Digital Labor in the Industrious Family: Neighborhood Influencers in Naples

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Around the world, TikTok has provided visibility to small-scale local businesses with popular origins, integrating local vernaculars and traditional family life into a popular social media economy. In this article, we draw on 80 interviews with small-scale content creators in Naples, Italy, to investigate how digital labor is reconfigured within this TikTok-centered social media economy rooted in the everyday life of street, family, and neighborhood. We suggest that social media content creation has been integrated within increasingly industrious family units, providing one of several income streams that contribute to everyday making do. Families support content creation by providing both an economic safety net and a moral economy grounded in notions of "decency" and "hard work." Both serve to safeguard against the constant "nested precarities" content creators face. Through such mechanisms of re-embedding, the exploitative elements of digital labor are veiled by a Smithian 'market populism' based on the ideal of equal exchange, and its alienating aspects are counteracted by reinforced local identities.

Keywords: TikTok, digital labor, industrious, popular culture, family

Across the world, TikTok has provided visibility to a variety of small-scale local businesses, often with popular origins. There is also evidence that TikTok content creation is part of a growing "side hustle economy," where popular and, increasingly, downwardly mobile middle-class actors rely on small-scale digital ventures to compensate for dwindling and increasingly precarious incomes (Allen & Finn, 2024; Ticona, 2022). Alongside longer-standing platforms like Instagram and YouTube, and newer entrants like Temu or Onlyfans, TikTok has expanded the reach of the small-scale, *industrious* economy of bazaars and

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street vendors—what Veronica Gago (2017) calls "neoliberalism from below"—by integrating it with novel digital practices.

In this article, we draw on our research into popular platform economies in Naples, Italy, to examine what our interviewees call "neighborhood influencers"—figures who build a social media presence to earn a modest income by promoting local businesses (sometimes their own), and who do so by platforming the vernaculars and conventions of ordinary life. We suggest that looking at the platform economy from their standpoint highlights a different configuration of digital labor. So far, most approaches have stressed the exploitative and paradoxically alienating nature of social media–based digital labor: How "not being paid to do what you want" (Duffy, 2017, or being paid very little) also entails submitting one's authentic passions to the aesthetic conventions and algorithmic properties of the platform, while also attempting to "sell oneself" as a curated personal brand (Gershon, 2014). In our argument, we do not downplay the roles of alienation and exploitation in social media digital labor. However, we argue that for our interviewees, digital labor on TikTok is also integrated within an alternative industrious value circuit deeply embedded in the everyday life of family and neighborhood. Here, content creation is a widespread "side hustle" that caters to a local economy of use value. It modestly supplements family incomes without disrupting everyday routines or identities, operating within established normative notions of decency and what constitutes a "normal" life. The vernacular traditions of family life supply cultural commons that can be platformized as content for a public of equals. The family also works as an extended production unit, contributing to the material production of content, sharing the associated entrepreneurial risks, and redistributing revenues within informal structures of family welfare. These family-based "moral economies" also provide symbolic resources that justify intensive and highly precarious investments in digital labor and accommodate the alienating experiences of platform-based algorithmic management (Stark & Pais, 2020). This way, content creation on TikTok blends into the material and symbolic economies of what Michael Salay (2023) terms the "industrious family": a post-Fordist entrepreneurial family unit that integrates multiple revenue streams and entrepreneurial ventures—sometimes informal or bordering on the illegal—to navigate an environment marked by growing precarity and instability.

Industrious Social Media

Social media content creation has always been embedded in everyday life, and for young people in particular, the family has shaped this context since the early days of YouTubers and camgirls (Jarrett, 2015; Senft, 2008). However, at least in the ideal-typical model of "Instafame" (Marwick, 2015)—developed about a decade ago to explain the emerging Instagram-centered "Influencer" industry (Hund, 2023)—creating influence and accumulating followers was contingent on adapting both the aesthetic and sense of selfhood the platform provided. It entailed continuously exhibiting conspicuous consumption through "aspirational labor" that strove to imitate the "lifestyles of the rich and famous" (Marwick, 2015, p. 141). The influencer economy promoted novel forms of microcelebrity while remaining within formats inherited from the star system of the 20th-century media industries (Craig & Cunningham, 2019). Even for the majority of users who lacked the time, resources, or interest to meticulously pursue such Instafame, Instagram provided an aesthetic of the extraordinary that became the default template for the everyday self-branding practices the platform favors (cf. Manovich, 2017).

Self-branding on Instagram was contingent on performing a selfhood distinct from everyday life. Though detailed data on the matter is limited, there is no doubt that succeeding to the point of monetizing—or even making a living from—social media was not attainable for everyone. It required "a set of physical and aesthetic criteria that are anything but common" (Marwick, 2015, p. 157)—or, more pragmatically, the technical skills, cultural capital, and motivation to invest in constant "visibility labor" (Abidin, 2016) to navigate the nested precarities of an opaque algorithmic environment (Duffy, Pinch, Sannon, & Sawey, 2021).

We use the passive tense because even though conventional Instafame is still alive and well, there is evidence that in the decade that has passed since Marwick's (2015) famous article, the social media economy has been populated by a wider variety of actors that have introduced a more diverse aesthetic register, moving beyond "the selfie" that served as a stereotypical (although not entirely empirically adequate) description of its main format at the time.

Across the globe, small-scale economic practices like the "vintage" or "craft" economy have migrated to Instagram and TikTok, often showcasing the home as a storefront (Kneese & Palm, 2020). Street vendors have turned to platforms like Flipkart, Temu, and Alibaba, as well as TikTok and Instagram (Boonjubun, 2017). A range of entrepreneurial pursuits, such as fast fashion reselling, street fashion, or sneaker culture, have begun to populate social media platforms (Affuso & Scott, 2023). At the same time, the influencer economy of the '10s has been paralleled by a more widespread "creator" or "microinfluencer" economy that features more egalitarian distributions of influence and income and more communitarian relations to followers, who often congregate within a particular niche (Bainotti, 2024).

The real "game changer" in this respect has been TikTok. TikTok builds on a Chinese social media tradition that began in 2011 with *Kuaishuo*, which favors widespread popular participation and facilitates social media usage for small-scale, often family-run, "petty capitalist" enterprises (Wang, 2020). The resulting "platformization of family production" (Zhang, 2021) has promoted a varied platform aesthetic, giving space to an "unlikely" creative class, often of popular origins (Lin & de Kloet, 2023). They are drawing on their local, popular traditions or vernaculars to build an online presence, often promoting small-scale business ventures that cater to people like themselves. In addition, the affordances of TikTok, and in particular the prevalence of algorithmically selected content that reflect a combination of personal preference and momentary trends (over content from people that you follow or who generally have a lot of followers; Gerbaudo, 2024), has meant that TikTok is less dominated by powerful influencers and more oriented toward showcasing content that stays close to the everyday world of its users. TikTok has transformed the online reputation economy by offering a platform structured according to a logic that is more bottom-up and populist than Instagram's traditionally elitist and spectacular aesthetic.

The new logic favored by TikTok has also influenced the affordances of established media like Instagram, in part, because these introduced similar features (like the Instagram video reels) and, in part, because most digital creators use both platforms. This way, TikTok has become central to a redefined social media landscape where content creation is a mass activity increasingly integrated into popular economic practices. This novel platform economy allows for further platforming established "petty capitalist" (Zhang, 2020) practices and integrating them with novel forms of digital hustling, such as dropshipping or affiliate

marketing (Ticona, 2022)—which used to be the purview of digital nomads (Luise, 2022) and other highly skilled drop-outs from the knowledge economy—thus generating fresh hybrids along the way.

The Industrious Family

Arvidsson (2019) uses the term "industrious modernity" to suggest that the digital economy is seeing a re-affirmation of the kinds of pre-capitalist economic forms that historians have identified with early modern Northern Europe and the colonial United States, as well as parts of China and Japan. Such "industrious revolutions" were mostly based on small family enterprises that had little access to capital but relied on the common resources of family or village to engage in labor-intensive commodity production for an expanding market economy (Sugihara, 2004). The reliance on common resources made Giovanni Arrighi suggest that the industrious economy moved within the context of a Smithian high-end equilibrium, rather than the ensuing Schumpeterian creative destruction of the *industrial* revolution (Arrighi, 2004, pp. 32, ff.) It was not coupled with ambitions of grand social transformation but was driven by an ethic of survival and making do, or at the most, gradual improvement motivated by the new availability of consumer goods. As Karl Polanyi (1944) suggested, the defeat of the conditions for such a socially embedded industrious economy was a precondition for the *industrial* revolution.

While the industrious economy never entirely disappeared, Arvidsson suggests it is now reaffirming itself, as *industrial* capitalism offers diminishing possibilities for both popular and middle-class livelihoods, and digital media supply novel resources for economic activity. The contemporary, post-industrial industrious economy offers a path for the world's surplus populations: the downwardly mobile middle classes of the Global North and the denizens of the urban "surrounds" (Simone, 2022) in Southern cities, who increasingly navigate between the formal and the informal. As Veronica Gago (2017) suggests, such popular economic practices often deploy a baroque mixture of entrepreneurial rationalities (as well as platform affordances) with what Bolivar Echeverria (1998) called the "natural forms of life," rooted in family and neighborhood (pp. 173–175). The result is an interplay of formal and informal forms—and novel digital affordances and practices—in constant efforts to "make do." The return of such industrious practices has reinforced the role of the family as a productive unit and as a source of both economic and identitarian security. Indeed, Melinda Cooper (2017) proposes that the return of "family values" among the U.S. lower middle classes can be linked to this renewed economic importance of the family, and Italian sociologists have pointed at similar developments for a long time, in particular in the South (Turcio, 2008). As we will suggest, this reinforced industrious family blends effortlessly with the TikTok-centered platform economy.

TikTok in Naples

In Naples, TikTok has been integrated within the existing popular economies of the city, traditionally composed of small-scale family ventures, often bordering on an informal economy estimated to amount to around 30% of local GDP. Such popular, small-scale entrepreneurial practices, sometimes bordering on the informal, have been a constant feature of the city since the post-war years—and in certain neighborhoods even further back. They expanded in importance as a source of popular sustenance when de-industrialization set in the 1970s and many traditional artisanal occupations subsequently disappeared (Dines, 2022). The addition of digital media and platforms has created a baroque digital economy that, while globalized in the

sense that its supply chains stretch to China, Turkey, North Africa, and Latin America, remains embedded in neighborhoods and local traditions.

At the same time, de-industrialization and declining prospects in the formal "properly capitalist" economy have reinforced the importance of the family as an economic unit for the downwardly mobile middle classes (Perulli & Vettoretto, 2022). Middle-class families have increasingly adopted characteristics traditionally associated with the popular strata like inter-generational co-habitation in extended households, the substitution of multiple revenue streams for single or dual breadwinner families, and the re-affirmation of the family as a production unit engaged in micro-entrepreneurship and domestic labor (Turcio, 2008). Indeed, this latter aspect has been substantially reinforced by the new media landscape and its opportunities for small-scale "digital hustles."

The persistence—and, in later decades, resurgence—of family-based industrious economic practices, combined with the novel digital landscape, has made Naples central to TikTok in Italy. A growing number of trends in music, fashion, youth culture, and gastronomy originate in the city, and street vendors, chefs, butchers, market stall owners, and housewives with distinct Neapolitan characteristics have risen to national fame (Arvidsson, Luise, & Recano, 2025). These nationally famous Neapolitan TikTokers are accompanied by a second layer of more locally famous ones. Unlike the Instagram stars of a decade ago, linked to the Milan-centered world of conspicuous consumption, fashion, design, and high-end restaurants, these Neapolitan TikTokers are embedded in the popular economies of the city and, increasingly, in its booming tourist economy. They speak in dialect, mimic popular songs, and promote re-purposed cell phones, branded clothing of questionable origin, and cheap yet abundant "all you can eat" fares—all cast in the popular ethos of excess that Deka (2023) discusses regarding Delhi's street bazaars. Many are established family businesses or street vendors who have discovered TikTok as a marketing channel and venue for self-expression.

Most of these ventures involve little or no digital "curation"—they simply film themselves in their stores or on the street, going about their routines—albeit in exaggerated ways—emphasizing idiosyncratic expressions, showcasing wares with flamboyant gestures, and generally engaging in what Bakthin (1984), discussing Rabelais, called "market speech." Some family businesses—restaurants, perfume stores, or tobacco kiosks pandering e-cigarettes—rely on younger family members for content creation. Many also use "neighborhood influencers"—a term suggested by our interviewees—to promote their offerings. These are typically young people, known within the neighborhood or the network of family and friends who have acquired modest social media following and are contracted to publicize new shipments, menu updates, or temporary deals. Our research targeted this mid-level of "neighborhood influencers," people who make a modest living and operate in a locally embedded social media economy.

Methods and Data

This article builds on two years of research into the novel popular platform economy in Naples, combining digital ethnography with surveys and interviews. Here, we draw on interviews with small-scale content creators that we conducted in collaboration with our undergraduate students.

Impressed by the number of self-professed "content creators" among our undergraduate students in Media Sociology, we ran a research project with them for two years. In the spring of 2023, the project's first year, we asked approximately 50 participating students to each identify five content creators and invite them to complete a survey and participate in an interview. We defined content creators as individuals who made money from their online social media presence. The survey received 90 valid responses, and we interviewed 80 people who fit our definition of "neighborhood influencers": They had an income from professional or semi-professional content creation, resided in the metropolitan area of Naples, and were not nationally famous or exceptionally high earners. The authors of this article, together with five students writing their BA theses, interviewed these neighborhood influencers.

In the spring of 2024, the project's second year, we continued the process. This time, we had 30 participating students distribute a survey to the general student population. We also had them help us build a database of (n. 100) TikTok videos generated by local social media practices, particularly in food and restaurants, street vendors, small stores, household drop shipping, counterfeits, the informal economy, and representations of gender relations. The authors of this article analyzed these videos in 5 workshops, where we asked our students for help (many of them were active as neighborhood influencers themselves.)

According to our 2023 survey, the social composition of our interviewees was overwhelmingly middle or lower-middle class. The median age was 24, and the gender distribution was fairly equal (41% identified as female, 58% as male). A majority of our interviewees lived with their parents and siblings (63%), a common condition among young people in Southern Italy. Families were composed of around 4 components (41%, 30% 3 components, and 21% 5 components). On average, they came from popular or lower middle-class origins. The majority lived in popular neighborhoods in the city center or the immediate periphery, marked by strong local cultures and dense interaction networks. Two-thirds (66%) reported that none of their parents had a university degree, and common descriptions of parent's professions were "unemployed, municipal employee, housewife, chef, salesman, shopkeeper."

Neighborhood Influencers

The first thing that struck us when we started looking for young content creators to interview was how easy it was to find them. The students working with us had no problems identifying people in their networks. In our research group, everybody knew someone who did something on TikTok and often made some money from it. In our follow-up survey in 2024, which we distributed to the general student population, 42% of the respondents stated they were regularly "posting stories, videos and other material" online, significantly more than the 23% who stated to do so in the 2022 Adobe "Future of Creativity" study, which looked at the general populations of the United States, Spain, South Korea, and Brazil (Adobe, 2022). More importantly, 8% of the young people we surveyed stated they made money from such activities. Such earnings were generally modest and equally distributed. In our 2023 survey of 90 content creators (who were all earning something from their online activities), the median income was 400 euros per month—roughly the monthly income of a part-time waiter. Our surveys are not representative, and there might be some bias toward content creation among students who are enrolled in our media sociology program. Nevertheless, our data loosely suggests that around one-tenth of lower middle-class young people in Naples

earn some money from content creation online and that the incomes average those of ordinary side gigs like waiting tables or delivering pizzas.

Indeed, for virtually all our interviewees, social media content creation *was* a side hustle of sorts. Content creation took its place alongside other gigs or small-scale ventures, each generating actual or potential value streams. Some of the people we interviewed saw their social media presence as a marketing channel for small enterprises, often run on a family basis, like bars, family restaurants or food stores. Others had their own professional activity that they promoted: they might be aspiring musicians, restaurant reviewers or beauty consultants. One young man was a personal trainer, and he explained how filming his own workouts both motivated him in the gym and helped him to find new clients. It was also quite common for content creators to see their TikTok activities as ways to prepare themselves for and acquire the necessary contacts and reputations to engage in other kinds of entrepreneurial digital labor. For others, content creation constituted a form of work that took its place alongside a variety of other more traditional side hustles and that generated more or less precarious income streams.

> I also manage other people's social media pages; I do video editing, and I get a monthly income for that. So, there are more things, that's why I told you that it's not just a job, really, you can do many things in the world of social media. As a video maker I also have like three incomes. (Male, late 20s)

Even for people with full-time employment, content creation provided an additional source of income to top up a meager salary.

> I actually work. Both in [Company Name] during the week and on weekends I work as a promoter in [Company Name] . . . So the job in the company is permanent, while on TikTok I don't have a fixed salary so I would say more than 2000 euros a month, then it also depends on the sponsorships even if I also reject several of them. (Woman, early 20s)

Most earnings come from advertising and sponsorship. While some of our interviewees occasionally rely on sponsorship from established national or global commercial brands—principally the ones who have acquired national visibility—most find entrepreneurial niches embedded in local business life. They review and rate local restaurants; work as tourist guides or provide "authentic experiences," often in collaboration with local bars and restaurants; advertise for local pizzerias or beauty parlors; or work with food delivery platforms, which are, in turn, rooted in the local restaurant scene (cf. Alfano, 2023). They are also employed to advertise local street fashion brands, as well as the growing phenomenon of small stores selling reconditioned smartphones or computers (a phenomenon that is growing in popular markets across the world).

> I am mostly contacted by fast food brands. I collaborated with two food delivery platforms and found it very good. I am invited by many restaurants that offer me dinner in exchange for videos and stories [mentions six local restaurants] or even for drinks [mentions a local bar], in this case I do not receive money, but they give me things for free . . . I collaborated with [. . .] which is a refurbished telephone company, therefore in the electronics sector.

> I collaborated with [. . .] that deals with electric scooters, when they arrived in Naples I
> was the first to sponsor them here. I collaborate with shopping centers [mentions three
> regional shopping malls] as far as fashion and beauty are concerned I collaborated with
> [a local chain of hairdressers, a local fashion emporium, two national fast fashion brands
> and one local sneaker store]. (Woman, early 20s)

In short, their social media activities are primarily oriented toward local business life, targeting audiences in the city or even the neighborhood. As many of the interviewees characterized themselves, they were neighborhood influencers.

Platforming Everyday Life

Generally, their activities revolve around an ethic of use value. According to our interviewees, gaining visibility or influence on TikTok depends less on self-branding and aesthetic profile crafting, and more on making "content that a lot of people want to see" and "producing new stuff everyday." The content needs to be useful, entertaining, or functional, providing guides to restaurants, product reviews, or even amateur coaching or therapy. They post content they find useful themselves—or imagine might be useful to peers. Strikingly, almost all our interviewees saw their content creation activities as effortless extensions of their ordinary lives. Many pointed to the Covid lockdown as a turning point, a time when they had both the time to expand their online presence and a heightened need to connect and socialize in more intimate, everyday ways. The recently launched TikTok platform provided a way to achieve this by simply putting online what they were already doing.

> I started making TikToks randomly during the pandemic like most people, and the first
> videos were ironic videos, like what was going through my head, especially videos about
> characters that I really like, like Shrek. Then I have always had this passion for make-up
> so I thought why not take advantage of this possibility, given that by now I had seen on
> TikTok that it worked so I brought a bit of my passions to it. (Woman, early 20s)

There is the young woman who studies medicine and posts short time videos to help other students with their exams. Posting on TikTok comes naturally because she always had a proclivity for social media. Others transform their weekend social life into an occasion for making short videos, this time with tips on how to save money on restaurants and drinks.

> What I do is bring videos about food, how to save or eat almost for free so I mainly make
> videos on the weekend, when normally I already have my free time, for example I go out
> with my boyfriend and in that free time I also record videos. (Woman, early 20s)

Or there is the young woman who transforms her passion for Cosplaying into a successful TikTok presence, the bartender who makes videos of his work and a lot of videos of family lives of couples, going out to dinner, enjoying a seaside stroll, or, frequently, fighting.

Industrious Families

Income from content creation remains insecure and highly variable. The TikTok algorithm in particular is unpredictable, and many interviewees report living in constant fear of being banned or having their accounts suspended, often for reasons they struggle to understand (cf. Morra, 2024). However, even in normal circumstances, income streams are too variable to function as a sole source of sustenance.

> I would like to be precise about this, but a precise estimate does not exist because, for example, from August to December last year, I did not have half a sponsorship and therefore zero earnings; instead, from January until today I have done four sponsorships, the fifth will arrive soon. From these sponsorships I got around seven/eight hundred (around a thousand including taxes) for a very small amount of work, and they all came immediately; a blank period could happen again even now or a period of eight months without sponsorship could happen again and then I could return to having a constant income. (Man, early 20s)

Such "nested precarities" (Duffy et al., 2021) are counterbalanced by the important role of the family. Indeed, for the majority of our interviewees, content creation was to varying degrees a family business. In addition, revenues were shared with family members in various ways, such as contributing to common expenses, financing the studies or other activities of younger family members, or simply serving as pocket money that would otherwise come from the household budget. Families provided basic welfare, which in turn made the precarious activity of content creation possible.

Family members also materially support content creation activities by participating in video making, discussing ideas and suggestions, and sometimes investing in cameras, props, and other equipment, even if they might not understand what it is about.

> I live with my family so my parents, my brother and my sister; my parents have a completely ordinary job and my brothers probably will too but most likely so will I [. . .] everyone in my family including aunts and cousins, grandparents, are aware of my work on social media and are involved and support me a lot, that is, they follow me, they have no problem with me, in fact they see my videos, comment on them, give me advice and stuff like that; this makes me very happy because they still come from a generation completely foreign to this world and instead they welcomed it very well. (Woman, early 20s)

Parents and family members support content creation activities on the understanding that it is an entrepreneurial venture that initially might require backing—economic and moral—from the family unit, but that eventually will hopefully make economic sense on its own, contributing to the family income, and more importantly, opening up a career that, however incomprehensible in the present, will one day offer economic independence. In fact, it is often the concrete realization of economic gain that convinces parents and older siblings to show their full support.

Ok, so at the beginning it wasn't easy, especially with my father, as I already told you we were in a drastic situation, no, drastic, drastic. So, I believed in fairy tales for my father, so I believed in being able to create something with YouTube and make videos and many times I even refused to go to work with my father. That time there was work to do, because I said I have to: I have to dedicate 100% to this work, every day I want to put myself here and I want to make videos and that's it. [. . .] Every now and then, however, when [my father] came from work he would arrive, open the door, look at me and see that I was sitting at the computer, and I also feel guilty because he went to work. [. . .] He said, if I have to pay someone, I want to pay you: You come to work, right? So, the money stays at home. I was saying, no, get someone else. I want to dedicate myself to this. And so, let's say in that case it wasn't easy [. . .] Then over time he gradually saw that 100 a month and maybe many people asked me to do shows. So they wanted me at their party and my father slowly began to believe in what I was doing, and even came to me:" I wrote this video". Then he would sit next to me, think with me and try to create something together with me. (Man, early 20s)

An additional condition for acceptance of content creation as a viable contribution to the industrious family is that it does not transgress standards for what is considered "normal" or "decent" (in Italian, as in other Latin languages, normal, *normale*, has a strong normative connotation; in this context, it also translates as "decent"). In fact, many report that family support for their content-creating activities is contingent on the understanding that they will not disrupt the normal course of life of a young person, will not interfere with studies or a career that leads to a possible "real job," or challenge what relatives and neighbors would consider decent.

So, first of all, I'm from a neighborhood in central Naples, and TikTok is very widespread here, there's no problem with what the platform is, but it's normal that when I show particular things it can create a little nuisance. Anyway, I live with my father, my mother and my sister and . . ., they are very happy for me because in any case they see that I continue my life normally, I go to school, in any case I meet with my friends, it's not always the case that I am constantly on social media, let's say it allows me to have a "simpler" life regarding certain things; More people know me, especially in the neighborhood, in the area, but I continue to have a rather normal life. (Woman, early 20s)

Content creation becomes a normal activity within an industrious family oriented toward survival and the consolidation of prospects and providing yet another income stream that can contribute to family stability. The key to acceptance is twofold and extremely pragmatic. First, that content creation provides some sort of income stream, or even better, the prospects for future economic independence. Second, that such activities do not threaten the appearance of normality and can be accepted by neighbors and family members.

Moral Economies

The ideal of "the normal," central to the family context of content creation, is also reflected in the ambitions of our interviewees. They remain firmly anchored in the conditions of the present, and at the most

aim at their gradual improvement: a more comfortable, consolidated lifestyle, and perhaps a modicum of personal autonomy: "Getting my own apartment; getting some sort of independence, deciding what to do, having my own time, having my own space, unleashing your creativity and in a way living my own life" (Man, early 20s).

Other common aspirations are that their content creation activities might be consolidated and turned into more stable social media professions. Many aspired to careers as social media managers or marketing consultants. At the very most, some hoped that their social media visibility could be converted into a career in music, television, or theatre. Ever here, most ambitions were restricted to the local level. Nobody claimed to aim for international or even national success, but many aspired instead to a place within the vibrant local music scene made up of local stars that find gigs at weddings, baptisms, birthdays, and similar occasions, and that often remain within the realm of the popular genre of *neomelodico* (Pine, 2012). Those who aspired to such local stardom recognized how difficult it was to realize and how much hard work it would take. Most also emphasized the importance of formal studies, even for a career as a singer or musician. Formal studies remained important for virtually everyone, and many stressed how their content creation activities served to finance their studies, which would secure stability in the future, regardless of possibly short-lived social media success.

The emphasis on studies and formal education, perseverance, hard work, and gradual accomplishments traditionally mark the ethos of middle-class families in Southern Italy (as well as elsewhere). For neighborhood influencers, it provides a moral economy—a set of principles for what is just and fair (Thompson, 1971)—that can be applied to the context of digital labor as well. None of our influencers ever criticized the extractive role of platforms—even if they invested a lot of time in "working" for them (in our 2023 survey, the median time dedicated to content creation was 2 hours per day)—neither did they criticize the climate of constant precarity that platforms, and TikTok in particular, generated. Rather, they saw this as the natural property of an opaque "algorithm" that had to be taken as a natural fact. Even if the algorithm was unpredictable and generated a climate of constant precarity, they believed that this insecurity could be beaten by hard work.

> There are times in which you can really make beautiful one-minute films, Oscar-worthy and get 20 views, that's right, there are periods that are like this, when the algorithm decides that it penalizes you [. . .] ok you can do whatever you want, and they don't work at all. The only thing you can do is sit and wait, continue making your videos, accept that they suck, sooner or later a video will arrive that works [. . .] But if you make a good video, even the few people who see it know how to watch it and maybe they send it to someone else, so in any case you have to try to maintain a high standard. (Man, early 20s)

When they voiced a critique of these conditions, it was framed in calls for stricter legal regulation of their activities. For them, issues like the unpredictability of influence and visibility, or the varying relationship between labor and its rewards, should be addressed through a framework of explicit norms and regulations that could provide predictability and transparency. Their desires in this regard sounded like a

faint echo of the Fordist era, when the "labor theory of value" established through collective bargaining and legal measures could guarantee a stable and predictable income environment.

> Then there's another issue . . . since this field isn't fully regulated yet, there's no law that sets a minimum or maximum wage. In reality, anyone can charge whatever they want. And that's a problem because you might come across people who ask for 2,000 euros for a one-minute video. Which, to be fair, if you have the skills and talent, makes sense. But in my opinion, there's a lack of regulation—everyone just sets their own prices. (Woman, early 20s)

Digital Labor in the Industrious Family

In Naples, the local industrious economy, substantially empowered by digitalization and social media, has allowed for several ventures that combine contemporary digital skills with long-established formats and practices. Neighborhood influencers have found a niche in this locally embedded social media economy: They advertise for shops and restaurants and create visibility and influence by drawing on their everyday lives to create content they understand to be useful and attractive to peers. This way, content creation on TikTok becomes a side hustle among many and is quite effortlessly integrated within a family economy that itself has become more "industrious" in nature. Indeed, like many lower-middle-class families in Southern Italy (as well as in other places), the families of our interviewees have had to abandon male breadwinner ideals in practice (if not in "ideology," in the sense that traditionally patriarchal gender roles remained in force) to embrace a situation where many family members, including children, contribute to family income through practices that are often precarious and short-term. In this context, content creation has provided a way for this industrious family to open up to the surrounding digital economy that is developing throughout the city. Initially suspicious, parents and older siblings come to see content creation as a potential entrepreneurial venture in which the family can invest its resources, both economically and otherwise. Parents gradually become involved as co-creators of content, and some acquire social media presence or even launch their own activities. Relatives and extended family members follow young content creators online and supervise and comment on their activities.

The family is essential to maintaining content creation as a side hustle. This is true economically, as families operate as welfare institutions that pool income to counteract the constant precarity of content creation. It also works in the identitarian sense, as established family norms stress the temporary and marginal nature of social media labor. This allows content creators to distance themselves from their online activities and maintain "normal" identities as students or young people aspiring to average careers (if only in the social media industries themselves).

The family also supplies a moral economy that allows content creators to accommodate the alienating aspects of digital labor. Opaque and unpredictable algorithmic management can be accommodated as a necessary evil, a natural fact that can be overcome by perseverance and constant hard work. Along with the economic security the family provides, such attitudes provide an existential sustenance against the vagaries of "neoliberal" market regimes. This moral economy also suggests a framework for criticizing the exploitative nature of digital labor, albeit in ways that recall a now-lost epoch of collective

bargaining and effective labor legislation. Inherently baroque, in the sense of effortlessly combining elements from different epochs—the acceptance of faceless algorithmic management alongside calls for something resembling collective bargaining, for example—this moral economy limits the alienating effects of platforms. There is no need to sell oneself; at most, one sells the stuff one makes online, offers useful advice about restaurants, or makes funny jokes in dialect. One's real self remains anchored elsewhere.

The relationship to the issue of exploitation is more complex. Early debates on digital labor disagreed on whether the exploitative elements of platforms could simply be modeled after 19th-century industrial labor (Arvidsson & Colleoni, 2012; Fuchs, 2010). Here, it seems that whatever these exploitative elements are and how they work, platforms are paralleled by the establishment of a more localized industrious value circuit. On the one hand, this industrious value circuit is not (yet) dominated by a small number of large-scale capitalist actors that can impose far-reaching exploitative mechanisms. Rather, it is structured by numerous relatively egalitarian actors who operate according to the logic of use value. Our interviewees' understanding that there is, or might be, a transparent relation between the exchange value and use values of their content might reflect an ideological (in the old sense of "false consciousness") apprehension of real conditions. It also reflects a Smithian reality where small-scale market competition makes excessive profit margins and market dominance difficult. Concepts of digital labor modeled on gendered forms of household labor (Jarrett, 2015) may better capture the exploitation here. At the same time, our interviewees' emic understanding suggests that the social media economy around TikTok in Naples represents a popular appropriation of digital labor and its employment within an industrious value circuit marked by the coexistence of intense competition on the one hand, and a fairly egalitarian and commons-based structure on the other hand, similar to popular bazaar economies around the world (Deka, 2023). Obviously, this popular appropriation is situated within global hierarchies where exploitation is an endemic factor—at the "lower" levels where the counterfeit and cheap goods that are sold on street markets or dropshipped are manufactured, as well as at the "higher" levels where the data extracted are translated into financial valuations of social media platforms. However, as Joshua Clover (2019) writes, this might reflect a novel popular condition where the economy is distant enough to enable populist market ethics to emerge. Here, the ideology of fair exchange can be upheld because exploitation is hidden far away: just like the transparent labor of the butcher and the baker who gave Adam Smith his breakfast unfolded on the back of slaves and plantation laborers hidden out of sight and out of mind.

Conclusion

In Naples, social media, particularly TikTok, have empowered the "lower level" or "not properly capitalist" economic activity that Fernand Braudel (1984) identified as a persistent feature even of advanced industrial economies (p. 630). The extent to which such empowerment is sustainable in the face of continuing tendencies toward platformization and capital concentration remains to be seen. The growing literature on embedded forms of digital labor offers two ideal-typical directions that we might consider.

On the one end, the literature on outsourced data labor, or "clickwork," draws on Marx's analysis of domestic piecework. The emphasis here is on how the embedded reproduction of labor provided by family and neighborhood contributes to rendering domestic data work "cheap" (in the terms of Jason Moore, 2017) by providing unpaid forms of reproduction. At the same time, the social relations that

constitute these support networks are fragmented by the relentless exploitation imposed by powerful corporate actors whose data *dispotifs* reach far into and re-structure family lives (Posada, 2022). In this context, family and neighborhood become new sources of value to be extracted and are themselves eventually consumed in the process.

On the other end, authors like Lin Zhang or Maitrayee Deka draw instead on Marx's analysis of pre-capitalist forms of "petty industry" or "petty capitalism," along with, in the former case, Chinese economic history. Here, the emphasis is on the resilience and autonomy of local social networks and on the ability to reproduce the social capital of family and village while still successfully engaging with novel platformized markets. Indeed, Zhang (2020) suggests that in the wake of the economic crisis of 2008, the influx of numerous rural industrious e-commerce entrepreneurs transformed the nature of the Alibaba platform itself, "virtually replicat[ing] the bazaar-style haggle and banter typical of the petty-capitalist informal" (p. 121).

Marx was rather dismal about the future of petty capitalist enterprises under the relentless pressure of capital concentration. Other authors (along with Braudel) have instead stressed the persistence or even cyclic reaffirmation of such small-scale "alternatives to mass production" throughout the history of capitalism (cf. Sabel & Zetlin, 1985). In Veronica Gago's (2017) work, the resurfacing of petty capitalist enterprises in the wake of the Argentinian economic crisis constitutes the core of what she calls "neoliberalism from below," popular strategies of adaptation to the declining prospects offered by contemporary capitalism.

Where "our" neighborhood influencers will find themselves in the future is difficult to say. On the one hand, there are attempts to centralize the extraction of value from this reinforced digital industriousness. Recent years have seen the emergence of a range of influencer agencies that also work with the novel category of local micro-influencers that we have discussed (Fabio, 2023). At the same time, the tourist-driven gentrification of inner-city popular neighborhoods has begun to marginalize the original inhabitants. In a process similar to that which Zhang (2024) identified in her return visit to the village that provided her original fieldwork site, rising real estate prices risk undermining the conditions for the embedded industrious social media economy.

On the other hand, the institution of the industrious family has a long history in Naples' popular neighborhoods, in part as a response to the scarcity of formal employment, and the resilience of the local "lower-level economy"—blending the formal with the informal—has increased in recent decades as a response to de-industrialization and post-2008 economic decline (Petrillo, 2011). This resilience is also reinforced by the strong control that local crime families—themselves embedded in neighborhood life—exercise over the important informal economy (Brancaccio, 2017). At the same time, power relations within industrious families are being transformed. Similar to what Zhang (2024) noticed, our research reveals the beginning of a shift in gender and parent-child relations (with children now finding new roles as breadwinners). The outcome of these processes will have to be an object for future research, as the relationship between the "lower-level economy" and capitalism proper is complex and mediated by institutional and cultural factors. Perhaps our case study of neighborhood influencers in Naples can contribute to the growing global literature that now explores this complexity, particularly in relation to platformization and social media–based digital labor.

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