of female power influencers to inspire and highlight normative gender roles and femininity that are socially favored. As observed in the social media content of female power influencers in South Korea, the nature of the content primarily consists of reflexive comments centered on glamorous visual content shared by influencers, rather than creative or resistant mediated messages. Particularly, female influencers and entrepreneurs exploit the communicative process by circulating their images, enabling their followers to relentlessly consume them. These female influencers also risk their private lives and reputations to compete with each other to fit into and succeed within the communicative capitalist system.

As a result, unlike early fashion blogs or social network sites, female influencers' Instagram postings do not provide a site for identity negotiation that others can easily relate to or identify with as an expression of resistance.

Considering the growing rooms and acceptance of different identities, such as LGBTQ+ groups, through the Internet, female influencers represent very limited heterosexual role models as wives, mothers, or career women who enjoy glamorous lifestyles.

Secondly, the nature of networks based on female influencers' social media platforms can be described as affective networks, but they fail to facilitate resistance, creativity, or a democratic communicative system against the dominant fashion industry. People constantly join them to connect but end up creating false senses of belonging and pseudo-friendships. In early research on digitized communication networks, Internet users were expected to produce and consume messages simultaneously, thus being identified as a new generation of "prosumers." However, there are clearly asymmetric communication flows when considering how influencers communicate with their fans via Instagram. Not only are followers positioned as consumers of commodities, but they also only provide continuous reflexive feedback on the agendas the influencers create. Although followers receive messages directly and immediately, it does not constitute multidirectional communication but rather represents an imbalanced connection centering around female influencers. For this reason, it is difficult to proclaim the recent rise of female fashion and beauty influencers, who are at the center of communication activities, as an advancement of the democratic communicative system in the fashion industry. Instead of finding a place to exchange creative and resistant ideas and create a community to engage in the fashion or beauty field, both followers and influencers realize that they cannot rely on each other but merely enjoy the feeling of community and belonging as entertainment.⁴³

Finally, it is doubtful whether female social influencers could posit the possibility of emerging business models for sustainable self-enterprise. The nature of communicative capitalism is inherently limited in serving as an alternative infrastructure for women entrepreneurs. True, the neoliberal

43. Dean also pointed out this limitation. See Dean, *Blog Theory*,96.

economy has expanded pathways for individuals to work. Moreover, female workers have relatively easier access to jobs in the fashion industry, especially via the online business sector. However, there are fundamental structural issues if these female influencers cannot participate in the industrial chains of the fashion or beauty sector. In the South Korean context, the representation of female business leaders is significantly inadequate compared to their male counterparts. According to the Korean CXO Research Institute, female CEOs comprise about forty out of one thousand CEOs, representing only 2.9 percent. Among these 2.9 percent of female CEOs, about 67.5 percent are members of family-owned businesses, while only 32.5 percent are professional chief executive officers.⁴⁴

Most female influencers often find themselves reliant on traditional industrial chains rather than utilizing their creativity, with only a few successful women entrepreneurs breaking free from this pattern. Without opportunities for advancement within traditional industry fields, aspiring young women may find themselves unable to reach leadership positions. It's unsurprising that the public frequently observes narratives linking the success and growing revenue of female influencers to irresponsible management and problematic business practices.⁴⁵ This implies that the success of female influencers may not primarily arise from their talent and abilities within the business and management sector. In responding to the crisis of their business, their communicative ability to cultivate a fandom and maintain affective networks through the utilization of social networking sites was not efficiently employed.

As a result, the success of these influential female figures and their revenues perpetuate a social myth of empowering women entrepreneurs in

44. Eunjoo Ryu, "Among 1,000 Major Corporations, There Are 40 Female CEOs, Representing a Slight Increase Compared to the Previous Year," ZDNET Korea, December 21, 2023, <https://zdnet.co.kr/view/?no=20231221093741>.

45. Haneul was also involved in a scandal exposed by former staff, alleging that she did not treat employees professionally. Following this, Haneul's company sued the staff, and many followers were disappointed by her personality and left her YouTube channel.

feminized business sectors. However, these opportunities are not accessible to all who aspire and strive for success. Given the nature of communicative content on social media platforms and the neoliberal economy, this success—though precarious—is reserved for only few select individuals, rather than representing collective empowerment for women aspiring to become entrepreneurs.

For future research, it would be worth exploring the meaning of the recent anti-influencer movement and whether it sheds light on a possible resistant communication strategy to break free from the loop of communicative capitalism and transition toward real communication. Although Dean argued that communicative capitalism would make difficult to bring about political change,⁴⁶ people still easily create online groups and share their experiences and knowledge if they believe it is necessary, as portrayed in the anti-influencer movement. This aspect warrants further examination to ascertain whether and how these movements exemplify the construction of resistance and ultimately contribute to significant changes using digitalized communication network in the technocultural era.

46. Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies*, 22.

