

# *Aesthetic Branding and Self-Representation in Influencer Culture on Instagram and TikTok*

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**Abstract:** This paper examines aesthetic branding and self-representation in influencer culture on Instagram and TikTok. It argues that influencers do not merely express identity online; they construct recognizable and marketable selves through repeated visual, performative, emotional, and commercial codes. Instagram encourages a curated aesthetic self through polished images, coherent feeds, stories, reels, and lifestyle display, while TikTok promotes a performative aesthetic self through short-form video, sound, humor, remix, trends, and algorithmic discovery. Drawing on self-presentation theory, micro-celebrity theory, and platformization theory, the paper explains how influencers use aesthetic branding to manage visibility, authenticity, audience trust, and commercial value. The discussion shows that authenticity is not separate from branding but is often performed through aesthetic signs such as casual speech, behind-the-scenes content, emotional openness, unfiltered images, and everyday routines. The paper concludes that aesthetic branding is a central form of identity labor in influencer culture, shaped by platform affordances, audience expectations, algorithmic visibility, and brand partnerships. It contributes to mass communication and digital media research by showing how the influencer self becomes styled, circulated, measured, and monetized within platform-based attention economies.

**Keywords:** aesthetic branding, influencer culture, Instagram, TikTok, self-representation, authenticity, micro-celebrity, platformization.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Influencer culture has become one of the most visible forms of contemporary digital self-production. On Instagram and TikTok, users do not simply share personal moments; they curate, perform, circulate, and monetize versions of the self. Influencers build audiences through repeated performances of beauty, lifestyle, expertise, humor, intimacy, consumption, and aspiration. In this process, identity becomes both personal expression and commercial resource, where the self is shaped as a recognizable media object and promotional asset (Duffy, 2017; Hearn, 2008; Hund, 2023; Khamis et al., 2017). The rise of influencers is closely connected to the concept of micro-celebrity. Micro-celebrity refers to a form of online visibility in which ordinary users adopt celebrity-like practices, including audience management, personal branding, self-disclosure, and continuous interaction with followers (Abidin, 2016; Marwick, 2015; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Senft, 2008). Unlike traditional celebrities, influencers often depend on the impression of accessibility. They appear close to their followers, respond to comments, share everyday routines, and present themselves as relatable individuals. However, this apparent ordinariness is frequently shaped by strategic visual style, platform metrics, sponsorships, and audience expectations (Abidin, 2018; Cunningham & Craig, 2019; Duffy & Hund, 2019).

Instagram and TikTok are especially important platforms for studying influencer self-representation because both foreground visual and audiovisual identity work. Instagram has historically emphasized curated images, coherent feeds, stories, reels, filters, lifestyle display, and visual polish. TikTok, in contrast, emphasizes short-form video, remix, audio trends, humor, informality, speed, and algorithmic discovery (Kaye et al., 2021; Leaver et al., 2020; Zulli & Zulli, 2022). These platform differences shape how influencers construct and present themselves. Instagram often encourages a stable and polished aesthetic identity, while TikTok often rewards performative immediacy, trend participation, and apparently spontaneous self-expression. Although previous studies have examined influencer authenticity, credibility, parasocial interaction, self-branding, and consumer persuasion, fewer studies have directly theorized aesthetic branding as a platform-specific form of self-representation across Instagram and TikTok. Existing research often treats aesthetics as part of visual identity or marketing strategy, but does not sufficiently explain how aesthetic branding mediates between platform affordances, influencer self-representation, audience interpretation, and commercial value. This gap is significant because influencer culture increasingly depends on the ability to convert personal identity into recognizable aesthetic codes that can be circulated, evaluated, and monetized.

This paper addresses that gap by conceptualizing aesthetic branding as a form of identity labor shaped by platform affordances, audience expectations, algorithmic visibility, and brand partnerships. It argues that aesthetic branding is not merely decorative; rather, it is a central mechanism through which influencers become recognizable, trusted, marketable, and visible within platform-based attention economies. The main contribution of this paper is the development of a conceptual model that explains aesthetic branding as a mediating process between platform design, self-representation strategies, audience interpretation, and commercial or algorithmic value. This paper is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How does aesthetic branding shape influencer self-representation on Instagram and TikTok?

RQ2: How do platform affordances influence the construction of the aesthetic self?

RQ3: How do influencers negotiate authenticity, visibility, and commercial value through aesthetic branding?

By addressing these questions, the paper contributes to mass communication and digital media research by showing how the influencer self is styled, circulated, measured, and monetized within contemporary platform culture.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Influencer Culture and Micro-Celebrity

Influencer culture has become a major area of study in mass communication, digital media, and marketing because influencers occupy a hybrid position between ordinary users, celebrities, entrepreneurs, and advertisers. Influencers are not only content producers; they are also personal brands whose identities are continuously shaped, displayed, and evaluated through social media platforms. Their influence depends on visibility, audience engagement, perceived authenticity, and the ability to convert attention into cultural and commercial value (Abidin, 2016; Duffy, 2017; Hund, 2023; Khamis et al., 2017). The concept of micro-celebrity is useful for understanding this process. Micro-celebrity refers to the practice of presenting the self as a public personality by managing followers, sharing personal content, and maintaining a continuous relationship with audiences (Marwick, 2015; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Senft, 2008). Unlike traditional celebrities, influencers often gain popularity through the impression of closeness and accessibility. They appear relatable because they share everyday routines, personal stories, informal conversations, and lifestyle practices. However, this relatability is often carefully managed through repeated visual styles, captions, platform metrics, and brand collaborations (Abidin, 2018; Duffy & Hund, 2019).

Influencer culture therefore depends on a tension between ordinariness and aspiration. Influencers must appear similar enough to followers to be trusted, but different enough to be admired. This balance allows them to function as both peers and taste leaders. Their self-representation is shaped by the need to maintain emotional connection with followers while also presenting a lifestyle that appears desirable, stylish, or expert (De Veirman et al., 2017; Ki & Kim, 2019; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020).

## 2.2 Self-Presentation and Digital Identity

Self-presentation theory provides an important foundation for understanding influencer identity. Goffman (1959) argues that individuals manage impressions by performing different versions of the self in front of different audiences. In digital media environments, this process becomes more visible and more permanent because profiles, images, videos, captions, comments, and engagement metrics remain publicly accessible. Social media users therefore construct identity through repeated acts of selection, editing, framing, and performance (Papacharissi, 2011; Schau & Gilly, 2003). For influencers, self-presentation is not occasional but continuous. They must consistently decide what to show, what to hide, how to appear, and how to respond to audience expectations. Jones and Pittman's (1982) self-presentation strategies, such as self-promotion and exemplification, are especially relevant to influencer culture. Influencers often present themselves as attractive, knowledgeable, moral, disciplined, fashionable, humorous, or authentic depending on their niche and audience. Instagram and TikTok intensify these practices because they reward visibility and engagement. Likes, comments, shares, saves, views, and follower counts become public indicators of social value. As a result, influencers may adjust their self-representation based on what attracts attention. This creates a feedback loop in which identity is shaped not only by personal expression but also by audience response and platform metrics (Cotter, 2019; Duffy, 2017).

## 2.3 Aesthetic Branding

Aesthetic branding refers to the strategic construction of a recognizable style, mood, and visual identity. In influencer culture, aesthetic branding includes color palettes, fashion choices, makeup, body presentation, camera angles, editing style, sound choices, settings, caption tone, and lifestyle cues. These elements work together to make an influencer recognizable and memorable. Followers do not only follow a person; they often follow a specific atmosphere, taste, and lifestyle ideal. The idea of aesthetic branding is closely related to self-branding. Self-branding describes the process through which individuals treat their identity as a marketable product (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Hearn, 2008; Khamis et al., 2017). In influencer culture, the body, voice, home, clothing, relationships, routines, and emotions can all become part of the brand. Aesthetic branding therefore transforms personal expression into a form of cultural and commercial value. On Instagram, aesthetic branding often appears through a coherent feed, polished images, repeated colors, curated spaces, fashion coordination, lifestyle photography, and aspirational captions. Instagram's visual structure encourages influencers to create a stable and recognizable image world (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Leaver et al., 2020; Marwick, 2015). On TikTok, aesthetic branding is often more performative. It may appear through repeated gestures, speech patterns, editing rhythms, humor, sounds, trends, and recurring content formats (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Kaye et al., 2021; Zulli & Zulli, 2022).

Although Instagram and TikTok differ in format, both platforms encourage influencers to create aesthetic consistency. This consistency helps audiences identify the influencer quickly and helps brands evaluate whether the influencer fits a campaign. Aesthetic branding is therefore not simply decorative; it is a key mechanism of visibility, recognition, and monetization.

## 2.4 Authenticity and Influencer Marketing

Authenticity is central to influencer culture because audiences are more likely to trust influencers who appear genuine, relatable, and transparent. However, authenticity in influencer culture is complex because influencers often combine personal storytelling with commercial promotion. Sponsored content, affiliate links, brand partnerships, and product placements may create doubts about sincerity (Audrezet et al., 2020; Duffy & Hund, 2019; Hund, 2023). Influencers therefore perform authenticity through recognizable signs. These may include informal speech, behind-the-scenes videos, unfiltered images, personal confessions, everyday routines, emotional openness, and honest product reviews. On Instagram, authenticity may be shown through stories, captions, casual photos, or posts about vulnerability. On TikTok, authenticity may be performed through low-production videos, humor, direct address, messy rooms, or spontaneous reactions. Yet these forms of authenticity can themselves become aesthetic strategies. Influencer marketing research shows that perceived authenticity, credibility, attractiveness, expertise, and influencer-brand fit affect audience responses to sponsored content. Studies have found that consumers are more likely to respond positively to influencers when they perceive them as trustworthy, knowledgeable, and aligned with the promoted brand (Casaló et al., 2020; De Veirman et al., 2017; Jin et al., 2019; Lou & Yuan, 2019). Parasocial relationships also play an important role because

followers often feel a sense of closeness to influencers they regularly watch or interact with (Ki & Kim, 2019; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020).

Thus, aesthetic branding and authenticity are closely connected. Influencers must create a recognizable style while also appearing sincere. If their branding seems too polished or too commercial, they may lose audience trust. If their content seems too unstructured, they may lose recognizability and brand value. This tension is central to self-representation in influencer culture.

### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is guided by three major theoretical perspectives: self-presentation theory, micro-celebrity theory, and platformization theory. These perspectives are useful because aesthetic branding in influencer culture is not produced by personal choice alone. It is shaped by the interaction between the influencer, the audience, the platform, and the commercial environment. Together, these theories explain how influencers construct recognizable identities, maintain audience attention, and adapt their self-representation to the visual and algorithmic demands of Instagram and TikTok.

#### 3.1 Self-Presentation Theory

Self-presentation theory explains how individuals manage the impressions they create in social interaction. Goffman (1959) argues that social life involves performance, where people present particular versions of themselves depending on the audience and situation. In influencer culture, this performance takes place through images, videos, captions, hashtags, comments, live sessions, and stories. The influencer's profile becomes a stage on which identity is continuously performed and evaluated. For influencers, self-presentation is not casual or occasional. It is a professional and repeated activity. Influencers must decide what aspects of their lives to reveal, what to conceal, how to appear attractive or relatable, and how to maintain consistency across posts. Their choices are shaped by audience expectations and platform metrics such as likes, views, shares, saves, and comments. These metrics influence future self-presentation because they show creators which images, videos, moods, and narratives attract attention (Papacharissi, 2011; Schau & Gilly, 2003).

Jones and Pittman's (1982) self-presentation strategies are also relevant to influencer culture. Influencers often use self-promotion by presenting themselves as skilled, fashionable, knowledgeable, or successful. They may use exemplification by appearing disciplined, hardworking, ethical, or inspirational. They may also use ingratiation by appearing friendly, humorous, humble, or emotionally open. These strategies are not always separate; they often overlap in influencer content. For example, a beauty influencer may present expertise through makeup tutorials while also appearing relatable through informal speech and behind-the-scenes content. Self-presentation theory therefore helps explain how aesthetic branding works as impression management. An influencer's clothing, camera angle, editing style, background, music, caption tone, and facial expression all contribute to the image of the self being performed. Aesthetic branding becomes the visual and emotional language through which influencers manage audience perception.

#### 3.2 Micro-Celebrity Theory

Micro-celebrity theory explains how ordinary social media users become publicly visible by adopting celebrity-like practices. Senft (2008) introduced the concept of micro-celebrity to describe online users who build fame through personal visibility and audience interaction. Marwick and boyd (2011) further explain that micro-celebrity involves treating followers as a fan base and managing the self as a public persona. Influencers operate within this micro-celebrity logic. They are expected to be visible, responsive, personal, and commercially attractive. Unlike traditional celebrities, influencers often build popularity by appearing accessible and ordinary. They share daily routines, personal struggles, family moments, beauty habits, fashion choices, and emotional experiences. This creates a feeling of closeness between influencer and follower. However, this closeness is usually mediated by strategic content production and personal branding (Abidin, 2016; Marwick, 2015). Abidin (2016) describes this process as visibility labor. Visibility labor refers to the work required to remain seen, liked, followed, and discussed online. Influencers must constantly produce content, respond to trends, maintain audience relationships, and protect their public image. This labor is strongly aesthetic because visibility depends on how the influencer looks, sounds, behaves, and performs across platforms.

Micro-celebrity theory is important for this study because aesthetic branding helps influencers maintain their public persona. A recognizable aesthetic allows an influencer to become memorable in a crowded platform environment. Followers may associate an influencer with a particular lifestyle, mood, fashion style, body image, humor, or emotional tone. In this way, aesthetic branding supports micro-celebrity by turning the influencer's identity into a recognizable public image.

### 3.3 Platformization Theory

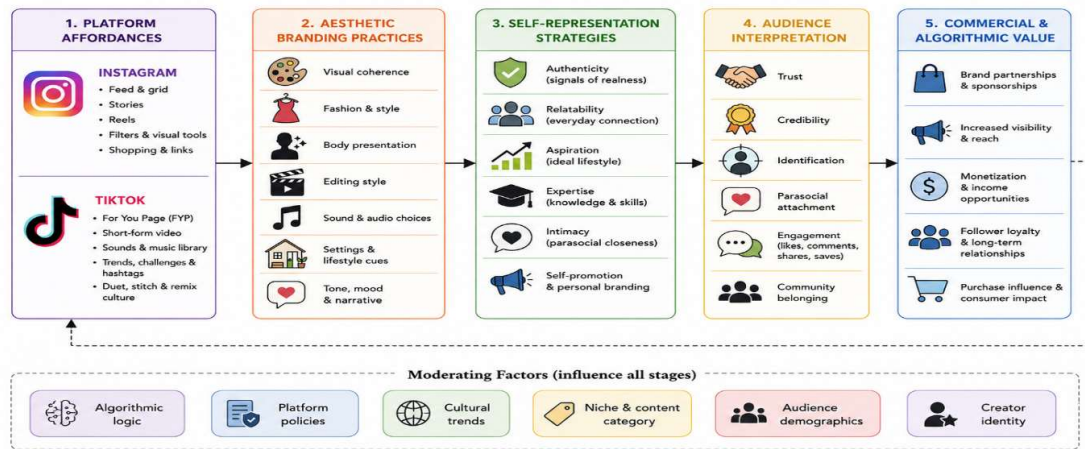
Platformization theory explains how digital platforms shape cultural production, communication, and economic activity. Platforms are not neutral spaces where users simply upload content. They organize visibility through algorithms, design features, rules, monetization systems, and data infrastructures (Bucher, 2018; Gillespie, 2014; Poell et al., 2021; van Dijck et al., 2018). Therefore, influencer self-representation is shaped by the technical and commercial structure of each platform. Instagram and TikTok offer different affordances that influence how influencers brand themselves. Instagram's feed, grid, stories, reels, filters, captions, and shopping features support visual curation and lifestyle branding. These features encourage influencers to build a coherent and polished identity. The Instagram profile often functions as a visual portfolio where each post contributes to the overall aesthetic of the account (Leaver et al., 2020). TikTok, on the other hand, emphasizes short-form video, trending sounds, remix culture, duets, stitches, challenges, and the For You Page. These affordances encourage fast, performative, and trend-based self-representation. TikTok influencers may not rely on a perfectly curated profile grid, but they still develop recognizable styles through voice, humor, editing rhythm, gestures, recurring formats, and participation in trends (Kaye et al., 2021; Zulli & Zulli, 2022). Platformization theory also explains the role of algorithms in aesthetic branding. Influencers often adjust their content based on what the platform rewards. If certain videos, sounds, poses, topics, or editing styles generate more engagement, creators may repeat them. Over time, platform metrics influence aesthetic choices. This creates a feedback loop in which the influencer's self-representation is shaped by both personal identity and algorithmic visibility.

### 3.4 Conceptual Model

Based on these theoretical perspectives, this paper proposes a conceptual model in which aesthetic branding functions as a mediating process between platform affordances, influencer self-representation, audience interpretation, and commercial or algorithmic value. The model begins with platform affordances because Instagram and TikTok provide different technical and cultural conditions for identity performance. These affordances influence aesthetic branding practices such as visual coherence, editing style, fashion, body presentation, sound, tone, and lifestyle cues. Aesthetic branding then shapes self-representation strategies, including authenticity, relatability, aspiration, expertise, intimacy, and self-promotion. These strategies influence audience interpretation, including perceptions of trust, credibility, identification, parasocial attachment, and engagement. Finally, audience interpretation contributes to commercial and algorithmic value, including brand partnerships, monetization, platform visibility, follower loyalty, and purchase influence.

The model also includes a feedback loop. Audience engagement and algorithmic performance influence future aesthetic choices. If certain styles, formats, or authenticity markers perform well, influencers may repeat or adapt them. Therefore, aesthetic branding is not fixed; it is continuously adjusted through audience feedback, platform metrics, brand expectations, and trend cycles.

**Fig 1: Conceptual model of aesthetic branding and self-representation in influencer culture on Instagram and TikTok.**



Based on these theoretical perspectives, Figure 1 presents the conceptual model guiding this paper. The model shows how platform affordances shape aesthetic branding practices, self-representation strategies, audience interpretation, and commercial or algorithmic value.

### 3.5 Application to the Present Study

The three theories used in this paper complement one another. Self-presentation theory explains how influencers manage impressions. Micro-celebrity theory explains how influencers build public personas and audience intimacy. Platformization theory explains how Instagram and TikTok shape the conditions under which influencer identities become visible and valuable. Together, these theories show that aesthetic branding is not simply a matter of personal style. It is a structured form of identity labor. Influencers use aesthetic choices to present themselves as authentic, attractive, relatable, aspirational, or expert. At the same time, their self-representation is shaped by platform affordances, audience reactions, algorithmic systems, and commercial expectations. This theoretical framework supports the main argument of the paper: aesthetic branding is a central mechanism through which influencers construct and maintain self-representation on Instagram and TikTok. It allows influencers to become recognizable to audiences, attractive to brands, and visible within platform-based attention economies.

## 4. METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a conceptual review approach supported by critical literature synthesis. The aim is not to measure influencer behavior statistically, but to develop a theoretical explanation of how aesthetic branding operates as a form of self-representation in influencer culture on Instagram and TikTok. A conceptual review is appropriate because the study seeks to connect several bodies of scholarship self-presentation, micro-celebrity, platformization, authenticity, and influencer marketing in order to clarify the role of aesthetic branding in platform-based identity production. The paper does not collect primary data from influencers or audiences. Instead, it synthesizes peer-reviewed academic books and journal articles from mass communication, digital media studies, platform studies, celebrity studies, consumer culture, and marketing. The review is narrative rather than systematic, but it follows clear inclusion criteria to ensure relevance and academic quality.

### 4.1 Literature Selection Criteria

The literature included in this paper was selected according to four criteria. First, sources were included if they addressed influencer culture, social media self-presentation, micro-celebrity, self-branding, authenticity, platform affordances, algorithmic visibility, or influencer marketing. Second, priority was given to peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and academic book chapters. Third, the review emphasized studies relevant to Instagram, TikTok, visual social media, short-form video, and platform-based cultural production. Fourth, sources were selected for their relevance to mass communication and digital media

research. Non-academic sources were excluded except where they could provide contextual examples of platform trends or industry practices. The core argument of the paper is therefore grounded in scholarly literature rather than popular commentary. Foundational works such as Goffman's self-presentation theory and Senft's micro-celebrity theory were included because they provide the theoretical basis for understanding influencer identity. More recent works on Instagram, TikTok, influencer marketing, and platformization were included to connect these theories to contemporary digital media environments.

#### **4.2 Analytical Procedure**

The literature was analyzed thematically. Key concepts were identified across the selected sources, including self-presentation, authenticity, micro-celebrity, aesthetic branding, platform affordances, audience trust, parasocial interaction, algorithmic visibility, and commercial value. These concepts were then organized into a conceptual framework explaining how aesthetic branding links platform design to influencer identity and audience interpretation. The analysis followed three stages. First, relevant theories were reviewed to explain how individuals manage identity and visibility online. Second, studies on Instagram and TikTok were compared to identify platform-specific differences in aesthetic self-representation. Third, influencer marketing literature was used to explain how aesthetic branding contributes to credibility, brand compatibility, and monetization. This procedure allowed the paper to move beyond description and develop an original conceptual argument: aesthetic branding operates as a mediating process between platform affordances, self-representation strategies, audience interpretation, and commercial or algorithmic value.

#### **4.3 Analytical Focus**

The analysis focuses on four major dimensions of aesthetic branding. The first dimension is visual and audiovisual style. This includes color palettes, fashion, body presentation, makeup, filters, camera angles, editing rhythm, sound choices, background settings, and visual consistency. These features help influencers construct recognizable identities and distinguish themselves from other creators. The second dimension is self-representation strategy. This includes authenticity, relatability, aspiration, expertise, intimacy, self-promotion, and emotional disclosure. These strategies shape how followers interpret the influencer's personality, credibility, and value. The third dimension is platform affordance. This refers to the technical and cultural features of Instagram and TikTok that shape how content is produced and circulated. Instagram's grid, feed, stories, reels, filters, and shopping features support curated visual branding. TikTok's For You Page, trending sounds, duets, stitches, and remix culture support performative and trend-based branding. The fourth dimension is commercial and algorithmic value. This includes brand partnerships, sponsorships, audience engagement, algorithmic visibility, follower loyalty, and purchase influence. This dimension explains how aesthetic branding helps influencers become valuable to both audiences and advertisers.

#### **4.4 Proposed Empirical Extension**

Although this paper is conceptual, it provides a foundation for future empirical research. A future study could use qualitative content analysis, multimodal discourse analysis, or digital ethnography to examine influencer content directly (Highfield & Leaver, 2016; Rose, 2016). Researchers could select influencers from beauty, fashion, lifestyle, fitness, travel, and everyday-vlog niches on Instagram and TikTok. A purposive sampling method would be appropriate because influencers could be selected based on follower count, niche, platform activity, and evidence of aesthetic branding. The sample could include micro-influencers, mid-tier influencers, and macro-influencers to compare how aesthetic branding changes according to audience size and commercial status.

Possible data sources could include profile biographies, profile images, Instagram feed posts, reels, stories, TikTok videos, captions, hashtags, comments, pinned posts, brand collaboration posts, and audience engagement indicators. The researcher could code these materials according to categories such as aesthetic coherence, bodily presentation, authenticity markers, emotional tone, trend participation, platform-specific affordances, product placement, and audience interaction. Such an empirical extension would allow researchers to test and refine the conceptual model proposed in this paper. It would also help determine whether influencers across different niches and platform environments use aesthetic branding in similar or different ways.

#### **4.5 Limitations of the Method**

Because this paper is based on conceptual review rather than primary data collection, it does not claim to measure actual influencer behavior or audience response. It also does not provide statistical evidence about the effectiveness of aesthetic branding. Its contribution is theoretical: it develops a framework for understanding aesthetic branding as a central mechanism of influencer self-representation. Another limitation is that Instagram and TikTok are rapidly changing platforms. Their features, algorithms, monetization systems, and cultural norms evolve over time. Therefore, any conceptual analysis of influencer culture must remain open to revision as platform environments change. Despite these limitations, the conceptual approach is valuable because it clarifies key ideas, identifies gaps in the literature, and provides a foundation for future empirical studies.

### **5. DISCUSSION: INSTAGRAM, TIKTOK, AND THE AESTHETIC SELF**

This section discusses how aesthetic branding and self-representation operate differently on Instagram and TikTok. While both platforms support influencer culture, they encourage different forms of visibility, identity performance, and audience engagement. Instagram aesthetic branding is relatively archival because the profile grid, feed, and visual history preserve a stable identity over time. TikTok aesthetic branding is more temporal and performative because identity is constructed through recurring participation in trends, sounds, gestures, short-video formats, and algorithmic circulation. This distinction is important because it shows that aesthetic branding is not a single practice applied equally across platforms. Rather, aesthetic branding is platform-specific. Instagram encourages influencers to construct a coherent visual world, while TikTok encourages influencers to develop recognizable performance patterns within rapidly changing cultural formats. However, both platforms require influencers to make the self recognizable, engaging, and commercially valuable.

#### **5.1 Instagram and the Curated Aesthetic Self**

Instagram influencer culture has historically been associated with visual polish, aspiration, and lifestyle coherence. The platform's grid structure encourages creators to treat their profiles as visual portfolios, where each post contributes to a larger identity narrative. This structure supports what may be called the curated aesthetic self: a version of identity organized through repeated images, color palettes, clothing styles, body poses, captions, locations, and consumer objects. For influencers, Instagram aesthetics often function as a form of brand identity. A fashion influencer may use neutral colors, luxury accessories, minimalist interiors, mirror selfies, and carefully posed images to communicate elegance and taste. A fitness influencer may use gym settings, activewear, progress photos, meal preparation images, and motivational captions to communicate discipline and physical transformation. A travel influencer may use beaches, hotels, cityscapes, sunsets, and destination imagery to present mobility, leisure, and aspiration. In each case, aesthetic branding helps followers recognize the influencer's lifestyle and helps brands evaluate whether the influencer fits a campaign. Instagram's visual culture also supports aspirational self-representation. Influencers often present idealized versions of everyday life through polished images, carefully selected backgrounds, edited photographs, and lifestyle objects. This does not mean that Instagram content is false; rather, it means that identity is filtered through visual selection and aesthetic arrangement. The influencer becomes not only a person but also a lifestyle environment that followers can admire, imitate, and consume (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Leaver et al., 2020; Marwick, 2015). At the same time, Instagram influencers must balance polish with relatability. If their content appears too perfect, followers may perceive it as artificial or distant. For this reason, many influencers use stories, captions, behind-the-scenes posts, and casual reels to create a sense of intimacy. These forms of content allow influencers to soften the polished quality of their feeds by showing vulnerability, humor, daily routines, or informal moments. Thus, Instagram self-representation often moves between aspiration and authenticity.

#### **5.2 TikTok and the Performative Aesthetic Self**

TikTok produces a different but equally important aesthetic logic. Unlike Instagram, TikTok does not depend primarily on a stable profile grid or polished image archive. Instead, it emphasizes short-form video, trending sounds, remix, humor, challenges, duets, stitches, and rapid content circulation. This creates what may be called the performative aesthetic self: a version of identity constructed through repeated gestures, voice, facial expression, editing rhythm, humor, sound, and participation in trends. TikTok influencers may appear more spontaneous than Instagram influencers, but their self-representation is still strategic. A creator may

become recognizable through a particular speaking style, editing pattern, recurring joke, niche topic, facial expression, storytelling format, or use of trending sounds. For example, a beauty influencer on TikTok may build an aesthetic through fast tutorials, “get ready with me” videos, product reactions, informal speech, and direct address to the camera. A lifestyle influencer may use day-in-the-life videos, casual bedroom settings, humorous commentary, and relatable routines to create intimacy and familiarity. TikTok’s aesthetic branding is often less about visual perfection and more about performance, rhythm, and immediacy. The platform rewards content that feels quick, engaging, emotionally direct, and culturally current. Influencers must therefore adapt to trends while maintaining a recognizable identity. They need to participate in shared formats without disappearing into imitation. This creates a tension between individuality and trend conformity. Influencers must be familiar enough to fit the platform’s culture but distinctive enough to remain memorable (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Kaye et al., 2021; Zulli & Zulli, 2022). TikTok also encourages a more informal mode of authenticity. Low-production videos, messy rooms, direct speech, mistakes, humor, and emotional confession often function as signs of realness. However, these signs can become part of aesthetic branding. A creator’s “casual” style may itself become a recognizable brand. Therefore, TikTok does not eliminate branding; it changes the form of branding from polished visual coherence to performative relatability.

### 5.3 Comparative Platform Analysis

The comparison between Instagram and TikTok reveals two different modes of aesthetic branding. Instagram’s aesthetic self is more archival, because identity is built through accumulated visual traces that remain visible on the profile. The Instagram feed functions as a curated record of lifestyle, taste, beauty, travel, consumption, and aspiration. This archival structure encourages consistency, polish, and long-term brand coherence. TikTok’s aesthetic self is more temporal, because identity is built through repeated participation in fast-moving trends and short-video performances. The TikTok creator does not necessarily need a visually coherent archive. Instead, recognizability emerges through recurring gestures, sounds, editing rhythms, humor, storytelling style, niche expertise, and affective tone. TikTok identity is therefore more fluid, reactive, and performative.

This distinction does not mean that Instagram is purely artificial or TikTok is purely authentic. Both platforms involve strategic self-presentation. Instagram authenticity may be performed through stories, casual reels, and vulnerable captions, while TikTok authenticity may be performed through informal speech, humor, and low-production aesthetics. Both platforms require influencers to manage the tension between being recognizable and appearing genuine. The central difference lies in the dominant aesthetic logic. Instagram privileges visual coherence and lifestyle aspiration, while TikTok privileges performative immediacy and trend fluency. Influencers who operate across both platforms must therefore adapt their self-representation. The same influencer may appear more polished and visually consistent on Instagram while appearing more humorous, spontaneous, or conversational on TikTok. This cross-platform adaptation shows that influencer identity is not fixed; it is shaped by platform-specific expectations.

### 5.4 Aestheticized Authenticity

Authenticity is central to influencer culture because followers are more likely to trust influencers who appear sincere, relatable, and transparent. However, authenticity on Instagram and TikTok is not simply the opposite of branding. Instead, authenticity often becomes part of the influencer’s aesthetic strategy. Influencers perform authenticity through recognizable signs such as unfiltered images, emotional captions, behind-the-scenes videos, personal confessions, casual speech, humor, everyday routines, and “honest” product reviews. This creates what may be described as aestheticized authenticity. Influencers do not merely reveal the self; they present authenticity through specific visual and performative codes. On Instagram, authenticity may appear through stories, vulnerable captions, unedited photos, or posts showing ordinary moments behind polished images. On TikTok, authenticity may appear through low-production videos, spontaneous reactions, informal language, or direct conversation with followers. In both cases, authenticity becomes something that must be shown, recognized, and repeated. The challenge is that authenticity can become formulaic. A crying video, a messy bedroom, a no-makeup post, or an “honest review” may appear sincere, but it may also function as a strategy for engagement. This does not mean such content is necessarily fake. Rather, it shows that sincerity and strategy often coexist in influencer culture. Influencers may genuinely share personal experiences while

also understanding that emotional openness can increase audience connection and platform visibility (Audrezet et al., 2020; Duffy & Hund, 2019; Hund, 2023).

Aestheticized authenticity is especially important in branded content. When influencers promote products, they must integrate commercial messages into their personal aesthetic without damaging audience trust. A beauty influencer may present a sponsored skincare product within a casual morning routine. A fashion influencer may include a paid clothing item in an outfit video that appears personal and spontaneous. A fitness influencer may promote supplements or activewear through motivational content. In each case, advertising becomes more acceptable when it fits the influencer's existing aesthetic identity.

### **5.5 Algorithmic Visibility and Aesthetic Repetition**

Aesthetic branding is also shaped by algorithms. Instagram and TikTok reward content that generates engagement, attention, and repeat viewing. Influencers therefore learn from platform metrics and adjust their content accordingly. If a particular pose, caption style, video format, sound, topic, or emotional tone performs well, the influencer may repeat it. Over time, algorithmic feedback can shape the influencer's aesthetic identity.

On Instagram, this may involve producing more reels, using trending audio, posting carousel content, maintaining a coherent feed, or creating visually attractive brand collaborations. On TikTok, this may involve using strong opening hooks, fast editing, trending sounds, niche hashtags, storytelling formats, and emotionally engaging content. The influencer's aesthetic is therefore not only a matter of personal taste; it is also shaped by what the platform makes visible. This process can lead to aesthetic repetition and homogenization. When many influencers respond to the same engagement signals, similar styles begin to circulate widely. For example, certain beauty routines, fashion poses, room aesthetics, editing patterns, or lifestyle narratives may become common across many accounts. Influencers must then negotiate between following successful formats and maintaining individuality. This is one of the central pressures of influencer culture: creators must be unique, but they must also be recognizable within platform trends.

Algorithmic visibility also affects self-representation by encouraging constant productivity. Influencers often feel pressure to post frequently, follow trends quickly, and respond to audience expectations. This pressure turns aesthetic branding into ongoing labor. The influencer must not only create a brand identity but continuously maintain and update it in response to changing platform conditions (Bishop, 2019; Cotter, 2019).

### **5.6 Commercial Value and Brand Compatibility**

Aesthetic branding has direct commercial value. Brands do not select influencers only because of follower count; they also consider aesthetic fit, credibility, audience demographics, engagement quality, and perceived authenticity. An influencer's aesthetic helps brands decide whether their products can be naturally integrated into the influencer's content. For example, a skincare brand may prefer an influencer with a clean, minimal, wellness-oriented aesthetic. A luxury fashion brand may seek an influencer associated with elegance, exclusivity, and visual polish. A youth-oriented brand may prefer a TikTok creator known for humor, informality, and trend fluency. This means that the influencer's self becomes a commercial interface. The body, face, voice, home, clothing, meals, friendships, relationships, routines, emotions, and opinions can all become surfaces for brand communication. Aesthetic branding makes this commercial integration smoother because products appear as part of the influencer's lifestyle rather than external advertisements.

However, commercialization also creates risk. If followers believe that an influencer's content is too promotional, trust may decline. Influencers must therefore manage the boundary between personal expression and advertising. Successful influencer branding often depends on making sponsored content feel consistent with the influencer's existing aesthetic and values. When brand partnerships appear forced or inconsistent, they may weaken authenticity and damage audience relationships (Casaló et al., 2020; De Veirman et al., 2017; Lou & Yuan, 2019).

### 5.7 Answering the Research Questions

The discussion addresses the three research questions proposed in this paper. In response to RQ1, aesthetic branding shapes influencer self-representation by organizing identity into recognizable visual, performative, emotional, and commercial codes. These codes help influencers communicate personality, lifestyle, expertise, authenticity, and aspiration. In response to RQ2, platform affordances influence the construction of the aesthetic self by shaping what kinds of content become visible and valuable. Instagram encourages curated visual coherence and archival identity, while TikTok encourages performative immediacy, trend participation, and temporal identity. In response to RQ3, influencers negotiate authenticity, visibility, and commercial value by balancing consistency with relatability. They must create recognizable aesthetic identities while avoiding the appearance of excessive commercialization. Authenticity is therefore not outside branding; it is often produced through aesthetic codes that make the influencer appear genuine, accessible, and trustworthy.

## 6. IMPLICATIONS

This section presents the major implications of the study. Since aesthetic branding and self-representation are central to influencer culture on Instagram and TikTok, they have important theoretical, practical, ethical, and methodological implications. These implications show that influencer aesthetics should not be treated as surface-level visual decoration. Instead, aesthetic branding should be understood as a structured form of identity labor that shapes visibility, audience trust, brand partnerships, and cultural meaning.

### 6.1 Theoretical Implications

Theoretically, this paper contributes to mass communication and digital media research by positioning aesthetics as a central mechanism of influencer self-representation. Existing studies on influencer culture often focus on authenticity, credibility, parasocial interaction, persuasion, and consumer behavior (Ki & Kim, 2019; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). While these areas are important, they do not fully explain how influencers become recognizable as branded subjects. Aesthetic branding explains how identity is organized into repeatable signs that audiences and brands can recognize. The study also extends self-presentation theory by showing how impression management operates in highly visual and algorithmic environments. Goffman's (1959) idea of performance remains useful, but influencer culture shows that self-presentation is no longer limited to direct social interaction. It now occurs through images, videos, captions, sounds, hashtags, filters, comments, and platform metrics. Influencers perform identity for audiences, brands, and algorithms at the same time.

In addition, the study contributes to micro-celebrity theory. Influencers maintain public visibility through continuous interaction, intimacy, self-branding, and content production (Abidin, 2016; Marwick, 2015; Senft, 2008). Aesthetic branding strengthens this process because it makes the influencer memorable and recognizable. A consistent aesthetic allows followers to associate the influencer with a particular lifestyle, mood, value system, or identity position. The paper also contributes to platform studies by showing that influencer aesthetics are shaped by platform affordances. Instagram and TikTok do not simply provide neutral spaces for self-expression. Their features, algorithms, and cultural norms influence how influencers present themselves (Bucher, 2018; Gillespie, 2014; Poell et al., 2021; van Dijck et al., 2018). Instagram supports curated visual coherence, while TikTok supports performative immediacy and trend-based identity. Therefore, aesthetic branding must be understood as a platform-shaped practice.

### 6.2 Practical Implications

The findings have practical implications for influencers, marketers, and communication professionals. For influencers, the discussion shows that aesthetic branding is important for recognition and audience loyalty. A clear aesthetic identity can help influencers stand out in crowded social media environments. It allows followers to quickly understand what the influencer represents and why they should continue engaging with the content. However, influencers must also avoid making their content appear too artificial or overly commercial. If an influencer's aesthetic becomes too polished, repetitive, or brand-driven, followers may question their authenticity. Therefore, influencers need to balance consistency with flexibility. They must maintain recognizable branding while also showing personality, vulnerability, humor, and change.

For marketers, this paper suggests that influencer selection should not be based only on follower count. Brands should also consider aesthetic fit, audience trust, platform-native communication style, engagement quality, and perceived authenticity. A highly followed influencer may not be effective if their aesthetic does not match the brand's identity. On the other hand, a micro-influencer with a strong niche aesthetic and loyal audience may produce more meaningful engagement (Abidin, 2018; Khamis et al., 2017). Aesthetic fit is especially important in influencer marketing because audiences often reject partnerships that appear forced. If a product does not fit the influencer's existing lifestyle or visual identity, the sponsored content may appear inauthentic. For example, a luxury fashion campaign may work better with an influencer known for elegance and high-end style, while a youth-oriented campaign may work better with a TikTok creator known for humor, informality, and trend fluency. In this sense, successful influencer marketing depends on the alignment between brand identity, influencer aesthetic, and audience expectation.

For communication professionals, the paper highlights the importance of platform-specific strategy. Instagram and TikTok require different approaches. Instagram campaigns may benefit from visual consistency, high-quality images, reels, stories, and lifestyle integration. TikTok campaigns may benefit from humor, trends, sound, creator personality, and participatory formats. Using the same content strategy across both platforms may reduce effectiveness because each platform has different aesthetic norms and audience expectations.

### 6.3 Ethical Implications

Aesthetic branding also raises important ethical concerns. One major concern is the pressure influencers face to maintain a consistent and attractive public image. Since their visibility and income may depend on their aesthetic identity, influencers may feel compelled to continuously perform a version of themselves that is polished, entertaining, attractive, or emotionally available. This can create emotional labor and affect personal well-being. Another ethical issue concerns body image and self-comparison. Influencer content often presents highly aestheticized versions of beauty, fitness, fashion, lifestyle, travel, and consumption. Followers may compare their own bodies, homes, relationships, and lifestyles to these idealized representations. Such comparison can contribute to dissatisfaction, envy, anxiety, or unrealistic expectations, especially in beauty, fashion, fitness, and lifestyle niches (Chae, 2018; Fardouly et al., 2015). Consumerism is another concern. Aesthetic branding often links identity to products. Influencers present clothing, skincare, makeup, technology, food, travel, and home décor as part of a desirable lifestyle. This can encourage followers to view consumption as a pathway to self-improvement or social belonging. While influencer marketing is not inherently unethical, problems arise when promotional content is not clearly disclosed or when audiences are encouraged to pursue unrealistic lifestyles through constant consumption.

The commercialization of intimacy is also significant. Influencers often build trust by sharing personal stories, emotions, vulnerabilities, and everyday routines. These forms of intimacy can create strong audience relationships, but they can also be monetized through brand partnerships. This raises questions about where personal expression ends and advertising begins. Followers may feel connected to influencers without fully recognizing the commercial structures behind the relationship. Therefore, ethical influencer practice requires transparency, responsible self-presentation, and clear disclosure of sponsored content. Influencers should be aware of how their aesthetic choices may affect followers' perceptions of beauty, success, lifestyle, and self-worth. Brands should also avoid pressuring influencers to present unrealistic or misleading lifestyles. Platforms have a role to play in supporting clear advertising disclosure and reducing harmful visibility pressures.

### 6.4 Methodological Implications

This paper also has methodological implications for future research. Since aesthetic branding is visual, audiovisual, emotional, and commercial, it cannot be fully studied through text-based analysis alone. Researchers need methods that can examine images, videos, sounds, captions, comments, gestures, platform features, and audience responses together. Multimodal discourse analysis would be useful because it allows researchers to study how meaning is produced through combinations of image, sound, text, gesture, and editing. For example, a TikTok video may communicate authenticity not only through spoken words but also through camera movement, informal setting, facial expression, sound choice, and editing rhythm. Similarly, an Instagram post may communicate aspiration through lighting, pose, clothing, background, caption, and product placement.

Digital ethnography would also be valuable because influencer culture is not limited to individual posts. It involves ongoing interaction between influencers, followers, brands, and platform trends. Ethnographic approaches could help researchers understand how influencers make decisions about content, how followers interpret aesthetic branding, and how platform cultures shape expectations. Comparative platform research is especially important. Instagram and TikTok show that aesthetic branding differs across platform environments. Future studies could compare how the same influencer presents the self differently on Instagram and TikTok. Such research would reveal how creators adapt identity to different platform affordances, audience expectations, and monetization systems. Future empirical research could also examine audience interpretation. While this paper focuses on influencer self-representation, followers play an important role in giving meaning to aesthetic branding. Surveys, interviews, focus groups, or comment analysis could explore how audiences judge authenticity, credibility, attractiveness, relatability, and commercial intent. This would help explain why some aesthetic strategies build trust while others create suspicion.

### 6.5 Societal Implications

Beyond academic and marketing contexts, aesthetic branding has broader social implications. Influencer culture shapes how people understand identity, success, beauty, work, and everyday life. Instagram and TikTok normalize the idea that the self should be visible, attractive, productive, and brandable. This can influence how ordinary users present themselves, even if they are not professional influencers. The spread of influencer aesthetics may encourage users to think of their own lives in terms of content. Everyday activities such as eating, dressing, exercising, traveling, studying, or relaxing can become opportunities for self-display. This reflects a broader culture in which identity is increasingly mediated by platforms and measured through visibility.

At the same time, influencer culture can provide opportunities for creativity, entrepreneurship, community building, and alternative representation. Many influencers use aesthetic branding to express marginalized identities, build niche communities, challenge traditional media standards, or create independent careers. Therefore, aesthetic branding should not be understood only as manipulation or commercialization. It is also a cultural practice through which individuals negotiate visibility, identity, and opportunity. Overall, the implications of this paper show that aesthetic branding is central to understanding contemporary influencer culture. It affects how influencers present themselves, how audiences interpret them, how brands collaborate with them, and how platforms organize visibility. Studying aesthetic branding therefore helps explain broader transformations in digital identity, communication, and cultural production.

### 7. CONCLUSION

This paper examined aesthetic branding and self-representation in influencer culture on Instagram and TikTok. It argued that influencers do not simply express personal identity online; they organize identity into repeatable visual, performative, emotional, and commercial codes. Through these codes, influencers become recognizable to audiences, attractive to brands, and visible within platform-based attention economies. The paper addressed a gap in existing influencer research by focusing specifically on aesthetic branding as a platform-specific form of identity labor. While previous studies have examined authenticity, credibility, parasocial interaction, self-branding, and consumer persuasion, fewer studies have explained how aesthetic branding mediates between platform affordances, self-representation strategies, audience interpretation, and commercial or algorithmic value. This paper therefore contributes a conceptual model that positions aesthetic branding as a central process in influencer culture. The discussion showed that Instagram and TikTok shape influencer self-representation in different but related ways. Instagram tends to encourage a curated aesthetic self built through visual coherence, lifestyle aspiration, polished images, feeds, stories, reels, and brand-compatible content. TikTok tends to encourage a performative aesthetic self built through short-form video, sound, humor, trends, remix, direct address, and algorithmic discovery. Instagram's aesthetic logic is relatively archival, while TikTok's is more temporal and performative.

Despite these differences, both platforms require influencers to construct recognizable aesthetic identities. Aesthetic branding allows influencers to communicate who they are, what lifestyle they represent, and why followers should continue engaging with them. It also helps brands determine whether an influencer fits a campaign. In this sense, aesthetic branding is not merely decorative; it is a central mechanism of visibility, trust, and monetization. The paper also showed that authenticity is not separate

from aesthetic branding. Instead, authenticity is often performed through aesthetic signs such as casual speech, behind-the-scenes content, unfiltered images, emotional openness, humor, everyday routines, and informal video styles. These forms of authenticity may be sincere, strategic, or both. Influencers must therefore negotiate a constant tension between appearing real and maintaining a marketable public image. Aesthetic branding also raises wider ethical and cultural concerns. It can create pressure for influencers to maintain a consistent and attractive identity, while followers may compare themselves to idealized representations of beauty, lifestyle, success, and consumption. At the same time, influencer culture can create opportunities for creativity, entrepreneurship, community building, and alternative forms of representation. Therefore, aesthetic branding should be understood as both a commercial practice and a cultural form of identity production. Because this paper is conceptual, future research should empirically test and refine the proposed model. Researchers could conduct comparative content analysis of Instagram and TikTok influencers across beauty, fashion, fitness, lifestyle, and travel niches. Future studies could also examine how followers interpret aesthetic authenticity, how brands evaluate influencer aesthetic fit, and how algorithms encourage aesthetic repetition or homogenization. Such research would deepen understanding of digital identity in a platformed culture where the self increasingly functions as image, performance, commodity, and brand.

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