



# SOCIAL MEDIA AS A DIGITAL LABOUR PLATFORM:

assessing the social, cultural, and  
political impacts of labour market  
migration to Instagram

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**deeplab**



European Research Council  
Established by the European Commission

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### ***How to cite this report***

Pinheiro-Machado, R., Matheus, J., Frid, M., Silva-Alves, W., Petra, P., and Penalva, J. (2024). Social Media as a Digital Labour Platform: Assessing the Social, Cultural, and Political Impacts of Labour Market Migration to Instagram. Digital Economy and Extreme Politics Lab, N. 2024.1

***ISBN 978-1-910963-82-1***

***Available at: <https://www.labdeep.com/reports>***

### ***ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS***

This research was produced by the team of Digital Economy and Extreme Politics Lab **DeepLab** (UCD, Ireland). It was funded by the European Union (ERC, WorkPoliticsBIP, 101045738, **DOI: 10.3030/101045738**). However, views and opinions expressed are those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Council. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

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# 1. introduction

***this report warns that social media platforms like Instagram should be viewed as labour platforms. This would allow a new look at digital labour and employment in Brazil and the world, providing a better frame for the design of comprehensive public policies for decent jobs and a wider social security net.***

The labour market in Brazil is undergoing a massive migration to social media platforms like Meta, particularly Instagram. Accelerated by the pandemic, this shift towards online entrepreneurship is a relatively new phenomenon, drastically reshaping both formal and informal work sectors. This report presents an overview of the digital labour landscape on Instagram. It aims to raise awareness of the significant social, cultural, and political impacts of such a process, focusing mainly on the most vulnerable segments of the Brazilian population. We are witnessing an unprecedented and profound restructuring of labour dynamics in 21st-century Brazil — a topic still under-examined and undocumented in its depth and breadth — that requires urgent attention from policymakers and big tech stakeholders.

The causes of such a phenomenon are structural; they are symptoms of deep layers of Brazil's profound social and economic inequalities, exponential growth of micro-entrepreneurship, and labour precariousness. They also reflect wider contemporary transformation caused by the fast development and adoption of digital platforms<sup>1</sup>. Still, big techs like Meta enable, potentialize, and transform the process, according to their own corporate interests and algorithmic programming, while significantly profiting from it. Given the magnitude and reach of this labour shift, this report warns that social media platforms like Instagram should be viewed as labour platforms<sup>2</sup>. This would allow a new look at digital labour and employment in Brazil and the world, providing a better frame for the design of comprehensive public policies for decent jobs and a wider social security net. In addition, big techs profit from the digital labour revolution

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Abílio (2020); Abílio, Amorim e Grohmann (2021); Grohmann (2020); Kalil (2020), among others.

<sup>2</sup> The academic literature on specific careers on social media is well-developed. However, the definition of social media as a work platform is nearly absent in the literature, with a few emerging discussions but still lacking in-depth analysis. For instance, Grohmann and Salvagni (2023) defined Instagram and other social media as platforms for communication and work.

and should therefore be held accountable for the unregulated practices occurring within the platforms.

When policymakers discuss the platformisation of work and digital labour, they tend to emphasise labour platforms and applications. However, it is crucial to include social media in this debate. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) defines platform work by dividing it into ‘web-based platforms, where work is outsourced through an open call to a geographically dispersed crowd (‘crowd-work’), and location-based applications (apps) which allocate work to individuals in a specific geographical area’<sup>3</sup>. This report offers new insights to expand the ILO’s classification. One issue with this limited definition is that it excludes the vast majority of people who are too poor to join an app but are actively engaging in entrepreneurship on social media. In these cases, social media platforms mediate services and customers like other applications do.

This report results from innovative research combining extensive and intensive methods developed by a European Research Council-funded team to capture the hidden story of those who are too small and too informal to be counted. We aim to shed light on an economy that remains invisible because low-income digital entrepreneurs are too precarious to be counted.

It is crucially important to consider social media as digital labour platforms because it allows us to rethink the current statistics on the number of workers engaged in platform labour and to explore the new labour conditions, psychological distress, aspirations, power dynamics, and political issues involved in working through platforms like Instagram. This perspective also opens a window to rethink platformisation — not just of work, but of life itself — especially in a country where people spend a significant amount of time online. Platformisation of work extends beyond customers using ride-hailing apps, for example; it encompasses the broad spectrum of Brazilian society, from elite formal work to informal street vendors. We aim to demonstrate the ubiquitous penetration of labour platformisation in society, which only social media can reveal. This report focuses on Instagram due to its growing and pervasive presence in business and for career-making. However, the arguments raised here apply to several other social media platforms through which people carry out labour activities, such as WhatsApp and Facebook.

Selling products and services through advertisements on social media, especially Instagram, has become a popular activity for Brazilians. Industry reports estimate Brazil has the highest number of influencers on Instagram in the world and suggest that 1 in every 10 Brazil-

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<sup>3</sup> De Stefano, V., Durri, I., Stylogiannis, C., & Wouters, M. (2021). *Platform work and the employment relationship* (No. 27). ILO Working Paper. Available at: [https://webapps.ilo.org/static/english/intserv/working-papers/wp027/index.html#:~:text=At%20the%20international%20level%2C%20research,apps\)%20which%20allocate%20work%20to](https://webapps.ilo.org/static/english/intserv/working-papers/wp027/index.html#:~:text=At%20the%20international%20level%2C%20research,apps)%20which%20allocate%20work%20to).

The ILO definition of platform work can be found here: The role of digital labour platforms in transforming the world of work (2021): <https://www.ilo.org/publications/flagship-reports/role-digital-labour-platforms-transforming-world-work>.

ians are digital creators<sup>4</sup>. However, much less is known about the millions of smaller, invisible profiles who engage in entrepreneurship on the platform daily. The exact scale and consequences of this process remain unknown. The economic impact of this ecosystem is largely uncharted, suggesting that national figures on entrepreneurship and the informal economy might need to be reconsidered, as the proliferation of people selling services and products on Instagram mostly occurs informally.

While selling something on social media may sound harmless — offering benefits to those who want to work from home, make extra income, or simply expand the reach of their small businesses — Instagram business, interconnected with a constellation of e-commerce platforms, has become a huge unregulated economic and political world apart, posing social and democratic challenges. Moreover, the lack of regulation of this sector raises significant concerns, as the digital entrepreneurship ecosystem is dominated by a small, elite group of networked influencers who control the market and sometimes engage in unethical practices.

Academic literature has discussed internet celebrities, the impact of social media on everyday aesthetics and visual cultures, the structuring of the influencer industry, the labour of creating content, digital work, and specific

online personalities and cultures<sup>5</sup>. Yet, knowledge about the extent to which Instagram has become dominant as a platform for work and entrepreneurialism, including among lower-income people, remains limited; more worryingly, policymakers have neglected it. Millions of people are trying to make money on social media through various means, which in turn is transforming the nature of one of the most complex phenomena of Brazilian society: the informal economy and its links with unemployment, self-employment, and the formal economy.

Labour through social media platforms envelops both emotional and financial aspects. The situation is particularly alarming in Brazil, affecting millions of people, especially unprivileged sectors of society, such as low-income Black women who are attracted by the idea of making extra income from home. In sum, a large part of the population is investing in a privately owned platform, controlled by a specific corporation, away from regulatory oversight. Some of the negative consequences of this process include career homogenisation, dogmatic cultural and aesthetic influences, hyper-individualisation, widespread belief in a distorted form of meritocracy, unrealistic financial aspirations, users investing in training and paying for social traffic, low-income individuals having difficulty understanding the

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<sup>4</sup> Data from Factworks for Meta via Youpix.

Youpix; Brunch. Creators e Negócios, 2022. Available at: [https://tag.youpix.com.br/2022\\_pesquisa\\_creators\\_negocios\\_2022](https://tag.youpix.com.br/2022_pesquisa_creators_negocios_2022).

Youpix. Vem aí na Creator Economy: uma visão da YOUPIX sobre o futuro do mercado, 2023. Available at: <https://tag.youpix.com.br/vem-ai-na-creator-economy-2023>.

Ver também: Impacto Socioeconômico dos Negócios Digitais da Creator Economy no Brasil. FGV Notícias. 23 out. 2023. Available at: <https://portal.fgv.br/noticias/retrospectiva-2023-estudo-sobre-creator-economy-engloba-produtores-conteudo>.

<sup>5</sup> For instance: Abidin (2016; 2018), Duffy (2017), Leaver *et al.* (2020), Karhawi (2020), Cunningham e Craig (2021), Hund (2023), Jarrett (2022), Leidig (2023) e Prodanov *et al.* (2023).

platform's functionality, and the spread of misinformation through self-published AI-generated e-books. From a political viewpoint, this system potentially fosters anti-democratic, anti-rights sentiments, and the rise of populist politicians. In addition, vulnerable sectors of the population are subject to fraudulent formative training and illegal scams.

Finally, this report recognises the invaluable contributions of social media in promoting small businesses, which is a positive and transformative aspect of the digital entrepreneurship landscape. We also acknowledge the fundamental role of many influencers in disseminating scientific knowledge, promoting content about health and well-being, and sharing tips that make everyday life easier. However, we begin with the premise that this positive dimension is not only already well-known, but also constitutes the prevailing narrative of Instagram for Business. While recognising these positive aspects, our goal is to shed light on the less visible aspects of the phenomenon.

*Some of the negative consequences of this process include career homogenisation, dogmatic cultural and aesthetic influences, hyper-individualisation, widespread belief in a distorted form of meritocracy, unrealistic financial aspirations, users investing in training and paying for social traffic, low-income individuals having difficulty understanding the platform's functionality, and the spread of misinformation through self-published AI-generated e-books.*

## 2. highlights

***Mass migration to Instagram:*** The Brazilian labour market is increasingly shifting towards Instagram and other social media platforms, driven by the COVID-19 pandemic and the allure of digital entrepreneurship.

***Transformation of the understanding of platform work:*** The intense use of social media platforms for digital entrepreneurship demands urgent attention from policymakers and academics, expanding the notion of platform work beyond specific labour platforms, such as crowdwork and location-based apps.

***Transformation of the informal economy:*** Instagram is becoming a significant player in Brazil's informal economy, with millions of people engaging in regulated and unregulated economic activities that blend formal and informal work sectors. This process remains undocumented and out of the state's gaze.

***Too poor to be counted:*** Only 54% of aspiring or micro digital entrepreneurs have a business account. Aspiring digital entrepreneurs frequently use social media intensively to promote their businesses, but they often refrain from opening a business account due to a lack of knowledge about how to do so. Many also avoid joining labour platforms, such as Parafuzo or GetNinjas for cleaning and other services, due to limited digital skills or because they are in debt. As a result, the actual number of individuals engaging in entrepreneurial activities on social media platforms is unknown.

***Big-tech profits:*** Big techs reshape traditional labour dynamics, profiting from the digital labour revolution while avoiding regulatory scrutiny.

***Entrepreneurial training provided by influencers within a big-tech platform:*** Training of Brazilian digital entrepreneurs is massively dominated by a specific network of influencers who concentrate power within a private-owned corporation such as Meta.



***Aspirational pyramids:*** The report warns of the exploitation within Instagram's labour environment, including the rise of pyramid schemes, unrealistic financial aspirations, and misleading digital training.

***On stage and behind the scenes:*** The report categorises labour activities on Instagram into visible 'on-stage' services, such as direct sales and promotions, and 'behind-the-scenes' operations, like affiliate marketing and info-product sales.

***Career homogenisation:*** The wide-scale adoption of Instagram by people engaged, in principle, in various types of work removes the specificities of different professional fields. They all try to apply the same digital marketing and sales techniques to attract clients and sell products or services (especially online courses), making learning methods, career paths, and money-making possibilities increasingly homogeneous.

***Digital mentoring:*** Aspiring digital entrepreneurs and influencers are often guided into selling mentoring or training services, resulting in repetitive and predictable career paths. Many social media users who reach a certain follower count start offering mentorship to others, reinforcing a pyramid structure of success.

***The more followers people have, the more likely they are to self-identify as mentors:*** Quantitative computational approaches reveal that when aspiring digital entrepreneurs reach over 5,000 followers, they begin to describe themselves as mentors, reinforcing the pyramid structure based on mentoring.

***Anti-labour rights sentiments:*** The digital marketing ecosystem on Instagram often promotes an anti-labour rights narrative, portraying formal employment and labour laws (such as Brazil's CLT) as restrictive and undesirable. Influencers frequently advocate for entrepreneurship and self-employment as superior alternatives, reinforcing the idea that formal labour protections are unnecessary, which discourages collective efforts to improve workers' rights and conditions.

***Influencer culture:*** Instagram's influencer culture fosters a dogmatic and homogenised digital market, influencing career paths, aesthetic and fitness models, and market trends, often at the expense of diversity and originality.

***Religion, conservatism, and family values:*** Instagram's digital economy is heavily influenced by conservative values, emphasising traditional family structures, religious faith, and moral virtue as pathways to success. This narrative is reinforced by influencers who promote a lifestyle centred around nuclear families, conservative gender roles, Christian beliefs, or energy therapies as a path to wealth, often marginalising alternative viewpoints and contributing to a monolithic cultural landscape on the platform.

***Ostentation of wealth:*** The Instagram economy is characterised by a strong emphasis on wealth accumulation and ostentatious displays of luxury. Influencers at the top of the pyramid often showcase their wealth through images of private jets, luxury cars, expensive vacations, and high-end lifestyles, promoting the idea that success is measured by material possessions.

***Negative impact on vulnerable populations:*** The shift to Instagram as a labour platform disproportionately affects vulnerable groups, such as low-income women, particularly Black women, who are drawn to the promise of earning extra income from home. This causes frustration, low self-esteem, and self-blaming for failures.

***Aspiring digital entrepreneurs from low-income backgrounds are impacted by the values promoted by influencers but remain financially stagnant:*** Several low-income individuals have internalised the influencers' narratives of meritocracy and wealth acquisition. However, they are not climbing the ladder and complain about being stuck in precarity.

***Little movement up the pyramid:*** Digital marketing reproduces and amplifies existing structural socioeconomic and racial inequalities. Despite investing significant time, money, and effort, most aspiring digital entrepreneurs — primarily racialized individuals from low-income backgrounds — achieve little growth on platforms like Instagram.

***Misinformation and AI-generated content:*** The proliferation of AI tools has led to a surge in self-published e-books and digital content that often lacks scientific backing or relevant personal background. This trend contributes to the spread of misinformation, especially in sensitive areas like health and wellness, and poses risks to public understanding and safety.

***Ageism, educational gaps, and digital literacy:*** Low-income and older populations face significant challenges in adapting to the digital labour landscape due to lack of digital lit-

eracy and the high costs associated with maintaining an online presence.

***Political, ethical, and social risks:*** The digital labour market's growth on Instagram fosters hyper-individualism and can potentially encourage anti-democratic sentiments and populist political movements.

***Political homogenisation:*** 87% of influencers within the so-called 'digital marketing' ecosystem show some alignment with the ideological field of the right and far-right.

***Need for policy intervention:*** The report calls for urgent policy intervention and regulation of social media platforms as labour environments to protect the most vulnerable and ensure fair labour practices and entrepreneurial trainings.

## 3. methodology

This report presents the findings from a comprehensive research study conducted between February 1, 2024 and November 1, 2024. The study builds on two years of prior exploratory research, with the goal of understanding the dynamics of digital entrepreneurship and influencer activities, particularly among smaller, less-established profiles.

Our team followed influencers at all levels of the field called ‘digital marketing’, as well as aspiring digital entrepreneurs in various work sectors, including retail, food, beauty, cleaning, fitness, education, and sex work. The report is a joint effort by a multidisciplinary team, utilising various research methods to triangulate and gather a broad spectrum of data. The case studies, in particular, are the result of individual research projects on distinct work sectors that have a strong presence on Instagram.

The study carried out in-depth interviews and ethnographic research in low-income communities in Porto Alegre and Rio de Janeiro. A total of 35 interviews were conducted, providing qualitative insights into the experiences of digital entrepreneurs and influencers. Our team also engaged in immersive learning experiences, attending courses on entrepreneurship, make-up, spiritual energy, and cleaning, among others. These activities allowed us to closely follow the routines of our interlocutors, taking coaching classes alongside them and assessing their progress through face-to-face interactions. Furthermore, we reviewed e-books and other materials produced by both small and large influencers to gain a deeper understanding of their content and strategies.

In addition, the study involved a daily data collection of content produced by 562 digital marketing influencers. The systematisation and analysis were carried out for 31 categories, such as marketing strategies, wealth, politics, and religion. To ensure a comprehensive understanding, we employed both top-down and bottom-up sampling techniques. This approach involved

interviewing followers of these influencers and discovering new influencers based on recommendations from our interlocutors.

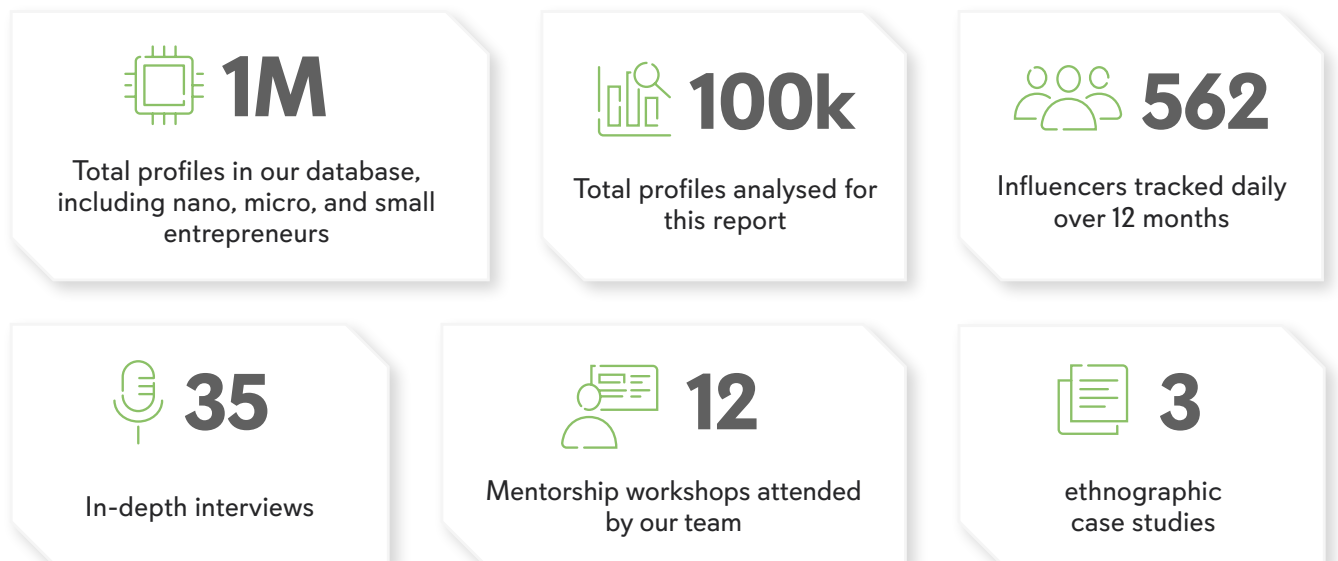
A common bias in researching digital entrepreneurs is the focus on those who have already achieved relative online success, making them easier to identify and study. To address this, we specifically targeted individuals actively seeking digital tools for income generation but who had small profiles with less than 5,000 followers. This approach allowed us to capture a broader and more representative sample of the phenomenon.

In addition to qualitative data, we used computational approaches to track the activities, profiles, and growth of those we name ‘strivers’, aspiring digital entrepreneurs who have up to 5,000 followers. Our sample consists of 1

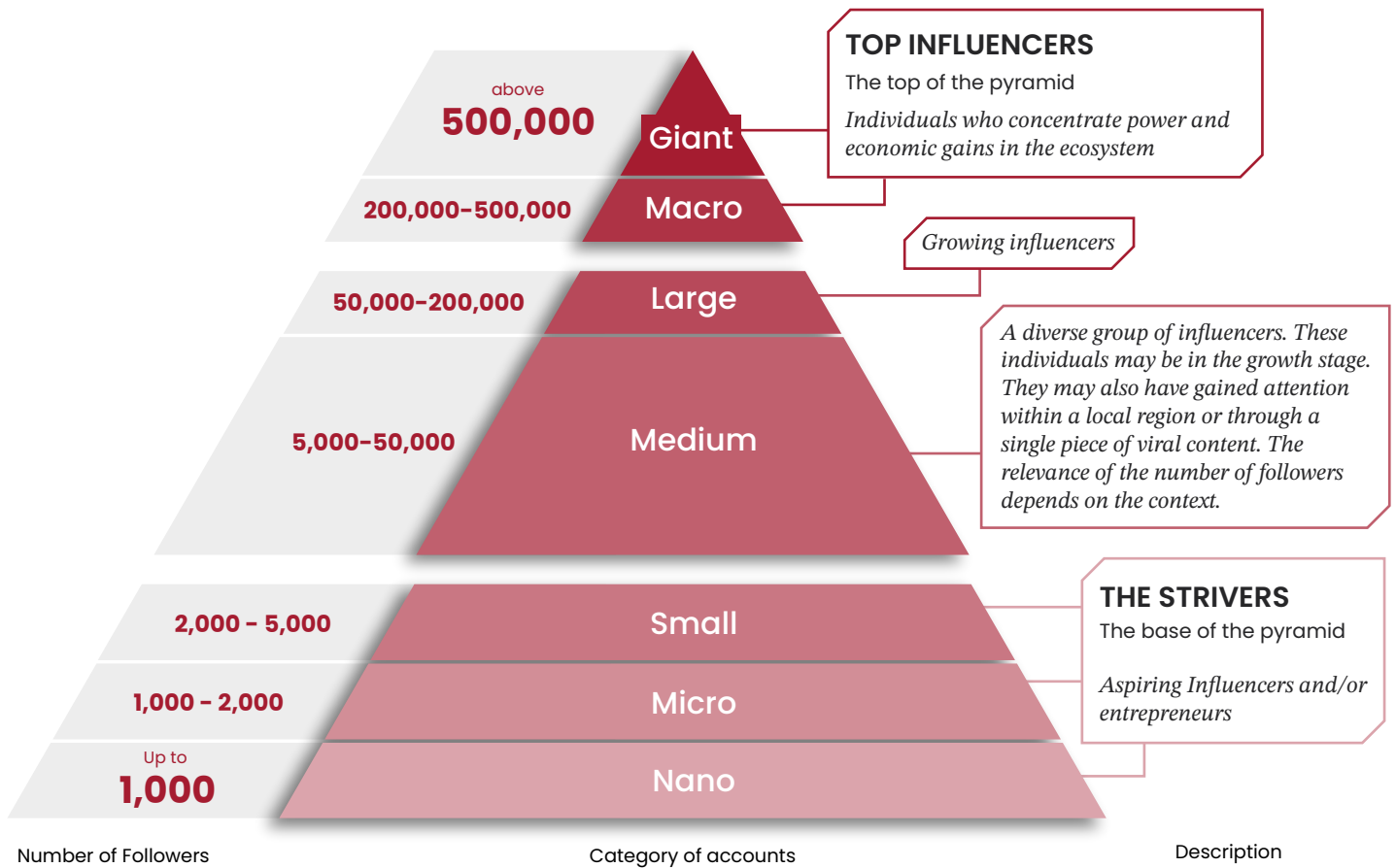
million accounts. For this report, we analysed the first 100,000 accounts, including 54,000 business accounts. DeepLab will publish annual reports with updates on the trends observed in this database.

This sample included accounts for people who demonstrated an active interest in engaging with courses or learning new digital tools for entrepreneurship. Data collection was conducted over six months, with daily updates obtained through a combined process involving manual content selection to verify the authenticity of users and confirm that they were real individuals seeking professional advice, followed by the application of automated data scraping tools. The collected data was then analysed using advanced machine learning techniques to identify patterns, trends, and growth trajectories within this cohort of strivers.

## Methods employed by the DeepLab



## DeepLab classification of online entrepreneurs and influencers



## 4. impacts on the world of labour

### Employment, informality, and precarisation in Brazil

To understand how digital entrepreneurship has become a national phenomenon, it is essential to contextualise employment and labour precariousness in Brazil. Historically, around 50% of the population has worked in the informal economy<sup>6</sup>. Recently, official figures revealed that full employment reached a record high in 2024<sup>7</sup>, with an unemployment rate of 7.1%, the lowest in 10 years. Despite this, the quality of these employment conditions remains questionable. According to a IBGE (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics) report from 2023, 39.2% of the employed population is in a situation of informality<sup>8</sup>. A recent study shows that 56.6% of formal jobs in Brazil pay no more than two minimum wages (currently R\$ 1,412, approximately €268)<sup>9</sup>.

Platformisation of work through applications and social media also reflects a broader national context of micro-entrepreneurship growth (today Brazil has 15.7 million micro-entrepreneurs; the number has tripled over the past ten years<sup>10</sup>) and that fosters precarisation, especially after the approval of the 2017 Labour

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<sup>6</sup> See Amorim and Corseuol (2016) and Pochmann (2012).

<sup>7</sup> Garcia, Alexandre Novais. Unemployment in Brazil falls to 7.1% in May, the lowest rate for the month since 2014. UOL, São Paulo, June 28, 2024. Available at: <https://economia.uol.com.br/noticias/redacao/2024/06/28/desemprego-maio-2024.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> IBGE shows that the country had an informality rate of 38.7% in the quarter through July. UOL Economia, Aug. 30, 2024. Available at: <https://economia.uol.com.br/noticias/estadao-conteudo/2024/08/30/ibge-mostra-que-pais-teve-taxa-de-informalidade-de-387-no-trimestre-ate-julho.htm?cmpid=copiaecola>. Accessed on: Sept. 6, 2024.

<sup>9</sup> This insight was gained through personal communication and based on analysis produced by the data scientist Marcelo Soares, with the official data (RAIS and CAGED) launched by the Brazilian government. Raw data can be accessed here: <https://www.gov.br/pt-br/servicos/solicitar-acesso-aos-dados-identificados-rais-e-caged>.

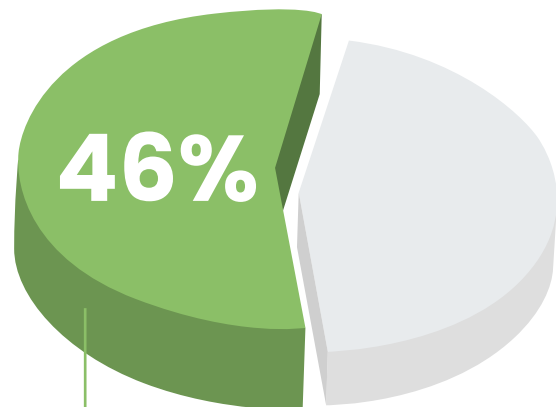
<sup>10</sup> Data from the Ministry of Entrepreneurship, Microenterprise, and Small Business (2024).

Reform (Law No. 13.467), which altered important aspects of the Consolidation of Labor Laws (CLT), the main legal framework regulating labour relations in Brazil. The Labour Reform catered to sectors with economic power that argued the set of legal guarantees protecting Brazilian workers was a hindrance to employability. In other words, the costs of formal employment would be reduced by easing regulations that guaranteed the protection of the more vulnerable party in the employment contract, namely, the employee. The Supreme Federal Court was called upon to rule on various aspects of the labour reform, including the possibility of ‘outsourcing’ the core business activity, meaning two companies share employees, and ‘*pejotização*’, which expands the situations when an employee can be hired as if they were a company, thereby leading to these employees receiving fewer benefits<sup>11</sup>.

Brazil has a specialized branch of the justice system that deals with labour and employment relations, the Labor Court. On various occasions, the Supreme Federal Court has acted to nullify decisions by the Labor Court, which continued to apply the Constitution even in the face of changes to the CLT. The Court has decided (including before 2017) that employees are autonomous in entering into labour relations that may be unfavourable to them. The classic employment relationship, in which the employee is considered the more vulnerable party, is no longer mandatory, with both the legislative and the judicial branches have chosen to support precariousness.

## Beneath the surface

Measuring the informal economy has been one of the most challenging scholarly tasks over the last 50 years due to the market’s fluidity and the prevalence of hidden and unregulated activities, as well as informal activities occurring within the formal economy. Quantifying Instagram’s hidden economy faces similar challenges for two main reasons. First, and most critically, Meta does not provide data on the number of business accounts per country. Second, our quantitative tracking of strivers reveals that only 54% of individuals conducting business on Instagram have opened a business account, meaning that 46% are operating without an official business account.



46% of Instagram micro-entrepreneurs, do not have a business account

<sup>11</sup> An example is the absence of the right to job security for pregnant women. If the contract is between two legal entities, one can terminate the contract in the context of pregnancy.

It is estimated that in January 2024 Brazil had 144 million active social media user identities, representing about 66% of the total population. About 78% of the population age 18 or over used social media in the country at the time. Brazilians spend an average of 9 hours and 13 minutes per day using the internet, ranking second worldwide by daily time online, after South Africans<sup>12</sup>. As mentioned earlier, various market research studies indicate that Brazil has the largest number of digital influencers in the world.

As of 2024, Instagram has approximately 2 billion users and 200 million business accounts globally<sup>13</sup>. If the numbers of business accounts were proportionally distributed across all countries, we could estimate that 12.7% of the Brazilian population is making commercial use of Instagram, trying to make extra income or promote their business on Instagram. However, as mentioned above, our quantitative and qualitative research shows that this number is much higher, as 46% of strivers do not open a business account, nor do a large portion of low-income individuals.

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The degree to which social media is utilised for business purposes is largely unknown as a major social phenomenon. The intensive Brazilian use of social media is a well-documented fact. A previous cutting-edge research project has shown, for example, that Brazilians tend to prefer using social media platforms like WhatsApp for health purposes than dedicated platforms<sup>14</sup>. Our overall data suggest that platforms like Instagram are becoming the powerhouse of the informal economy today. This occurs as a result of several factors, such as intense popularity and usage, cultural capacity to improvise everyday solutions, and the precariousness of livelihoods and formal employment<sup>15</sup>.

At first glance, engaging in businesses on Instagram appears to be cost-free. Like other activities within the informal economy, it has no access barriers, making it a supposedly easy source of extra income for individuals who lack the formal education required for non-manual jobs.

When considering entrepreneurship on Instagram, most people first think of promoting businesses, services, and expertise, which can be positive, especially for local and small ventures that can reach a wider public through the platform. Using social media as a channel to promote businesses is part of the advertisement revolution provoked by digital technology.

<sup>12</sup> DataReportal (2024a, 2024b).

<sup>13</sup> This figure is also shared by Instagram itself when promoting the Business platform. Also available in this report from agencies specializing in monitoring platform data (<https://www.omnicoreagency.com/instagram-statistics/>), all agencies, also based on the figures previously released by Meta, present similar results.

<sup>14</sup> See Anthropology of Smartphones and Smart Ageing: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/anthropology/assa/>.

<sup>15</sup> See Spyer (2018) for an in-depth study of social media use in a Brazilian community.



gies. This includes successful cases of people from unprivileged places and backgrounds being able to grow and transform their work opportunities and lives through social media<sup>16</sup>.

However, enterprising on Instagram goes far beyond the promotion of old and new businesses, which is just one side of the story — the side that Meta itself is proud to tell the world. The problem is everything that extrapolates this surface story and gets obscured in a muddled area. We highlight a more profound aspect, which is the hidden and giant transformation of contemporary labour through social media, oftentimes provoking negative consequences for vulnerable people.

### Undocumented and unregulated: The unknown migration of the informal economy to social media

Our research suggests that a vast part of the informal sector and self-employment in Brazil is migrating — and conforming to — Instagram in a movement that seems, to many, to be inevitable. However, the numbers moved by such labour shift are unknown. Many individuals operate on Instagram for sales but do not formalise themselves as MEI (Individual Micro-entrepreneurs)<sup>17</sup>. In addition, since Meta does not disclose the number of business accounts per country, the lack of transparency

surrounding this phenomenon becomes even more critical. As a result, this emerging phenomenon remains undocumented and, consequently, unregulated. Even more concerning is that individuals entering this market remain unprotected.

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The transformation of the informal economy by social media platforms provokes several impacts, such as:

- a. new and more challenging blurring between the formal and the informal economy;
- b. lack of public data, which represents a lack of transparency and accountability and, consequently, poses risks for the social protection of the most vulnerable;
- c. informal economic activities (and formal activities, too) need to shape themselves into the platform infrastructure. Informal activities are more and more dependent on such a structure.

<sup>16</sup> For example, Bianca Andrade (Boca Rosa) and Natália Martins (Natalia Beauty) are known cases of women influencers who experienced significant mobility through work on social media and entrepreneurship in the beauty sector.

<sup>17</sup> A simplified legal framework in Brazil tailored for self-employed individuals and small business owners looking to formalise their businesses. It provides a simplified tax system, less bureaucracy, and access to social security benefits, such as pensions and healthcare.

The informal economy and its intersection with self-employment is a state problem that demands constant monitoring and public intervention as it is directly related to the reproduction of social inequalities and the lives of the most vulnerable sectors of the Brazilian population. The transfer of the informal sector to a privately owned platform means the state is unable to track one of the country's most significant socioeconomic problems.

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## How the digital marketing sector works

In Brazil, starting and growing a business on social media is part of an ecosystem known as digital marketing. We highlight three main ways through which Instagram operates as a form of work and a source of income: *on stage*, when people appear to promote something, and *behind the scenes*, when people do not appear to promote anything. These two types of operations may lead to a third, which is a combination of the two.

### *People on stage*

Some individuals use Instagram to become influencers and receive financial rewards for their daily content. Others use Instagram to promote a product or a service, but many of them also aspire to become influencers. Advertising a service has a physical limit; for example, someone might start by advertising their

manicure services but can only accommodate a certain number of clients per day. As a result, aspirations often shift towards selling informational products, such as courses and e-books. This shift fosters a pyramid-like structure and a standardised new form of work, where only a few people want to continue to offer traditional services. Entrepreneurs often begin by selling their courses on social media with a simple website. Over time, their aspirations may grow to include advertising their 'info products' on large e-commerce platforms, eventually having others sell their products.

To sell an info product, such as an e-book or mentoring service, many individuals promote what is called a 'launch' — an online live event or webinar designed to attract an audience with the primary goal of selling the product at the end of the session. Typically, the true purpose of the event is not disclosed when it is advertised. Influencers often promote a 'free class' on digital marketing or on another topic, but by the end of the event the audience is met with a sales pitch for the product.

Though it has become commonplace to think of social media influencers as individuals whose posts presumably appeal to consumers in given niches and thus become a channel for big third-party brands through paid and unpaid collaborations, the widespread use of Instagram by self-employed workers and small entrepreneurs expands that idea as they (aspire to) rise to expert status for a specific skill or professional field while marketing their products and services. These expert influencers may also resell or collaborate with third-party brands, but they (seek to) reach that position by advertising and selling their own offers on Instagram.

## ***Accounts behind the scenes***

Accounts behind the scenes are sustained by drop-shipping, multilevel marketing, and pyramid schemes that promise people they will make considerable amounts of extra income without appearing on Instagram posts. This ecosystem is maintained by a constellation of intertwined e-commerce platforms, including those selling:

- a. *info products***, such as digital marketing courses and e-books
  - such as Hotmart, Eduzz, Monetizze, Kiwify, Ticto, HeroSpark, etc.
- b. *physical products*** from e-commerce giants and big techs
  - such as Amazon, Mercado Livre, Shopify, Shopee, WooCommerce, Magento, Monetizze, Kiwify, AliExpress, etc.
  - Individuals can sell these products by being an ‘affiliate’, meaning entering a personal pyramidal structure or directly accessing a platform for selling.
  - There are hundreds of thousands of influencers from all levels coaching people to sell these products.
  - Individuals monetise through sales they make from their Instagram account or website
  - To trade as an affiliate, individuals are often encouraged to invest in Instagram paid traffic or Google Ads

**Instagram is a key player amidst a constellation of e-commerce platforms, because physical and digital products are mostly advertised or even sold via the social media platform.**

## ***Mixed model***

The above division is not strict. Manicurists, personal trainers, or retail sellers on stage may also work behind the scenes to complement their earnings. Individuals can also profit through charges associated with referrals of professionals, products, or brands.

Some examples of the mixed model we collected in the digital research include:

*An owner of a small business trades Acai in the state of Para and starts promoting the little shop on Instagram. Behind the scenes, he also starts searching for extra income opportunities as an Amazon reseller, as the algorithms will conduct the user through a diverse constellation of business influencers.*

*A physiotherapist tries to become an influencer on Instagram, offering massages in her city in the state of Santa Catarina. She also generates an AI e-book about self-massage to sell in her account. Behind the scenes, she also tries to make extra income with Google Ads.*

In all cases, the social media infrastructure and influencer culture forces people to grow. Most users do not have the skills and tools to grow. Growth demands investment. Therefore, the cost-free benefits of social media’s marketing fade away.

- a. Users invest in paid traffic, which represents one of the largest sources of Meta revenue market-share<sup>18</sup>.
- b. Users invest in coaching. They need skilled experts on social media to teach and motivate them.
- c. Users invest a significant amount of time learning new skills and technological tools.

## A rigid pyramid in a libertarian façade

The consolidated body of research has shown that the seemingly horizontal, free, and democratic world of social media is indeed constrained by a limited algorithmic infrastructure<sup>19</sup>. This is especially evident in the business realm.

The business world on Instagram presents a fundamental contradiction: it promotes a free-market libertarian ideology while exhibiting a pyramidal structure. Freedom is a key value in the social media business ecosystem, mirroring the principles that inspired the Silicon Valley network. The mantra of making money on Instagram is that people can be their own bosses. A widespread message from giant to nano users is that anyone can grow, be free, be rich, and work anytime from anywhere. However, this seemingly equal and free world is, in reality, a pyramid with influencers at the

top and millions below them aspiring to grow. Instagram for businesses is inevitably structured around the principle of growth, which fosters an unequal structure.

## 'I teach you': Homogenisation of career-making

As Instagram becomes central for career-making, formal and informal economic activities need to be remodelled to fit the algorithmic structure and culture of the platform. One of the most significant impacts of such a process is homogenisation of economic activities. This means that self-employed workers may join Instagram to promote their services or that people simply want to resell an info product. In the end, the platform functioning leads users to homogenise discourses and aesthetics according to what can be trendy and viral

*One of the most significant impacts of such a process is homogenisation of economic activities.*

This process can happen organically or can follow tips and paid workshops from Instagram experts. A variety of professionals adapt their bios to the same model and wording. Regardless of whether the worker is a manicurist or a cleaner, the online presence moulded by the advertising culture will make people reproduce similar carousels, reels, or stories,

<sup>18</sup> Meta posted net income of \$39 billion on revenue of \$134.9 billion for the 2023 fiscal year (FY) ending Dec. 31, 2023.4. Approximately 98% of the year's total revenue was advertising revenue (131.9 billion). Source: "Meta Reports Fourth Quarter and Full Year 2023 Results". Available at: <https://investor.fb.com/investor-news/press-release-details/2024/Meta-Reports-Fourth-Quarter-and-Full-Year-2023-Results-Initiates-Quarterly-Dividend/default.aspx>.

<sup>19</sup> See Zuboff (2019), Duclos (2019), Bishop (2018), Petre, Duffy, and Hund (2019), and Araújo (2021).

which has impacts on diversity, originality, and creativity. Yet, ethnographic work shows some caveats:

- people adapt and insert their own personalities, manipulating the hegemonic trend.
- Some people, especially older workers, have more difficulty adapting to what is on trend because of a lack of technological skills, which makes them feel like they are left behind in the job market.
- One of the results of a sequence of homogenising practices is that many users attempt to grow on the platform, aiming to sell mentoring. This means that the services offered will reach a limit, and the next step in the pyramid is to sell mentoring for your service, both specific mentoring, i.e., on how to be a cleaner, and the mentoring of digital marketing more broadly. Many sex, beauty, cleaning, and teaching workers will all follow the same structure.

## A push culture towards sameness: Flux from career diversification to career homogenisation



However, this progression does not necessarily follow a linear or gradual path. In our database of strivers (individuals with up to 5,000 followers), who are actively learning how to grow online, the most common phrases found in bios include ‘I help/teach you to...’, indicating that those still in the learning phase are simultaneously positioning themselves as teachers, as dictated by the pyramidal system’s

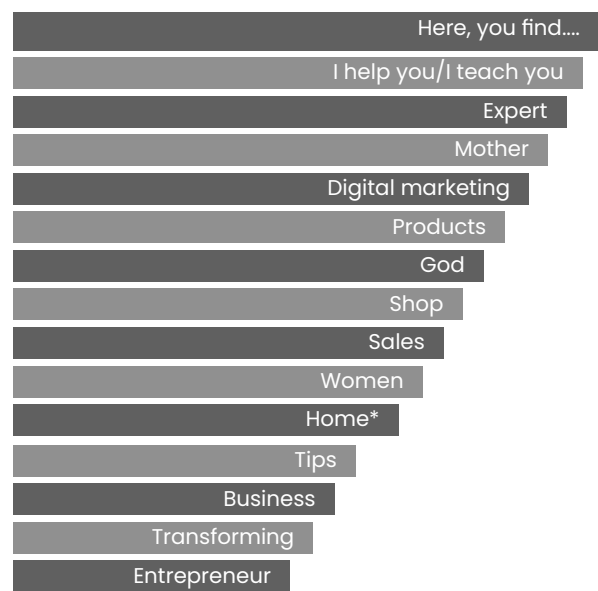
structure. Once users reach around 1,000 followers, many begin to label themselves as CEOs or experts in a particular field. Additionally, self-identifications such as ‘mother’ and ‘Christian’ are prevalent in their bios. As their follower count grows, many of these individuals increasingly refer to themselves as ‘mentors’ and exhibit the number of students in their courses.

## Most frequent words in bios per category

### Nano accounts

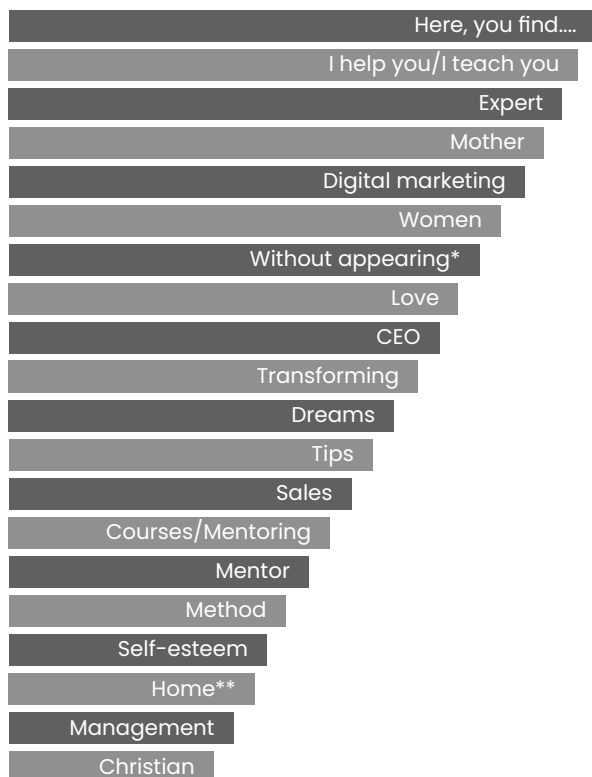


### Micro accounts



\*referring to home office

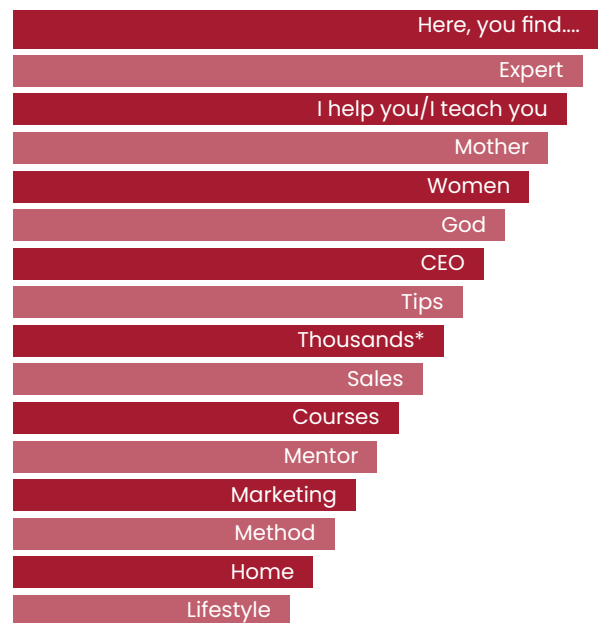
### Small accounts



\* referring to sales behind the scenes

\*\* referring to home office

### Medium accounts



\*referring to the number of mentorees and students

## Course of selling courses: Digital mentoring and in-person events

The world of digital marketing gravitates around the possibility of selling mentoring. The influencers at the very top of the pyramid are mentors for medium and small influencers. They create a lineage. Some pioneer influencers have educational backgrounds in marketing or business, but the vast majority rely on their experience as digital entrepreneurs and the digital courses with other influencers who came first.

Influencers use Instagram as an advertising and marketplace platform to attract students, often by offering free tips in a post and ending with a call to action like, ‘If you enjoyed this content, comment “I LIKE IT” to receive more tips in your inbox’. After engaging, the person receives a link to enrol in their courses, many times through insistent approach. Alternatively, many influencers host live sessions on Instagram and YouTube, where they promise to reveal the secrets of digital marketing. We have attended several of these lives, which all follow the same sales script: the influencers repeatedly claim they will share exclusive tips for about an hour, only to later assert that growth requires investment. They then promote their courses or mentorship programs with limited-time ‘promotional prices’ for those who register quickly. The price of these mentoring courses varies enormously according to the reputation of the influencers, ranging from R\$ 400 to R\$ 250,000. They are sold in several instalments (usually 12 instalments) by various payment methods to allow people from lower income strata to afford them.

*The price of these mentoring courses varies enormously according to the reputation of the influencers, ranging from R\$ 400 to R\$ 250,000.*

If the influencer is at the top of the pyramid chain, they usually have their own educational company selling a variety of pre-recorded mentoring courses, which promise the best lessons to succeed through unique methodology. In general, this type of influencer is not available for one-to-one mentoring, and only appears in paid events organised by their team in a large auditorium. When they appear in private live sessions for specific groups, which are named as ‘communities’, they offer exclusive mentoring for a premium price. Their courses are the top-ranked in the e-commerce platforms listed in the previous chapter, with a legion of people becoming influencers by selling them. In-person events and exclusive mentoring sessions are often marketed in a way that creates a sense of exclusivity and urgency. By selling tickets in batches or through waitlists, influencers generate the perception of high demand and limited availability. This established persuasion strategy taps into the principle of scarcity, making potential attendees more eager to secure a spot.

These events usually come with tiered pricing, where each tier offers different levels of access or experiences. For example:

- **Standard Tickets:** These might be priced at the lower end, such as R\$ 200, offering basic access to the event.



- Premium Tickets: Mid-tier pricing might include benefits like better seating or exclusive materials.
- VIP Packages: The highest tier, which can go up to R\$ 20,000 or higher, often includes premium seating, additional perks like a meal with the speaker, or private mentoring sessions.

This tiered approach allows influencers to maximise revenue while giving attendees the perception of varying levels of exclusivity and value. The most expensive packages are often limited in number, adding to the competitive nature of securing these tickets and enhancing the overall allure of the event.

In-person talk events, characterised by a mega show structure, employ motivational and religious cult strategies to foster collective effervescence and trance. These events allude to concepts such as “quantum physics”, hard work, and strategic use of social media into an entrepreneurial discourse, where positive thinking and disciplined action are depicted as essential for success. This discourse also incorporates religious elements, ‘the secret’, which will be revealed by the coach, and the law of attraction. If the influencer is not at the top, they give live mentoring for smaller groups. The number of students in these courses can vary from one to thousands. The research showed that it is common for aspiring influencers to open their mentoring courses and have only one or two participants, but the logic of advertisement follows the idea of exclusiveness and desire, always stating that there are limited spaces.

*In-person talk events, characterised by a mega show structure, employ motivational and religious cult strategies to foster collective effervescence and trance.*

The main goal of Instagram’s digital marketing is to offer mentoring, as it is highly profitable and confers power and distinction on the individual. Aspiring influencers take the course by the influencers at the top of the pyramid and subsequently sell mentoring on how to be a cleaner, how to create lashes, etc. But the next step is to sell courses and certifications on how to be a mentor in cleaning, a mentor in lashes, etc.

## 5. the top of the pyramid

*I got tired of being poor, and you should get tired too. After all, there's no nobility in poverty. (...) The reality is, when you don't thrive, when you don't become wealthy, you're not just taking away from yourself; you're taking away from your family, your kids, everyone you love, everyone who depends on you. When you stay in mediocrity, you dim your light, and you don't illuminate the people around you. But if you have received a gift, if you have worked, if you have studied and have knowledge that can transform the lives of others, and you can make your family prosper, it's your duty to shine, it's your duty to be a light, a beacon.*

— Female Influencer (80K followers)

Beginning like a rant and becoming a sermon on the moral obligation of individuals to make money, the fragment above is the first part of a crafted advertising video to launch an info product offered by a digital marketing expert. The business owner starring in the video continues by sharing her experience, stating that working digitally was how she made the ‘big turnaround’ in her life. Today, she can afford to pay for a private multilingual school for her children, take the trips she’s always wanted, and live in the house of her dreams while also providing for her parents’ needs. Her company makes over 10 million reals/year, employs 30 people, and supports social projects. As the video approaches the final pitch, the expert suggests that her mentees also earn through work ‘in the digital’ — they ‘made over 10 million last year’. She finishes with an invitation to interested viewers to comment on her video using a specific keyword, not only to make people engage with her post, but to enrol them in the next phase of a product launch: ‘What are you waiting for to thrive in the digital [and] be a light in the lives of the people you love the most? If you want me to teach you the path I took to achieve this life, comment “turnaround” below.’

Though the video had a carefully planned visual and textual message and was one of the phases of a marketing strategy to sell the expert's product, it is nowhere tagged or identified in any way as an advertisement. Instead, such kinds of promotional pieces by various expert influencers pop up on the Instagram feed as regular posts. Thus, they first appear like a conversation with followers or any other user who bumps into them through algorithmic recommendations. However, if effective, the post works like bait to hook customers — or more like a deceptive trick.

Using Instagram for marketing, advertisers are as concerned with winning against competitors in the race for attention as they are with optimising the algorithm in favour of distributing their posts if they are not paying to boost reach. As part of this competition, influencers often produce posts with questionable ethics, whether using tricks to disguise their sales intentions, unrealistic promises of enrichment, or advertising copy that appeals to fear, shame, and guilt.

*As part of this competition, influencers often produce posts with questionable ethics, whether using tricks to disguise their sales intentions, unrealistic promises of enrichment, or advertising copy that appeals to fear, shame, and guilt.*

***A work sector dominated by influential power that controls expertise and exhibits a homogeneous ideological alignment.***

Working on Instagram is an activity largely dependent on an ecosystem composed of self-declared wealthy or millionaire influencers who claim the expertise of marketing, digital marketing, Instagram algorithms secrets, self-image and positioning, the spiritual energy for millionaire mindsets, AI for sales, creative image content, and investments. Interconnected with these instructional influencers, there are several pastors, evangelical and motivational figures, who seek to inspire low-income people to pursue a journey of wealth. These influencers control the digital marketing sector offering mentoring on how to succeed in the venture. Selling digital products, such as mentoring, these influencers copy each other — and oftentimes complain about it — and produce a standardised narrative and aesthetics with limited individual differentiation.

At the top of the pyramid are influencers who have more than 500K followers and up to 15M followers. In their bios, we see the following statuses:

- Being featured on a Forbes list  
*A rare and distinctive status in the field. This is a verifiable and objective status.*
- Being a best-seller author  
*Oftentimes authors of self-published books. Best-selling classification is unknown*

- Having hundreds of thousands of students around the world

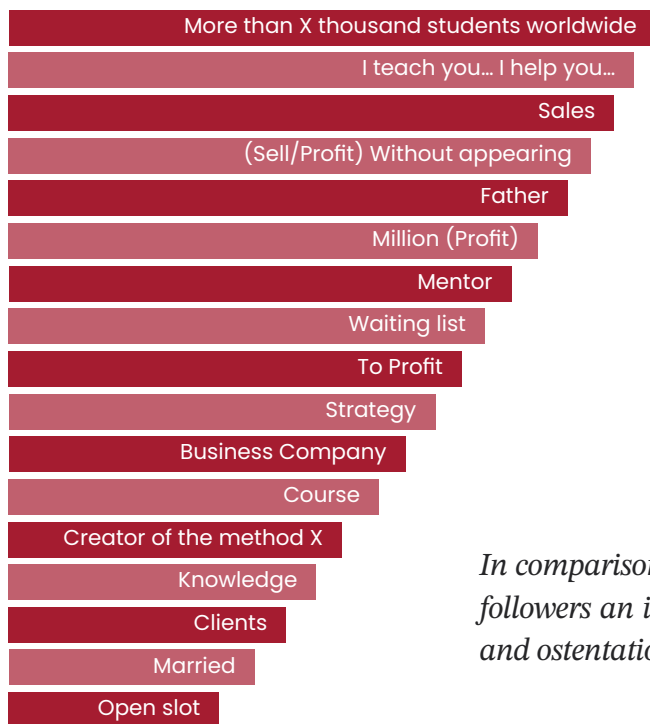
*The measures to count these numbers are unknown*

- Having developed a singular selling method. *Which is usually an acronym of three letters, such as DEE<sup>20</sup>.*

- Naming their community of followers. *Such as deeplabers, champions, butterflies, etc<sup>21</sup>.*

- Displaying a link to their coaching courses.
- Showing they are married and have children.
- Showing that their pictures are taken by the most well-known photographers for image positioning in the country.

## Most frequent words in the bios of the top Influencers



*In comparison with strivers, here we can note that the more followers an influencer has, the more corporate, masculine, and ostentatious the profile descriptions become.*

<sup>20</sup> Fictitious names are used for illustrative purposes

<sup>21</sup> Fictitious names are used for illustrative purposes

Below, there are thousands of influencers with hundreds of thousands of followers offering the same service and reproducing a similar narrative. This is followed by influencers with 5–50K followers. Below 5K followers, there is great diversity between those who are only users and those who are already positioning themselves as influencers, copying the same playbook but exhibiting a less professional aesthetic.

The standardised behaviour produces a homogeneous ideological worldview, which become a single, indoctrinated mode of life based on the following principles:

## Disregarding formal employment and labour laws

*Want to learn how to leave your CLT job and get rich online?*

Male Influencer (13M followers)

*Forbes announced Digital Marketing as one of the three highest-paying remote income sources and you're still missing out on this opportunity!*

*Last week, I made over 10K with this mega trend!*

*I quit my CLT. I work from anywhere. I have freedom of time. I'm my own boss.*

*[...]*

Female Influencer (80.7K followers)

Brazil's Labour Law Legislation, the CLT (Consolidation of Labor Laws), is often seen as synonymous with something degrading, associated with a boring, underpaid, and low-income life. While millions of Brazilians seek formal

employment opportunities, the expressions 'leaving CLT, burning CLT, getting rid of CLT' are viewed as signs of status, freedom, and social mobility within this universe.

There are cases of people saying that they are proud of having left permanent position as civil servants. A male growing influencer with 16 thousand followers defines himself as 'a former frustrated CLT, now a digital businessman'. Another male influencer with 2 million followers said that people should resign from their formal jobs and with the FGTS (a fund in Brazil that provides workers with financial protection in case of unfair dismissal or other specific situations) they should invest in digital marketing, adding that Forbes announced that this is currently the most profitable career in the world.

## Distorted meritocracy

*I started with nothing and now have millions. You can do it too.*

Female Influencer, 1 million followers.

*This is what will make you rich: HARD WORK and DEDICATION! The rest is just talk.*

Female Influencer, 286K followers.

The narrative suggests that if an individual works hard, maintains discipline, and invests in mentoring, they will become a millionaire. Strivers should not victimise themselves. Success is portrayed as a result of having the right mindset and mental drive. The underlying message in most of the posts is, 'If I could do it, so can you'.

## Virtuous faith

*Want to thrive? Get married!  
“Oh, but I got married and my life got worse.” You need to prepare for marriage and to thrive in it. We’ll talk more about this in the therapeutic training “THE RESCUE” that I’ll be offering for free. Link in BIO.*

*Send this video to someone who wants to build a prosperous life together!*

Male Influencer, 2.2M followers

Family and faith are two important signs of moral virtue strongly operating in this network’s values. To succeed you need to have faith in Jesus Christ. Alternatively, people working on mental energy talk about spiritual energy and God in a broader sense. People also should have a monogamic and heterosexual family. Faith and family should be shown as a sign of virtue. Male influencers frequently assert that the best investment a man can make is to marry, proposing that couples can significantly increase their wealth together. This notion is widely accepted among top influencers, who highlight how couples can boost their financial success.

## Lifestyle: Cultivate new habits, distance yourself from weak individuals, and eliminate negative thoughts

*They will criticise you. They will say it won’t work. They will try to make you stop. They will try to bring you down, make you feel ashamed, make you feel afraid. (...) It’s time to SHOW UP, GROW, and SELL, showing the world everything you were born to be.*

Female Influencer, 700K followers

*Transforming the Millionaire Woman Mantra into an EFT (Emotional Freedom Techniques). To eliminate scarcity beliefs that block you and tune into financial abundance, type XXXXX in the comments and check your DMs*

Female influencer, 205K followers

Success is defined by lifestyle, suggesting that people should adopt a series of habits ranging from taking a cold shower in the morning to distancing themselves from old friends and family who have a ‘poor mindset’ and instead get closer to wealthy individuals. Poor people are often labelled as pessimistic, dragging down those who strive for success. Negative individuals are said to mock those trying to grow digitally until they become envious of their newfound fortunes. Top influencers frequently post messages that encourage an adversarial stance against imagined enemies — the people who could delegitimise the dream of wealth.

Faith, combined with the belief in the power of thought, shapes both professional aspirations and lifestyles. This mindset holds that consistently repeating positive patterns will attract favourable outcomes. Central to this practice is avoiding complaints or expressions of lament, replacing them with affirmations like ‘I can do it’, ‘I deserve it’, ‘I believe’, or ‘I claim it’.

## The dream of flexibility

*It was the best decision I ever made... watching my daughter grow is priceless!*

Female Influencer, 34.1K followers

*Being able to choose between resting or working. Whether I wear heels or sneakers to a business lunch... If I stay at home or head to the office... If I take a last-minute trip... If I sleep in or wake up early... If I pick the kids up early from school or spend the day at the salon... Choosing what to buy with my money, without having to ask my husband... Choosing if I work tomorrow... or if I take a dip at the beach. Choices... The power of decision is liberating. The power to be able to choose Choices that started not too long ago, when I decided to sell my knowledge at a high value, every day. The most powerful decision I ever made was becoming a mentor. First, because it gave me freedom, and second, because it's so rewarding to teach this to other women. The second was investing in the right mentors. They taught me the way quickly and accurately.*

*Making 5, 6, 7 figures... there's no other market where this is as feasible as in the digital space*

Female Influencer, 126K followers

The narrative in the ecosystem is that digital workers on stage or behind the scenes will both make money with a cell phone anywhere in the world. Images of laptops near a swimming pool are commonly used for persuasion. They often mention freedom as the possibility of seeing your children grow and spending more time with them.

## Wealth, luxury, and ostentation

*Yesterday, I achieved a dream that, 11 years ago, seemed impossible. I bought, in full, the car that had been my computer's wallpaper for many years. This accomplishment is the result of a journey that I am incredibly proud of, and remembering each step motivates me even more—giving up was never an option.*

Male Influencer, 1.8M followers

*I had a folder on Pinterest called ‘my new life’. In that folder, I had all the trips I wanted to take, my wedding, my house, my car, the connections, the money, the achievements—everything, absolutely everything I wanted. At that time, I was broke, but I truly believed I would achieve it all. No matter how long it took, I knew I would. For the past 5 years, I've been making absolutely*

*everything I desire come true, and don't be mistaken—there's nothing mystical about it. [...]*

Female Influencer, 286K followers

The ostentation of wealth is a rule. At the top of the pyramid are those influencers who show their jets, mansions, luxury brands, and print-screens of millionaire bank statements. These influencers say that everybody deserves wealth, and they are sharing it to inspire people to pursue their first million. Nano, micro, and small influencers copy these signs trying to give the impression that they are succeeding. Influencers encourage their followers to have a dream board in which they can collect all their material dreams.

## Wellness, fitness, and transforming appearances

*Protagonists don't have a perfect life. But when something happens in their life that they don't like, instead of asking, 'Oh my God, why is this happening to me?'... Their attitude is different: What do I need to learn from this? Then they learn and address things. It's as simple as that. If you're not satisfied, change it. [A photo accompanying this post features a slim, white woman wearing a bikini with the phrase 'You have the belly you deserve' written on it.]*

Female Influencer, 1.2M followers.

Influencers are mostly white. People are slim and their bodies are sculptured. They work out every day and show their surgical body in-

terventions as a sign of virtue. They implant white dental veneers and fix their smiles. Women have long hair and lip filling. Men have trimmed beards. It is essential to show how they have been transformed by wealth, showing before and after pictures, in which *before* means poorer, overweight, with racialised curly hair, no make-up, and non-straight teeth. They appear on public transportation or in their poor houses. *After* means whiter, long and shiny hair, make-up on the face, slimmer and sculptured bodies, and white and straight smiles. Women proudly demonstrate facial harmonisation with injectable fillers.

A normal, average body becomes a degrading symbol of deprivation. The idealisation of aesthetics is portrayed as a mark of virtuous effort and self-investment. Typically, body transformation represents an intensification of the individual's involvement in entrepreneurial logic on social media, where the body is seen as the facade of their business and, therefore, must be maintained accordingly

*A normal, average body becomes a degrading symbol of deprivation. The idealisation of aesthetics is portrayed as a mark of virtuous effort and self-investment.*



## Investment in coaching courses

*Did traditional education prepare you for what you do today? Did your college teach you how to monetize your knowledge? Did your MBA provide you with practical, applicable tools for your daily life? How many years did you invest in learning trends that, by the end of your course, were already ‘in the past’? Imagine learning the best practices from the fastest-growing companies in the world, translated in real time for your business, delivered by professionals with a proven track record, in a quick and immediately applicable way. That’s what you’ll find at [...] Immersion and Mentorship. Click the link in the bio and secure your spot!*

Profile of a Business School, 1.8M followers

Influencers repeatedly emphasise that, if people want to be rich, they *must* invest in mentoring courses. All investment will be rewarded if people take the mentoring seriously. Some influencers state how much they have already invested to grow online (an amount that than reaches 7 digits) to persuade people to do the same. The reference to formal education in this ecosystem is ambivalent. On one hand, there is a prevalent narrative that formal and regulated education is a failed system that does not prepare individuals for real-world business, which encourages people to purchase their courses. On the other hand, as influencers grow and formalise their businesses, many establish non-governmental organisations or educational institutes and proudly highlight that they are certified by the Ministry of Education (MEC).

## 6. the bottom of the pyramid:

### impacts on low-income people

Instagram is now a part of all career-making in Brazil. The push to have an online presence impacts medical doctors, scientists, lawyers, and more. Our focus, however, lies on low-income groups of people who are self-employed, with precarious subcontracts, or unemployed. These groups have fewer professional choices and weakened capabilities, making them more vulnerable to the impacts of unregulated Instagram's digital marketing world.

#### Persistent informality

The level of formality varies in our sample. Micro-entrepreneurs with small shops or businesses generally have their paperwork up to date. As entrepreneurs grow their ventures, they tend to formalise their operations. However, this is not always the norm. Our low-income interviewees, especially those who remain in poverty, who engage in e-commerce behind the scenes, or run small businesses, largely remain informal. While some micro-entrepreneurs register as MEI (Individual Micro-entrepreneurs), many cannot afford the regular payments and become irregular. They feel the need to advertise their businesses but fear being caught operating informally. Those involved in e-commerce often do not formalise their businesses, remaining outside the formal economy.

#### Inevitability

Our interviews reveal that most aspiring digital entrepreneurs perceive having a professional presence on Instagram as inevitable: 'You no longer exist if you are not there', said a retail

seller. As they start their online enterprises, algorithmic recommendations quickly lead them to the cluster of influencers mentioned above in a process of recommending more and more influencers, as generally happens on Instagram.

### Promoting small businesses

Qualitative research shows that having a profile on Instagram has positive impacts for those who are already running a small formal business. The negative side is the time spent answering endless inbox questions about the service and its price. However, in general, Instagram profiles help micro-entrepreneurs to reach more people in their neighbourhoods or even beyond the local area.

### Investment in courses

The interviewees mentioned they need to follow these influencers to learn how to navigate posts, stories, and reels, and to grow online. All our interviewees have already paid for mentoring courses with digital marketing influencers, and most of them plan to continue taking these courses. The payment for these courses represents a significant financial effort, including saving money for months, paying in 12 instalments, using their employment insurance, or asking for it as a birthday gift.

The increasing demand for entrepreneurial and financial education is being catered to by an unregulated qualification market, where anyone can claim expertise. For many of our interviewees, particularly those from less privileged social strata, these informal courses provide an accessible form of education. Therefore, they are not only participating in

informal work but also seeking out informal training and certifications that address their need for knowledge, skills, self-esteem, confidence, and status.

### Investment of time

Developing an online presence demands dedication and time. Low-income research subjects have long invested their time and efforts to grow their Instagram accounts or YouTube channels. Even without perceiving significant rewards, they believe that time, persistence, and investment are necessary to succeed in the future.

### No significant growth

Climbing the Instagram rigid pyramid is almost impossible for the very fact that the pyramid reproduces long-standing and profound class, gender, age, and racial inequalities.

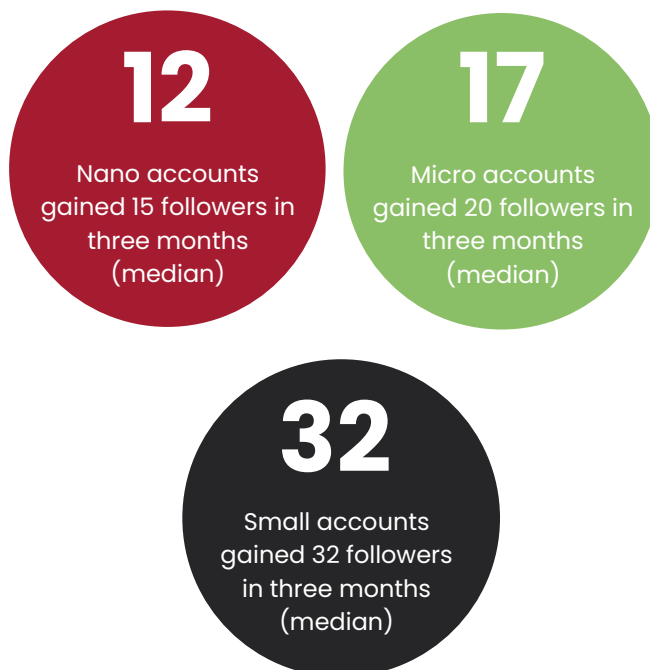
A common methodological mistake in studying workers who are becoming influencers is relying on stories of success and growth. This type of research often identifies subjects through digital research using a snowball sampling method. The problem with this approach is selection bias. One of the main findings of our research is that the vast majority of millions of aspiring digital entrepreneurs remain invisible; they do not appear in searches because their profiles are too small and unprofessional.

The track to acquire followers for 40,000 strivers shows little growth in a period marked by *active investment* in digital growth. The initial data was collected from April to June. The follower count was updated in October.

Therefore, the analysis covered approximately 4 new months. Only 1.4% of all aspiring digital entrepreneurs surpassed 5,000 followers (a benchmark used in our study as a reference for growing influence). Over the next three years, our lab will update this analysis based on the full sample of 1 million profiles.

*The track to acquire followers for 40,000 strivers shows little growth in a period marked by active investment in digital growth.*

## Strivers' growth



## Playing with women's hopes

The idea that someone can make money working on Instagram is attractive for low-income groups who face economic insecurity and social vulnerabilities. It appears as an opportunity to make extra earnings to complement household income or plan to make enough money to live exclusively from it. In particular, our research shows that the promise of living from digital marketing inspires hope among the most vulnerable sectors in Brazilian society.

Black women represent 28.5% of the population but earn only 10% of the total work income in the country. Recent data shows that they have larger households, lower life expectancies, lower educational levels, lower incomes, and depend more on Bolsa Familia, the cash transfer created by the Workers' Party under Lula da Silva's administration<sup>22</sup>.

A large part of our interviewees comprised low-income Black women living in impoverished peripheral zones. They bear heavy domestic burdens, caring for their families while trying to find dignifying employment. They are part of a new generation that wants opportunities beyond working as maids — a conventional career for Black women in Brazil, with a strong legacy of slavery and servile culture. Several influencers target this demographic, promising to help them grow their online presence.

<sup>22</sup> United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2024. See: <https://g1.globo.com/politica/noticia/2024/05/28/maioria-no-pais-mulheres-negras-sao-o-grupo-menos-beneficiado-por-avancos-sociais-diz-pnud.ghtml>.

See also: National Household Sample Survey, 2023, by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE)

<https://revistamarieclaire.globo.com/carreira/noticia/2024/05/mulheres-negras-recebem-salario-47percent-menor-que-a-media-da-populacao-brasileira.ghtml>.

Getulio Vargas Foundation (2002): <https://portal.fgv.br/en>.

Our research among low-income Black women who aspire to be digital entrepreneurs shows that working from a cell phone and making extra income from home, while managing domestic tasks, seems like a golden opportunity that fills several gaps in their lives. They start dreaming of having free time to enjoy life, autonomy, and enough money to afford good education and leisure for their children. Our data suggest that an increasing number of women believe they will make at least 10K a month — enough to ‘leave CLT’ or other gigs they engage in.

Many interviewees confidently said that they would become millionaires. One interviewee mentioned that she would make 100 million by selling mentoring sessions that unlock the chakra of wealth. Copying the trend encouraged by influencers at the top of the pyramid, many create their dream boards, which are whiteboards with pictures of objects they will acquire, the houses they will buy, and the travels they will undertake.

The influencer narrative on wealth for everyone who works hard is particularly attractive to women who are unemployed or have exhausting and underpaid care jobs. Conversely, low-income Black women with experience in running formal or informal small businesses (with physical and digital presence) tend to be more sceptical about influencers’ promises and realistic about their own life constraints. They say that there is no miracle to make money other than working every day to accomplish small but important achievements in the medium term, like paying the bills or saving money for years to organise a family trip.

While scholarly works in social sciences have shown that the role of dreaming is an important dimension to climbing the ladder, the capacity to aspire is one dimension among other concrete educational and cultural capabilities necessary to break the cycle of inequality. Influencers showcase stories of low-income women who accomplish their dream goals. However, even if real success cases inspire, they have no significant statistical value in terms of social change, as the reality of social stratification in Brazil remains profoundly unequal.

*Influencers showcase stories of low-income women who accomplish their dream goals. However, even if real success cases inspire, they have no significant statistical value in terms of social change, as the reality of social stratification in Brazil remains profoundly unequal.*

## Digital illiteracy

The ethnographic study among aspiring and/or micro female entrepreneurs in a large low-income community revealed that navigating Instagram’s buttons and functionalities was the most challenging aspect of promoting their businesses. These women understood the importance of posting aesthetically pleasing content, being creative, and making videos of their daily routines. However, they struggled to even pronounce the names of basic tools and features. Additionally, many expressed reluctance to post content due to insecurities about their written Portuguese skills, which they perceived as poor. This highlights the digital literacy barriers that these entrepre-

neers face, alongside their existing economic and social challenges.

## The risk of blaming oneself for failures

*Do you truly love your children? Do you genuinely want to give them a bright future? It doesn't appear so. If you did, you would be dedicating time to investing in yourself to improve their lives (referring to digital marketing mentoring).*

Influencer (300K followers), specialised in female entrepreneurship

The subjective impacts of influencer culture's discourses on wealth can be harmful. We interviewed several women who were still very motivated to make money online. Low-income women have invested significant amounts of money to take influencers' courses, which become a dream. They reproduce the influencer culture from the top of the pyramid that growing online demands heavy financial investment in their self-development and growth.

Our data suggest that most of our research subjects, after investing scarce money and time, are not able to finish the courses or to give continuity to the digital efforts as result of a draining domestic routine, especially with small children. Reproducing the influencers' discourse, some women stated that they are responsible for not achieving their dreams because they have not yet developed the mental drive to focus and succeed. In this case, spiritual faith from various creeds plays a crucial role in keeping these women motivated to try again, investing in new and more promising mentoring.

Self-blaming is directly connected to the mainstream discourse within the ecosystem, perpetuated by several influencers, which asserts that individuals are solely responsible for their poverty. This narrative manipulates mothers over the guilt they often feel, suggesting they are entirely responsible for providing a good future for their children.

*Self-blaming is directly connected to the mainstream discourse within the ecosystem, perpetuated by several influencers, which asserts that individuals are solely responsible for their poverty.*

## Developing low self-esteem

Some of our research subjects wanted to be influencers and started making significant efforts to this end. Yet, appearing on stage was described as challenging. In a universe dominated by wealthy, white, and slim influencers, interviewees said that, for example, they are too shy to appear in the photos and videos, that their houses are noisy and unattractive to record anything, they are overweight, and their teeth are not straight. We came across many women who were too shy to smile in the images, for example, as their teeth were not straight, or who were unwilling to expose scars they had received due to physical gender violence.

As a result, working 'behind the scenes' is a perceived good replacement for women who do not want to appear in the posts. As option do not work either, some women stated that, for example, they have low-education background that make it difficult to understand the digital language, that they are weak and didn't

invest enough or did not make an effort to succeed. The process of trying to make money online from scratch and the subsequent failure reinforces a cycle of low self-esteem in their physical appearances and intellectual skills. The entire process of working in the digital sphere that is supposed to lift the confidence of women many times ends up in frustration, which may lead to another round of investment in mentoring, for example, with influencers more appropriate for their realities.

This cycle — starting with optimism about educational opportunities and the potential for better self-esteem and ending up with frustration and self-blame when expectations are not met — reflects the broader struggle of reconciling aspirations with reality.

## Health, stress, and anxiety

Studies discuss how the uncertainties of dealing with platform algorithms and the need to maintain a constant presence on social media damage digital creators' well-being<sup>23</sup>. Our interviewees did not stress a correlation between their professional use of social media and their experiences with mental illnesses. Some discussed comparison as a trigger for anxiety, explaining how they avoided measuring themselves against peer competitors online and focused instead on doing their jobs well. The in-person ethnography shows strivers seek to signify competition and anxiety in a positive light as drivers of productivity. They associate competitiveness with respect and consider it an incentive to push themselves to work harder. However, through digital eth-

nography, we observed posts in which they expressed feeling frustrated and hurt by mean comments, the spread of detrimental gossip, or the lack of visibility and engagement obtained by their posts.

## Ageism

Younger aspiring entrepreneurs perceive Instagram to be a natural path to develop their businesses or to make extra income. However, older people find it difficult to navigate the social media culture while feeling compelled to have a presence there because 'it is inevitable'. Our research identified that low-income people older than in their 50s already experience difficulties in learning the tricks. Among the things that they report difficulties in are:

- a. operating Instagram functionalities, especially reels and stories;
- b. understanding influencers' language related to the business world;
- c. feeling embarrassed, degraded, or even physically sore after recording fun videos in a TikTok style.

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<sup>23</sup> See Bishop (2018), Duffy et al. (2021), and Karhawi and Prazeres (2022).

## AI resources are the most popular content among aspiring influencers

*After making 20 million, I discovered something even more advantageous than digital products. I shifted my marketing focus to sales automation and AI, discovering true freedom. To learn about the impact of Artificial Intelligence in action and how it can free up your time while multiplying your profits, comment [...] and I'll share more!*

Female Influencer, 608K followers

Qualitative and quantitative research showed a massive appropriation of Artificial Intelligence (AI) resources low-income people. By far the most popular content offered by influencers is lessons on how to use AI to produce content for business. AI Influencers share free software for pictures, videos, and content writing. They also teach a variety of aspects, such as how to use the best prompts, make creative images, produce reels or posts for 7 days, identify the weakness of your consumer niche, or write entire e-books.

In our tracking of aspiring influencers, AI tips were consumed at least 3x more than any other mentoring related subject. This is a result of two things:

a. people do not have time, money, interest, creativity, or patience to develop content for their accounts, and AI appears to be a cheap and quick resource to solve these issues;

b. people do not have educational and technological backgrounds to be able to create content from scratch. AI suggest ideas and produces images and text instantaneously, with fewer grammatical inaccuracies.

The *positive results* of this appropriation are time and money savings. Additionally, low-income people can catch up with several educational gaps that otherwise would prevent them from having an online presence. On the other hand, *negative results* include the fact that many people report feeling overwhelmed by so many tools, which are perceived as difficult to use and expensive after the usual 7-day free trial.

## Potential for misinformation massification through self-published e-books

E-book sales became a huge part of the digital marketing business-share as e-books are a cheap product to sell in large numbers. Influencers at the top of the pyramid have their books with individual methods and these works are commercialised in in-product platforms for info products. The higher the position the influencer occupy in the pyramid, the higher the number of affiliated people who will sell that e-book.

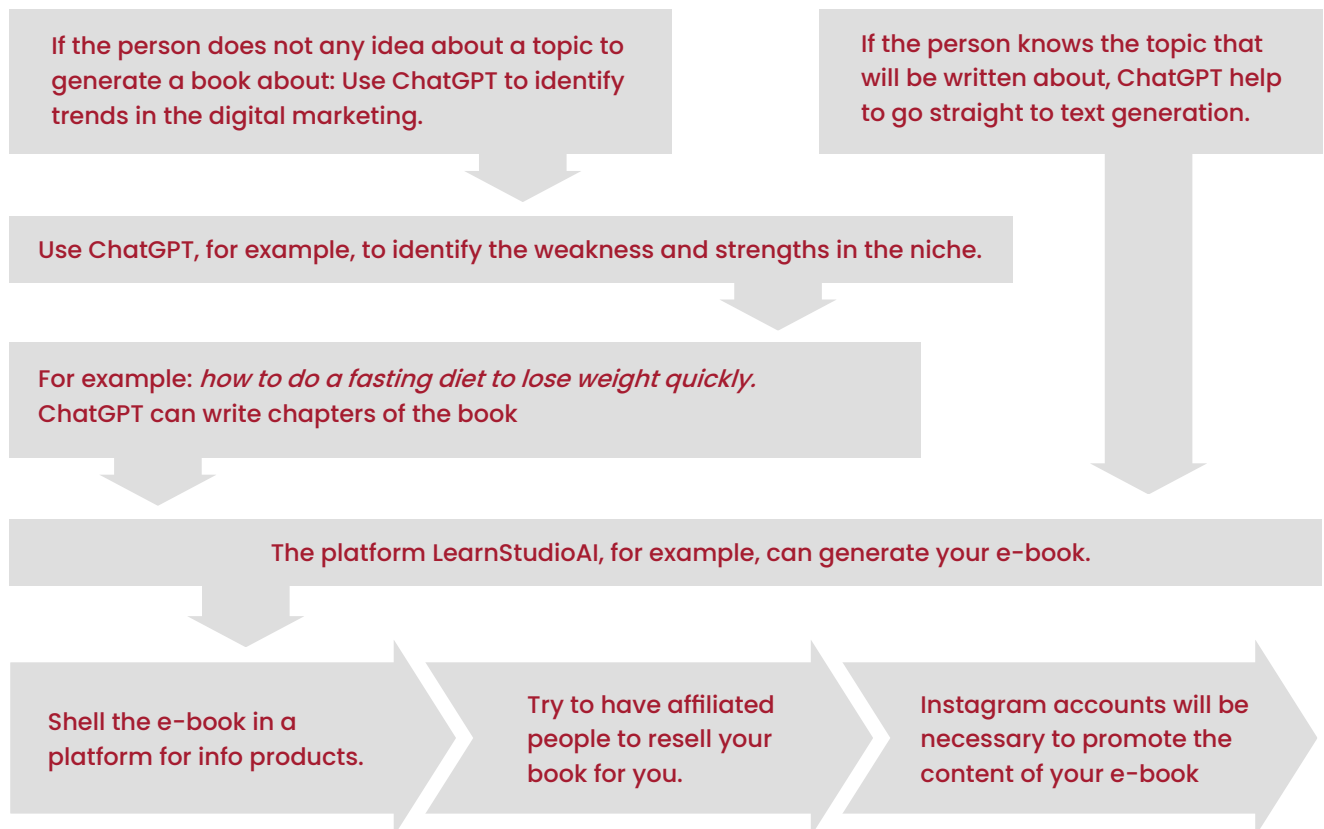
People from all social strata and with a wide range of followers develop their own e-books to sell on these platforms, which charge 7 — 10% of the sale of each info product. Selling e-books created by AI became a phenomenal trend in the digital marketing world, and many influencers teach how to create an e-book.



Our interviews with low-income people showed that this option is considered a form of self-realisation: ‘a person without secondary school can write a book in seconds!’— said

an interviewee who is unemployed — and can make money with higher profit margins than selling somebody else’s book.

## E-book self-publishing flow with AI tools



Digital research with a wide sample of users suggested that influencers’ followers are eager to learn how to generate and sell e-books as this is a popular topic in the digital marketing sector. In-depth ethnographic research

showed that aspiring digital entrepreneurs want to have their own books on topics that they like but have no expertise with. One of the most trendy topics for e-book generation is wellness.

Patricia created an account for well-being, fitness, and nutrition tips, but she has no background or experience in any of these areas. She is a technician in accountancy but has yet to find a job in her field.

Her Instagram posts are all copied from other influencers who go viral, as she is skilled in using several digital AI tools that identify trendy posts. Her Instagram account achieved 2,000 followers after sharing someone else's video – and giving credit – on how to work out from home using bricks or cooking pans.

She does not appear on her Instagram account because she feels that people would not legitimise her account since she is overweight.

Her husband, who struggles to lose weight and has been on a diet, created an e-book on weight loss.

The couple demonstrates anxiety about their bodily appearances and overall health. They keep promising to start a new lifestyle. They hope to use her account to promote the e-book, which was uploaded to info product platforms, and to start appearing online, showing their weight loss progress when they begin their own fitness journeys.

The main concern about this phenomenon is the spread of self-generated e-books by entrepreneurs without any scientific expertise or relevant personal background in several health areas, such as fitness, nutrition, and supplementation. The latter, in particular, has become very popular in Brazil, with sales of vitamins and minerals that promise vitality and longevity. It is common that accounts that sell e-books also sell supplementation.

### **Aspiring entrepreneurs are subjected to scams, illegal raffles, and betting sites**

Aspiring entrepreneurs are vulnerable to scams, fraudulent profiles, and illegal raffles as they engage in the digital marketing space. Many find themselves interacting with influ-

encers who offer unreliable services and illegal products. Our study identified at least two concerning situations.

Firstly, some influencers grow their following by sharing tips and advice in specific areas, such as how to clean a house or bake something. Once they achieve a certain reputation and attract a number of engaged followers, these influencers often start offering other products for sale, particularly raffles that promise prizes ranging from iPhones to Ferraris. The strategy involves initially gaining trust by providing legitimate services and then transitioning to activities that operate outside the bounds of the Brazilian Federal Revenue regulations. Additionally, numerous scandals in Brazil have come to light, exposing fraud in prize delivery. Many of our interlocutors admitted to purchasing entries in these draws,

only to later share stories of influencers who failed to deliver the promised prizes.

Another risky situation reported by aspiring and/or micro-entrepreneurs involves being exploited by opportunists or even criminals who prey on their desperation and hope for success. Fake accounts often appear, offering digital marketing services or promoting illegal pyramid schemes, asking for bank transfers or credit card payments, but failing to deliver the promised services. These scammers often disappear after receiving multiple complaints and reappear under new accounts.

Furthermore, some influencers claim expertise in specific areas, promising to help others make money, but are either impostors or lack the necessary qualifications and experience. While this phenomenon occurs offline across various sectors, the internet amplifies these opportunities for deception. Many people report difficulty discerning between trustworthy and fraudulent influencers, as many influencers often portray their success in a similar way.

### **Frustration follows significant investments of expectations, money, and time**

Although the field of social media digital marketing is expanding in Brazil, there is a growing sense of disillusionment among those who have attended numerous classes and courses. Many followers report feeling let down by the promises of digital marketing. Their primary complaints include:

- a. the tactic of offering seemingly free classes only to request payment and course registration at the end;
- b. the fact that AI digital tools are not as free, effective, or simple as advertised;
- c. the use of sensational content to capture attention;
- d. the reinforcement of dogmatic, heteronormative views on nuclear families.

### **Potential to discourage studies by promising quick gains in the digital world**

Preliminary research has recorded accounts from many public school teachers in impoverished areas, reporting that their young students are leaving school to become digital influencers, believing this to be a quick path to wealth. The research has been tracking the phenomenon of child influencers: minors who gain visibility by teaching other young people how to ‘become millionaires,’ downplaying poverty, and adopting a language of entrepreneurship and power. This phenomenon is predominantly male and has direct implications, discouraging secondary education completion or college enrolment among youth in underserved areas.

## Symptoms of a failed formal educational, full employment systems, and structural inequalities

The meritocratic narrative of ‘if I could do it, you can too’ fails to acknowledge the structural barriers that limit many people’s success, implying that individual effort is the sole determining factor. However, this view overlooks the contexts of inequality that significantly shape each person’s opportunities.

When social media attempts to fill educational and employment gaps, they reveal deeper layers of lack of public policies and structural state weakness in these areas. When people seek support from influencers, this is merely reflecting the lack of opportunities. Our study shows that people see influencers as ‘gente

como a gente’ (people like us), meaning accessible, having a similar background or a relatable, everyday experience, and speaking a language that is easily understood — unlike in formal education, which is often perceived as elite. The experience of formal labour, as described by our interlocutors, was seen as exploitative, degrading, and underpaid. While the popularity of the digital marketing world is a symptom of a profound structural problem, it also contributes to deepening that problem. In democracies, one would expect citizens to advocate for decent jobs and access to formal education. However, the digital marketing world reinforces a perspective in which formal employment (CLT) is associated with shame, poverty, and monotony. Influencers frequently complain about CLT jobs, and university degrees are often dismissed as useless.

In our sample, we have a few dissonant examples that highlight the importance of formal training and employment. Carina, a 27-year-old care worker, had spent five years dreaming of making extra income through digital ventures. A low-income resident of a favela and a single mother of two, she invested a significant amount of money in several digital courses. One day, she had the opportunity to take a formal technical course through SEBRAE to become a care worker. She secured a formal job in a hospital, where she earns a decent salary and feels respected. Over time, her enthusiasm for the digital marketing world faded.

Similarly, Marcelo, a 34-year-old Uber driver, had been trying various strategies to make money online. At the time of our interview, he believed this was the only path to prosperity, distrusting formal employment, especially since, as a former convict, he thought no one would hire him. However, he was mistaken and was eventually hired as a driver for one of the city’s major media outlets. In his daily routine, driving journalists to events and interacting with politicians and authorities, he expressed full satisfaction with the dignity and stability his job provides.

## 7. impacts on democracy

The growing field of digital marketing and the migration of economic activities to social media platforms like Instagram impact democratic principles and pose risks to the pursuit of a fairer, more diverse, and egalitarian society.

### A dogmatic single mode of life

While democracy is characterized by the coexistence of plurality and diversity, the field of digital marketing that supports Instagram businesses strongly reinforces a conservative lifestyle centred around the nuclear family, Christian faith, and abundant wealth. Although conservatism is a legitimate worldview within democracies, the imposition of such a lifestyle becomes a political issue. Through repetitive imagery and messaging, this dominant view in the field emphasizes that these are the morally accepted and primary paths to prosperity.

### Hyper-individualism and distorted meritocracy

Principles like solidarity, community, and sorority are rarely mentioned in this context. The predominant discourse in this field exaggerates the idea that those who work hard can succeed, a message frequently repeated by wealthy individuals who either come from privileged backgrounds or share stories of overcoming less privileged backgrounds. Although this idea is not new, social media has made it ubiquitous. Many interviewees from underprivileged backgrounds, or even those living in poverty, reiterated the belief that they were not yet rich because they did not have the right mindset.

In this process, several spiritual and religious leaders help cultivate what is called a ‘millionaire mindset’. Influencers often

suggest that old neighbours or even family members should be left behind if they do not support the goal of becoming wealthy. For example, a common trend is to share posts with an adversarial tone, claiming that everyone laughed at or discouraged them when they started their digital businesses, but they persisted alone against everyone. Underlying this narrative is the idea that all previous connections are obstacles, and only the new nuclear family can support an investment-focused mindset.

## Conservatism and the far-right

In this sphere, conservative and libertarian worldviews often intersect — libertarian in terms of economic beliefs, and conservative in terms of lifestyle. The digital ethnography revealed that so-called ‘trad wives’ (traditional wives) are the dominant female archetype. The phrase ‘virtuous women’ is commonly used, signifying adherence to conservative moral values. Men, on the other hand, are often described as being ‘men of value’ (*Homens de valor*), referring to their strength and virility — demonstrated through activities like mountain excursions with wolves or cold immersion baths — while they also accumulate wealth through investments.

Due to the conservative nature of the field, several major influencers openly support and campaign for far-right politicians, such as former president Jair Bolsonaro. Others do not overtly show their political preferences but subtly use colours and messages that indicate their leanings. Some simply follow far-right politicians. There is a noticeable lack of divergent, progressive, or left-wing voices in this sphere. Our quantitative and qualitative survey revealed that 87% of influencers in the

digital marketing ecosystem support the right and far-right, with 50% of this support being explicit. The remaining 13% show no form of political alignment, and 0% align with progressives or the left. In other words, this is a field with a highly homogeneous political view.

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## Pablo Marçal, an icon of digital marketing, is now a central political figure in the public sphere

In 2024, a new political figure emerged in Brazil, running for the city government of São Paulo and monopolizing public attention. Pablo Marçal is one of the biggest coaches in the field, a giant influencer with around 12 million

followers. He is the stereotypical personification of the digital marketing world and its ideological views.

He aligns with former president Bolsonaro in his political views, adopting an anti-establishment narrative combined with conservative religious values. He proudly calls himself a billionaire, owns private jets, and has been married to his wife for a long time.

*When I committed to getting ripped, I had never done that in my entire life. But I'm mentally relentless when I say I'm going to do something. If I say it, my brain begs me not to go through with it. It's over, man. When I became Iron Man, I said I wouldn't give in to sweets anymore. My brain was pleading, 'Please, for the love of God, stop. Do it after the year is over'. When I said I was going to take cold showers until I reached a billion, it took four years, and my brain was telling me every day, 'That's enough. Fuck!' I only stop when I've completed what I said I would do. Sorry to use these words, but if you don't push hard, you won't grow. Children do what they like, but adults do what needs to be done.*

Marçal's words are part of a short Instagram video in which he appears on stage with a motivational soundtrack. The video was widely shared by several of his supporting accounts in 2023.

He rose in the field of digital marketing through motivational and controversial talks, taking the pyramid scheme to an exponential level. Short videos of his talks became an info product through which people make money in the pyramid scheme. His mentoring courses cost up to R\$ 300,000, including two Zoom sessions with him and a mindset development work that incorporated fasting, prayer, and triathlon training<sup>24</sup>.

He is as popular as he is controversial. Our interviews with aspiring digital entrepreneurs showed that he has gained significant popularity among low-income groups. Following the populist playbook, he is seen as an inspiration — a family-oriented person, a self-made man who became a millionaire and now fights against the establishment. He is also described as the only person capable of combating the 'communists'. The Bolsonaro family sometimes supports him and sometimes rejects him. He is certainly a derivative of Bolsonarism, but also

<sup>24</sup> See: <https://tab.uol.com.br/noticias/redacao/2024/09/20/os-bastidores-e-brigas-da-mentoria-de-r-250-mil-vendida-por-pablo-marcal.htm>.

differs in some respects, particularly in how he incorporates evangelical values in a freestyle manner, as a lifestyle, as he calls it. Additionally, while Bolsonaro represented a combination of authoritarianism and conservatism, Marçal represents a blend of market-driven principles and conservatism.

It is not the first time he has run for political office. He was elected as a congressman in 2022, but his candidacy was impugned by the electoral justice court. He was also criminally convicted for participation in a major gang involved in

bank fraud and scams. In 2024, during the election, the electoral justice system blocked his social media accounts for violating funding rules. He is also accused of spreading disinformation and misinformation without embarrassment, such as mentioning that his left-wing opponent is addicted to cocaine.

The disruptive presence of the candidate, who saw a rapid rise in the polls, became the most talked-about topic during the 2024 elections in Brazil.



## 8. case studies

According to our quantitative database and qualitative research, some of the main career sectors among strivers are:



**Beauty:** Individuals who work on stage providing beauty services, such as nail extensions, eyebrow shaping, haircuts, and makeup.



**Cleaning:** Cleaners who are beginning to position themselves as entrepreneurs and personal cleaning service providers, aiming to bring new positive meanings to the stigma of domestic work in Brazil.



**Drop shipping, reselling, and affiliates:**

Businesses or individuals involved in trading products or information products created by others, either on stage (publicly) or behind the scenes (privately).



**Fitness and wellbeing:** Individuals sharing tips and methods related to fitness routines and overall wellbeing.



**Food:** Sellers specializing in food items such as sandwiches, salgados (fried snacks), cakes, and sweets.



**Retail and services:** Small shop owners who sell items like clothes and gadgets.



**Craftwork:** Individuals or businesses involved in creating handmade or artisanal products.

In this final section, we present case studies on 3 diverse sectors, which have been studied in-depth by our team members. The sectors are beauty, cleaning, and retail. We look at the internal dynamics, hierarchies, aspirations, and challenges of each field.



**By Marina Frid**

Instagram overflows with content generated by profiles of individuals who converge in the same beauty sector but have various backgrounds, specialties, and approaches. In this project, the digital ethnography observes public Instagram profiles predominantly focused on topics like makeup, skincare, haircare and hairstyling, manicures and nail design, and eyebrow design. Among these profiles, we invited women aged between 20 and 45 at diverse levels of follower counts — from 1,000 to 200,000 — to be research participants and interviewed them about their work to understand why and how they use Instagram.

Overall, we can distinguish two user paths for turning Instagram into a professional activity or a work tool in the beauty sector.

On one path are people who start out on Instagram as ‘bloggers’ or content ‘creators’ more broadly, posting on beauty topics as a hobby or a non-paid activity. Content creators who manage to collaborate with brands by receiving ‘gifts’ and posting about them take part in ‘influencer marketing’, though only a smaller pool gets paid advertising and public relations jobs. By cultivating their interest in a beauty area and becoming associated with it among

their followers, some content creators expand to the physical business world, offering in-person services, reselling products, or opening their own beauty studios.

On the other path are beauty service professionals, like makeup artists, hair stylists, manicurists, eyebrow designers, and aestheticians, who started using Instagram to make themselves findable and presentable to potential clients. As a research participant put it, clients check her out on Instagram before booking a service, even if they were referred to her directly by an acquaintance. Participants perceive Instagram as being a showcase for their work and an ever more ‘necessary’ tool for attracting and maintaining a relationship with customers. Furthermore, beauty service professionals use Instagram to connect with their peers, positioning themselves as experts who teach and mentor people looking to begin in the field, or who want to upgrade their beautifying techniques and entrepreneurial skills. Brands partner with such experts to boost product credibility and distribution.

Evidently, the distinction between these two user paths is more blurry than clear as more people try out Instagram as a work platform and experiment with different forms of professional use. Also, the more users on these two paths post to maintain a constant presence on Instagram, the less distinguishable the paths become. They partake in the same trends, showing similar aspects of their personal lives not directly related to beauty themes or their work (family gatherings, religious practices, holidays, meals, exercise routine, outfits) or creating content on digital marketing techniques and entrepreneurship.

## Instagram as a work platform in the beauty sector:

- **Showcase:** Displaying images of themselves, models, or clients with their makeup, nails, or hair done; of them on the job; before and after montages; their work supplies and studios (if they have one).
- **Contact:** Promoting their in-person services with calls like ‘book your appointment today’ and taking bookings via direct message or linking to a WhatsApp account, a scheduler, or a website. Interacting with followers/clients in comments and ‘stories’.
- **Collaborations:** Promoting third-party products, services, and businesses for content, paid and unpaid advertising collaborations, or as brand ambassadors.
- **Sales**
  - Selling their info products, such as online courses and mentorships – live streaming, posting promotional content, linking to distribution platforms like Kiwify or Hotmart.
  - Re-selling products (as shop owners, informally, or as sales representatives in a multi-level marketing strategy).

Influencers like Bruna Tavares, Bianca Andrade (a.k.a. Boca Rosa), and Evelyn Regly embody the model trajectory from creating content for their personal blogs and social media in the 2010s, before the growth of Instagram, to partnering with traditional cosmetic companies and launching products with

them to becoming business owners and leaders. Some had experience providing beauty services while beginning to create their social media presence. Most of them started creating content online when still in high school or college and deciding what professional path to take next.

Anna, 21 years old, finished school amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Her mother had insisted she would ‘break the cycle’ in her family and become the first to have a college education. Despite her mother’s expectations and her father’s financial support to pay tuition, Anna dropped out of an undergraduate course in marketing, which she did not perceive as helpful for social media strategies, preferring instead to focus on working as an assistant in the team of a makeup artist. However, she

had to quit her work and social media during a rough emotional period.

Our project encountered Anna just as she was starting over, launching an online makeup course on her Instagram profile with 1K followers and getting makeup jobs with the support of her previous team. She had shared the costs of accessing the online course of a life coach with a friend and mentioned that as a helpful step for changing her mindset.

Anna launched her online makeup course for a low fee and on her own to try and learn social media sales techniques, but less than a handful of people completed the purchase. So she decided to carry on with her first students and use that as an experience to prepare for a second launch, as she believes in her purpose to uplift women through makeup.

Most beauty professions are unregulated and do not require a higher education degree or a license. Hence, these are not traditionally considered upper- or middle-class occupations, and they have likely been underestimated for long in the public sphere due to their association with the feminine world. However, the

considerable visibility beauty topics enjoy on social media has increased appreciation of the work of makeup artists, hair stylists, eyebrow designers, and manicurists (or ‘nail designers’), making these occupations appear to be more interesting career choices, both in terms of money-making prospects and recognition.

Tatiana loved doing manicures and learned the craft at a young age. However, she tried other professional paths after finishing school, like working on a factory floor and in a local shop, looking for the best option in terms of earnings. Feeling a bit lost, she listened to her mother’s advice and decided to give it another try as a manicurist.

Tatiana started taking appointments in her grandmother’s backyard and at clients’ homes until she managed to set up her own space. Today, at age 30, she has over 120K followers on Instagram and another three manicurists work in her salon, which also has a classroom for the professional technique courses she offers.

Two simultaneous things were crucial for her business to grow. First, she became an expert in nail extensions—a more expensive and high-maintenance manicure service—and an ambassador of a cosmetics brand in that niche. Second, her posts on tricks of the trade gained traction on Instagram, drawing the attention of peers and aspiring manicurists, who started recognising her as a reference in their professional field. For instance, Nina was an Instagram follower, fan, and student, attending every event Tatiana announced on Instagram, until she started working at the salon. Tatiana’s sister is in charge of her social media.

For participants in their late thirties and early forties who primarily work as service providers, not content creators, constantly feeding Instagram does not come naturally. They understand they need to do so to ‘stir up’ business and keep themselves in the loop, so to speak. But they feel that activity adds to the workload in their routine. Having an Instagram profile is not enough. They need to keep it organised, visually pleasant, constantly updated, and interactive.

The perception that they must stir things up with Instagram has to do with a central challenge for beauty professionals, which is to attract clients and keep their schedules full and balanced, that is, without drastic oscillations between periods of overwork and periods of little work.

Like self-employed workers and entrepreneurs in other sectors, beauty professionals feel there is a lot of competition between them for acquiring and maintaining clients without lowering prices. Instagram tends to fuel anxiety and an environment of rivalry, as they assess what their peers share about themselves and their work and compare follower counts and rate of growth.

For beauty content creators, competition for paid collaborations is also hard. The more users on Instagram in Brazil, the more follower counts tend to increase overall, but especially for the most popular profiles at the top of the pyramid, devaluing the metrics of influencers at micro or medium levels and, therefore, their fees. Also, more people on Instagram means more competitors trying to work as content creators and accepting unpaid or less favourable conditions for collaborations, fur-

ther diluting the bargaining power of those in the market for longer.

Still, a common theme in the research is that working in beauty can be transformative and rewarding, financially and spiritually, if one has consistency and organisation and knows how to position or ‘sell’ oneself.



## *Cleaning*

*By Wagner Alves-Silva*

Social media, particularly Instagram, has redefined the cleaning market in Brazil, creating a new way to frame the career: the personal cleaner. This new field is predominantly comprised of women aged 30 to 55 who were previously informal workers as domestic helpers, and requires constant engagement on social media, transforming the worker into a digital influencer, alongside the need to acquire numerous certifications and attend cleaning-related events. Former domestic helpers transition into personal cleaners by participating in courses that not only teach new cleaning techniques but also skills in digital marketing and business positioning.

The activities of a personal cleaner are similar to those of a traditional cleaner, with little difference in the tasks performed. However, personal cleaners possess specialised techniques and approaches to carry out these tasks in a more ergonomic manner. This opens up a new world to the professional, involving brands, equipment, and products, and the promise of controlling their time. A well-prepared professional must have access to the best equipment on the market, which is seen as an investment.

Additionally, while traditional cleaners typically use the products and equipment provided by their clients, personal cleaners prepare a personalized kit each night with the necessary equipment for each cleaning session. Packing this kit is essential and often occupies a special place in their Instagram stories, as it demonstrates the professional's extra care for the specific needs of each home.

The pandemic was crucial for the emergence of this professional field. Many domestic workers had to lower their daily rates. At the same time, a plethora of videos and courses on cleaning and ergonomics emerged on social media, breaking away from the colonial and servile past of the profession and presenting domestic work as a viable career choice, like any other. Traditionally, domestic work in Brazil has been associated with subservience and is racially marked. The training courses for personal cleaners operate under the maxim 'I am not Isaura [a famous slave character in national soap operas], I am a diamond', and emphasize the importance of having an online presence as a strategy for social mobility.

The researcher's interlocutors report that 'Instagram is the future' and often state that the platform 'changed my life'. Any professional who does not engage with this platform is seen as missing out on great opportunities. To succeed in their ventures, these professional cleaners, registered as micro-entrepreneurs, hire media trainers and professionals responsible for managing their image on social media, believing that this is a crucial distinction between good and bad professionals. The concern for the public image of their businesses is seen as a defining value of a good professional.

Traditional domestic helpers who are unable to use Instagram and do not engage in the world of courses, often due to financial constraints, are perceived by personal cleaners as deserving the precarious situations they live in because they 'do little for themselves'. For these new professionals, the inability to navigate social media is not considered a valid excuse, as there are specialists who can assist with this. Success or failure is understood as the result of personal choices regarding engagement on social media.

Beyond functioning as a portfolio of cleanings, techniques, and courses, Instagram serves as a map of important social connections, and professionals often compete or compare themselves based on how their feeds are organised. It is common to hear accounts of personal cleaners who enrol in a course to obtain a certificate and a photo with a particular mentor, which holds symbolic weight in the organisation of their profiles. Additionally, they test products, recommend companies and brands, and seek sponsorship through their stories, creating a new world of competition regarding the best products. Stories are also central to comparing techniques, and when a professional wants to differentiate herself from others, she often suggests that you follow the stories of her competitors to see how their techniques are inferior to hers.

Despite believing in Instagram as a vehicle for social mobility and reinforcing success narratives<sup>25</sup>, these stories often do not translate into reality. Although they earn more, many professionals face increased expenses maintaining their businesses, as they need to supply the products and equipment required for cleaning jobs. Each Instagram account is seen

as a company, sometimes representing more than one professional. With the boost from paid-traffic, these professionals reach an audience they cannot serve due to scheduling conflicts. In such cases, they hire other professionals to work for their business, charging a 20% referral fee.

Claudia participated in personal cleaner training courses. Born in Maranhão, she moved to Rio de Janeiro 14 years ago to work as a domestic worker for a family. Currently, she works as both an elderly caregiver and a personal cleaner.

She does not have her own Instagram account, as she describes herself as shy. However, she collaborates on her friend's account, sharing the daily earnings equally. Recently, she has started to appear more frequently in the stories of the Instagram account where she works.

Claudia believes that transforming a worker into an influencer is essential, as she sees Instagram as the future. She has recently begun considering creating her own account to overcome her shyness and has been discussing this with a professional from the suburbs of Rio who manages her friend's Instagram.

However, she is cautious. Although she believes in Instagram as a tool for social mobility, she acknowledges the challenges of attracting and retaining clients and says she cannot afford to exchange a steady salary for the promise of improvement at this point in her life. Publicly, Claudia advocates for entrepreneurship and the use of social media to attract clients, but privately she admits that bills do not wait and that she is waiting for the right moment to become an influencer: it will happen, she says, but she doesn't know when.

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<sup>25</sup> The most common success narrative in this sphere revolves around how, through courses, professionals managed to double or even triple their earnings. Sometimes success is linked to material possessions, like buying a car or a motorcycle. More often, however, it is associated with better time management, allowing professionals to dedicate more time to their families.

At the top of this ecosystem are the influencers who sell training courses. Following them are the students who enrol in these courses to transform their lives. They quickly realise that merely having a presence on social media and showcasing their cleaning work on Instagram is not sufficient to achieve social mobility. Consequently, Instagram has become a platform for aggregating gig opportunities. These students, now transformed into personal cleaners, often take on the role of mentors, teaching other domestic helpers who are unfamiliar with this world. Approximately 70% of interlocutors who serve as mentors have fewer than 1,500 followers on Instagram. These students help to establish the newly branded personal cleaner as a professional, and they also play a role in promoting the resale of products recommended by the mentors. Students are required to purchase products from the mentors and resell them. A similar arrangement exists with client referrals; mentors refer some of their students to clients on the condition that a certain percentage (usually 20%) is paid to the mentor as compensation. The students form the foundation of this ecosystem, which

excludes traditional domestic helpers, viewing them as lacking commitment to self-improvement.

The research interlocutors do not see themselves as workers; they are primarily entrepreneurs who have broken away from servitude dynamics and have inaugurated a new professional field where the cleaner becomes an influencer and a coach for aspirants. What interlocutors do not publicise is that little changes in terms of social vulnerability and precariousness. Although they earn nearly double what they used to, they must pay a professional to manage their social media, engage in courses, invest in products, and personalise cleaning kits, which consume a significant portion of their earnings. They continue to live on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro but do not feel they belong there, as they believe that as personal cleaners and ‘cleanfluencers’ their lives will change even more, and the dream of personal time management will finally be achieved. As one interlocutor said, ‘The influencer life will change my destiny; I prophesy this victory’.

## Instagram as a work platform for personal cleaners:

- **Top tier:** Influencers who sell training courses in cleaning and related fields.
- **Students:** Enroll in these courses to enhance their skills and transform their lives. They learn that a mere presence on Instagram and showcasing cleaning work is insufficient for social mobility.
- **Gig aggregation:** Instagram becomes a platform for finding gig opportunities, as students transition into being personal cleaners and using the platform to aggregate job offers.
- **Mentorship:** Former students, now Personal Cleaners, take on mentorship roles. They teach other domestic helpers and help establish the new professional identity of Personal Cleaners. About 70% of mentors have fewer than 1,500 followers.



- **Product resale:** Mentors promote and sell cleaning products. Students are required to purchase these products and resell them, often earning from referral fees or direct sales.
- **Client referrals:** Mentors refer students to clients, earning a referral fee (usually around 20%) from the service price. This system helps to expand the network of Personal Cleaners.
- **Entrepreneurial shift:** The interlocutors view themselves as entrepreneurs rather than workers. They break away from traditional servitude dynamics and establish themselves as influencers and coaches.
- **Financial and social impact:** Despite higher earnings, Personal Cleaners invest significantly in social media management, courses, products, and personalized cleaning kits, which consume a large portion of their income. They continue to face social vulnerability and live on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro but maintain hope that their influencer status will lead to further improvement in their lives.



## Retail

*By Rosana Pinheiro-Machado*

Business owners who run informal stands on the streets or formal small shops are increasingly establishing an online presence on Instagram in post-pandemic times. In this context, social media is mainly used to advertise merchandise and promote businesses in specific geographic areas or even nationally.

Over the course of 25 years, a research project run by the author followed the trajectory of 420 informal street vendors who were removed from public spaces and formalised in a low-income shopping centre in the city of Porto Alegre. During the pandemic, these sellers felt compelled to migrate their little shops to social media, first on Facebook Marketplace and, more recently, mainly on Instagram.

The researcher's interlocutors perceive that being on social media is now inevitable. Unlike other sectors where the highest aspiration is to become a mentor of mentors, in the retail sector the main goal is simply to increase sales. Compared to other career sectors analysed in this report, the specificity in this field is that entrepreneurs who trade physical products tend to be more sceptical about the digital world as a main source of income. Their long-standing engagement in day-to-day sales teaches them that making money is a difficult task.

The results of the online experience have been diverse, varying mainly according to generation.

In the shopping centre, a few traders made the pandemic an opportunity to adapt, transform, and expand their businesses. The age of these entrepreneurs ranges from 25 to 35 years old. This shift allowed them to grow quickly and exponentially, becoming suppliers of merchandise for other small resellers and trad-

ing nationwide. Their shops now have tens of thousands of followers, post fun stories, and design professional visual materials. A few traders evolved to a complete process of formalization of their shops, providing full-time jobs for employees and professionalizing their marketing and social media. Other traders formalised their own businesses but foster an informal drop-shipping chain.

At the other extreme, we find a large number of people over 60. On the streets, older traders were respected for their knowledge acquired through experience. Now, they feel left behind with the feeling that the post-pandemic world is expelling them from the business. Additionally, with low literacy backgrounds, many demonstrate difficulties operating basic smartphone tools, and typing can be an embarrassing task.

Between these two opposite experiences, there is a large variety of traders who benefit from promoting their businesses online but also find it challenging. They perceive that displaying their products online can reach more consumers in the local area and beyond. Some sales can come exclusively from the digital world. However, the feeling of inevitability can be overwhelming, and the trade-off may not be positive. They need to spend a large part of their time posting — always showing a positive and fun mood. Clients approach them through the inbox function, asking questions about dimensions and prices for hours — most of the time without making a purchase. This process is much longer than a face-to-face sale. They also need to significantly invest in Instagram literacy. To do so, some opt to pay for digital marketing courses or hire someone to manage their social media presence.

The nature of competition has changed completely. Street competition was based on displaying the best products at the lowest prices. Now, they need to compete for the number of followers, feeling compelled to constantly follow fun trends to create stories and reels. Younger traders tend to find this activity more natural and enjoyable — acting as influencers — while middle-aged adults tend to find it exhausting.

## 9. **policy recommendations**

### **Increase transparency and regulatory oversight of labour conducted in social media platforms**

Given the extensive and unregulated use of platforms like Instagram for economic activities, it is essential to establish clear regulatory frameworks that ensure transparency in the digital labour market. This would require social media companies, particularly Meta, to publicly disclose data on business accounts per country. Such transparency would allow for more accurate tracking of the scope of digital entrepreneurship, particularly among vulnerable groups like low-income individuals, and enable policymakers to better assess the social, economic, and political impacts of this shift to digital entrepreneurship. In addition, regulations should mandate ethical standards for influencer marketing and digital entrepreneurship, addressing unethical practices like pyramid schemes and the promotion of misleading information. Overall, regulatory intervention would create a fairer digital economy, protecting workers from exploitation while holding big techs accountable for the impacts of their platforms.

### **Develop awareness that the digital marketing field on Instagram is dominated by influencers**

Policymakers, government and non-government regulatory agents, and social media corporations must be aware that self-employed workers, small entrepreneurs, and local businesses are using platforms like Instagram for digital marketing and sales and respond with adequate educational and regula-

tory measures. So-called influencers are not just working for national and multinational companies, they are advertising for themselves. They must learn — or be reminded — that tricking, shaming, guilt, and scaring people into consuming their products and services is unethical. Social media companies, as the designers and providers of the technological infrastructure, including algorithmic distribution, performance metrics, and paid boosts, must take responsibility for promoting ethical marketing practices on their platforms. For instance, they need to ensure that anyone using their platform for business understands and acknowledges when they are engaging in advertising and ensure that all forms of advertisement are clearly identifiable. They must also promote accessible, wide-reaching training for small entrepreneurs, focusing on collective and democratic values.

### **Develop robust employment policies and wide-reach entrepreneurial training targeting vulnerable sectors of Brazilian society**

To combat the rising economic precariousness and exploitation of vulnerable groups in the digital economy, it is crucial to implement robust employment policies alongside accessible entrepreneurial training programs. These policies should focus on providing social protection, fair labour conditions, and formal pathways for workers engaged in informal and digital sectors, particularly low-income individuals, women, and racial minorities. Government-backed entrepreneurial training programs should be widely available and tailored to the specific needs of these groups,

offering digital literacy, business management skills, and guidance on navigating platforms. By providing democratic and inclusive training, and ensuring social security coverage for digital entrepreneurs, the government can help equip vulnerable workers with the tools they need to thrive, reducing reliance on unregulated influencer-driven mentorship schemes and fostering a more equitable digital economy.

### **Redefine classifications of platform work to include social media**

The ILO's current classification of platform work — divided into crowdwork and location-based apps — excludes a large portion of digital labourers who use social media platforms like Instagram for entrepreneurial activities. To better reflect the realities of the contemporary digital economy, this binary classification should be expanded to include social media as a distinct form of platform work. Millions of people, particularly from marginalised groups, are engaging in informal entrepreneurial activities through social media without being recognised in official labour statistics. A broader definition would capture the true scale of digital labour, enabling the creation of comprehensive public policies aimed at securing decent work, social protection, and economic justice in the digital age. This adjustment would foster more inclusive debates and policies around the digital economy, recognising social media as a significant and growing site of labour.

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