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The Influence of Influencers

An ethnographic study of content creation and social dynamics through TikTok Psychedelic influencers

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Abstract

TikTok has seen a staggering growth and relevance in the social media space since its release in 2018, becoming a staple of social media in the short time it has been around. In the last ten years or so, an entire industry centered around content creators has developed for an ever-expanding audience, and these influencers and content creators can occupy a wide variety of genres for any kind of viewer. Among these different developing categories of influencers, I have found Psychedelic influencers, which have gained a foothold on TikTok creating content discussing the safe usage, and benefits, of taking psychedelics. This thesis tries to understand the positions of Psychedelic influencers, not only as psychedelic users operating in a space that doesn't seem to want them, but also as activist influencers, and content creators more generally, that are working in a new form of global communication. I explore how this activist content creation is started on social media and its larger relation to activism and discourse outside of the digital space. I argue that influencers and content creators build a certain type of "entertainer authority" in asserting themselves in the quadrilateral power dynamic that exists within this blending digital and economic space, cultivating and using credibility as a form of capital to better coax their followers into supporting them. This thesis draws on digital fieldwork on TikTok and interviews with psychedelic influencers, as well as developing new strategies for bringing anthropological methodologies to the social media space. Content creation is not only a space where activists can contribute to important ideological dialogues, but it may also be a space anthropologists can contribute to the public understanding of the discipline.

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Introduction

Influencing, and content creation more generally, has continued to become an important part of how people interact in digital spaces. Social platforms have seen a continued growth in popularity, as evident by not only the rising number of users on these platforms, but also the cultural significance of platforms like Facebook in the last decade, and the rapid rise of TikTok's popularity. Free entertainment content through social media is becoming a larger part of people's total media consumption, and apps like TikTok with their endless scrolling capabilities are continuing to grow and providing new ways of consuming content. Content creation is having impacts on what people watch, enjoy, purchase, and what they themselves create.

The social media platform TikTok has begun to have a significant economic and political importance on the world. What this thesis wants to explore is how to further expand on this impact while also involving the specific sociocultural impacts that can be found on a user-to-user basis. Rather than looking at the overall results and manifestations of TikTok's impact, by closing this paper's view onto specific subsets of this global population, this project may be able to better understand the ways this platform and its creators are affecting everyday individuals. It is with this logic that the subcultural group of "psychedelic influencers" was chosen to be the connection between these areas of influence. I will discuss how this subgroup can help us look at the political implications of activism regarding illegal activity (and general political discourse in online spaces), the economic relationships of influencing, the impact of community creation for like-minded people to interact in, and the dynamics of credibility and authority within these fairly new digital spaces.

TikTok is a social media platform and phone application (app) from Chinese company ByteDance, originally released to the Chinese markets in 2016 as "Douyin". After finding some success in the mainland Chinese market, ByteDance released TikTok to the international market, but it only really began gaining international traction after buying another China-based social media application Musical.ly in November of 2017. Musical.ly had seen international success with their platform, unlike Douyin (which is still a separate app from TikTok, only available in China). After acquiring Musical.ly for $1 billion U.S. dollars, ByteDance implemented several

app features from Musical.ly onto their app and used Musical.ly's presence among younger demographics in the U.S. and other international markets to further expand their international outreach. In August of 2018, the two apps merged into the worldwide version of TikTok which is still around today (Yang and Goh, 2020). In July of 2021, it was reported that TikTok was the first non-game phone application not owned by Meta Platforms, Inc. to hit three billion downloads, the others being Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Messenger (Sensor Tower, 2021). In September of 2021, TikTok announced they had surpassed 1 billion monthly users on the platform (TikTok, 2021), and have consistently been among the most downloaded apps on mobile devices since 2018. Where many of the Meta Platforms, Inc. apps have surpassed these same milestones, they did so by cultivating a user base over a decade or more (Instagram, for instance, was publicly released in the Fall of 2010), TikTok has cultivated that success in around half the time, getting 981 million downloads in 2020 alone (Sensor Tower, 2021).

TikTok has gained a massive user base exceptionally quickly but, like other social media sites before it, has been subject to much controversy. For a short time under the Trump Administration, the U.S. Government threatened that Americans and American companies will be unable to perform transactions with the companies owning TikTok and popular China-based messaging platform WeChat, unless they sold their operations in the US to a US-based company. This was later blocked by judges and no ban actually took place. More recently, after a border clash in June 2020 between Indian and Chinese soldiers at the Galwan Valley, in which 20 Indian Soldiers were killed, the Indian government temporarily banned TikTok and several other Chinese apps (as well as many Chinese products) and made that ban permanent going into 2021 (Yang and Goh, 2020).

But why TikTok? Why not focus on other social media sites, which was originally meant to be part of this project before focusing solely on TikTok. It has already been demonstrated that TikTok is becoming a big player in the social media space, by number of downloads and active users compared to competitors, and the short period it took to find success. But why is it *the* big player that was focused on here? This reasoning is the exact same as why a video on these types of platforms gets extremely popular, virality. It is best summarized by an interlocutor when asked for advice in starting a social media page to document the journey of this project, and the

logic extends to focusing the ethnography on TikTok. “Start on TikTok, it’s as simple as that. It’s in its viral stage, it’s still in its viral stage somehow. There's always a new thing at some point every five years or so. There's always a new app. So just take advantage of what's popping at that time. And that's TikTok right now.”

Undoubtedly, TikTok is having influence on the world, but it is impossible to tell if that influence will continue to stretch out over the years, or if its influence will slowly dwindle until it is shut down. However, similar to the interlocutor who urged me to use the platform while it was still in its “viral stage”, researching TikTok while it is still popular allows us to better understand how these new forms of communication are developing. This can not only be used for the specifics of TikTok itself, but extended into the general changes that are happening with its introduction into social media communication, ripple effects it might have on global communication, and how these platforms may continue to change and influence how humans communicate regardless of what the next platform happens to be.

TikTok: Background of the Field

TikTok is a short-form video social media platform, where creators can share videos that range from a few seconds to 10 minutes. Important starting point for terminology: the app is called TikTok (capitalized), but users will also refer to videos on the app as a "tiktok" or "tiktoks" (lower case), and users on the app, both content creators and viewers, are sometimes referred to as "tiktokers". These videos can be recorded directly from the app, or videos uploaded from someone's photo library can be edited and posted. Once created, videos are uploaded with captions that go on the bottom of the screen, where more context can be given for the video, or include "hashtags". Hashtags are common around the internet using the # symbol followed by words or phrases (no spaces, however) that try to mark something as being tied to a specific topic or context (e.g. #ThrowbackThursday), similar to the keywords section in the abstract of research articles. Hashtags can generally be searched through social media apps (TikTok included) to find a library of videos with those tags, usually organized by popularity.

Unique to TikTok is the addition of "sounds". Sounds can be anything from a sound bite, a song, audio from a TV show or movie added to play over a video posted on the platform. Creators can even make the audio of their video into a sound, so other users can use it in their own videos. The audio level of sounds can be adjusted, so sometimes sounds will play over the video, either with the original audio of the video or will play instead of the video's original audio. An example of this might be playing a hit song in the background of an unrelated video (Showing off a user's day, for example: https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTRQejXGp/), or make a remix or parody of another TikTok Creators video, using the same audio but recontextualized it to fit under new circumstances. This is very common on the platform. An example that involves remixing is when popular comedy creator @tonystatovci made a video which starts with the slogan for American pizza chain Papa Johns, "Better ingredients, better pizza" before continuing the slogan to say "better bitches, better money, my clothes better, my shoes better…" and going on to other boasts. This audio had over 40,000 videos made using it, just 2 weeks after it was made on August 23, 2022 (https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTRxsTf56/).

TikTok videos do not have to involve the creators or users themselves, although this is a lot of the content on TikTok. Videos can also be clips from sports, TV and movies (sometimes entire episodes or films over many videos), video games, or any other form of photo or video media. Creators are able to "livestream" their phone camera directly to the app, and can make money while doing it. Videos can be very "low budget", filming with a phone camera in a bedroom, or "high budget", with creators filming videos with a professional camera, uploading music videos, short films, etc. Users also do not have to be "normal" individuals. You can find TikTok accounts for musicians, actors/actresses, athletes, CEOs, politicians. Even corporations have a presence on TikTok. Some accounts have even risen to celebrity status as a result of TikTok and gained international attention. Sisters Charlie and Dixie D'amelio (the 2nd and 11th most followed accounts, respectively) both gained millions of followers on TikTok, have made Late Night TV appearances, record deals, and started a Hulu reality TV shows as a result of their viral fame on the platform. Recently, creator Addison Rae, the 4th most followed person on the platform, had a big enough public identity that large news organizations were writing headlines regarding her recent familial drama in August 2022.

TikTok also allows many ways for accounts to interact with videos on the platform. Viewers can interact with videos by liking them, commenting on them, sharing the video to TikTok friends through messages and links, or downloading the video for themselves. Users can even interact with videos by remixing them and creating their own content. As mentioned earlier, creators can allow for the "original audio" of their videos to be a standalone audio that other creators can use in their own content. These usually are used to parody the content, whether to make fun of the content itself, relate that sound to another similar situation of the new creator's imagination, or copy the original joke for their own content. The previously mentioned audio from @tonystatovci has been remixed a lot, where the original joke about the quality of pizza, with many remixes using the audio to boast about not being lactose intolerant (https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTRxsbCyt/), using the term "partner" rather than gendered terms like girlfriend or boyfriend (https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTRxsg218/), or why Batman is better than Superman (https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTRxsTRP7/).

Another way that users can interact with TikTok videos is through the interaction of a "Duet" or "Stitch" (or Duetting and stitching). This is where another user can "duet" someone else's video, where the original video and the new user's video play side by side simultaneously, or "stitch", where the original video plays for a set period of time and then it switches to the new user's newly recorded video. This allows for a wide variety of ways to create, remix, and react to videos on the platform. Stitching/dueting may allow for users to add an addition to a video, usually cutting off the original video and making a correction, drawing a parallel, or adding their own points which builds off the original video's premise. Other duets or stitches may just be a simple reaction to what was said or happened in the original tiktok, adding to this discussion, or just joining in on the action of the original video. Sometimes duets/stitches might just be someone joining in on a dance, or actually singing (duetting) with the original video. The ways people tend to use these functions are entirely based on the community's creativity. This function is incredibly important to the creation process of videos and is used very often on the app, both by psychedelic influencers and other content creators. (Example of Duetting: https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTRxsG6gn/ and stitching: https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTRxso7Rm/)

Content creators can also interact with their following by doing a video reply. This is where a creator can reply to a comment on a video by creating a new video. Here, the comment will appear in the corner of the video, and the creator can create a reply that might use the comment as a lead-in to their new video, talk about the commenter and what they said, or elaborate on a point the commenter made. Video replies will appear as a reply to the comment itself on the initial video's comment section, with a small screenshot of the reply that people can click on and go straight to watching the reply video. You can even do a video reply to a comment on another user's video, and the video reply will show up in the comment especially if it is from a large account. Comment replies are really big in the "activist influencing" that psychedelic influencers participate in, a concept I will discuss in chapter 3. Comment replies allow activist influencers the chance to interact with followers, answer their questions regarding psychedelics and safety, and create a dialogue with followers with both those who agree or disagree with their content and ideology. (Example: https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTRxs7vWA/)

Those are the ways that TikTok users can create videos, remix them, and interact with them. Another unique way that TikTok allows users to interact with content is how it is "delivered" to users. TikTok's interface breaks down into a few different areas. Some of these are very similar to other social media applications. On the bottom of the touch screen you have five options to select from. Profile, which shows the logged-in user's account, stats about their account (Followers, Following, Likes); Inbox, which shows activity pertaining to the account (Someone new following or liking their video, direct messages from other users); Create, where you go to create and upload your own tiktoks; And "Now". This section lets you watch TikTok's from people who you either have in your phone contact list who have TikTok, Facebook friends who have TikTok, or accounts that both you follow and the other account follows you back, making you "friends, as well as TikTok's new "Now" function, sharing a daily photo to followers from a randomly selected time of day.

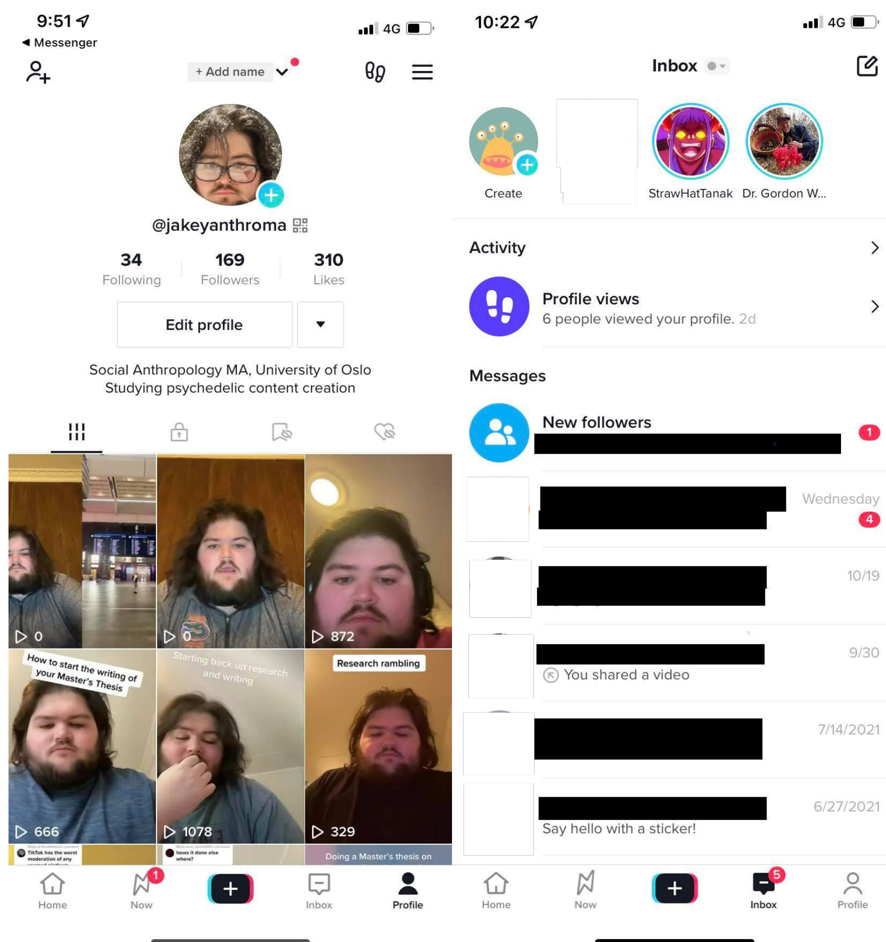

Figure #1 & #2: The TikTok Profile page and Inbox page, respectively.

The For You Page and The Algorithm

The final and most important section to the TikTok's interface is Home. Home is broken into two sections. The first is "Following" where any new TikTok's posted by accounts that a user is following will show up. The other page, and the default page when you open the TikTok app, is the For You Page, FYP for short. This page uses a content recommendation algorithm like many other social media sites or video-sharing sites have. The algorithm tries to feed content to users that suits their preferences and likes, and what makes TikTok unique is the focus on these recommendations. Other social media sites, like TikTok's biggest competitor Instagram, is not centered around this algorithm. Instagram may use it to give targeted ads, and it has sections of its app to give a similar experience, with Instagram Reels, but this is not a main focus of the app. Instagram's starting interface still has a focus on the app's original purpose when it was launched in 2010, showing pictures posted by people that a user is following.

Figure #3: The TikTok For You Page, the first thing that appears when opening the app, scrolling with your finger upward to go to the next video in an endless scroll.

TikTok makes the FYP the first thing you see, and is how most users interact with the platform. The algorithm will also feed you popular new content from users you follow, so many times you get the most popular videos from the accounts you care about without having to enter the “following” section of Home. The FYP page has an “endless scroll” feature, meaning that as you swipe up to see the next video in your feed, the app will be continually loading the videos to come. This algorithm is designed specifically to be “addictive” (what many in the community call it, although I doubt TikTok would support such phrasing), and keep users engaged so they use the app for extended periods of time. Making sure it feeds content that a user will want to engage with is the algorithm’s main goal. With the popularity of the site and the amount of posts that are generated each day, this scroll is basically limitless. TikTok, and most social media content sharing platforms, are inherently an “attention-seeking device” as Horst and Miller (2012, pg. 27) coined, trying to draw users to engage with sites more and more, as that is what generates their revenue.

One effect of this addictive, infinite scroll is TikTok has also implemented posts on the platforms to keep scrolling in check. If you have been on the app for an extended period of time, or it is extremely late into the night and you are continuing to scroll, TikTok has made specific videos that play, telling users to go grab a drink and snack, go outside, or go to bed, and then they can come back to the app after that. This does not lock them out of the app, is it merely a suggestion. TikTok’s account settings do include a “Digital Wellbeing” section, where users can put limits on their daily screen time (can just be bypassed by putting a code that the user decides), get reminders to take breaks after set increments of screen time, or get updates on their weekly screen time. Parental controls can also be added by linking a “child” account to a parental account that can make these same actions and more regarding the accounts privacy. Despite creating the circumstances that can create such an addicting interaction, TikTok leaves the power to pick up or put down the app in the hands of the users, rather than trying to mend the aspects of the platform they recognize as addicting. It is a paradoxical relationship that has been covered similarly by Jablonsky (2019), trying to understand meditation mobile applications that try to operate on technology that is meant to demand engagement and dependence in their owners.

The algorithm is a somewhat abstract part of TikTok. At its core, it is the most important part of the entire platform. It is the code and programming that makes the app work the way it does, and creates the conditions for an endless scrolling experience that users find so enjoyable. It is a similar code that determines what videos are recommended to a user on video sharing sites like YouTube, how ads that target a user's specific preferences are established, and how demographic information can be collected by companies without asking users to tell it explicitly. Anecdotally, many people have talked about how the algorithm on TikTok seems especially sophisticated compared to other platforms. A platform's algorithm is something that is coveted by their company. It is the very infrastructure their platform relies on, and is usually kept secret from the public, both so user's do not understand an app's inner workings as well as their competitors. This makes the algorithm difficult to discuss and analyze in-depth with any true evidence behind it, but some basics can be established.

On TikTok, the algorithm does a few jobs. Most apparent is how the videos delivered to the user are generated, and sending ads that interest each specific user. These are established by how a user starts to use TikTok. When a TikTok account is first created, the algorithm gives mostly very popular, usually mainstream celebrities/influencers to feed content to a user. Mixed in with these videos will be videos that are currently going viral across the platform within any kind of "genre", or type of content (Literature, Movies, Sports, Psychedelics, etc). It could be a really funny comedy sketch someone did, or a video talking about political states of a country/place, or dancing to a viral song. As a user is experiencing these mainstream videos, TikTok is looking at what the user is actually paying attention to and interacting with. Obvious ways of measuring this would be if they liked the video, commented on it, or shared it to a messaging service to show their friends. There are aso lesser known ways of tracking viewer's interest, an example like "viewer retention". Viewer Retention refers to the tracking of how users interacted with videos while watching them. Some stats in this category might be if viewers watch the video all the way through, when did users start to scroll past or click off the video, were there parts of the video that users tended to skip past. These stats not only tell you if users are liking the content they are seeing, but also if they like that specific content style or content creator. If a user is tagged as liking superheroes, but their retention on videos having to do with DC Comic media/characters is low, the algorithm could account for this, putting less videos

flagged as being associated with DC Comics on a user's FYP. Similarly, if the user is flagged as enjoying cooking videos, but seems to avoid a very popular creator's videos, the algorithm may stop sending those videos to a user's FYP.

These traits are somewhat hypothetical. TikTok has never released their algorithm to the public domain so how exactly it works is difficult to pin down. It is important to note the algorithm not only focuses on viewer retention for what videos a user wants to see, but also focuses on retention to help keep users on the app and consuming content. Inherently the programming of these algorithms is meant to "trap" user's attention onto the platform (Seaver, 2019). It can be said for certain that the algorithm does affect someone's FYP, not only in the actual app itself, but also in the ways people discuss and talk about their content and how they use the app. The algorithm is the main force that will drive a video to virality. One interlocutor discussed how "influence is highly dependent on the TikTok algorithm in that way, if only 6000 people see a video… then that's as far as the power and influence goes."

The programming affecting an user's personal algorithm can be seen easily by comparing across accounts. For this project, I created a new TikTok account, @JakeyAnthroMA (https://www.tiktok.com/@jakeyanthroma?_t=8XH4BoXLrh4&_r=1) which was used as a way to put advice and ideas from interlocutors into practice. This account will be talked about more in-depth later, but the important thing to note now is this account only ever followed accounts or liked videos having to do with spirituality and psychedelics. It was a very deliberate attempt to see how very specific engagement could alter the way TikTok would send out videos on the FYP. What I found is this made the FYP on the JakeyAnthoMA account very focused on videos tagged with psychedelics, philosophy, spirituality and addiction. Compared to my private TikTok account, the videos that come on the FYP are vastly different, mostly dominated by my personal interests, comedy, and series I am personally invested in. Anecdotally, many times I have mentioned creators I like to friends and asked if they have ever seen them on the app before, many times thinking that this creator is quite large and my friend must have seen them before. Often, it is a complete toss-up if they have ever heard or seen them before. The landscape of TikTok can lead to very different algorithms for people, even if they have similar interests and do see a lot of the same videos already. This is the case with me and my best friend, Ryan. Quite

often we will send videos we like to each other only for the other one to say "Oh yeah I already saw that," but then some creators one of us will never have heard of.

The videos that the algorithm seems to put on a user's FYP based on their interest are not all the videos that show up on the FYP, however. Many videos are, but some videos on the FYP are videos currently going viral, big name creators, and area specific tiktoks (tied to phone numbers). This second grouping does not seem to follow the usual rules of the algorithm, and I would often see the same viral videos on either account if I used them both in the same 2 to 3 day period. Other times, you will get videos on the FYP from very small creators that have had almost no engagement (usually less than 1,000 views and only 0-20 likes). It is a phenomenon that appears across all accounts and everyone talked to for this project, and its reason is still unknown.

The algorithm is also a concept that has entered the lexicon of users on social media, anecdotally appearing to have taken a hold and be more heavily associated with TikTok. The hashtag #tiktokalgorithm has 424 million views on the platform as of writing, and you can find many videos of people discussing how the algorithm works, how to go viral, or grow your followership on the platform, while not sourcing how they know it besides "I have gone viral I get it". You can also find videos discussing how weird people find the algorithm sometimes, how they might get a huge number of views on a video (50,000 to 100,000 or more) and the next one gets 2000. People will also refer to the different areas of TikTok as (blank)tok or (blank) TikTok, meaning the grouping of videos having to do with a specific subset of culture or a specific person/place/thing.

These can be associated with nearly anything. One creator, @guacamolephil, does videos on the sitcom How I Met Your Mother and starts his videos off by saying "You've reached How I Met Your Mother TikTok," (https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTRxssT2o/). Other sections might be associated with a particular interest, like Dungeons and Dragons has DnD TikTok, videos having to do with the tabletop role-playing game. Some sides of TikTok might be even more abstract, having to do with overall identity or groups of people. Gay or queer TikTok is referenced many times both on the platform and by users discussing their FYP. The space for LGBTQ+ members

of TikTok, it is often used as a comparison to the opposing “Straight side of TikTok” as an explanation for why someone who is in the LGBTQ+ community might see some videos that hetero people do not, or vice versa. So not only is the algorithm something that happens in the background of users' experience and directly affects how people are able to interact with the app, but it is also something that is being embraced by the community on the platform, discussing it, and trying to effect and take advantage of it. This further points to the ways that online engagement can be facilitated by identity and the way people ascribe themselves to groups, with TikTok having both group identities of political and social importance (LGBTQ+) and those of general interest (DnD), further showing how engagement in attention-seeking mechanisms can be “irreducibly socially and materially mediated phenomenon” (Pedersen, Albris and Seaver; 2021, pg. 312).

The FYP acts as a combination of the way the algorithm gives user’s information and new content, and this content can come from accounts of any size as discussed above, growing and creating followers every day. Videos from accounts that a user is following will pop up at the same time, and more recently, popular series-based episodic content on the platform will feed you the latest “episode” in a series posted by a specific account without any input by the users (even if they do not follow the account making the series) because the algorithm can tell that a user is watching these videos consistently. Examples include, a soon-to-be father giving advice to his son every day until he is born in the form of TikTok videos (@seanlowery2020: https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTRxsvdBX/), a DnD inspired series where dice determine what an author is having for lunch (Roll for Sandwich by @adventuresinaardia: https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTRxscJu6/), or more spread out and less conventional series like two avid sports fans doing “mock” sports draft picks for non-sports related topics, examples like months draft or coziest things draft (@breadbasketofficial: https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTRxsEk8m/)

Moderation

Another important area to discuss when it comes to how TikTok works for users is understanding moderation. Moderation is the term assigned here to refer to the ways social media platforms observe actions on their platform and keep it in check through dialogue with

users, warnings, and banning users from the platform for misdeeds. Moderation plays a large role in understanding how users, and psychedelic influencers specifically, interact with a platform, and will be covered in chapters three and four.

Firstly, what are the repercussions of breaking the rules on TikTok? Across social media they can vary, but almost universally, breaking a platform's rules follows a few steps. First, a warning is sent out to individuals, telling them they did something wrong and some minor repercussions happen as a result (video taken down, no longer making money off an offending video), but no further action is taken. On TikTok, they will usually start by taking down a video and (usually) send the creator a message telling them what rules it broke to necessitate this. Then, if minor rules are broken more times, a temporary punishment may go into effect. On Tiktok, these are in the forms of temporary bans, where a user cannot comment on videos or create and post any content to the platform, but can still view content. A temporary ban can last for a variable amount of time, from a day to several days or weeks, and the penalty will usually increase as the number of offenses grow. Further breaking the rules may lead to serious actions. Platforms might move towards a permanent ban and an account deletion, where the entire account and all the videos are taken down, and all their followers lose access to the removed account. Additionally, if an account is banned, TikTok will not allow a creator to get the revenue that was made on that account, which is frustrating when you cannot withdraw TikTok earnings until they surpass $100 USD.

With any moderation actions, users do have the chance to appeal or go to support regarding a punishment and try to get it overturned on whatever grounds they plead. It is not uncommon for users to have punishments overturned. This will revert the profile to how it was before the punishment, but it is a case by case basis. If there is no hope of getting an account back after a permanent ban, the only real option for a creator will be to create a brand new account and begin their digital journey all over again. On TikTok, many choose to do so, possibly because of how easy it is to go viral and grow on TikTok especially once you “learn” how to find success and have become recognizable. Some creators may make preparations ahead of time for this possibility, creating and advertising alternate accounts before being banned. Several interlocutors for this project had “back-up accounts” that they told their followers about,

in case their main account got banned from the platform. There is this general acceptance, both from interlocutors and the TikTok community at large, that if you are banned you just create a new account and start over. Many will continue to make content on the platform if they have already amassed a following, but may not be able to see the same success. Creator Elijah Kelso (@notelijahkelso) had an account with 2 million followers which was banned in August of 2021, and eventually made a new account that at the time of writing has amassed 581k followers. Kelso claims that he was never given a reason for his ban (https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTRxsvSA3/).

TikTok AI moderation explained

There is an important nuisance to TikTok's moderation that should be discussed. With the sheer number of users, and the total number of videos uploaded every hour, human moderation for videos would be impossible to do. The amount of content is too much for a team to watch within reason. Because of this, in June of 2021, TikTok announced that they would begin using artificial intelligence (AI) automation to take down violating content, whereas before these AI were only used to "flag" (point out) content that might violate TikTok rules, but did not deliver punishments itself (https://newsroom.tiktok.com/en-us/advancing-our-approach-to-user-safety). Now, they are using a system most likely similar to the sophisticated algorithm that delivers videos to users on the FYP. The way this system works is not public, but based on the statements from TikTok, interviews and assumptions made by creators the generally accepted view of the system is that the AI first takes in visual stimuli of videos for dangerous acts and flags it. This does not always result in a harsh punishment if they are recreational or benign, sometimes TikTok will have a warning at the bottom of the screen stating "Sensitive content. some viewers might find this video disturbing," or "The actions in this video are performed by professionals or supervised by professionals. Do not attempt."

It is thought that, more important to visual stimulus, is the audio, writing, and voice over in videos that affect these things. TikTok has AI that can transcribe what is being said in a video, used for the "captions" featured in the video creation tab, and it is believed something similar is used to understand if a creator is saying anything TikTok does not want on their platform. It is important to note that the system is not very good unless someone is speaking very clearly. In the

video creator, you can also add text that goes on screen, either in the picture preview of the video or during the video, or use a “voiceover”, a digitally synthesized voice to say whatever you want in a video rather than using your own voice, which is used quite commonly on the app. Using written text is much easier to analyze than visual stimuli, so it is believed that these written systems are more commonly used by the apps AI moderation to analyze videos and deliver punishments to users.

The key to this automatic moderation is that, unlike a human reviewer trying to moderate content, it can be tricked fairly easily. Finding ways to subvert auto moderation is the main way that interlocutors for this project, and users across the TikTok digital space, are able to create content that TikTok might not want to be widely distributed. This subversion will be discussed later in chapter four.

Psychedelic Influencers, Methodology and Ethics

With the establishment of what TikTok is and how it works, the lens can now turn to the focus within this digital landscape. This chapter will try to break down many different important contextual information regarding this project's definitions, theoretical understanding, methodology, and ethical conundrums.

Firstly, with the size and variety on TikTok, you can take any sort of subculture or subgroup you can think of, and find a section of users dedicated to that digital space. So I will first be looking at why I chose to do psychedelic influencers, what the definition of influencer will be for this piece, and then break down what exactly I considered to be a psychedelic influencer. Then, I will break down some of the theoretical foundation for this thesis, specifically in the concepts of activism, authority, and credibility, breaking down some definitions for these concepts and the theories/anthropological understanding I use in conjunction with my analysis.

Additionally, this chapter is going to start to discuss the actual methodology for doing this research. Not only the logistics of interacting with the psychedelic influencers themselves, but also discussing the methodologies for digital research in anthropology. I want to understand how methodologies are understood in digital space, and also the shortcomings when it comes to doing so on social media. Finally, a starting discussion of the ethics this project engaged with; How it affects the ability to conduct research, both in this project and digital fieldwork generally, and how it affects the ability to write about this community. Also, questioning the specific challenges associated with doing fully digital social media research while incorporating the aspect of illegality, discussing safety for both interlocutors and researchers, and the ways that influencing can completely alter attempts at "proper" research ethics.

Legality, Online Research and Ethics

Why were psychedelic influencers chosen and why on TikTok? The answer to this is a mesh of previous research experience, timing, and chance. Having done previous psychedelic research involving legality and social change (Ference, 2020), continuing this understanding of

psychedelic usage and culture was something that was present from the beginning of this Master's project. Deciding on TikTok Psychedelic influencers is an ethnographic vignette of its own. With the Covid-19 pandemic starting just 6 months before the start of this program, a transition to an online approach seemed necessary, but inherently difficult. How do you approach an almost universally illegal activity with proper research ethics, in an online space? It led to many ethical issues in the early iterations of this project, originally planning to look at online groups to see how individual users navigate this area. It was not until a chance encounter that these dilemmas were solved and a new direction for the project was found.

TikTok began to really become a hit amongst social media platforms with the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. With not much else to do, many people began downloading the app. I was also swept up in the craze and began using it in May of 2020, before starting this Master's program. It was not until almost a year later, that while casually scroll on the FYP page I came across a semi-true skit video, using a popular audio from a TV series rather than the creator's own voice, where the creator was discussing with his shaman what it is like to take the South American hallucinogenic, ayahuasca. It was the first time I had seen psychedelic content online, an individual creating videos sharing experiences with a followership and actually getting traction online. That video currently has close to 125,000 views on TikTok. I eventually reached out to this creator about the project; I had already found my first interlocutor for this new direction.

As I found more videos and content creators in this field, it became apparent that this could be a viable direction for trying to understand how psychedelic users are using social media regarding their beliefs and practices. It was single individuals, creating a wealth of content, opinions, and their own online "community" in the exact niche I was searching for. They were a clear authority, the controller of all the content associated with their page. While I could not use comments from other users or their followers inherently, I could use their understanding of their own community to get a grasp on the wider community outside of content creators themselves. They were unique actors in a space of illegality and activism, and gave a much clearer (although not crystal) ethical picture compared to earlier attempts at this project. This discovery was completely by chance, just another example of the never-ending scrolling of the FYP correctly

predicting a video that a user wanted to see, but it set up the next 2 years of research and writing that was to come.

What is an Influencer?

Before breaking down the specifics of the "Psychedelic influencer" cultural group, what does the term "influencer" mean in the context of online content creation? Internet influencer or internet influencing is a topic that has not penetrated the anthropological literature, but has become an important subject of conversation in other fields like public relations, marketing, communications, and other fields focused on the economic impacts of influencers. Definitions of "influencer" can vary depending on the discipline the concept is being discussed in. Definitions can even come down to the criteria of a person or team of people trying to label social media users for their business or workplace. Several studies do not provide a fleshed-out definition for influencers, perhaps due to the fairly ubiquitous nature of influencers in their respective fields (Leban et al. 2020; Chatzigeorgiou, 2019; Chwialkowska, 2019). Many definitions include a specific component to the economic aspects of influencers, either with the stipulation that influencers are users with a large following where their work is done "for profit," (Lehto, 2022, pg. 204), or by accumulating followers over time as "ordinary, everyday social media users," who then monetize their following (Morais et al. 2019, pg. 289). Outside of the research world, definitions for influencers might not have much of a focus. When asked, one LA-based PR firm employee talked about how his company does not have a definition for an influencer. Rather, their interest was in defining who is a good influencer for their client's campaigns. It was broken down to three factors: if they conform to the values of a brand, share the same goals of the brand, and are convenient to use for the project.

A few issues come up with these definitions. One attribution that comes up in Lehto's definition is that an influencer needs a "large engaged following" (Lehto, 2022, pg. 204). Having a large and engaged following is important for success as an influencer, and could be attributed to the level of authority an influencer might have (coming up in chapter 4), but for a definition it complicates things. How can anthropology define the qualitative attribution of an "engaged following"? What metrics could be used, outside of view analytics that only the creator or the social media platform itself will have direct access to? On TikTok it could be tracked by how

many videos posted by a creator a follower actually watches on average. However, shift to something like the popular live streaming platform Twitch.tv, and that metric is no longer comparable. Next, how do you define a large following? What number does a creator have to surpass to be considered an influencer? And how does the size of a creator dictate when their content goes from random internet users just posting whatever they want, to established influencers doing a legitimate form of work? How does one weigh the relative importance of numbers versus engagement?

In Morais et al's definition, an influencer is an ordinary user who eventually grows and monetizes their content and following (Morais et al. 2019). But what about users who specifically go into platforms and content creation with the intention of trying to create a following? Platforms like Youtube or TikTok do still have user's just posting videos for fun, keeping a log of their lives for personal reasons, but a platform like Twitch is entirely built around creating content for followers. With the growth and impact of influencers and content creators, the "dream job" of becoming a content creator is becoming more commonplace for those who grew up with these role models. Having the immediate goal of influencing or monetization lacks the spontaneousness and the shift in intention that Morais et al's definition sets up.

In another vein, several definitions have the economics or the monetary aspects of influencing play a central role in the creation of an influencer's identity. In many fields, where economics or monetary success of this industry is central to their research, this is a valid understanding of the group. However, this definition excludes any number of social media influencers who may not be using their following or their viral success in order to make money. Additionally, being able to turn social media presence into an income requires large followings, well-planned personal branding, and support from outside persons or corporations. Most social media users do not have access to these pathways of monetization, but many might still create content intended for a followership or the general masses. Many users might fail in their pursuits to gain monetization. These definitions do not account for users who are not participating in monetization, whether from lack of access, desire, or success.

Economic pursuits of influencing are undoubtedly an important aspect of the influencer space, and it was even seen within the psychedelic influencer space (although quite small and developing during this research project). Some of the interlocutors for this research have no form of monetization on their content, while others have begun using different methods to gain capital as a result of their internet success. Part of this is due to the difficulty of gaining access to common influencer economic engagement because psychedelic influencers are working in a sector focused on illegal practices, making it difficult to be supported by the platforms or corporations in any official capacity. Many social platforms have ways for users to generate revenue just from making videos, called the Creator Fund on TikTok, but there are requirements that might not be available to certain users based on following, consistency in posting successfully (one hit virality does not make for easy monetization), or region.

Additionally, many interlocutors and content creators on the app have talked about how little money is actually made directly from TikTok's Creator fund compared to other platforms. Creators get around $1,000 USD monthly for every 1 million followers, which is significantly larger than any of the interlocutors for this project (this is a rough estimate, of course). Influencing cannot be solely reliant on the act of generating revenue because many users do not have that opportunity, but they may still have reach into a community of followers. How can a new anthropological definition of influencers shift away from a focus on money making when it is not always present?

One solution may be to consider *intent*. Rather than focusing on how influencers and content creators use their content, such as for monetization (although this is an important point as well), the label could be attributed to why they make their content. A social media user should be an influencer when their intent in creating content is to be enjoyed by, and in turn "influence", an outside followership. Many times, the ways that social media platforms are used is either to focus on following content creators and enjoying their content (YouTube, Twitch), or to connect to people in a user's real-life social circle (Snapchat, Facebook and Instagram in their original creation). Many of these "real-life social circle" apps are also making following influencers a bigger part of their platforms, but the social circle functionality is still there and *usually* a central focus. What influencers are doing is making content for people outside of their social circle, and

may not want it shared with their social circle at all. Making this the distinguishing marker for what makes user's "an influencer" allows for a lens that is not predicated on follower counts, or monetization, however you can still address these specifics given the context they are found in. For these reasons, the definition of influencers for this project has been *someone who creates content that is posted to social media, where its intention is to be engaged with by an followership outside of the influencer's immediate social network, a title that is given credibility by their followers who trust in their authority based on a belief in an influencer's expertise*.

The "based on a belief" portion of that definition is important. A followership can never be sure of an influencer's expertise or that this digital persona is the "real them". It is a trust that is built up and created, either by an honest showcase of the influencer, or by tactical deception to acquire trust of a followership. Under this definition, anyone can be labeled an influencer if they are creating content with the intent of others watching it, regardless if anyone actually is. This works fine for a broad definition of what influencers are and trying to study the group anthropologically, as individual researchers will have to change how they view specific "influencers" to fit their project criteria. However, for the understanding of how social media users might perceive and label people as influencers, it is a blend of these ideas of intent and success. Reception and enjoyment of the content plays a key role, but also that metrics discussed above, like follower count and monetization, will determine how users will choose to label someone as an influencer or not. Undoubtedly, the "abilities" and authority of an influencer are given to them by a community that chooses to acknowledge them. For these reasons, rather than using follower counts and financial success to determine if someone is or is not an influencer, they can be used as descriptive characteristics to determine how powerful, credible, and significant an individual influencer is to a community or platform.

What is a "Psychedelic Influencer"?

In this complicated structure of TikTok and influencer labeling, how do psychedelic influencers fit in? What is known about this group and how is it defined? Psychedelic influencers are not an exceptionally large community. More general accounts that make content that is clearly influenced by psychedelics can have upwards of 2-3 million followers on TikTok. Content creators who are directly talking about psychedelics and their usage can reach around

500-600k followers. For this project, 7 content creators were interviewed formally and throughout the project were asked for advice or insight, with 2 secondary interlocutors who are not psychedelic influencers, but actors who operate within the influencing space to provide further opinions and context. Besides those interviewed, 6 others were approached and interested, but did not take part, and then 9 other creators were contacted but no response was received. Of those 7 psychedelic influencers talked to for the project, the follower numbers have ranged anywhere from 10k to 500K of those directly interviewed. Total number of users that follow all these accounts collectively is difficult to calculate, as it is likely that any number of users are following several of the interlocutors for this project as they operate in similar spaces. However, it is obvious that at least 500k unique accounts are a part of the space this project covered, and the interlocutors interviewed have amassed over 22 million likes collectively across all their content.

Psychedelic content creation can take many forms on TikTok, and social media more generally, and how to define who is a "psychedelic influencer" is tricky. This group of psychedelic influencers was defined by individual TikTok accounts that created content involving psychedelic to inform viewers on psychedelic usage, effects, impacts, and just tripping in general. Note: a trip (noun) tripping or tripped (verb) is a slang term meaning a specific experience someone had with psychedelics, or the verb is that act of being on psychedelics. This is a wide definition because it can take many forms. Some interlocutors were advice-oriented, giving practical advice for what to expect while tripping and how to be safe, usually backed up by the content creators' claimed experience with tripping. Other interlocutors take more of a story-based or personal approach, focusing more on telling followers about times they had a trip and what they experienced, or what it is like on different substances. Other content creators might focus on more spiritually-oriented content, focusing on the helpful spiritual effects of psychedelics and how they can help provide spiritual guidance. Some may take a more impersonal approach, examples like posting art or memes that either they have created or they are reposting (meaning posting someone else's work again, which may or may not be credited), making skits that can be both serious and comedic, or other forms of engagement in this space without making the actual content creator's personality the star of the show. Many of the

interlocutors here belong to several of these categories, and may delve into some other content approaches while mostly participating in one specific format.

During this media creation, almost all content creators on TikTok will also create videos where they react to recent news or videos from other content creators, or comments they have gotten from followers asking questions about using psychedelics, the influencer's usage, or anything else. This is where stuff like duetting/stitching and the comment video reply function outlined earlier is quite useful, as it allows for content creators to directly interact with their followers in the same ways they create the content their viewers enjoy. Most platforms do not have a function like this integrated, usually just allowing interaction through a traditional reply message to comments. Usually, unless the content creator is participating in a livestream, where they can immediately reply to their followers in real-time, it is more difficult to have a response to followers that feels personal and similar to the rest of their content, but these TikTok specific functions help fix that issue. All the interlocutors of this project, and most content creators on TikTok in general, will participate in follower engagement like this.

There were important boundaries to create when deciding what the group "psychedelic influencers" should entail. Should it be closed off to users of specific types of substances? For this project, no importance was put onto the type of substance that was used by interlocutors or discussed in their content. Many content creators have their own preferences for psychedelic substances they use, and this will bleed into the content they create. In many ways, the substance usage is not an important part of this project, only content creation *about* the substances is. One interlocutor for this project started psychedelic content creation because of their academic research, and had not used any psychedelics until they had been making content for a long time, and researching the substances academically for longer. For this project, interlocutors were never asked about what substances they used, and no questions had to do with personal accounts of their own psychedelic experiences, rather focusing on how they got interested in psychedelics, why they turned to content creation and what they hope to do while they are taking on this role of a "psychedelic influencer". This is similar to Lillth Mahmud's research on Italian Freemasonry, who was interested in the social relations of freemasons, but their practices were irrelevant and were largely ignored by Mahmud, which actually helped her gain more access to

the group (Mahmud, 2014). Rather than focus on their actual usage of psychedelics, the choice was made to focus on how they are deciding to spread their message through their content.

Another decision was "what is not a psychedelic influencer?" Many different types of content were outlined above, but an important piece to touch on is the type of content that was excluded. A large part of the online psychedelic community has to do with showing off and selling psychedelics. It has become much more common on social media for people to create content that shows off psychedelics, showing products that a user is selling, even shipped internationally, to an online community. This will usually just be photos or videos of people showing off mushrooms, LSD tabs, or psychedelic candies. They can be commonly found on TikTok, as well as other social media platforms. On multiple occasions, my personal TikTok account and the TikTok account made for research, both of which engaged with psychedelic content regularly, gained many followers who had pages that were videos of psychedelics, profile bios (biographies) saying they are selling psychedelics and how to contact them. Some accounts will post on psychedelic influencer's videos, comments saying either they or some other account are selling products. On Instagram this is prevalent as well, and on multiple occasions I was directly messaged by accounts on Instagram asking if I wanted to buy any psychedelics, and even mentioning they had discreet packaging to mail internationally if needed. It seemed obvious that this content should be excluded for several ethical reasons, as it would legitimize the direct sale of illegal psychedelics, but it is such a prevalent part of psychedelic content that it should be mentioned. As e-commerce and the illegal drug trade are continuing to merge, the continued developments of how these things are spread should be examined. With accounts now seemingly marketing their products in online spaces, and directly cold-messaging random users who show a mild interest in psychedelics to buy from them, this seems like a pressing issue that could warrant further research.

Finally, a focus has been put on activism regarding psychedelics, and there is a reason for this. As social discourse is taking place more in digital spaces, understanding the ways it manifests among groups of both satisfied and dissatisfied populations will be an important step in continuing the discipline's understanding of information sharing. Online communities are where like-minded individuals can come together and form groups of shared values and beliefs

beyond both physical and imagined boundaries or borders. Simultaneously, this new form of discourse allows for dissenting individuals to argue against these points and have a dialogue with the "opposing side", and this lack of barriers opens the door to not only the positives of open interaction with people who have differing opinions, but also the negative, more extreme forms of dissent like belittlement and harassment. Based on prior experience, and the unique aspects of this community regarding illegal activity, advocacy, and activism, following psychedelic influencers not only shows us how content creation and influencing takes place in digital spaces, but also how legality and control can continue to be powerful forces within these spaces.

Theoretical Understanding and Literature: Activism, Authority, and Credibility

One of the biggest issues with digital fieldwork is finding literature that can directly relate to the project at hand. Social media and online influencing is understudied in anthropology. While looking for literature about this field, only one article was found that was similarly related to the topics of content creation and social media (Bluteau, 2021). The inclusion of Boellstorff (2008) will supplement with an important foundation for digital anthropology in online spaces. To remedy this lack of clearly relevant literature, many older theories that are well established in the discipline are incorporated in this analysis. This acts to further show their relevance in the discipline despite the different context they were created in, and also demonstrates that digital anthropology should incorporate theories formulated outside a digital context. My understanding of the concepts of activism, authority, and credibility, are informed from these pieces, but altered to better understand the digital space.

Theory remains fairly limited in Chapter 3: Activism and Advocacy, mostly focusing on ethnographic insights from the unique aspects of psychedelic influencers. I will begin touching on the social media equivalent of what Antonio Gramsci calls "the ruling class", in its final section, with a discussion of moderation and silencing activism involving the concept of hegemony from Gramsci, as a quick introduction to power that will be expanded on in the following chapter.

Power is one of the most prominent theoretical concepts this thesis tackles, and how it manifests itself in this digital space is given the spotlight of Chapter 4; Power and authority. With power being such a large topic in the discipline, limiting this project's engagement is necessary. In this project, my focus is going to be on how power relations manifest themselves between parties that occupy the digital social media space, specifically the platform itself, content creators (Psychedelic influencers are the focus, but this is also a larger discussion of influencing in general), and users/content consumers on the platform. This will include several concepts to be discussed later in the text, including calling back to chapters 3 discussions of hegemony, a discussion of Bentham's (and Foucault's analysis of) panopticon in tandem with Goffman's frontstage/backstage in a "reverse panopticon", and how structural power from Eric Wolf effects different power dynamics of TikTok.

The main theoretical contribution taken up in chapter 4 is trying to recontextualize and update Max Weber's concept of authority to fit within the social media space and the idea of influencing. Weber outlined power as "the ability of an individual or group to achieve their own goals or aims when others are trying to prevent them from realizing them," (1978, pg. 53). With that attribution, Weber also broke down his three manifestations of authority, defined as legitimate domination by some translators, that he understood. His first was traditional authority, situated within feudalism and is maintained through tradition and custom. Next was legal authority, the authority situated in modern state and politics. Finally, and most important here, is that of charismatic authority. Charismatic authority is defined as the "quality of an individual… set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person… regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader," (Weber, 1964, pg. 358-359). This authority, therefore, is the domination over a group of followers, who prescribed in their leader a certain special quality or knowledge that caused people to follow them. For Weber, this was meant to be exemplary of spiritual or religious leaders, but has since been expanded to many other forms of leadership.

Celebrities have received this extension of the idea of charismatic authority (Marshall, 1997; Rojek, 2001; Alexander, 2010). While the influencer space has some important

distinctions to that of celebrities, and will be covered in chapter 4, the similarities in having a followership and cultivating authority and belief seems an obvious point to frame this discussion. Weber's definitions, of both power and charismatic authority, do not translate well into this context without some reworking. To help update this understanding for this project, I use a piece from Eric Hendriks (2017). Hendriks believes that, in many ways, charismatic authority and celebrity authority are antithetical, but are still "substantially intertwine[d] and coextend in society." While a good analysis, Hendriks' piece seems intent on trying to distinguish the two, without actually trying to reformulate or rewrite the Weberian definition to work in the context of celebrities. In the start of chapter 4, I will take time to break down the shortcomings of these definitions and develop a new understanding of power and charismatic authority to better suit influencers and content creators under the new term, "entertainer authority", to better breakdown the dynamics of power and authority between the different actors in the social media space.

Chapter 5 focuses on the understanding of credibility in relation to how influencers actually gain their "entertainer authority". This is framed both within the discussions of power and Weber's definition of legitimacy, and the introduction of Bourdieu's capital. This also ties in to Herbet Simon's notion of "attention economy", which is briefly utilized earlier in this paper and in sections throughout the thesis, and is relevant to online content creation in general. It is important to understand not only how credibility is cultivated by influencers, but also how it is a usable "currency" to further their social standing and authority.

The aim is that the chosen literature will help to demonstrate the ways that older theories can remain relevant to the understanding of digital culture. Similarly, their inclusion can help give a foundation for understanding the dynamics of digital influencing, both for readers who might be familiar with this field site and those who are not. Finally, I try to show how influencers are relevant to an anthropological understanding of digital culture, the effect it can have on the outside world, and how the title of influencer is maintained and challenged by both the social media platform and followers.

Methodology: Participant Observation Online, Current Methods and Shortcomings

Going into this project, it was important to analyze how "we" as anthropologists conduct research, the shortcomings of doing so in digital space, and how to fix this problem at the very root of the discipline. Anthropology has always worked within a specific "methodological toolkit" to try and better understand the cultures that are under study. Chief among these tools has always been the method of "participant observation". When you are staying in a place or working with a specific people or culture, the best way to not only gain rapport with this group, but also better understand their practices, is to study their day to day lives, participate in their activities, learn their language, and engage with them in even the most minute ways. This has been a staple of anthropology for nearly a century, and in nearly all anthropology research this will be used in fieldwork methodology.

But there are challenges to this. As technology continues to advance, and more communication happens through personal computers or smartphones, even in the poorest countries of the world, how can this methodology be brought with us? How do you engage in online spaces like anthropology has done in physical field sites for decades? Some champions of this methodology have been made. Boellstorff's seminal piece *Coming of Age in Second Life* (2008) focused on the video game *Second Life*. Second Life was meant to be, literally, a second life: a digital world where players could do anything they wanted, creating entire new realities to live through. While having obvious tools and features that did not adhere to reality, it allowed players to create an avatar, dress them up, have property, work, socialize, and form relationships with other players, even romantic ones. Boellstorff used this world as a set piece to demonstrate the ability to bring participant observation into the digital space. Boellstorff shows that the digital can indeed be treated like the physical world, and anthropological methodologies can be carried over into it. Not only that, but it gave Boellstorff, as a researcher, the opportunity to truly participate in the space just like his interlocutors or general users would do, allowing for true participant observation. It is a great example of a way to bridge these worlds, but the unique fieldsite of Second Life allows for these methodological practices to be easily translated. Second life was a world in and of itself, which happened to be digital.

Obviously there are specifics of using that environment that are uniquely separate from traditional fieldwork, but the ability to interact with people in a way that was designed to mimic reality allows for that carry over of methodology to be possible. Many examples of this could work in places where socialization and communication between individuals is possible. Online gaming on the whole can work under some variation of this model from Boellstorff, although may not as smoothly as it did in Second Life. This could also work on community-based platforms like Discord, where engagement is about communication between distant users on a shared medium rather than content creation/media sharing. Despite its trailblazing role for digital fieldwork, however, *Second Life* does not provide a one-size-fits-all framework for digital fieldwork.

Just transplanting the understanding of participant observation into social media does not work. One of the major shortcomings is how do you truly "participate" in social media? There are a few avenues to incorporate this into digital fieldwork. You can try to focus on the physical world's engagement with the digital, understand how individuals fit their technological usage into their day-to-day lives, and others in this very MA are working on projects in this regard. This is an important avenue for study, but what if the focus is on specifically online activities, like influencing? How do you follow the uniquely online activity of social media?

Firstly, you can engage with what they are doing online, like watching influencer's content, but this is just observing, your participation is more so in line with a content viewer than a content creator. You could stay with the influencer and study their creation process in real life. This is a viable method, but it would be difficult to look at multiple influencers due to the physical space that might exist between them. In a highly populated city with a content creation industry, like Los Angeles, this might be more viable. This could allow a researcher to do more than observe if they are included in the creation itself for several interlocutors (further ethical issues). However, if you want to engage with a specific community, going to one place might not help at all. The two closest participants in this project were still hundreds of miles away. So, traditional ways to engage in participant observation are lost if you are not incorporating daily activity, have no generalizable location, and mostly observe activity rather than participate.

Additionally, there is relationship-building and rapport. Overall, online research has a disadvantage in interlocutor engagement and rapport building. How do you actually engage with interlocutors casually, when planning for conversation through online mediums is usually so restrictive. Many are too busy to casually chat, needing to set up specific times days in advance as they balance real-world responsibilities with online content creation. Conversations are more like meetings than meetups. Throughout this project, it seemed like there was so much downtime for actually engaging with the community itself. Meetings were few and far between and most engagement a researcher has with content creators will be watching the content they are making for their followers.

In some ways you can go around these issues. Closing off your search to specific physical boundaries can help distance, and looking at general trends and non-niche communities can help with the problem of actually having participants. Great research can be done in understanding how general populations interact with social media, like teenagers, senior citizens, minority groups, etc. But what about for more niche communities, like the traditional small-scale societies of old that anthropology clung to for so long? How can anthropology better approach participant observation in these circles? The rapport problem is incredibly difficult and not something that can be easily remedied. One idea is to incorporate casual sessions where participants can join an online video call and talk to the researcher about whatever, but turnout for something like this might be low in practice and didn't seem viable. Obviously, maybe doing a short-term trip to the interlocutor would be helpful, making it a relationship that has gone beyond the digital. For this project that was not viable without funding or time allotted to do so, but it is a possibility for more established researchers. If it is a wide space that is not really dominated or solely composed of influencers, both rapport and participation can be remedied. As mentioned previously, platforms like Discord could be used which has a very casual conversation interface, or other platforms like Reddit could provide a usable space, both were originally considered for this project. However, consent on these fronts can be difficult if you want to use a wider social community, who can approve someone joining as a researcher for a community of tens, hundreds, or even thousands, and how do you use general data from it if not everyone can viably approve?

Content Creation of and for Anthropology

What about going back to specific, largely individualized online interactions like influencing, how can the participation problem be fixed? The key in this project is focusing on the actual actions of the interlocutors. If anthropology wants to bring the approach of participation into the content creation space, then participating in content creation is required. What if anthropologists became content creators? Rather than just studying people who are doing these things and trying to understand it from the outside, why not apply the trends researchers see and learn from their interlocutors and mimic their online interactions? Create accounts on social media, create content with a goal of trying to not only better understand the platform itself and how it works, but also what your interlocutors do on a daily basis. Why not? How can anthropology talk about creation if it does not understand how the video editor on TikTok works, or how different additions to a video, like popular audio, popular VFX, or comment interaction can affect the popularity of content?

How might this look in practice? I see one of two ways. One could be considered a "full mimic", where, given the right online community, a researcher could fully interact and create content exactly as their interlocutors do within that same community. An example might be working with an online art community that specializes in wood carving. The researcher could incorporate what they are learning about this community and wood-carving generally, and make content of their art journey or their own carvings. Outside of just being a researcher, it allows anthropologists to have a more "native" approach to the community, not just someone studying it. It can also act as a creative outlet for their research, where they can somewhat leave the headspace of researchers and engage in fun content creation which grows academic understanding.

Now what about communities outside of easy contribution and participation, like psychedelic influencing where years of experience sits at a lot of the content that is discussed in these spaces. Another avenue, and the one used in this project and in the @JakeyAnthroMA TikTok account (https://www.tiktok.com/@jakeyanthroma?_t=8XH4BoXLrh4&_r=1), is either casual creation or "Anthropological influencing" which the JakeyAnthroMA account participates in. Here the goal is not mimicking the content of the specific online community that research is

being done on. For casual creation, a focus is placed on just content creation, being involved in the online space, and experimentation. For JakeyAnthroMA, that had to do with being in Oslo and experiencing new things and places during this research. Videos talking about where I went during a day, comparing my experience as an American to Norwegians, talking about landmarks like Akershus Festning, the public transport, or going on hikes in Sognsvann.

On the other side you have anthropological influencing, where the content is centered around the discipline. Being a part of a Master's program, doing research specifically in online spaces, doing videos that are just tests for better understanding the platform itself, or talking about how you design and write a research project. Part of this is just talking about research and posting it, not really for follower engagement, but to better understand how creation can really work. In reality, this is also a creative outlet for researchers, deciding how they want to create videos and bring anthropological knowledge into a digital space.

This is something that does have some basis in literature. Bluteau (2019) works with tailor shops in London, many of whom had active Instagram accounts where they would show off their wares, or take pictures of clients in their products. Bluteau saw this engagement and thought it would be a way to get involved in the digital manifestations of his ethnographic fieldwork. For two years, his Instagram @anthrodandy, would post pictures of what he was wearing as a way to engage in this digital space. He believed that rather than operating entirely in digital space, or contextualizing the use of technology in the offline world, you could perform what Bluteau formulates as an "immersive cohabitation", blending both his digital field site through this Instagram account, and his physical field site of these London tailor shops. He mentioned the difficulties learning how to create content, and the desire to get closer to an "observing participant" rather than just watching interlocutors use social media.

Despite this, my work differs in the totality of its digital immersion, rather than retaining elements of offline fieldwork for a blended digital methodology. This blending is a very interesting attempt at bridging the gap between the physical and digital world, and while not possible for this project, the ideas of immersive cohabitation are similar to the discussion above.

Engagement in these same forms of online engagement are an important step in gaining a proper understanding of your interlocutors.

There are also ethical issues with this idea of a researcher posting about their research in this project and an immersive cohabitation. What might a researcher post online that breaks ethical guidelines, without even thinking about it? How much are they able to post about their public life alongside their research, and how can they conduct themselves in creating these social media posts? If the goal is to move towards a more participant observation oriented understanding of online research, how do you conduct content creation and social media posting as a researcher, when you are held to different ethical standards than the average influencer?

For this project, the method was to try and avoid filming anyone in public who was a stranger, at least in any way that is truly recognizable or involved in the post itself. Anyone who was shown as having a larger role in the post, like friends or colleagues, were asked if they were okay with it being posted online formally, with the option to opt out if they desired. Each project will have to decide how to do this ethically on their own, and remaining constantly aware of these concerns is the only way to promote safety for both the researcher and others.

These forms of content creation can give a better appreciation for how demanding content creation can be, and how challenging it can be to figure out how to start creation and what to do. How do people actually make videos, what topics do they choose to make them on, how do you stay consistent, you learn these things through this process. It is not easy by any means, and was struggled with during this research consistently because, to be honest, I am not good at it, a sentiment mirrored in Karen Ho's attempts at being a stock broker in *Liquidated* (2009).

However, participating in this content creation helps give a better understanding of how the interface, engagement, and creative process works on TikTok, regardless of actual ability to do so. It is an interesting experiment in trying to understand the platform itself and also gives you something to ask interlocutors about. How would you improve these videos, how do you tackle consistency or actually find something to film every day? Most importantly, this *is* participant

observation in digital space, given the limits of physical boundaries and ability to interact. It allows researchers to supplement their limited interactions with interlocutors by developing a better understanding of the inner workings of the platform itself. While I could not get the specifics of psychedelic influencing, I could learn about creating content.

Ethics of Legitimizing Illegal Activity

One of the final discussions for this project is what ethics are being dealt with in psychedelic influencer research, and influencer research more generally. What effects does this research have in online spaces? What needs to be considered when looking at these groups? What are the issues with doing online research when it comes to anonymity and identification? How does posting on social media affect the research process and the ability to conduct ethical research? Here are some of the specific ethical challenges that came up in this project that needed to be addressed.

Many of the ethical concerns within researching psychedelic influencing are tied to discussions about the dangers and ability to abuse authority and credibility by influencers (either intentionally or not), which will be covered in chapters 4 and 5 respectively. In addition, bringing creators like psychedelic influencers, who do occupy a space of illegality, into the sphere of academic research raises some questions when handling them as a "legitimate" (although, who can really decide that) activist in an ideological space. Obviously, in the case of a single Master's thesis, there is not much fear of giving interlocutors much credibility besides their own personal feeling of being taken "seriously". However, in the case of being a part of a larger project by an established researcher, more repercussions can come about by being involved in a published study. This goes for general influencing as well, how an influencer's ability to "influence" people might expand from their involvement, promoting their personal brand. The psychedelic subgroup has other concerns. They are discussing something that is illegal, and something that is possible for people to abuse and could harm them. Regardless of the stance of the interlocutors or myself on the legality of psychedelics, the fact is that the possibility of promoting illegal activity on a platform that lacks age-restrictions (unless self-imposed), and then conducting research that possibly legitimizes this promotion can have considerable ethical implications. How do you safely talk about drug-use without promoting drug use? For most of this thesis the

method has been to frame it in the wider construct of activist influencing, frame it as an ideological stance that is being shared with a followership, without any focus on the substances or activities themselves. It is also one of many reasons why the interlocutors of this project are anonymous, so no promotion of their social media content is happening directly.

In a way, providing this platform for individuals, regardless of promoting their actual endeavors, is a form of support as it is being shared as an act of political activism. It is for reasons like these that the selection process for the project was fairly strict for finding people making "the right" content, and avoiding others who seemed to be in it for less than ideal reasons. It is also a context that is in line with the advances being made by the political and scientific communities. Currently, freedom and decriminalization for different types of substances are being talked about more frequently. The state of Oregon in the U.S. went as far as to decriminalize the small possessions of almost all hard drugs in 2020. Similarly, more organizations and universities are opening up to research psychedelic usage for medicine and therapy, like John Hopkins University opening its Center for Psychedelic & Consciousness Research in 2019.

With many of the creators who took part in this project focused on the benefits of psychedelics to mental health and harm reduction, it seems to be a fair project to take place within this growing push for drug reform and psychedelic research. Similarly, some interlocutors focus their content on spirituality, which is becoming more commonly associated with psychedelics in the western world. Including this dialogue can act as a recontextualization to an earlier time in anthropology, where a focus has been put on indigenous practices of psychedelic usage, like the Amazonian shamans studied by Jeremy Narby. Turning that lens onto modern examples of psychedelic usage, and the online context where this advocacy is taking place, should not be treated as any more promotional for the practices than those projects of old.

Anonymity and Safety, Interlocutors and Research

On a wider scale, research on influencers poses a lot of problems in terms of anonymity, not only for interlocutors, but also researchers. Much of this centers around the role of influencers as public figures that want to stand out among a sea of other creators to be

recognizable. For starters, some important ethnographic data and vignettes are based on the posts by interlocutors, as well as their thoughts they share with me regarding their content. However, recounting exactly what a creator does or says in a post could be a recognizable feature of the posts themselves, and lead to readers being able to easily pinpoint their accounts. In examples from this project, using one specific phrase from the TikTok psychedelic community leads to many videos from three separate interlocutors.

In one vignette, a single, seemingly insignificant detail that was left unaltered meant that the post being discussed could immediately be found on the TikTok search function. Discussing what exactly someone does for a living, what they center their content around, or the places they live can all be important identifying factors that have to be limited in the writing process to promote anonymity. It also limits how I am able to relay ethnographic data because I cannot discuss specifics of what an interlocutor's video style is like, or what they post about that is unique from other accounts. Even something as simple as what country they are from may be too much personal information if they are from a small country because they might be the only substantial content creator from that country on TikTok.

Similarly, the creation of content and being consistent is so important to success for content creators, especially on TikTok (usually multiple posts a day). And with the short-form video sharing of TikTok, many content creators will make videos describing what they did on that very day. Content creators have an incentive to take part in something like this because it provides them another avenue of creating content, as well as the addition of added credibility. With this, the possibility of a creator wanting to post about an interview, or post actual recordings of the interview, is something that has come up as a possibility and actually happened in this project. Within the data framework of NSD (Norwegian Centre for Research Data), and general safe practice with data storage, data the researcher has on an interlocutor is the ownership of the interlocutor themselves, not the researcher. With this, interlocutors have full access to the data, and are allowed to do whatever they want with it, including posting it to their social media despite the fact that a researcher would never be allowed to do the same under standard ethical guidelines.

Obviously, this is something a researcher needs to consider when tackling a social media project and deciding if this is something they are comfortable with. It happened in this project before it was even considered as a possibility by the first interlocutor. A full interview was posted to their social media page, and then the discussion of "is this ethical?" had to take place. It was decided that it was something that was ethically sound and I was comfortable with, but some other considerations need to be present. What if the researcher or the interlocutor discussed something personal over 1-2 hours that either of them would not want to be public, but they never remember it was said and posted the interview regardless. It is easy to forget some of the context for what was said over a long interview, and without a proper review could lead to posting personal information unknown to either party.

Ethical discussions like these were a constant during the span of this project, a reality caused by the fairly new ground being explored in this thesis. While a difficult terrain to navigate, it further shaped this paper into this final product. We will return to some of these ethical discussions in the concluding remarks section of this paper, but it seems appropriate to move to the more thorough analysis of this ethnography.

Activism and Advocacy

Content creators have always had a wide range of impacts on their followership. Many times this focus might be on economic impacts, especially for brand deals and products that an influencer is explicitly pushing towards their followers. Beyond attempts of influencers to have viewers buy a product, their influence in what their followers do is still there. Youtubers like Marques Brownlee, who now is largely doing branded content, gained a following by unboxing and reviewing tech products online and influencing people to buy them. Gaming content creators can also have a huge impact on a video game's commercial success, with their enjoyment of the game being shared with followers and causing their fans to buy it as well.

In comment sections of large creators, it is not uncommon to see viewers talk about how inspirational they find someone's content, how emotionally beneficial or life changing/steering their content has been. The concept of "comfort creators" or "comfort videos", labels users will give if they consistently use specific content to relax or improve their mood, shows the genuine connection a follower might feel towards a person's work. In some instances, this genuine care of followers can see extremes, like naming a baby after the content creator themselves (https://youtu.be/A8rCPP5ssTY?t=180). Economic impacts are the very surface level of what these online personalities do for their viewers, and they should be examined as such, with each content community or even each creator being a different project in their own right.

But what about the impact of creators like the psychedelic influencers focused on here? Psychedelic influencers fit into a category that I call "Activist Influencer," meaning *a creator whose content surrounds ideas of current societal practices, beliefs, or shortcomings, and may be a commentary of sorts or an educational tool to better inform their followers on the issue.* Content under this moniker discusses things that might have polarized opinions, and tries to help others understand the reality of the topic, give specific insights a creator might have, and hope to better educate or inform their viewers. These creators have content that might be about psychedelics, but it could also be about sobriety, prison reform, sex trafficking, leaving abusive relationships, or mental health wellbeing. This can also go into the political spectrum, with topics like abortion, equal rights, police brutality, nationalism, or more.

Activist influencers want to inform followers or the world, about what is going on within a specific topic, and in some ways might hope to change people's opinion on the matter. This can be on a small scale, like the influencers used here, but this definition also fits huge online personalities on both the left and right political spectrum, like Hasanabi or Ben Shapiro. This is a huge swath of internet content, and some extensions could be made for other forms of less ideologically charged forms of content being "activism", or more appropriately, "advocacy", advocating viewers on certain topics (DIY, investing advice). These might not be activism as such, but could also go into a new understanding like "Online Advocacy", a broader term that would incorporate any content that is trying to advise people about certain topics, whether that is what to do, how to act, what to believe, or just give general advice on a topic.

These are general terms to talk about a wider phenomenon, because while many of the interlocutors agreed with the idea of being labeled as a "Activist Influencer", the distances between people under this label can be vast. Influencing and content creating has endless possibilities, and its many forms are dependent upon the creator themselves. That could be the topic they choose to discuss, how they choose to discuss it, or the medium of creation they take up to do so. As a result, rather than focus on how they do online activism, let's focus on the question of why? Why start creating content, what is the point? What do creators do after seeing some success in content creation? Do they bring this creation into other forms of "traditional" political activism? Is there a difference between this new form of influencer activism and traditional forms of activism? Why is this form of content seeing success on TikTok and how is the platform trying to limit it?

Why Start Making Activist Content?

Questioning the why in the context of online activism, and especially in the case of psychedelic activism, is important because in many cases, there is not a huge economic incentive for starting off, and in some cases, even continuing to create the content. In all forms of influencing, the economic opportunity is usually not achieved from the start, but as one interlocutor put it ,"especially within the psychedelic community, [monetization] is pretty tough." Monetization is generally more difficult with any ideologically charged content. A

company will want to agree with the basis of the activism, and be willing to publicly acknowledge that support. Sponsored content can also face backlash from followers of the content creator, calling them a “sell-out”. So both the influencer and the company need to worry about making sure sponsored content fits within their “brand”.

One interlocutor who worked with a few brands mentioned how they chose to work with some companies because “they're good brands with good missions, and they align really well with my brand and who I am as a person.” Additionally, being so open about beliefs and thoughts on sensitive topics opens creators to criticism, both legitimate discourse from dissenters, or more childish forms like internet trolling (A universal of sharing on the internet). Having something politically charged can also alienate possible followers, rather than if a creator just made “family-friendly” content.

In the psychedelic space, this is even more limited by the illegality of the topic discussed. Corporate brands may not want to be associated with some types of content because of legality. According to a LA public relations employee, they have worked with creators in branded content with around 50-75k followers, and sometimes as little as 7k-10k. Despite some interlocutors of this project having over 500k followers, only two interlocutors had done sponsored content on their TikTok. Economic opportunities, from corporations or brands, are very slim in this community.

So why do activist influencers get involved in this space? The answers always vary from person to person, as individual experiences or goals push people to make these decisions. For some, it comes down to spontaneity and just wanting to post something interesting, but transforms into more. One interlocutor shared “it was kinda by accident”. While the account was made for another project of the creators, after having one video go viral about psychedelics, they started to have second thoughts, “I didn’t realize the magnitude of responsibility until something actually happened, because I didn’t expect anything to happen, you know?... I freaked out and decided from there on out, if I even wanted to keep this account, I need to devote the entire thing to responsible psychedelic usage.” After receiving some success in creating videos in a particular niche, they just continue down that path. “I realized, ‘oh shit, that’s actually a really viable

content [avenue]' and I put up a few more videos of [psychedelics] and they all got traction, and I'm like 'oh, I guess that's what I'm doing.'"

This is not just the case in activist influencing. This spontaneous story of starting content creation is commonplace throughout all forms of creation, as many times people just want to post things for their own personal enjoyment, or for that of a few close friends and family. Viral success may cause users to continue creating, although that was never their original intention, and inversely, some will continue to post content regardless of any success because of their general interest.

However, content creation can also start because of more specific goals, and in activist influencing this makes sense with the ideological baggage of the content. While their exact reasoning varies, they all share the desire to create something to help people. One interlocutor, who is an academic psychedelic researcher, thought that "one of the biggest problems in academia is science communications… so that was kind of the major driver behind it. I also just have a passion for psychedelics, I think they can help a lot of people. [I] was doing science all of the time, and I just thought I needed to do something creative." Others have more personal goals for doing so.

Being able to just speak my experiences to people who were seeking it out… just realizing that people also interpret these experiences quite negatively, whereas I always interpreted these experiences very positively… maybe I can make a video they can relate to and they can see I've been through this and can have a more positive outlook on that… It started as expression, but once I found my community it became less about expression and more about just trying to help people interpret psychedelics in a positive way.

Why someone gets started in these spaces is entirely personal, and every interlocutor had some nuance to their story of getting started. However, shared amongst them was an internal desire to do good and create something that can help people, whether they realized after doing it randomly and seeing success, or going into this content "project" with that goal in mind.

Growth of Activism Outside the Digital Space and Difficulties

Once creators start to garner a followership and have some sort of impact, the next question is where they want to take their activism from here, or if they even wanted to take it any further. When asked, many of the interlocutors wanted to go further beyond this online space, but did not exactly know how. For some it was easy. One interlocutor is doing a PhD and trying to better understand psychedelics. For them, further activism is continuing to work on the science, continue to develop the world's understanding of psychedelics, and the online content was meant to be a way to get that information to the public. Another wanted to go into psychedelic therapy treatment, get certified and help others go through proper, clinical psychedelic therapy, because they believed that these substances can do amazing things, and have done amazing things for them personally.

Others do not exactly know what to do, or question if they will be accepted as help by traditional forms of activism. One expressed,

I would like to work with more legal based organizations because I could be helpful in getting their messages out. As far as getting something on a ballot, I would love to help do that… I still feel like it will be awhile before any of those groups take me seriously. And that's fine, but to people outside of the TikTok sphere it's pretty abstract. They don't understand that I am able to reach at least a few thousand people a day. If I really want to work with them I need to put more feet forward toward them. I'm still learning and figuring out how I'm gonna do that.

It can be that getting involved into other forms of activism and taking advantage of the online influence and communities these creators have already made may not always be easily translated to other forms of activism.

For psychedelic influencers, not only are they battling legality of substances they are discussing, but also the social stigma associated with it. For many, psychedelics are seen as this dangerous substance that makes people throw themselves out of windows. Meanwhile, activists in the push for legalization are often focused on the medical benefits, mental health treatment and rehabilitation, or the important spiritual guidance of psychedelics which has a huge

traditional and historical significance that is making its way into western spirituality. However, discussions of psychedelics can often get stuck in the belief that they are just a fun party substance that makes people see trippy visions and is fun at parties. Even those who have a positive opinion can be somewhat detrimental to the campaign for psychedelic legalization. It is a sentiment that appeared many times when discussing this project with people, where rather than discussing the importance of legality, activism, and online engagement within this topic, conversations tend to just revolve around fun recreational experiences people had with the substances.

It seems that, to a good portion of the general public, psychedelics are not being associated with medicine, spirituality, or safety, like the content being made from interlocutors. This partially shows the need for activism within this dialogue to change that perception. This view is not bad by any means, and legitimate reasons for legality in recreation of psychedelics is an important discussion that some interlocutors also engage with. However, it can work to confirm the prejudices of dissenters who just think people want to get high. It makes it even harder to take this activism into the “real” world, where you might feel like you have less support than you find in online spaces due to being used to the people who are choosing to interact with and support you.

It is also a sentiment that the activist influencers themselves want to avoid. One interlocutor said “the core of everything about the account and the content is that, if there are people who are actually helped by it, then I know that I'm not completely off base and I'm not just… getting clicks because I'm talking about drugs.” Their goal is not a promotion of illegal substances, but a discussion of the misrepresentation of these substances and the ways they can be used safely and effectively to improve people’s lives.

It also is not easy to try to mobilize a following to participate in more direct forms of psychedelic activism, whether they wanted to or not. With the online activism outlined in this project, there is no exact call to action by the influencers. They are not trying to get people to vote in a specific way, support specific people or organizations, or do any particular action. Part of this is because of the digital landscape. TikTok is a borderless platform. You cannot

effectively instruct people to do something specific in the physical world, especially in something that is as geographically and legally variable as psychedelic usage. Influencers cannot tell followers exactly what they can do to help support psychedelic freedom, because with such a broad community, the resources and availability is all over the place. What organizations are working towards it in their area, what avenues are there for pressuring government officials in their municipality or country, these things change depending on where a user lives. One interlocutor says donating to the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS) is what he would tell his followers to do, but this does not let the influencer or the followers actually get involved with activism.

Instead, the “call to action” that seems to permeate from creator to followers is that of safety, acceptance, and tolerance. Those three concepts are what seem to be the main universal message from psychedelic content creators, with each creator addressing some or all of these dynamics in their videos to various degrees. For several of the interlocutors, it came down to wanting to have some sort of impact, sharing the idea that if they could help just a few people better understand psychedelics and be safe, they were satisfied. In this way, their impact happens on a very personal level that affects individual users (who will hopefully affect their social circle), instead of specific communities or governments. To quote one interlocutor, “...at the end of the day, it's not about getting followers. The goal is helping people be better at something they're going to do anyway.”

Separating and Unifying Physical vs. Digital Activism

But what separates online activism, or more appropriately media activism (includes things like news coverage and documentaries as well) from physical forms of activism (which includes things that happen in the “real world” like protests)? One interlocutor brought up an interesting point in this discussion, based on their own work. They believed the distinction for these different types of action comes down to impact. Who does this activism affect and what change might happen as a result? The interlocutor broke it down like this: when people talk about physical activism, they are mostly constricted to impacting the “local”, or doing things and making changes that will actively affect your community and your life. This could be small, like writing in the local paper about the topic and trying to change the mind of those in your

community, or it could be large marches or protests that take place in large cities, capitals, making national headlines, trying to get change on a larger "local" level, like the larger government and legislation. The interlocutor believed that this could cause real change, have real impact, but on a smaller amount of people or smaller areas.

However, this interlocutor believed that this online activism is an opportunity to have effect on a much wider, global, but less impactful, change. Online activism allows us to reach (getting close to) everyone all over the planet. It has the opportunity to deliver a message to different areas of the world, where it can be built upon by their local ideology and understanding. This might not have the same impact, it is unlikely that these creators and their content will lead to any direct systematic or legal change, but it can have small, individualized impacts on their followers, and those followers could make a small change in their everyday life. In these spaces it is about helping teach individuals about psychedelic safety, responsibility, spirituality, and science. For some people, these smaller impacts might be what they want to pursue over localized impacts. The same interlocutor who made this argument finished it by saying, "The goal is systematic change [Laws, government reform, etc], but cultural change, in small scale impact, is greater. Influence culture to influence change."

In practice, there might be many more nuances than this interlocutor describes, however. Physical activism is not limited by this idea of the "local" as it is really limited by space. Inherently, physical activism is limited by the location and boundedness of the space it can happen in. You can expand this space by staging multiple protests to happen at the same times at several different locations, but that still requires people to be present physically in these locations to engage with this activism. Digital activism does not have this limitation of space, but it is also a more diffused kind of discourse. A physical protest has the visual factor, you can see all these people coming together over this issue in a bounded space. While the numbers of physical protesters in a protest may be smaller than the number of users who are engaged in digital activism (content creators and followers), that image of all these people *feels* more powerful. It shows a different kind of willingness to engage and publicly show support compared to talking about problems online.

The idea of “influencing culture to influence change” does have some interesting potential, however. Physical activism seems like it has a political pressure associated with it. The point of protests is to try and show a wave of support for a cause, and dissent for the ruling class in order to create change. Other physical activism, like petitioning, is also meant to put pressure on the system of politics in order to create these specific changes. Digital activism does not have the means or ability to organize and create forms of political pressure, besides telling followers to go perform it in their municipal areas. However, activist influencers are working in an area to create cultural understanding and a paradigm shift in public perception. This might be why it is so common in the activist influencer space to use the video comment reply function, answering questions and informing their followers about their experiences of the ideological topic they center their content around. The point is the introduction and reeducation of these concepts to their followers, hoping to give better insights into these issues, creating cultural pressure and cultural change. One interlocutor described it as “...the process of educating, hoping to change people's minds, which feels like a kind of activism, because you're almost fighting against other people's notions of what psychedelics are.”

This is not to say that physical protest has to be mostly political pressure. There have been plenty of examples of trying to shift the political understanding and cultural understanding of issues together in physical activism, but compared to political changes, cultural change is still struggled with afterward. The U.S. Civil Rights movement in the 1950s and 60s saw minorities gain equal rights under the law, but racism and disenfranchisement is still rampant for these communities despite this success in creating political change. Rather, it feels like the majority of pressure, more so in practice rather than the intent or planning of activism, is placed on specific areas of change depending on if it is physical or digital.

Another important recognition is that digital activism is becoming more important for the manifestations of physical activism, and the lines between the two are blurring. There can be downsides to this, where online activism is either harmful to attempts at physical protest or ridiculed for being ineffective. Facebook activism of putting “attending” to a protest event page but not showing up, when many people do it, can make movements seem large online, but in practice are actually much smaller, diminishing a movement's credibility. On June 2nd, 2020, a

trend on social media was #BlackoutTuesday, where users would post a plain black square with the hashtag to signify support for George Floyd. This action was ridiculed, during its usage and after, not only for drowning out actual activists trying to use social media to help the cause, but also just being a way for people to gain the social recognition of supporting the cause rather than actually committing to it. This could be put under a larger term from the 1990s called slacktivism (slacker and activism).

There have also been many movements that spread as a result of social media engagement by supporters. The U.S. protesting against police brutality has often come as a result of footage of such acts being shared on social media. The Black Lives Matter Movement started as a Twitter Hashtag in 2013, and has expanded to a global movement. #MeToo happened the exact same way. Even for activism that did not start in digital space, digital engagement is becoming a centerpiece. The 2011 Egyptian revolution would not have happened without Facebook, creating discourse, helping plan, and aiding in pushing for the revolution to take place. Social media is seeing more usage for discourse, where more people are able to express their opinions openly for large "audiences" to see, and places like Twitter are becoming more and more politicized.

It is also worth noting that activism does not require engaging with large numbers of people, whether physical or digital. You can also have very personal, individual impacts (although, this is mostly bound to physical activism). Being a psychedelic treatment counselor or nurse, like one of the interlocutors in this project hopes to become, is a great example of doing so. Another interlocutor who is doing academic research on psychedelics, or in some ways this very thesis, are other ways of engaging in activism and contributing to discourse. One interlocutor shared the idea that "Obviously, everybody influences each other in some way or another, I guess there's just levels to that influence." Activism, and activist influencing, can take place at many different levels and affect people in many different ways.

Turning back to influencer activism, or just online engagement in social movements, examples like these are not always recognized as activism, merely tools that might help lead to it. Even if they are accepted as such, it can get caught up in the discussion of which kind of

activism is more valuable. In this thesis, both are important, and view them as becoming more inseparable. Part of this lack of focus is due to the fact that this form of engagement is still very new. Additionally, TikTok is the first platform where many individual people, unassociated with any organization, are growing communities about these topics and starting to influence people. Why is that?

Activist Influencing and How TikTok (Unintentionally) Helps It Grow Stronger

Why is there so much success (in terms of followers and engagement) in activist influence in these spaces, where thousands of accounts are participating in content about any number of social issues? This is very much a theoretical understanding as to why these complex manifestations are happening, but some ideas do seem to make sense.

For starters, social media allows for people to find these sorts of dialogue easily and are free to choose which ones they engage with. These are individuals creating platforms around the discussion of these issues, and TikTok has seen many of these people and my interlocutors find success in doing so. It might be that the structure of TikTok helps more people be exposed to these sorts of communities. As already discussed, most users interact with TikTok by scrolling on the FYP and watching whatever video comes up for them. This allows well-made videos from activist influencers to be put on the FYP more often, and be exposed to a wider audience that might like the content but would not normally seek it out.

Other social media platforms do not have as much of a “forced viewing”. YouTube, for example, may recommend videos, but it does not just start playing them for a user. Tiktoks, on the other hand, immediately start playing once you scroll on the FYP. This allows users to engage with, and possibly have their attention caught by, a video instantly. In turn, this might lead to users watching videos they normally would not, and might choose to engage with it going forward. If a video is doing sufficiently well, it could make it to audiences well outside of the psychedelic content space and draw more people in, which might introduce more people to these concepts and thoughts. There are negative side effects to this wide influence and growth as well, and it will be broken down in the following chapter. This is not to say other social media

platforms do not have this sort of content. Political commentary has long been a part of online space and seen success. Rather, the format of TikTok might help to deliver this kind of content to more users, and allow for niches like psychedelic influencing to take hold.

Second is the banal but important personal interest people might have towards the topic or the content creator themselves. Something like psychedelics has this kind of pull on people, especially those who have done them before, and this has been proven time and time again when discussing this project in public. People are interested if the topic comes up and are drawn to watch/engage. If they happen to find their way into this digital space, they may be drawn to it more if they have experience with psychedelics. When a psychedelic content creator comes up on the FYP, or other interesting topics regardless of activism, people might just be interested in the topic and want to watch it.

Similarly, a content creator might be very engaging, and might know exactly how to use social media to draw people into their videos, with a catchy introduction that hooks their attention, or an eye-catching aesthetic, for example. There is a bias present in this project where the interlocutors talked to do all have some success in creating content and getting engagement. They clearly have some aptitude for the practice and that shapes the discussion of "why does this content do so well", it might just be because of them.

As a result, it is hard to draw exact conclusions on the "Why?" in all this. It does seem important that the focus of TikTok in giving users new videos constantly could have an effect on the success activist influencers have seen in this digital space. However, one important point that does give some indication to this is that almost all the interlocutors here have some other social media platform where they also create psychedelic content, with some actually having these other platforms and making psychedelic content before moving to TikTok. Without exception, these creators have more followers on TikTok, not just by a small margin, 10 or 100 times more followers on TikTok compared to other platforms. Many of the interlocutors have talked about how growth and getting a following is so much easier on TikTok, and it is believed that the way TikTok delivers videos is the main culprit behind this phenomenon. It seems unlikely that TikTok has a community that is hyper-engaged in topics that could be understood as "activism

influencing". Rather, the ability for users to find these communities is heightened by the way TikTok uses its algorithm.

How Moderation Can Silence Activism, and Content Generally

Moderation can play a role in how activism does not find success on platforms, and this is especially important to note for content like psychedelic influencing where illegal activity is being discussed. This plays into the rules of the platform and how they chose to enforce them, and the ways a platform might silence activism can vary depending on if any rules are actually being broken. Much of this has to do with dynamics of power between users and the social media platform, which will be further discussed in the following chapter. However, moderation has the ability to control speech and regulate topics within online spaces, and that can lead to voices being diminished as a result.

Moderation does not only affect content that is breaking their platform's rules, however. A platform could turn to more discreet methods of controlling content and its distribution if they so desired. Most commonly this is called a "shadowban". A shadowban is when a creator is flagged by the platform to not have their content distributed to users, or aided by the platform's automatic distribution. On TikTok, this may be not sending videos to the "Following" tabs of a creator's followers, so not many of their followers see it. This "distribution manipulation" could refer to shadowbanning, but also any way the platform might try to limit videos being sent out to users.

Creators may also not have their videos make it onto the FYP as often either, so their overall views on a video will go down, despite it still being public and anyone who goes directly to their profile can find it. Shadowbanning is something that is believed to be able to happen on specific videos, so that one video is suffering from it, or entire accounts where all the videos are affected by it. It is an inherently difficult and shady practice to fight against, hence the "shadow" moniker. Shadowbanning is not a concept that is generally discussed or acknowledged by platforms themselves, and there is no standard procedure for dealing with it. It is an example of discrete moderation, where its existence is denied or ignored by platforms itself but users might discuss or believe in it.

But on TikTok the existence of shadowbanning, or any form of video distribution manipulation by the platform, is up for debate. One interlocutor made a video talking about shadowbanning and how they do not believe it exists on TikTok, and this is a sentiment I have seen other, non-psychedelic, creators talk about. The belief is that TikTok's algorithm is just so good at knowing what is doing well with users and what is not, that a reason a video suddenly is not doing well is tied to it just not being a good video. Rather than getting hung up on the conspiracy of shadowbanning, instead you should try to make better content.

But other creators think there is still something going on. In chapter 1, creator @tonystatovci was mentioned. Statovci is a very successful comedy creator on the app, with nearly 3 million followers and over 200 million likes. Statovci has made, essentially, a series of videos talking about what he thinks is distribution manipulation. Each video he notices the same thing. He will have periods of very good view counts, almost always over 1 million views, sometimes much more, and then suddenly he will get a drop, going down significantly, even as low as 100,000. For each time this has happened, he has gotten a message from TikTok suggesting he uses their "promote" feature (basically, pay TikTok money and they will show more people your video on the FYP). His claim is that TikTok is purposely trying to get creators to spend money by limiting the ability for their content to be distributed, especially as "promoting" content is not a product that costs TikTok anything. You can see all three of the videos he has made on the topic (#1: https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTRx7PrYK/ #2 https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTRx7yvfh/ and #3 https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTRx7AqMD/). So it could be that silencing videos in activism is not because TikTok disagrees with the stance, but it seems more likely that the reason they might limit distribution is to make money off of creators.

With Psychedelic influencing, there is a different problem, and that is silencing creators in their ability to discuss topics because of the legality behind it. Psychedelic creators can be punished *a lot* for their content. All interlocutors had faced some kind of moderation, and many had been temporarily banned from posting multiple times and feared they would have their account deleted. One interlocutor shared "It [moderation] is scary. It's something I actually don't think about that much… you have to be aware that it [TikTok account] could just be taken away at any moment, And that is the reality of it." Dealing out punishment is the main way that

silencing happens for those who are occupying illegal space, even if they are discussing safety and responsibility in doing so, or just discussing topics that might not be illegal but are frowned upon by the platform (discussing death in general faces this on TikTok). It gets at the important dynamics of the relationship between the platform and its users, its hegemonic nature.

Social Media is a hegemonic system that has the “ruling class” of executives and programmers trying to control specific content being shared on the site. Moderation, interestingly, can be seen as manifestations of control for both the political society and civil society, as described by Gramsci (1971). Moderation works as the political society, the main use of force or “violence” to control the platform. But it also alters civil society, not only ruling with consent from users (terms of service agreements are user consent), but also as the main way of reinforcing and teaching the “societal” understanding of what is acceptable on platforms.

This is also seen on other platforms, with YouTube in recent years punishing content on the platform for not adhering to the new focus on more family-friendly entertainment, and that being the reason for many creators facing demonetization of their content. Gramsci’s definition also talks about how the civil society is used as a tool to legitimize, or manufacturer consent for, the ruling class through institutions like the media, academia, and religious institutions (Heywood, 1994). This does not seem as appropriate in the social media space, as a platform is obviously legitimate in their control of their own platform, but moderation may be used as an example and warning to those who might go against these rules.

This hegemony has also created the push against its domination. Users will try to fight against this rule and post what they believe should be allowed on a platform, and that is also shown by the discussion of banned creators creating new accounts despite losing everything. Regardless of consenting to the rules of the platform when they joined it, and already being punished or faced with possible punishment, users will continue to fight against this rule and use the platform how they see fit. Because of this, many users start to create new methodologies for conducting themselves on the platform, trying to subvert and circumnavigate moderation and continue making content they like, and this also bleeds into larger conversations of how users

and the platform share a dynamic of power through this hegemony. The next chapter will discuss this dynamic and subversion in depth.

Power, Authority, and Subversion

Just as was stated at the beginning of this paper; Social media, and the content creation focused on here, is having a noticeable impact on the entertainment and purchasing habits of users around the world. Social media platforms are continuing to grow by the day, and it is not hyperbole to say that nearly everyone in the world has some interaction with one platform or another. Similarly, influencers are able to bring their content to all of these individuals as well, and grow their fan base alongside these platforms. Social media platforms are allowing individuals to create entertainment that can be engaged with all over the world.

However, the content that is being made on these platforms does not just stop at entertainment. As greater numbers of people watch online content, it is being emulated by the whole world, either in the creation of social media "trends", or new content working to revitalize older topics or trends. Over the last few years this is becoming more and more prevalent in online spaces. 2019 was the year that many saw what is being described as a revival of the Swedish video game Minecraft's popularity in the public consciousness, after several years of dwindling content success. TikTok has seen online emulation often in what is loosely called "viral trends", an action, object, or process posted online that is being emulated by many others on the internet. This has been seen in dances (a remnant from their common usage on musical.ly), songs going viral on TikTok and then charting high on streaming platforms, and even viral food trends like recipes for Supermodel Gigi Hadid's Pasta recipe (https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTRxs7FaY/) and a viral feta and cherry tomato one-dish pasta (https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTRxGxkkk/).

Ads are becoming commonplace on social media pages, both inserted by the platforms themselves that interrupt the flow of content to users, and sponsorships from companies done by influencers and content creators. These are indications that businesses are seeing a reason to engage in these online spaces for advertisement. As the name would suggest, Influencers have an influence on their followers, and their abilities to mobilize these followers into emulating trends or buying specific products shows there is an important set of power relations in play. But how is this power distributed and shared in digital space? How do the actors in this space have authority

over one another and keep each other in check? How can individuals utilize this authority, or subvert the authority of others? For this chapter, the goal will be to break down and understand what "power" and "authority" means in these online spaces, how it is used by followers, by content creators, and certainly by the platforms.

Influence and Charismatic Authority

On social media, authority is gained through content creation and user engagement. Just as the discussion of "what is an influencer" outlined, the way to track the effectiveness and credibility of an influencer is through their ability to get views or attract followers. The more of these an influencer has, the more they are able to utilize this following, having their followers support a creator's creative and economic pursuits, or convincing brands that creators are worth investing in for advertisements. Similar to the outline of theory in chapter 2, Weber's charismatic authority has been utilized as a way to understand the authorities of celebrities in the past, but there are some important shortcomings to this. Here I will discuss these shortcomings, and how celebrities (and influencers for this project), do not fit into Weber's definition. Then, I will try to discern a new definition that can be utilized to discuss the authority of influencers.

I brought up Weber's definition in chapter 2, and want to take time here to break down how influencers fit into this definition. With the help of Hendrik's (2017) analysis, I can talk about the ways they do not fit under charismatic authority. First, there are some important similarities to the concept of charismatic authority and the authority held by celebrities and influencers. To start, it is not tied to a specific domain of some kind, it can theoretically extend out universally given the means for information to travel, which in the days of the internet is even more possible. Similarly, it is not tied to a formal recognition of authority like an elected office or position, seen in Weber's other forms of authority. Also, the lines between these categories blur at certain points, where charismatic authorities are given celebrity status from their charisma creating attention around them, and attention can also give charismatic qualities to celebrities, although these qualities might not be claimed by the celebrities themselves. So the understanding of these two categories are not totally disconnected, sharing similarities and having permeability.

Next, I want to go over two parts of Hendrik's analysis that were discussed as differences between celebrities and charismatic authority, which this project wants to review. First, Weber's definition also states that charismatic leaders possess "supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities," (1964, pg. 358). In celebrities, Hendriks (2017) believes that many "ideal-typical celebrities" instead rely on keeping a "just-like-us" (pg. 357) familiarness in order to appeal to the masses and is "known for his well-knownness," (pg. 351). However, Hendriks contradicts himself, saying some categories of celebrities do have exceptional qualities associated with them; actors, musicians, athletes for example. This project believes that most traditional celebrities do belong to groups that are associated with an exceptional quality, and finds Hendriks' analysis lacking.

However, the influencer space seems to rely much more on this "just-like-us" persona, and less often operates with followers believing in the exceptional powers of the influencer outside just being skillful video editors or the skill set needed for their video genre (good at makeup, good at video games). However, many influencers can also be actors, musicians, and athletes, or exceptional video editors, so exceptions are always present, but for influencers it seems like there is more of this "just-like-us" persona compared to the traditional celebrities Hendriks formulated his understanding with.

The second disagreement is that Hendrik believes that charismatic authorities deal with a threat of delegitimizing cases, while celebrities do not. Hendriks' belief is that due to the "just-like-us" appeal of celebrities, mistakes they make will be seen as a humanizing force. However, that seems far from the truth in the modern celebrity landscape. This will be covered in depth later in the chapter in a discussion of cancel culture, which acts as an example of a delegitimizing case for celebrities because a "just-like-us" appeal can also break in response to acts that are not "just-like" the public's.

Finally, the ways celebrities do not fit into Weber's concept of charismatic authority are very important and apparent. First, Weber says that charismatic authority is "not accessible to the ordinary person" (Weber, 1964, pg. 358). Celebrities and influencing, however, is characterized by the permeability of the status, and how anyone *can* become a celebrity, although it may be

difficult. That permeability is why the "dream" of becoming a famous movie star or musician is so ubiquitous, because it can be obtained.

Secondly, the definitions and understanding of what Weberian authority is does not fit in the celebrity/influencer space because of scale. Weber talks about authority as a legitimate domination over followers, who are obeying the leader's desires (Weber, 1964). In social media, this extreme viewpoint is insufficient because the scale is so much smaller. This is not a relationship between people and a leader, but rather a parasocial relationship of admiration and support for creators. Influencers just do not operate under domination and obedience, two ideas which Weber makes clear in his understanding of authority. Instead, I formulate that influencers work to *coax* followers into supporting them, persuading individuals to offer their support. The act of trying to force domination onto followers does not work in this space, with one interlocutor saying "any power that I actually have disappears if I try to wield it." So immediately, the discussion of influencer authority needs to move to a less grand scale.

In association to this smaller scale, Weber's definition lacks a balance in the dynamic of power between the leader and the follower. That is not to say that the dominating tone of Weber's definition cannot be helpful. The abuse of power has happened many times in social media, by users, creators, and social media platforms, but users still need to be brought into this relationship willingly and the impact of abuses are generally of a lower severity. In the cases of high severity abuse from influencers (illegal, traumatizing, abusive, etc.), these abuses will usually impact a very small number of users. Users also have more of a say over how an influencer interacts with followers, unlike they would with a charismatic leader, because choosing to follow is where influencer authority comes from. It is not enough in the digital space to be *good* at content creation, you have to be *recognized* as being good in order to actually do anything.

Power is never a one-sided exchange, especially when people are entering into a dynamic willing. Instead, the focus of power in this project is in the ways that different actors in the quadrilateral power dynamic of social media affect one another. Those four are the content creators/influencers, their followers (or just average users), the media which has taken a role in

modern charismatic leadership (although less important for influencers rather than traditional celebrities), and the platform itself. None of this is to say that the scale of power and authority is quite small for everyone involved in this relationship. Obviously the overall scale for the platform as a corporate entity is huge, on the scale of entire governments. But, in relation to how this massive entity interacts with individual users (creators and followers), or how a content creator interacts with their followers, the scale is quite small in worldly repercussions.

Usually, the scale for creators is trying to coax followers to support their content, and usually attempting to make money off that support, or in the case of activist influencers, selling an ideology or certain belief. However, content creators implementing ways for users to support them financially or be supported by corporations for advertisements still relies on another party agreeing to the transaction. Meaning, if a creator is not able to convince others to support them, they do not have the option of forcing it upon them. Even when creators are trying to convince followers to do something that does not require the followers to agree to a transaction, a follower can always ignore it on their own volition, and without the traditional "superhuman quality", are much more likely to do so compared to a charismatic leader.

It is important to keep this discussion of scale and relative importance in consideration because as this paper continues and I talk about power dynamics, or creators abusing power, the actual scale of these things is so low that most issues are resolved between an influencer and their followers quite quickly and without drama. So the ideas of dissent and rebellion are very rare in creator/follower relations with this small scale in mind, although exceptions to this will be covered below. Even when discussing the idea of having authority or power, interlocutors did not see themselves as powerful:

I wouldn't say it's a feeling of power. it's like 'oh, cool. People actually did something that I said,' that's just a really cool feeling.

Yeah... but I would say there's a very minor power of being able to make people interpret their trips in a more positive way… I had a lot of people commenting that they now wanted to try DMT, if any of those people did do DMT then I'd say that's some kind of influence but who knows

if they would stumble upon somebody else who would just reinforce the same message and have the same effect anyway, so what power do I really have there? So yeah, I don't know, minor power if any power.

Most often, interlocutors' understanding of their power and influence is in changing people's opinions, making followers want to try psychedelics, or be more open to their usage, not in forcing them to make specific political actions or certain economic contributions.

As a result, the differences in scale and understanding of Weber's definition, it seems appropriate to create a new concept to label the authority of celebrities and influencers which Hendriks neglected to do. This new understanding, *Entertainer Authority*, could be considered a subcategory of charismatic authority operating within a different scale and purpose. With that in mind, entertainer authority is *the ability of entertainers to capitalize on human attention through entertainment, creating communities of followers who allow themselves (consciously or not) to be utilized for supporting the entertainers endeavors through mild support (following, viewership), or being coaxed into more direct contributions (donations, buying merchandise).* With activist influencers, this coaxing is also related to the ideological stance that the activism is taking place around, sometimes with an addition of economic contributions. With this definition, I want to start explaining how this authority operates among the different actors in the social media space in the sections below.

Influencers and their Followers, Dynamics of Power

Formatting influencer's authority in these terms, it can help to better understand other aspects of the relationship influencers have to their followers, and to the platforms they operate on. First, I will discuss the relationship between the influencer and their followers. As already discussed, an influencer needs to convince the public of their abilities, to believe in their "charisma" (or in many cases on social media, their skills). As Weber outlines, once this charismatic authority has been created, it helps to reinforce the loyalty of their followers (Weber, 1964). The establishment of this relationship is covered in the following chapter, credibility. Here, I will focus on the ways that influencers might use their authority.

Utilization of a following, and therefore a creator's authority, is common for creators. For one, creators might want to move towards utilizing their following and try to make money off their content. This could be for typical "greedy" reasons and just wanting to make money, but for many creators a lot of time and effort goes into creating their content so being paid to do so is a huge incentive for doing bigger and better projects. Alternatively, followers might like creators so much and be invested in their content enough that fans want to support creators and may ask for ways to do so. It could also be that a creator has garnered a large enough following that brands are reaching out to them to do advertisements, and the creator might see no harm in making money by mentioning a brand briefly in a larger piece of content or doing one short video about them.

Regardless, most creators will move in some way towards utilizing their following. There are a few common ways they might go about this. Obviously, sponsorships are one method that are quite common in the influencer space. Sponsorships usually entail a creator getting paid to make content advertising a product or including an advertisement for their product in a video during a designated sponsored segment. Usually, brands will have an outline of what they need the influencer to do in order to be paid, how long the segment or ad needs to be, or a script of what to say. Usually, the advertisement encourages followers to use the product with discounts or special offers, usually with a discount code, sometimes specific to the creator, or a special purchase link that is tied to the creator themselves, an example like "go to www.MAthesiswriting.com/jakeference for 15% off your first order." Companies may use codes or affiliate links to track success of the product based on these ads, and use these metrics to determine if they should sponsor the creator again. An important note here is that while I talk about this as a creator mobilizing their followers, it is more akin to a company seeing an opportunity to use someone else's followers to the benefit of the company, rather than the actual creators.

There are ways that creators can mobilize followings to support them more directly. One of these methods is through merchandise. Many large content creators across all platforms have "merch" they sell, usually clothing, household items, or novelties. Several interlocutors for this project started merchandise lines during the course of this research. Selling merchandise can do

more than just make money for a content creator. For the followers, not only do they get to support a creator, who they clearly hold to some esteem if they want to spend money on merchandise, but it also allows them to have an item that shows their support for a creator. Merchandise is a clear indication to others of this support, or at least some form of recognition, to creators and their endeavors. This could be used as a symbol to others in the physical world to someone's interests, or could be a conversation starter with a stranger who happens to share these interests, just as wearing a band t-shirt might.

Another way this might be utilized is through donations and gifts, something that is seen in other areas of digital space as well. Here, creators may be asking for money (or just give supporters the ability to send them money) that can directly support them, but does not always involve any physical object in exchange. Creators might use a platform like GoFundMe, a website where donations are usually oriented toward funding a specific project. This could allow for content creators to make larger projects they want to undertake, but do not have the means to do so. The platform Patreon is often used as well. Patreon allows for users to donate monthly to creators and help fund whatever project the creator is working on. Patreon is usually not tied to a creator's specific project or endeavor, just a general stream of revenue that content creators can use for making content. Both GoFundMe and Patreon can include the ability for special rewards for donating specific amounts of money. These might come with benefits like exclusive content or material objects for donors, which grows with the amount of money they are donating.

Many times, donations also take place through live-streaming services like Twitch or TikTok Live. Sometimes this will be using donations through PayPal, but some sites will have built-in donations. TikTok Live has a donation function called “Gifting”, where viewers can purchase and gift virtual currency (Coins) to live streaming creators, of which creators only get 50% of because TikTok takes half of all coin purchases on the platform. Similar to stated earlier, this revenue cannot be withdrawn if an account is banned.

Donations, and other forms of follower support, are not a one-sided exchange, however. Here, the influencer has authority in being paid by the followers, but the followers are given a predetermined authority in some regards over the content creator. Many times, live streaming

creators will have incentives for donating, like a shout out for the user, or for every $10 donation the streamer will do some action in a stream. These donations allow for followers to directly interact with their favorite content creators. Being recognized by the creator as a supporter can be a huge incentive for someone having donated. However, this dynamic is still unbalanced, because the creator is the arbiter of the incentives, and dictates the rules of engagement. The creator does not have to deliver on the proposed incentives (in some cases they might not want to, like not wanting to say an inappropriate username), nor do they have to give any incentives at all. So, followers are given a very narrow piece of authority, but it is completely delivered to them by the creator themselves, who can deny that authority if they so wish.

Obviously this might upset followers, and creators can face backlash for denying large incentives or not delivering on a promise, but sufficient explanations, apologies, or reparations can help remedy these situations. It is important to note that, often, these incentives are much smaller, and may just be "common" rather than required, like reading off a donation message. This is common on platforms like Twitch, but is by no means required and streamers could do away with it for little to no consequence. The followers do still have a bit of authority here. If they choose to not give the creator any money, it could mean financial trouble for the creator. However, this is almost impossible in a coordinated effort unless the community is extremely close-knit. With a large enough creator, they could receive donations and support with no incentives at all because they have a large and presumably dedicated following, and the loss of a few supporters here and there is insignificant especially with sufficient growth.

A larger manifestation of how followers are able to exert authority over a content creator is in uncoordinated actions in response to news regarding a creator. This might go under the more general terminology of being "canceled", when news regarding a public figure comes out in regards to some action of theirs and they face backlash because of it. Many times, the action might be illegal in nature, or implies inappropriate actions in the real world, or may just be hypocritical actions that go against the "brand" that a content creator has cultivated. The result of being canceled will be a loss of faith by their following, and a deterioration of their entertainer authority. While loss of authority can gradually happen to content creators over time, like a loss of followership due to irrelevance or the social media platform they operate on losing prestige,

canceling is an example of conscious action by individual followers of dissent against a creator, which compounds into large scale loss of followers and public support.

Canceling a creator is often facilitated by others in their community, or by the general population of the platform they inhabit, who will make videos talking about the “drama”. It could even come from news organizations and popular media if the creator is large enough. It is important to note that while canceling is something that usually only happens and is talked about for large creators, smaller creators are not free from it either. In July 2022, an account named Star Wars Dinx, featuring a hand-puppet sharing Star Wars lore, was found making homophobic remarks online. Many other creators in the Star Wars TikTok community made videos condemning the actions of the puppet master (https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTRxGFEbT/), as well as the ridiculousness of the situation on paper, eventually leading to the deletion of the account. This was big news across the platform for a while, and was talked about by the larger TikTok community at length, despite the size of the creator involved only being 200,000 followers. Several interlocutors in this project have more followers than Star Wars Dinx had, and it further shows the possibility of canceling affecting a creator, regardless of size.

This has happened to “traditional” celebrities as well. The line for how these cases differ are difficult, but for influencers it does seem like a more direct impact on their standing and authority if they lose public opinion and therefore followers. For many content creators, their actual social media followers and viewers are their direct patrons, so losing them is much closer to home. For traditional celebrities, it is a slightly more indirect relation, where many will still make money for “doing their job” (movie, music) before an audience interacts with the product, or through royalties for their previous works. A loss of public opinion may lead to a record label dropping an artist, or an actor not getting as good of roles, but it is a slightly less direct impact as the public is not directly affecting their financial stability, unlike the influencer space. This makes influencers relatively more vulnerable to the impacts of being canceled in a given digital platform.

Sometimes, influencers will completely lose all authority in online spaces and never have any again. However, some influencers are able to rebuild their brands and followership (either

with the old followers coming back or just continuing to grow and gain new ones) and regain authority and credibility. Canceling is inherently chaotic and volatile as it is an uncoordinated action. Some followers may choose to ignore it regardless of irrefutable evidence, returning to the debate of separating the art from the artist. Allegations may not remain in the public consciousness for long, and eventually they will be forgiven or forgotten with sufficient time and an apology. In some cases, the attention they get from controversy may lead to more success if it is being spread through the traditional media and news coverage to make an influencer more well known, "any publicity is good publicity."

This relationship between the content creator and followers does also have some unique connections to other power dynamics outside of entertainer authority. One interesting view is a reversal of Foucault's understanding of the panopticon from *Discipline and Punishment* (1975). If the influencer is thought of as the central tower in this analogy, while the followers and viewers are the prisoners, the surveillance is reversed. While the followers can see the content that is being created and shared with them, the creator is virtually unable to see their actual followers in any substantial way. Either a creator will be able to see all of their followers in a digital space where only limited information being presented (i.e. whatever their follower has posted about themselves, but never a personal connection), or a content creator can get a more intimate view of a small group of followers through in-person events, meetups, or other digital platforms that have a more social component.

However, there is also an additional component, Goffman's frontstage/backstage (1959). Here, the followers see the outside of the tower, its facade, as the image the creator wants them to have of themselves; their content, their social media, their front stage persona. However, their emotions, feelings, personality, and entire personal life might be part of a backstage persona. Content is cultivated, edited, and delivered to the prisoners, and therefore the power of people's opinions is still in the hands of the central tower itself, excluding outside forces that could deliver information to the masses like the cancel culture discussion above. Social media does incorporate a blend of these two personas where the point is to truly share their real life, daily vloggers are built on the idea of sharing their entire day/lives for their followers, dismantling the frontstage/backstage. The hip new app BeReal, created as a way for users to have a "A new and

unique way to discover who your friends really are in their daily life" by having all users be randomly notified during the day to post one picture of what they are doing right then and there, works on a similar blend of the digital and real self (BeReal, 2022). However, these assertions could also be part of that facade, that deception. I use BeReal, but I *choose* to only post when I am actually doing something that is not sitting at home playing video games, watching YouTube, or lying in bed. It is about presenting the front stage persona *as* the backstage.

This does also leave the door open to the central tower miscalculating what people want to see, and showing the prisoners something that they will dislike. This can take a very innocent direction, like posting content they simply do not enjoy, or in more drastic forms that can lead to controversy, like Youtuber Logan Paul facing extreme backlash for filming a suicide victim in 2017 and purposely posting it to YouTube. This breakdown of the frontstage and backstage persona is something that might be the cause for outcry when something like canceling happens, the reveal of the facade for what it truly is. It is how this dynamic can find some balance, the followers still have the opportunity to stop believing in the facade, to no longer watch the central tower. The reverse panopticon is more of a stadium in that regard. Rather than prisoners, they truly are an audience, and have the ability to choose if they wish to continue being one.

Influencing and the Authority of the Platform

Turning back to this idea of authority, there is another important dimension to this dynamic that is unique to this digital space, and where the connection to psychedelic influencing and the "subversion" in the title of this chapter shines through. Charismatic authority in its purest form is the binary relationship between a charismatic leader and their followers, supplemented by other forms of authority depending on the context of its emergence. But in the digital space, this is more so a ternary relationship. While a traditional charismatic leader might have to deal with other actors that could affect their abilities or the reach of their authority, content creators have to contend with an omnipresent, all-knowing, authority-encompassing entity that is essentially faceless and can remove that charismatic leader at the click of a button. This contender is the social media platform themselves, and they have authority similar to Weber's legal authority as it is structured in the rules that govern the land, or in this case the digital space. When discussing the idea of influencer authority, the asterisks of this authority always need to be

recognized, that an influencer only has this position because they are allowed a platform to cultivate this ability. The platform itself holds most of the cards in this game, and at any time, and with little to no accountability, can remove a creator from this space with any and all progress that has been made being removed as well.

While this is an exaggerated hyperbole of the situation, the reality is still present that platforms call the shots on what is and is not allowed on their platform and can crack down on those who go against it at any time. A perfect example of this is when, in the final days of his presidency, Twitter banned Donald Trump's account on their platform in January of 2021. This also happens to creators themselves. Former kickboxer and social media personality Andrew Tate, was banned from Twitter in 2017, and Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Twitch in August of 2022 for hate speech. In some cases, this could be outside the control of the platforms themselves, like bankruptcy or an app's shutdown/removal, but the inherent power dynamic is still shown. If ByteDance decided to just shut down TikTok today and make it unusable, users would have no way to combat this decision and would lose everything they had done on the platform. In a real example, when competitor Musical.ly was bought out, users had no choice but to switch to using TikTok. Creators rely on these platforms to continue to make their livelihood, more so than traditional media formats, and awareness of what a platform will and will not support can be a huge stress factor in the decision making of content creators, and can completely change how a creator interacts with a platform.

The fact still remains that this relationship is a complete turn in what the classical understanding of charismatic authority is. In its later iterations, charismatic authority has been incorporated into other forms of authority, like bureaucratic forces, incorporating charismatic authority into their governing (or their literal government) which helps exert some control over it and keeps charismatic authority in check. But this is not a check on an influencer's authority, it is a new form of domination, a new kind of authority. Similar to how the influencer dictates the rules of engagement between them and their followers (in most cases), TikTok is entirely in charge of how influencers can operate on their platform with no check to TikTok's authority. Obviously, there is a lot of freedom that content creators and users are able to enjoy here, but that freedom is only there because TikTok allows it, and as shown by the ban of the app in India and

Trump's supposed ban of it in the states, some groups believe that this app may not believe in the same "freedom" that others believe in.

In many ways social media also includes a component of structural power as theorized by Eric Wolf. Wolf saw structural power as "power manifest in relationships that not only operates within settings and domains but also organizes and orchestrates the settings themselves, and that specifies the direction and distribution of energy flows." (Wolf, 1999, pg. 5). The platform itself is that domain being organized by the ruling group. This also goes into the algorithm and FYP itself, as that is the social sphere where users are interacting with content and the platform most regularly, and learning the "acceptable" usage being pushed by the ruling class in an environment constructed *by* the ruling class. It is also thought that Weber's understanding of authority can be added as an institutionalization of structural power (Barrett, Stokholm, and Burke; 2001). In this study, you can also include Weber's legal authority, where TikTok is creating and organizing their domain (platform) and creating authority through "laws" (community guidelines) and kinds of "force" (moderation) to legitimize their control. In many ways, TikTok and social media platforms generally could include a lot of analysis on how they mirror state structures, but it is outside the scope and size of this paper. It is something to consider for future research.

It is important to note the authority that TikTok has is not only what content influencers and users are allowed to post. There are legitimate concerns about what data from the app might be used for, and if the Chinese government has any involvement in that data collection or the inner workings of the app. These will not be focused on in this thesis because of their lack of evidence or study, but a discussion of power structures and control centered around TikTok is at least thought to extend outside of just a digital corporate space. While governments are trying to figure out how they want to approach the growing authority of social media platforms, users are already battling the platforms themselves in how content is being controlled.

Subversion of Moderation

In chapter 1, I discussed how TikTok moderation works in practice and the ways they might choose to punish users who break their rules. Account's having videos removed or being

banned is a concern by users, and while they can appeal these decisions, TikTok is not required to give accounts back, nor do they have to allow the ability to appeal punishments for breaking their rules. Even if creators start to rebel against the platform, with the sheer size of TikTok and how much it is still growing, TikTok can willingly ignore the dissenters and it might not hurt their success for a short time, but may eventually come back to punish them if not addressed eventually. This has been happening on YouTube for many years now, with many creators calling for changes to the platform's policies as demonetization continues to harm creators ability to make money, but the problems persist. This has hurt YouTube in the long run, with its popularity dwindling over the years and competition sprouting up (Twitch and TikTok), much of that unaddressed dissent can be detrimental to a platform's future.

Even in the short term, while dissent is being ignored by the platform, the fear of being punished for content still looms. As a result, subverting moderation is a major part of user interaction on TikTok, especially in the psychedelic space. Psychedelic influencers deal with a much higher level of moderation on the platform compared to your average user because of the implication that they, according to TikTok's policy, create "content that depicts or promotes drugs, drug consumption, or encourages others to make, use, or trade drugs or other controlled substances," (TikTok, 2022).

Psychedelic influencers give a better understanding of how users attempt to take back some form of control over their content despite the authority that a platform holds over them, and there is consistency between psychedelic influencers and more general TikTok creators and users. By using this fringe group as a lens, I can illustrate how this imbalance of power between users and the platform exists, and how users continue to combat it regardless. In this case, subversive practices are methods that the community uses to work around moderation and continue creating content they like. Much of this works by using nuanced language, misdirection, and tongue-in-cheek humor. Often the goal is making content fly under the radar of AI moderation while still being as close to what the creator actually wants as possible. One interlocutor shared "...to not be [moderated], you have to be a bit more implicit with the way you say things, you can't be too explicit. I'm not exactly explicit about the things I'll describe."

One starting point is how content creators subvert moderation when the video, audio, writing, and voice over elements of a video are being monitored. Video is quite simple, large content creators focused on psychedelics do not make videos of substances, or take videos consuming them. This removes the possibility of something being tagged for those reasons, and in most cases videos are just of the creator themselves talking.

In regards to audio, writing, and voice, much of this comes down to the language creators use when they talk. Many words are believed to be flagged by TikTok to be forced under moderation, words that are associated with illegal activity, like "drugs" or "murder", but many creators also believes words generally associated with bad things are labeled similarly, like "died" or "death". The voiceover function will not even say "offensive words" if creators try to add them for a video, which provides some evidence that TikTok wants to control the discussion of certain topics. Recently, some users are beginning to believe that mentioning other platforms, like saying "YouTube", is being flagged by TikTok to not support their competitors. There are also nuisance to what videos are actually affected by moderation in the psychedelic space. With videos that just discuss the general idea of taking psychedelics, the effects of the substances, or how to be safe while taking them, moderation seems more inconsistent and random according to interlocutors. However, as mentioned above, videos that are more explicit about the substances, or show something that could or could not be a psychedelic, moderation seems to be more harsh.

While many influencers will not avoid saying these words in their own voice, which might come back to the AI transcription not being the best and many creators not facing punishment for saying them, most creators want to try and avoid writing these words in any of the video creator tools. To get around this, creators will purposely mis-caption their videos or the voiceover function with words that do not seem to be flagged by the algorithm but provide the same function. One of the most popular examples across TikTok is trying to say the word "died". Rather than having the voiceover say "died" or adding the word to their captions, the creator will most popularly use "unalived" instead (example in the captions of this video: https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTRxGrKAy/). Obviously, this gets across the same idea, and is usually paired with some obvious context to the true meaning. Obviously, these loopholes can be patched by programmers to just include new words like unalive to their AI. However, users can

always just switch to another subversive word in its place. As most often a real person is saying the actual word alongside this deception anyway, users will usually pick up on the true meaning quite quickly.

In psychedelic spaces, this also extends into other words more specifically used in these spaces. Words like Mushrooms, LSD, Acid, and Trip are also believed to be heavily moderated by TikTok AI. The specifics of how the community goes about this cannot be discussed in exact detail, protecting the ability of interlocutors to create content, but generally, similar methods are used as discussed above with words like death. One interlocutor shared how their videos have changed in the face of moderation:

[my videos are] getting [to the point] that you know why you're here. The way that I'm talking, you know what I'm talking about if you're here, I don't need to say anymore. I don't need to be specific even if it means these videos don't blow up because they're not kept catchy or flashy.

In spelling out words, misspelling is often used to be as close to the actual word as possible but still fools the algorithm. This also extends into the ways that psychedelic influencers apply hashtags to their video's description, to mark them and have them show up with other creator's content as well. Using this method, the point of the video is still carried through and no information or context is withheld from the viewer, but reasons to be moderated are being withheld from the platform itself.

An example of this is the hashtag #TripTok. "TripTok" is the name commonly used by some creators on the app to describe the platform's psychedelic community, and was used as a hashtag at one time in order to associate content with the psychedelic community, but is now hidden from the platform. If you use the search interface on TikTok and try to look up "TripTok" you get a message saying "This phrase may be associated with behavior or content that violates our guidelines. Promoting a safe and positive experience is TikTok's top priority." Interestingly, you can make videos under the TripTok hashtag, although it will not give autofill suggestions for it like the interface usually does for other possible hashtags. While you cannot search it on TikTok, if you find a video with the hashtag TripTok you can go to the page for the popular

videos under it or use a link to it (https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTRxGuJMM/). Currently it has over 30 million views and the top videos are a mix of fairly recent ones and some that are many months old, so TikTok does not seem to be taking down every video under that hashtag. However, many content creators instead use other variants of "TripTok" with misspellings which the platform does not block in its search function. The most popular version of this misspelling has around six times the number of views of the original #TripTok, currently sitting at 178.4 million views. Other kinds of hashtags incorporate misspellings or short forms of specific substances, like mushrooms and acid.

It calls into question, why keep these at all? TikTok can always completely remove them, so why not? Is it because just a hashtag is not technically against the rules, just specific videos that might be in the topic are? But why block the ability to get to the #TripTok page but keep the page up? Is it for the views and revenue they get from viewers, or because they know it will not really stop the content to begin with? It is impossible to say exactly, but there clearly is not a scorched earth policy when it comes to breaking the rules on TikTok, and it might be an important topic in the future to figure out why they do not rule with an iron fist.

Other ways of subversion might be in the actual production of the videos or trying to be explicitly non-illegal. Here, content creators will create videos that try to be very explicit about what they are talking about, but it is really a tongue-in-cheek reference to other practices TikTok would not want them to share. It could be performing actions that could be used for illicit actions but trying to state clearly it is for other purposes, or speaking in a way or using body language to convey the intended message while saying otherwise. Things like pausing before saying certain words, so followers can fill in the blank, or more cliché methods like winking into the camera to convey the deception.

The best example of this would be from one of my interlocutors, who made a video about how to safely store mushrooms for their viewers. In the video, the interlocutor made it clear that this process was meant to be used for cooking, and storing edible mushrooms for long periods of time so they do not go bad before you decide to cook them. In the video, they demonstrated how to store them, and used a common edible mushroom from the grocery store to show the proper

methods. The intention of these types of videos are clear and direct, simple advice for everyday tasks like storing cooking ingredients, and should not be treated differently on a platform that is meant to approach each individual video with moderation. Given the context of the other forms of content a creator has made, this video could be seen in a context the platform does not want to support, but it is an effective way to create content that goes around the scrutiny of the automatic moderation.

This aspect actually goes into the final portion of how to subvert moderation, and that is appeals and human input. As discussed, moderation is now done automatically by an AI system, but a punishment given can always be appealed by a creator. When an appeal is made, the creator's case is sent to a real employee of TikTok who reviews the case, the appeal, and can repeal or continue a punishment. In many ways this is not a subversive practice of TikTok in its entirety, just the auto moderation. Sometimes users are wrongly punished and they would like their punishment reversed. However, it seems likely many would submit a repeal regardless of breaking these guidelines or not, with the hopes that human input will revert the action anyway, or give a less harsh punishment. In situations like this, the biggest subversion tactic is feigned ignorance, trying to appeal to the human input that could overturn their punishment and acting like they did no wrong.

The above story of the mushroom storing video is a perfect example. That video was actually taken down for breaking community guidelines. The interlocutor submitted an appeal saying the video was cooking advice and the mushrooms were common cooking ingredients and the video should not have been taken down. The human moderator who took up the case agreed and let the video go back on the platform. It could be argued by TikTok that given the context of the account and the possible intent of being used in an illegal context, it should be taken down regardless. However, judging things by assumed intent does not seem like a fair way of dealing with individual videos. Additionally, it makes you question why TikTok would not do so when they clearly have a position of authority above content creators. With large, verified creators it is one thing, but most of the interlocutors here are relatively small, but they are still getting "a pass" in some regard. It is hard to know the intention behind all this inconsistency. Regardless, the mushroom storing video was restored and the punishment reversed. In this way, creators can

use appealing to human input as a way to go against auto moderation, both its mistakes and its justified actions, and use subversive tactics in order to forgo any punishment. Subversion, both in the creation of videos and appeals to authority, are done in an attempt to balance the power dynamics of influencers to the platforms they chose to operate on.

One reason for this might be tied to another Foucauldian topic, governmentality. Governmentality is about the passive ways of control that a government employs to teach the society to accept their governance, education and rehabilitation may be examples. This idea is discussed by Francis Fukuyama who wrote that "A liberal state is ultimately a limited state, with government activity strictly bounded by a sphere of individual liberty," (1995, pg. 357). Also important is the inclusion of autonomy and self-governance to bring the people's objectives and thoughts in line with that of the ruling government, and lead to an internalized rational and legitimization of the state. Nikolas Rose discusses how governments in the 19th century "[constructed] a web of technologies for fabricating and maintaining those very forms of social subjectivity and self-government upon which the exercise of political power was premised," (1999, pg. 227). Moderation is also a tool of teaching self-governance. And in some ways, that mentality has been instilled in users on the app. Users are hyper-aware of the ways that moderation takes place, and actively change the ways they act to fit within it.

Obviously this is also a subversive practice, where they use this awareness to further go against the platforms rather than just do what the platform wants. But in other ways it is not. Interlocutors have also become aware of what they absolutely cannot do in their videos. One interlocutor said if they showed any kind of mushroom, even common cooking ones, on TikTok, they would face some kind of moderation, and have instead shifted that kind of content onto other platforms. One interlocutor said, "[moderation is] a real threat in the back of my mind, which is why I have to be so delicate with the way I phrase things." Other content creators have completely shifted their format because of constant punishments from moderation. Popular user @thescumbagdad (4.4 million followers) created a platform based on skits playing as the user's irresponsible and neglectful criminal father, and would do videos about taking his "child" to drug deals, kidnappings, and assassinations (https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTRxGm66o/). He has made videos talking about how he constantly faced moderation, and has almost completely stopped

making his scumbag dad series, and turned to making "low effort" content instead because he is actually seeing success that way (https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTRxGfbKF/). Ironic as his "scumbag dad" persona started as a parody of another TikTok user, @yourkoreandad, who made the format of being his follower's "Korean dad" (https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTRxGUDDk/).

So in some ways, it seems that moderation has caused a mentality shift within users, but due to generally using force to do so, rather than creating an acceptance of the ruling platform, users are resentful and either try to subvert or reprimand it. Either way, TikTok may see this as a success, both in making inappropriate content less common on the platform, and also limiting the visibility of dissent creators by forcing them to subvert moderation efforts, which can also make it harder to find new fans and engage with their existing ones. It also means the users can continue to have a rebellious voice on the platform and try to create change. This may be the reason TikTok does not have a scorched earth policy for dissenters. The longer they can keep an eye on them the more they can be familiar with the current methods of subversion. Keep your enemies closer, as the saying goes.

Permeability and Gaining Authority

Finally, I return to the discussion from chapter 3 on how authority in online spaces is organized in a hegemonic structure, with platforms at the top, then content creators, and finally the general user base. The final note to make on this topic is the permeability that exists between the different levels in this space. The fact is, any user can reach into the influencer/content creator level, and most of the members of the "creator" class have done exactly that. Many times, the content creators on a platform were at one time content consumers, or were making content that was not doing well and eventually garnered followers. All the interlocutors in this project just decided to start making videos for fun, and never expected to actually have a followership that wanted to continue watching what they were doing. The chance of gaining a large following is slim, but the possibility is there. Similarly, a content creator can always quit and decide to stop making content. While they might be recognized in everyday life and be remembered for what they did, they never have to create ever again if they so choose, and can somewhat dip back into the general user class (although may be in a limbo state of infamy).

Compare this to the highest level of TikTok itself, or any social media platform, where the permeability of getting into that class is basically zero. Regardless of the fact that this is more of an entity and not an actual career or position, the number of people who actually have the authority to make true changes on TikTok is incredibly small compared to the one billion users who are on the app monthly. Even if someone chose to pursue a job at ByteDance in China or its overseas offices, most would never even be close to a position that could actually make a difference on a large scale. What other options exist to try and exert influence on this space? Boycott? That has worked for some things at a corporate level in the digital age. Video Game Fans boycotted the micro-transactions in Game Publisher's *EA* release of Star Wars BattleFront 2 in 2017, fans boycotted the art direction for the Sonic the Hedgehog movie for how it made the character look in 2020, both of these saw real change happen to address these issues. Could a digital revolution happen, an overthrow of a multinational corporation or social platform to implement real change? Would the word "revolution" even convey what this sort of protest would be?

The authority of these platforms, their outreach, and their presence in everyday life is growing more and more, and replacing them is hard. YouTube came to the scene in 2005, and has continued to be the largest, long-form video sharing platform since. Facebook, now Meta, is one of the largest companies in the world and has two of the largest social media platforms, Facebook and Instagram, and their apps like Messenger have become one of the dominant forms of communication in many parts of the world, like Norway. Other platforms like Twitter and Snapchat have also come to be common on many phones across the world. Some world governments are try to control these apps, but besides India banning TikTok and China's internet firewall blocking access of their citizens to much of Western internet, there have not been much happen to actually stop how these sites treat their users, just how they treat their user's data in relation to government authorities. Power is still a fundamental subject of analysis in anthropology, but its manifestations in digital space are lacking analysis. As anthropology moves forward, it might do us well to pay more attention to these spaces lest the discipline lose out on something along the way.

Credibility

The last chapter sought to understand how authority works on TikTok, and also how influencers have “entertainer authority”. This chapter will focus on that authority, and how creators are able to gain it by cultivating a following. Specifically, one of the most important things to understand about influencing, referring back to the definition from earlier, is that influencer is “a title that is given credibility by their followers who trust in their authority based on a belief in an influencer’s expertise.” Obviously, it is this study’s belief that intent can be the determining factor in labeling influencers, and this concept of credibility can be used to better understand how much authority someone has or how “good” they are at influencing; A metric for a successful versus unsuccessful influencer. Credibility can be thought of as the acceptance by a followership that an influencer is an authority within the topic they choose to make content on, as well as why a followership might choose to enter a power dynamic with them. A followership willingly engages with a content creator, through actions like watching their videos, following their social media accounts, and donating to them. This gives creators more credibility as an influencer, and more specifically for this project, as an activist. So how can anthropologists understand and “show” credibility in online spaces? How can it be cultivated and created? And how can online credibility be extended outside of digital space, or, vice versa, how can outside credibility be brought into digital spaces?

Another word that was thought of for this phenomenon was “legitimacy”, as Weber defines legitimacy in relation to his three types of authority, and it seems appropriate to first understand his definition as I did with authority. He describes legitimacy as “The basis of every system of authority, and correspondingly of every kind of willingness to obey, is a belief, a belief by virtue of which persons exercising authority are lent prestige,” (Weber, 1964, pg. 382). Weber’s definition of legitimacy hinges on two concepts, that authority is *accepted* and *obeyed* (Smith, 1970, pg. 17). In influencing, however, that concept of obedience is missing. Weber is working under the idea of obedience to the laws established by authority. While influencers do try to cultivate an acceptance of authority, followers do not have rules set by the influencer that they generally obey, even if they have accepted that authority. You can see this in chat messages

during live streams on platforms like Twitch, where larger creators utilize trusted users as moderators to keep the chat in control because they often do not follow the chat's "rules".

This is also shown in the lack of obedience to calls of support. Creator's will often ask their viewers to go support them on other platforms, donate to them, and buy their merchandise. However, the number of people who actually support a creator is always going to be significantly lower than their followers on a platform, especially if money is involved. For interlocutors in this project, it has usually been less than 5% for monetary support. One interlocutor of this project has over 500,000 followers, but only gets monthly donations from a handful of users. Clearly obedience is something that is rare in content creation, so it seemed right to find new definitions to better fit influencers. For that reason, Credibility in this project is defined as *the acceptance of entertainer authority, a metric that can be measured through their success as a content creator, which allows them to further grow their content, have more opportunities for creating capital, and therefore more chances to expand that authority.*

Credibility as a Metric of Success

In many ways, the topic of credibility heavily relies on the understanding of size and popularity in social media. In content creation more generally, the goal (in terms of profile growth) will always be to have more people watch your content, have more people follow your content consistently, and in influencing that extends to having more people interact with your content and contributing to whatever you are trying to influence them on. In the traditional sense, this has been understood as contributing to products that an influencer has made, or is being paid to promote to their followers. In activist influencing, the "product" is an idea, an ideology, or a belief, like psychedelic freedom, that the influencer is trying to promote to their followers. With a larger fan base, a larger outreach, and generally a larger social media footprint (how well known and ubiquitous someone might be to a platform), a content creator or influencer is better able to promote their own growth and gain contributions from their followers.

These aspects can be seen as metrics of credibility, measures of how good a creator is at getting fans and views. This gives them credibility in two different forms. First, public recognizability; because they are known to a growing number of fans, they continue to become

more well-known. This can happen both in their general community of content they create, and wider spaces like the platform they inhabit or extend into recognizability as a “household name”, becoming so well known that strangers are familiar with who creators are without interacting with their content. Additionally, this creates economic credibility, where a growing fan base allows creators to make money, both from the platforms they inhabit through ads, and direct donations from fans or merchandise sales. This can support further creation and committing more time to creation rather than their jobs outside of influencing/content creation, and some may be able to fully focus on content creation as a career with enough success.

In many ways, gaining credibility is reminiscent of Bourdieu’s idea of capital. Bourdieu defined capital as “accumulated labor which, when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor,” (Bourdieu, 1986, pg. 15). Influencing and content creation is a more directly recognizable form of capital accumulation (follower counts going up), and therefore raising social standings. In online influencing, capital is directly related to the size of an influencer’s followers, and therefore their credibility. Followers are the basis for how creators make their money (economic capital). It expands their social networks, not only with their followers but also other content creators who they might work with, or being recognized by businesses as their following grows (social capital).

Cultural capital is a little more abstract, but given the state of influencing and the role it plays in digital space, it might be that content creators are creating cultural capital by changing the public’s perception of their jobs. Bourdieu broke cultural capital as the qualifications of someone, usually this is based on their education, knowledge, and skills. He further broke cultural capital into three kinds. While embodied cultural capital, cultural behaviors and preferences built up from socialization, and objectified cultural capital, the collecting and using of cultural goods, do not seem as affected by this new influencer space (no more than other successful entertainment jobs or public persona), institutionalized cultural capital might be. Institutional capital is based on an institution's recognition of a person's cultural capital, like a University awarding a degree. For many years, traditional entertainers had (at least an illusion of)

a certain amount of credibility for their qualifications, institutionally recognized by the studios or labels that were paying them.

You now have an industry of (mostly) young creators who have the opportunity to make a lot of money, or have impact on a lot of followers, and they do not have any traditional credentials to show their qualifications in doing so. But, influencers are now being recognized and given "professional credentials" by working with large companies in sponsorships and turning the activity into more of a "job" which might permeate into the public perspective. Ten years ago many creators would joke about how they needed to get a "real job", but it has now become something that people aspire to do as a career one day. So the ways that cultural capital is being accumulated by these creators is from working towards making their industry more credible and accepted. Activist influencing might be doing a similar thing, by taking on a role that has been dominated by political speakers/ideological commentators and transforming who the public sees as an authority on ideological issues.

Gaining credibility can lead to many things. First, it can give internal credibility to a creator, seeing success and starting to make money from content, or getting direct donations from followers, can help a creator start to believe in themselves and dedicate more time and effort into creating new content. Next, gaining online recognizability can help to further garner a following. With almost all social media apps using some kind of virality algorithm, online growth is a snowball effect. Having more followers and videos that are doing well will lead it to being recommended to more users outside of that follower base and further grow a profile. Additionally, other users may learn about a creator as they grow without actually interacting with their content, and may seek them out rather than just finding them through random recommendations. General admiration from viewers is also a side effect of this credibility. Content creators will get recognized in real life, get heartfelt messages from followers, and have avid followers that genuinely care about their well-being and the content they are creating.

Finally, gaining followers and credibility can lead to being recognized and sought out by businesses. This can lead to things like sponsorships and brand deals, which I have discussed already, but it can also lead to recognition from the platforms themselves. Many platforms have

partnership programs to pay creators for their content. This varies from platform to platform, on TikTok it is called the "Creator Fund", other sites like YouTube and Twitch call it a "Partner Program". Only after being invited to these sorts of programs are creators able to start making revenue from a platform. This recognition can also lead to creators collaborating with the platforms as well, either with events the platform is doing, or producing online content that is directly supported from the platform itself.

How and Why Influencers Gain Credibility in Digital Space

Thus, not only can credibility be used as a tool to understand how much authority and success a creator has, but it can also be a way of understanding how they can have an impact. The way this manifests on TikTok is similar to other social media sites, it is about drawing people to your content. With activist influencers, and all influencers in general, there are other layers to this. When discussing topics that an activist influencer creates content on, they need to convey an understanding and knowledge on the subject, as my influencer definition states. This competence is sometimes explicitly expressed by an influencer, and while not explicitly recognized by their followers, it is the basis for why followers want to continue watching content. A creator needs to demonstrate they have some form of credentials that gives them justification in discussing this topic and "teaching" it, which goes back to the discussion of institutionalized cultural capital. This could even be shown in more traditional forms of influencing. The idea of a "Fitness model", or influencers who focus on posting about health or their workouts, they show their experience and knowledge on the topic of fitness by showing how physically fit they are and their physique.

Psychedelic influencing is no different. Sometimes this is explicitly stated by interlocutors. Sometimes it will be experiential, saying how they have done this many trips or had these trip experiences/used these substances. Many will do what they call a "Trip Report" where they have done a trip on a particular substance and discuss the things they felt or the unique things they experienced compared to other substances. Other times, the knowledge is based on other credentials, like my interlocutor who does academic research has degrees and research papers as credentials. It could also be an understanding that is built up over time, by

general engagement in topics and creating content in their space, creating recognition and credibility from consistency.

The recognition of this knowledge by a followership can be seen in social metrics such as followers or likes. If a majority of content by an individual is based on these activist topics, as is a majority of their views, the reason people are following the account is because they agree or recognize this individual as an "authority" or contributor to this topic, and are releasing valuable information about it. This explanation makes it seem more structured and thought out on the part of a followership than it really is. In reality, many times following a creator is a much more casual endeavor, "I liked this, I want to see more of it", but with something that has a political or ideological background, there is some implication of agreement or recognition of knowledge. Extending this process to these extremes just helps to further understand how these manifestations work.

Credibility, however, does not just have to come from overall recognizability. It does not have to be entirely congruent to views, likes, or follower counts because credibility can be very real in smaller communities where someone is well-known. The same way that in some music scenes, there might be a band that everyone who is into that type of music knows, but outsiders have never heard of. In these cases, influencers might have a huge amount of influence and authority, but only in very specific groups because of their relatively niche fame. So follower count is not always an accurate way to understand credibility, and exceptions are always present.

Credibility can also be further cultivated outside of the digital influencing and content creation space, which can then reciprocate back to online credibility. This mostly takes place at a higher number of followers, where content creators might start working in traditional entertainment industries; music, movies, TV, sports, and gain more of a following through these endeavors. Popular Youtuber FilthyFrank went on to start a music career under the name Joji with 34 million monthly listeners on Spotify, which is significantly more than his old YouTube channel has today (7 million). Popular Vine creator and Youtuber Logan Paul started starring in movies, later moved onto professional boxing and is now in the World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE). These outside endeavors help gain more notoriety in the real world, which can then

reciprocate back into more digital success. For psychedelic influencers, this is not really possible as the barrier to entry for these outside industries is too high, but it is a possibility for other influencers or activist influencers to take part in more traditional "industries" to further legitimize themselves. Popular prison reform TikTok user @Second_Chancer recently launched a non-profit to try and help reformed inmates gain access to early release and parole, as well as help keep them out of the prison system long term (https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTRxGYoGK/). Working in this NGO space not only works to give Second_Chancer more credibility in the space of prison reform activist influencing, but also allows him to use his understanding and content to benefit people, and possibly reciprocate back into further credibility both on and offline.

Additionally, academic research projects like this project lead to more credibility for activist influencers and influencers more generally. Here, it lends credibility to the interlocutors of this project, as members of some kind of movement and recognition of their contribution to social change. More generally, a push towards a better understanding of online content creators, their impacts, and authority can lead to more research, a better understanding, and more credibility for their endeavors. It can take it out from "just someone making videos on the internet" to something more important and transformative, or lead to being taken "more seriously".

How Traditional Fame Effects Online Credibility

Credibility in online spaces is also something that can be achieved easily by already having it outside of these spaces. If you look for the most followed accounts on most social media sites, influencers or social media content creators are not at the top. On Instagram you have top international football player Cristiano Ronaldo, Twitter you have former U.S. president Barack Obama. YouTube was for a long time dominated by an original creator occupying the top slot, but in 2019 Swedish Youtuber PewDiePie, who held the record of subscribers for over 5 years, was surpassed by Indian music conglomerate T-Series, who continues to be the top slot. TikTok has largely avoided this consistency, with the current top slot being held by Khabane Lame or @khaby.lame, and a more traditional celebrity does not appear until the 5th slot with actor Will Smith, with a large difference between the two (148 million vs. 72 million). However,

it is consistent that traditional celebrities will still have millions of followers if they have an official social media account. Many do create unique videos and engage with TikTok and its trends, actor Will Smith and Singer Jason Derulo do so quite regularly, but other accounts, like Justin Bieber as an example, use the app to post videos that could be on any social media site. Having already achieved celebrity status, not only is gaining followers and recognizability easier, but so is making money on the platform from advertisements, getting verified by the platform to be marked as the real celebrity, or getting brand deals. And this refers back to the attention economy in a sense, because this further shows how "offline and online activities are mutually constitutive" (Pedersen, Albris, and Seaver; 2021, pg. 314). The way influence and credibility works in either the digital or real world can bleed into one another, and the separation between traditional celebrities and famous creators is thinner by the day as traditional ones are coming into digital spaces, and digital ones are expanding into traditional celebrity status.

Credibility can also be acquired by being seen as tangentially related to traditional celebrities. One recent trend is using the concept of "6 degrees of separation", a popular showcase saying that any two people on the planet can be connected by 6 different steps of relations between people. For some time in the spring of 2022, a very common version was to connect the content creator to a famous person using pictures of that user with celebrities, that celebrity with another celebrity, and so on. This usually also involves fan interaction, where users will comment who they want the creator to connect themselves with in comments like "No way he could do the Queen of England," and then the creator will do a video reply doing just that. Some accounts on TikTok are entirely devoted to this concept, like user @bb_malloy, who has 330k followers and one video that went viral with almost 14 million views (https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTRQdDCPJ/).

Another example of this might be Celebrity impersonators, who have already made a career from acting like celebrities, and using that celebrity's credibility and recognition to their advantage. This is also seen occasionally on TikTok. User @mayilong0 (@Yi long ma), is a Chinese TikTok user who bears a striking resemblance to billionaire Elon Musk, with his handle ,Yi Long Ma, meant to be a Chinese phonetic pronunciation of the billionaire's name. His content consists of standing in front of Tesla's or wearing t-shirts of companies owned by Musk

and saying “Hi everyone, I am Yi Long Ma,” and then going on to say compliments to the viewer or give advice or talk about how good his English is. With just 27 videos posted since December 20th of 2021, the account has gotten 565k followers, 9.8 million likes, and most videos get at least a million views with several beyond 10 million (https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTRxG9knJ/)

This is not to say that this is just piggybacking off the coattails of the famous, content like this can take some real dedication from content creators. The 6 degrees of separation genre requires research and knowledge on who has met or worked with who to make these connections. It is, however, important to note how its relevance is extended by using actors, musicians, or whoever, that are household names. That relation helps make this a more entertaining experience and contributes to a viewer’s image of that content creator, thus leading to more credibility.

Danger of Credibility for Followers and Influencers

Within this understanding of credibility, there are also important side effects that need to be discussed. Similar to the discussion in Chapter 4, credibility can be abused and that is an important part of understanding what online popularity can entail. Top creators can make a lot of money, and more credibility and recognizability can lead to larger deals and sponsorships. However, content creators can always take up sponsorships and promote products that are less than legitimate, or straight up harmful. For many years, celebrities like the Kardashians, or daytime talk show host Dr. Oz, have been criticized for promoting “miracle weight-loss products", and similar things have happened among fitness influencers. Another example might be shady promotions, or content creators not disclosing that they are doing a paid advertisement to their viewers. Back in 2016, the video game Counter Strike: Global Offensive saw a scandal involving online gambling of in-game items. Content creators were being sponsored by the sites, and were gambling with “house money”, or funds provided for them from the sites themselves, and playing with rigged results to better promote the sites. There were several lawsuits in the U.S. regarding this scandal, and the game’s developers, Valve Software, and live-streaming platforms like Twitch, tried to crack down and stop these practices.

Another area of abuse could be in directly abusing fans of a creator. Some fans will have a very deep emotional connection to content creators they watch, and creators have taken advantage of the opportunity to use their viewers. Grooming underage fans is something that has been seen several times in content creation communities, where well known creators use their status to take advantage of younger viewers. With online spaces usually being the scene for these acts rather than physical spaces, and the difficulties of taking proper legal action because of state boundaries or country borders, most often these acts are judged and punished by the public. Posting screenshots of private messages, recounting stories of what someone said in voice calls, creators posting apology videos, are all common tropes of these revelations. As mentioned previously when discussing cancel culture, sometimes this could result in an irreparable loss of followers that a content creator is never able to fully recover, and for others it blows over after a couple months like nothing happened. With this you also cover the questions of true accusations, victims being scrutinized and questioned, or who is and is not stepping forward and why.

It is obviously an extreme example and most creators will never do something like this, but it is a real possibility that has been seen many times, and it shows the level of abuse that some creators have already done. You can find many other examples or creators being violent in public to fans, infidelity scandals, taking advantage of friends and family. The dangers of abuse are very real in all positions of power, and content creation is no different. One interlocutor shared his understanding of this ability to abuse power:

When you're an influencer… you not only have the respect of these people, but you also have their admiration… You have this sort of dominant force in every sort of interaction with people in a way. And it's like it's coded. It's really cool to have that, but you know Spider-Man, with great power comes great responsibility.

Finally, what about how credibility affects psychedelic influencers and what they do, and this is a danger to both the influencer themselves, and the influence they have. For everyone involved in this project, and most psychedelic users worldwide, this is an illegal activity and they could be prosecuted for their possession and usage of these substances. By creating an online platform and being so public about their interests and about their usage, there is a certain level of

risk creators put themselves in. It is one of the reasons why, despite posts being considered public domain, none of the interlocutor's accounts are named here. While it is not really a fear that many of the interlocutors had, more so worried about their legal identities being public online or their TikTok profiles being banned, it is still a risk they take on and it is why some interlocutors do not use their real name on their profiles.

On top of that, their content can have a side effect of having a negative influence on their followers. While across the board the interlocutors believe that not everyone should take psychedelics, and they are most worried about promoting safety for people who are already planning on using them, the possibility of accidentally convincing someone to try them and something going wrong is a reason for concern. What effect do these types of videos have on their followers, and with TikTok not having an age-restriction or the ability for creators themselves to age-restrict, what if a child comes across these videos, or someone decides to try psychedelics because of these creators and something goes wrong (Legally, mentally, physically)?

So credibility is not just a demonstration of how many followers someone has, but it is also a complex interweb of relations to a community and the public, responsibility, and understanding the ability to misuse the authority that comes with it. Credibility is what allows influencers to do what the name suggests, it allows them to influence the public and lends them to be more approachable by the economic powers that have so often defined their existence. But beyond that, it also lends activist influencers the chance to create change inside this digital community, and help the public develop a better understanding based on a creator's (perceived) knowledge. Along the way, it is important for not only the influencers themselves to keep in mind their credibility and the authority it lends them, but also those who wish to follow them (or study them) as researchers continue to understand both their contributions and their problems.

Concluding Remarks

This analysis has by no means been extensive. Much has been lost along the way in creating an understanding of what it means to be an influencer, and how psychedelic influencers specifically contribute and are affected by this digital space. This thesis did not have the opportunity to discuss things like: The structures of platforms and how they are similar to state structures, a more in depth analysis of the economics of influencing, the ways that influencing is highly based on the interaction of multiple different platforms at once, or the ways that competition and setting oneself apart from other creators is paramount to finding success on the platform. These are just a few that were considered for inclusion, but limited space meant it was not possible.

However, the hope is that this was an extensive breakdown of not only what TikTok is and how it works, but also an important discussion of some of the most basic, but important, contexts that allow for influencers to have authority and use it to meet their goals. Most importantly, the hope is that this thesis has been detailed enough to explain this complex world in a fashion that even those unfamiliar with TikTok, or social media in general, can understand the world that has been studied during this Master's. With that, here are some final thoughts and takeaways from the project.

Online Posts and Anonymity: How Public is Public Domain?

The first takeaway from this project is how anthropologists decide to treat the anonymity of public online posts. My interlocutors were users who are creating posts that are not restricted for viewing in any meaningful way and are quite easy to access and find, but to what extent is it okay to put a spotlight on them? Obviously the interlocutors of this project were anonymous, but was that because they were interlocutors, despite doing nothing different than the many references that have been made to other social media personalities in this piece? Is it because of the legality of psychedelic usage, something their content focuses on specifically? What if someone was interviewed that was not making content about psychedelics, or anything illegal, could they be specifically identified because they are posting in the public domain? How public

is the internet when there are millions, if not billions, of different things being posted every day? All the accounts or personalities referenced here have hundreds of thousands, if not millions or tens of millions, of followers, is that somehow more “public” than someone who might post videos but barely gets any recognition? Are small posts still public and can be discussed as such? What about their followers, who comment and interact with these content creators all the time, would identifying content creators somehow affect the identification of their fans as well? How do you get the consent of a followership?

Obviously there are no easy answers to these questions, and like most ethical boundaries it is something that has to be answered somewhere on a spectrum. For the most part it is up to the researcher to make these choices in a way that seems legitimate, especially in a space that is so under-researched in social anthropology as social media influencers. It is an important dialogue to continue to have, and it is worthy to discuss how, although publicly posting on the internet, the total amount of information and posts across the internet does lend some form of anonymity to users who are making “public” posts. It is a sort of “mass anonymity”, when surrounded by millions or billions of other posts or videos, an individual user is still hidden from view from most people. Just food for thought.

Familiarity of Content Creation

A final challenge that presented itself is tied to both the community of psychedelic influencing, but also influencing more generally. Knowing other members of your community is commonplace in internet content creation, and project-like collaborations is an opportunity where two creators can work together on content that can benefit both of their platforms. In the psychedelic community, which is relatively small in terms of successful content creators and this project touched a wide section of, the likelihood of one creator involved in the project knowing another one is quite high. In one case, an interlocutor of mine had another meeting after our initial interview which turned out to be with another content creator who was already part of the project. They had been discussing possibly meeting up in real life, and it so happened to come up that they had both been working on the same psychedelic influencer project. So outside of the researchers intentions, connections to interlocutors can manifest in the real world and remove a portion of that anonymity between interlocutors. In similar cases, almost all of the people who

took part in the project actually wanted to know who the other creators were, and were okay with having their involvement be divulged to other creators, because of their shared community and usually knowing each other or having talked to one another already. It was a surreal experience and something that had to be discussed ethically with my supervisor, because it seemed like a breach of a clear tenet of the discipline. But for many, why would they not be comfortable? They already share so much about themselves with random strangers on the internet, who cares if they share their involvement in one project with other content creators in their community?

There is an important consideration with this. This familiarity between interlocutors and their openness in their involvement meant that there was a relaxing of rules for talking about interlocutors of this project. This could lead to a researcher divulging information that an interlocutor did not want to be shared with another participant, and while it may not jeopardize that individual's career or personal information, it still breaches the privacy of their conversations with me. This was a mistake that was made in this project and had to be reconciled, with the discussion being removed from interview recordings and all data available to both researcher and participant. It is an unfortunate incident and raises more questions about balancing the wants of interlocutors with the boundaries of doing academic work.

Maybe allowing for any information to be shared is a mistake, even if all parties involved are okay, because of the possibility of making a mistake that puts interlocutors at risk. Sharing who is taking part in the project is one thing, but more in depth information that might have been shared with the researcher in confidence could slip out into another interview where it has some relevance. If sharing that information was sufficiently anonymized it could be okay, but because of the openness in who is taking part in the project, it can compound into accidentally discussing personal information of a participant. This is especially important when many of them know each other on some level.

Science Communications and where to go from here

To echo the sentiment from one of the interlocutors from chapter 4, “one of the biggest problems in academia is science communications…”. While that statement was from the point of view of someone in a different field, the sentiment extends beyond and definitely pertains to

anthropology. The social sciences can also struggle with trying to interact with the public in a very social way. It feels as if it sometimes gets lost in the shuffle of dealing with the requirements for research positions, funding, department boards, publications and book writing. Not only does that hurt the ability for anthropology's findings to reach the public, but also means anthropology cannot reach the young minds who might one day run this discipline in our place.

This, however, is not due to a lack of engagement by the public. People seem inherently curious, and science is something that internet culture and content creation has been making enjoyable for years. Shows like MythBusters saw huge popularity in the early 2000s to 2010s, and online content on YouTube, like Vsauce with 18 million subscribers and professionally produced series MindField, shows that science entertainment can find success. Creators like Aslan Pahari (@AslanPahari: https://www.tiktok.com/@aslanpahari?_t=8XH8r0k8yYU&_r=1) on TikTok are making content talking about history and correcting other creator's videos that contain historical inaccuracies, and has over 5 million followers. So the public wants to engage with these things, but the sciences are failing to give them that content. Why not try and do this anthropologically?

This is not to downplay what a colossal effort this would be. This is a huge creative endeavor that has taken some creators years to perfect (Vsauce) or a whole team of producers and employees (MythBusters). Not to mention that this process has a constant battle between making digestible content but also including a true scientific process, but is not anthropology perfect for that? A discipline characterized by personal experiences and vignettes? Some great examples of this are already present within this very department. In February of 2020, a video was uploaded to the Det samfunnsvitenskapelige fakultet UiO YouTube account titled "The reason I study SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY at the University of Oslo." It is a sort of advertisement for the Social Anthropology Master's Program, which had, that very academic year, gone international. It talks about the uniqueness of the program, showcases a student who talks about why he wanted to do it, and highlights some of the department's talented professors who played an important role in developing that Master's program (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wstA4VTncZY). Someone with skills was able to create

this video and it does a great job at highlighting some of the magic of the discipline. So why stop there?

This idea can expand into having professor spotlights, where a department member talks about their research interests, or do video pieces where professors can talk about their newest publications in an online, open-access space. CICERO kimaforskerne, @klimaforskerne on Instagram, has their “Behind The Science” videos, short videos where researchers break down their current projects and their main themes/findings. It is a quick and casual example of the ways to incorporate scientific communications into online spaces, and can also be an introduction on content creation in anthropology that could be approachable to researchers who are not necessarily technologically savvy.

Social Media Research and the Middle Ground

Social media research is going to continue to play a larger part in the discipline as research continues to progress, whether that takes shape on the older, long standing platforms like Facebook or Twitter, new contenders like TikTok, or something that has not even been released yet. Anthropology is going to continue expanding its understanding of this phenomenon. Even among the students in this Master’s program, different approaches to incorporating the digital world into anthropology are taking place. How do anthropologists place this digital world in relation to the rest of our lives?

This project focused on having online usage as an activity that is being kept separate from the everyday lives and physical worlds of those involved. One reason for this is obviously because a pandemic and funding meant it could not involve physical research, but it was also because influencing and content creation has a certain amount of distance between a creator’s internet persona and their personal lives, calling back to Goffman. Others believe that anthropology should balance the digital and physical worlds, grounding the usage of the digital to everyday reality, where its usage is always tied to physical space, the social boundaries someone already finds themselves in, and their lived experience. Or maybe it is a side story, where the focus needs to remain on physical worlds and the digital aspects of someone’s lives is a smaller part of an overall cultural picture.

And there are advantages and disadvantages to each. To speak on the ones in this project, purely digital fieldwork is difficult in a whole new way compared to physical fieldwork. Rapport is difficult, as already discussed, but even just talking can be hard. Contact through online messaging means there is no physical pressure to engage with someone when they are right in front of your eyes. Many times you will not know if the reason someone has not replied to your message is because they do not want to participate, or maybe they just did not see it. Might I be more comfortable messaging or calling my interlocutors out of the blue if I had been with them physically, spent downtime with them and got to know them on a more personal level outside of direct messaging and zoom calls? What have I missed out on when it came to content creation that I could not pick up on from doing it myself? What if being able to truly watch a "professional" create content was the only way to grasp certain pieces of this puzzle?

But think back to the discussion of digital vs. physical activism, and how physical engagement is more spatially bounded, while digital is immediately shared around the world. Under that framework, digital fieldwork shines. Digital fieldwork has allowed for a Master's fieldwork, with no funding, to have discussion with people from 5 different countries, all different paths of life. With just the 8 interlocutors who were interviewed for the project, they have the ability to interact with a minimum of 500k followers, and the possibility of interacting with millions. This is something you could do physically, go to all these different countries and stay with these individuals, but the cost and logistics of doing so would be difficult. It is not viable outside of doing a digital research project. With a less niche group of content creators you could realistically talk to people from everywhere in the world, all different cultural and economic backgrounds, without restrictions.

Additionally, it might hit different areas of the human experience that cannot be found physically. A theme that Boellstroff found in his work on Second Life was interlocutors talking about how the Second Life avatar was their real selves, it was how they truly saw themselves. I think some of this idea can come into digital fieldwork more generally. Online interaction is a different outlet for people to express themselves, sometimes in ways they are unable to do in the physical world. While many of these concepts can be examined in relation to what is missing

from that physical world, I think there is some rationality to having these areas be examined in their own right, as somewhat distinct from a person's physical space.

So how should anthropology balance it? It is nuanced, like everything, and opportunities to incorporate the digital and physical world into a cohesive picture should obviously be pursued as the digital world is being incorporated into our everyday reality. However, purely digital fieldwork or looking only at online engagement gives us the ability to circumvent physical boundaries and broadly work with many different cultural communities, just as all internet users have the ability to do. Digital space has given everyone with a smartphone the ability to engage with each other, and it is a form of human communication no one could have expected in anthropology fifty years ago.

In that same vein, the digital does not need to be a part of every project, and in some cases should just be sidelined as a minor inclusion or maybe taken out entirely to focus on other social phenomena. How anthropologists want to incorporate the digital is entirely a project-to-project question, and obviously part of the decision is on a researcher's personal interest and what they choose to write about. So to answer the question of how anthropology should position digital ethnography into the physical world, it depends on the situation of the project itself, but that is going to require anthropology changing its understanding of digital engagement and how it believes people use digital space, which will only come with more time spent trying to understand it.

Generational Divide and the Generation to Come

The biggest issue that has been seen in this fieldwork is the generational divide in understanding for this field site. There are things in the thesis that people at a certain age will at least be familiar with, that someone just a few years older might find totally alien to them. For people in my generation, understanding how a social media interface works is something we grew up with and it is second nature to us. In a conversation with one UiO professor, they mentioned that for a generation with just a 10 year age gap, technology is something that had to be learned rather than immediately enjoyed. Understanding this space requires either real skills and dedication to try and understand its interworking, or just generational knowledge.

Recognizing this difference in knowledge and familiarity with online platforms is also a fundamental reason why so much effort and space was given to explaining the various mechanisms and features of TikTok. As a 23 year old, I use the internet for everything. Young people today are more likely to read a book on a laptop or tablet than on paper, if how MA students in this program chose to do class readings is any indication, at least. Online culture is truly something that young people of today are experienced and well-versed in, it is how all the references throughout this piece were chosen because this is stuff that young people understand and many are intuitively familiar with.

However, there will always be nuances to this and no true singular "online culture" exists. Just as I talked about different TikTok communities, some people will intuitively be more familiar with some things than others based on their interests and experience using the internet. There will always be something that one group knows very well and other, similar aged people will have no clue about (like music, in that sense). Recognizing this fact, that the digital world is a lot more varied based on generation or interests/niche is going to help how anthropology approaches digital space going forward and what it can do to better study it.

The Finale

In a final word for this chapter, and this analysis as a whole, the big takeaway from this project is that anthropology needs to continue expanding its understanding of digital spaces and developing its methodologies. This project has been an experimentation for myself and the discipline in a sense, trying to understand what feels like the fringes of what social anthropology understands within digital space. Social media platforms and their creators are having important impacts on their followers, both in traditional ways anthropologists understand these impacts economically, but also socially with the insight this project tried to provide. It is something that is widely understudied, or at least under published, and while some great resources are provided for the topic, largely this is a field site that is dominated by other disciplines focusing on social media's economic impacts.

Anthropology has to continue striving towards advancing digital anthropology, otherwise it may never approach an accepted methodology or understanding of how the digital world works within the discipline. One of the reasons for including older ideas in this piece, like Charismatic authority or the Panopticon, was to demonstrate the ways that the discipline's older theories can still play a role in topics like online influencing which did not even exist when these theories were penned. As much as I could try to sell digital spaces as an entirely new way of human interaction entirely separate from what anyone experiences in the physical world, it is still real people on the other side of the screen. They still work under the same concepts and understandings anthropology has tried to develop for the last 100+ years. If the discipline wants to expand its knowledge, it has to be able to bring its old understandings into digital space, *and* new digital understandings into the real world. With a pandemic that forced all of us into these digital spaces, we will have to see how the perception of these spaces is changed. Not only this, but we need to prepare for the growing importance the digital world is going to have in the generations to come. Not only as the young people of today will become our interlocutors of tomorrow, but also those young people who may one day dominate the field of Anthropology in our place.

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