

Posting What You Know and Caring for the Niche: How Micro-Influencers Survive Platform Culture Demands

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Abstract

In recent years, platforms such as Instagram and TikTok have become central arenas for the performance of identity, consumption, and social values. Within this platformized ecosystem, second-hand fashion has emerged as a highly visible and narrativised content niche, particularly among micro-influencers. While second-hand consumption has long been linked to subcultural distinction and sustainability, its current digital mediation raises new questions about visibility, labour, and legitimacy. This article explores how micro-influencers represent and perform second-hand fashion on Instagram and TikTok and it investigates to what extent these practices reflect niche care and ethical commitment, or rather strategic acts of self-branding under platform pressures.

Drawing on digital ethnography and semi-structured interviews, the study analyses how content creators navigate the demands of platform culture while attempting to professionalise their identities. Findings show that second-hand fashion is often selected not purely for ideological reasons, but because it is already familiar and easier to mobilise within the repetitive demands of content production, functioning as a sustainable and recognisable niche. These influencers present their work as a form of care and advocacy, yet such positioning simultaneously functions as reputational labour aimed at achieving visibility and legitimacy. Situated at the intersection of precarity, care, and professionalisation, these practices reveal how affective and ethical narratives are shaped and constrained by platform infrastructures. Rather than viewing these performances as inauthentic, the article argues for their interpretation as complex strategies of survival within the contemporary attention economy.

Keywords: platform labour, micro-influencers, niche, algorithmic demand, second-hand fashion, sustainability.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, digital platforms such as Instagram and TikTok have redefined the dynamics of consumer culture, transforming the act of consumption into a highly visible, performative and strategic activity. These platforms do not merely mediate consumption; they actively shape it through their algorithmic infrastructures, visual grammars, and social norms (Caliandro et al., 2024). Users, particularly content creators are incentivised to curate their identities in alignment with platform logic, developing a form of platformised self-branding (Scolere et al., 2018). Within this context, consumption becomes not just a personal act but a public performance, intertwined with visibility, engagement metrics, and the pursuit of reputational capital (Bainotti, 2024). On TikTok and Instagram, selfies and trends such as hauls, #TikTokMadeMeBuyIt, and daily outfits function as performative rituals of taste and identity, allowing users to demonstrate belonging to specific aesthetic or ethical communities (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016; Abidin, 2021). The platform logic favours content that is visually appealing, emotionally resonant, and easily replicable, thus reinforcing a culture of consumption based on visibility rather than utility (Burgess & Green, 2009; van Dijck, 2013). The dynamics of platformization shape not only what is consumed, but how it is represented and by whom. In this context, the figure of the influencer emerges as a key node in the entanglement between platform logic, consumer culture, and personal branding (Marwick, 2015; Scholz, 2021). Particularly among micro-influencers (creators with smaller but highly engaged audiences) the negotiation between authenticity, visibility, and reputational labour becomes even more pronounced, as they navigate precarious opportunities and the demand for continuous self-presentation (Park et al., 2021). Rather than being passive participants, they actively shape and perform narratives of consumption that align with broader socio-technical expectations (Caliandro et al., 2024). This paper contributes to this discussion by investigating how second-hand fashion content oscillates between practices of care for the community or the environment and strategies of self-branding, shaped by the socio-technical affordances and visibility demands of TikTok and Instagram.

2. Theoretical frameworks

2.1 *The labour of visibility on Instagram and TikTok*

Over the past decade, platforms such as Instagram and TikTok have redefined how individuals engage with consumption. Far from being neutral infrastructures, these platforms actively shape what is seen, shared, and valued. Through a combination of algorithmic governance, engagement metrics, and cultural aesthetics, they promote specific ways of presenting oneself and the consumption practices (van Dijck, 2013; Poell et al., 2021; Caliandro et al., 2024). What emerges is a platformized form of consumerism in which visibility, not utility, becomes the central value (Abidin, 2016b). On TikTok and Instagram, this logic is particularly evident in visual and replicable formats such as selfies, hauls, GRWM (Get Ready With Me), “what I eat in a day,” or thrift flips, genres that turn personal and consumer habits into shareable performances. These trends circulate through templates that invite imitation and virality, reinforcing a culture of consumption built on aesthetics, relatability, and performative authenticity (Abidin, 2021; Caliandro & Anselmi, 2021). This consumption is also deeply coded by the affordances, such as looping videos, algorithmic rewards, and trending sounds on TikTok; stories, reels and aesthetic grid coherence on Instagram (Leaver et al., 2020; Zulli & Zulli, 2022). The success of such formats depends not only on their relatability but on their ability to make sense within the grammars and vernaculars of the platforms. While grammars serve as solid frameworks shaping how content can be created, interacted with, and circulated, vernaculars refer to the cultural conventions and linguistic styles developed within communities. This interplay identifies the co-creation of the platform environment, which should be considered when producing content (Burgess, 2006; Gerlitz & Rieder, 2018; Caliandro et al., 2024). As content circulates, creators learn which gestures, aesthetics, and narrative tropes are most likely to success, leading to the standardisation of certain expressive modes (Della Ratta et al., 2021; Schöps et al., 2024). In this sense, being a content creator on these platforms means navigating a complex ecosystem of visibility labour, where the ability to be seen and to signal authenticity becomes a form of capital. The platform rewards those who can perform their best self-branding, consistency and emotional connection, and can align with dominant aesthetics and trends (Abidin, 2016a; Duffy & Meisner, 2023; Losh, 2025). Such dynamics align with what is described as the “nested precarities” of creative labour on social media, where economic instability is combined with cultural expectations and algorithmic uncertainties (Duffy et al., 2021). In this environment, content creators face an ever-increasing demand for hyperactivity: creators are encouraged to maintain a constant presence through multiple posts per

day, across various formats, in order to remain visible and relevant (Arriagada & Ibáñez, 2020). This demand creates a structural condition of anxiety, where the fear of becoming invisible fuels a cycle of continuous, and often exhausting, production (Bishop, 2018). However, creators are not merely passive subjects of platform pressures. In response to the exhaustion induced by hypervisibility and algorithmic demands, many adopt informal strategies of surviving: for example, focusing on niche content, cultivating smaller but more loyal communities, and prioritizing authenticity over mass appeal. These tactics allow them to maintain a sense of creative agency while navigating the precarious realities of platform labour (Are, 2022; Thorne, 2023; Bonini & Treré, 2024).

These socio-technical dynamics mobilize a complex interplay of commodification, including that of everyday life, emotions, intimacy and even consumption ultimately transforming consumption into a visible, performative, and reputational act (Hidayati, 2024; Barbala, 2024; Caliandro et al., 2024). The act of consuming, indeed, becomes a means of self-presentation and distinction, where conspicuousness operates as a central asset in the production of online status, especially in the case of micro-influencers who constantly need to negotiate belongingness (Bainotti, 2024). While mainstream influencers such as Chiara Ferragni often dominate public narratives (Marwick, 2015), micro-influencers (who have smaller and niche audiences) have gained increasing scholarly attention for their perceived authenticity and intimacy (Park et al., 2021; Walter et al., 2024). Micro-influencers are defined not only by follower number (usually less than 100.000) but by the authenticity they perform with the public: a carefully curated and deeply shaped by platform logic and cultural expectation (Harrison, 2024). Duffy (2017) described these practices as a form of ‘aspirational labour’, where content creators engage in time-consuming, unpaid or underpaid self-promotion in the hope of future professional opportunities. This form of labour is part of the ‘visibility labour’ discussed by Abidin (2016b): a form of reputational struggle where individuals constantly maintain an active presence online in order to remain relevant and potentially monetizable. Concepts such as aspirational, visibility, and reputational labour seems overlapping, but they emphasize different aspects of content production. Aspirational labour regards the temporal horizon of accepting unpaid work for future gains; visibility labour highlights the everyday practices of sustaining presence; reputational labour refers to the symbolic and relational struggles to accumulate trust and credibility. Together, these concepts illuminate how creators mobilize different forms of labour to transform activity on platforms into potential forms of digital capital. These resources collaborate to the accumulation of what scholars call digital cultural capital, an extension of Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital to the digital sphere, where technical literacies, aesthetic judgement, and practices of self-

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presentation become assets convertible into social or economic advantage (Solaroli, 2015; Arriagada & Concha, 2019). Posting is not vain sharing, but a way of cultivating an image of productivity and cultural capital. These dynamics are particularly intense for young people navigating uncertain labour markets, who increasingly turn to platforms as a way to construct their professional identities (Gandini, 2016). The platform becomes a site of self-exploitation masked as opportunity: while the aesthetic of spontaneity is central to their appeal, behind the scenes lie complex strategies, emotional labour, and algorithmic optimisation. And for micro-influencers, the boundaries between passion, personal-branding, and entrepreneurial strategy are often even more blurred than in the case of top-tier influencers, as their position relies more heavily on niche engagement and perceived authenticity (Park et al., 2021).

2.2 Second-hand fashion as content niche

Within this fragile ecosystem of self-promotion and reputational work, content creators often gravitate toward thematic niches that allow for consistent production, aesthetic coherence, and potential cultural legitimacy (Bochenek, 2019). This gravitation toward niche topics is not only a personal strategy but also a response to platform logics. Algorithmic infrastructures of platforms like Instagram and TikTok actively promote content that fits into recognisable, affective niches, facilitating discoverability, engagement, and virality. In this sense, niches are not merely self-selected by creators but co-constructed through platform affordances and recommendation systems (Arvidsson & Caliendo, 2016; Bruns, 2019; Suriyapong, 2024).

Among these, second-hand and sustainable fashion have gained notable visibility on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, emerging as prominent themes in the broader landscape of content creation. Second-hand fashion, in particular, is experiencing significant growth not only in cultural relevance but also in economic terms: according to the 2022 Resale Report, the global second-hand market is expected to grow by 127% by 2026, outpacing the fast fashion industry. Second-hand and vintage are part of the slow fashion movement (Ironico, 2014; Meraviglia, 2014), which is becoming more and more popular worldwide, as a way to reduce environmental impact. This type of consumption refers to accessories that have been 'pre-loved or pre-owned' (Ryding et al., 2019). What was once a subcultural phenomenon in the 1990s has now entered the collective consciousness (Peters, 2014). But why do people buy or sell second-hand or vintage pieces? The motivations identified in the literature are diverse: social, emotional, and financial, ranging from decluttering to make space in the wardrobe, to the search for a non-conformist style that transforms 'trash

into treasure' (Ryding et al., 2019). Platforms have contributed to the mainstreaming of second-hand consumption and the vintage digital economy is part of a broader phenomenon of indie revival, which has emerged as a response to post-Fordist production logics (Charnley et al., 2022). This economy relies on what is referred to as "listing labour", the work of cataloguing, authenticating, and promoting goods online, which extends beyond commercial transactions to include the cultivation of reputation and authenticity (Kneese and Palm, 2020). In this sense, sellers of vintage fashion are not only entrepreneurs but also cultural intermediaries (Arriagada & Concha, 2019), as they must constantly translate goods into stories, aesthetics, and lifestyles that resonate with platform publics. Although many vintage sellers do not explicitly identify as content creators, often emphasizing market expertise and sustainability to differentiate themselves, they nonetheless rely on self-branding, storytelling, and continuous content production that closely align with influencer logics. This process emphasises the re-imagination of craftwork practices (Kneese & Palm, 2022), while also intersecting with the twenty-first-century phenomenon of hipster culture, which negotiates a tension between fashionable trends and the pursuit of authenticity (Michael, 2015; Gandini, 2020; Gerosa, 2024). On platforms like TikTok and Instagram, second-hand fashion is not only consumed but also narrated and performed. In the Italian context, where this study is based, this market is still developing at a slower pace compared to other European countries: according to the Second Chance Impact Report (Cebr), while growth trajectories are evident, Italy remains behind in terms of purchases and consumption, which makes the increasing visibility of vintage sellers on Instagram and TikTok particularly relevant for the cultural legitimization of this practice.

Digital platforms have reshaped the public sphere, transforming it into a hybrid environment where personal expression, consumer culture, and social engagement coexist (Papacharissi, 2010). Rather than merely serving as infrastructures for communication, platforms function as stages where users perform curated identities and build reputational capital (Gandini, 2016). This evolution blurs the traditional boundaries between public and private, as personal interests can become publicly performed. While early theorists such as Habermas (1989) emphasized the risks of reduced complexity in mediated communication, platform cultures have shifted toward more personalized, affective, and highly visible forms of participation (Kennedy, 2008). These new modalities of engagement are often discussed in terms of connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), where individuals contribute to social causes through loosely coordinated, self-expressive actions amplified by platforms. As so, this shift has raised concerns among many scholars. While it broadens access to visibility and participation, it also tends to favour symbolic, episodic, and highly aestheticized gestures over sustained engagement. The concept of 'performative activism' has

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emerged in this context, describing practices where social causes are endorsed primarily through visible, affective, and often strategically curated performances. In such cases, the performance of commitment may outweigh its material impact, reflecting broader anxieties about visibility culture and neoliberal subjectivity (Thimsen, 2022; Dean, 2024). Building on Butler's theory of performativity (see Disch, 1999), these acts can be understood not as false or hypocritical, but as socially coded rituals that confer legitimacy and identity. On social media, political or ethical engagement becomes entangled with personal branding: posting about a cause is not only a sign of concern, but a way to position oneself within a moral economy of visibility. As platforms reward consistency, community, and recognisability, these dynamics raise questions about how altruistic gestures themselves might be shaped, if not scripted, by platform logic and the same time many scholars and at the same time, many scholars are increasingly acknowledging the ambivalence of such practices, recognising them as both strategically motivated and potentially impactful forms of participation (Pham, 2015).

In light of these dynamics, it becomes crucial to investigate how the display of sustainable consumption practices, such as second-hand fashion, are shaped by the visibility-driven environments of platforms like Instagram and TikTok.

3. Data and methods

The empirical research adopts a qualitative approach based on digital ethnography and semi-structured interviews. The study investigates how second-hand fashion is represented and performed by micro-influencers on Instagram and TikTok, and to what extent this form of sustainable consumption can be understood as a practice of care for the community or the environment or a strategy of self-branding.

The epistemological framework draws on the 'follow the user' principle (Caliandro, 2024), which shifts the focus from platforms as technical environments to the practices, routines, and representations of users themselves. This approach is particularly suited to cross-platform environments and the post-API landscape (Venturini & Rogers, 2019), where direct access to large-scale platform data is limited, and researchers must instead engage with users' public-facing activities to understand platform cultures. Following the user meant observing the creators' content over time and tracing the articulation of their narratives and identities across different formats (such as posts, stories, videos...) within Instagram and TikTok.

The decision to focus on TikTok and Instagram is due to their influence in shaping digital consumption, especially in the domains of fashion and lifestyle

(Gupta et al., 2024). Within these spaces, micro-influencers (typically defined as users who post professionally and with fewer than 100,000 followers) offer a strategic site of analysis. Unlike celebrity influencers, micro-influencers operate within niche communities and are often perceived as more authentic, relatable, and credible. Their visibility is not guaranteed, but earned through continuous engagement and platform labour, making them ideal subjects for investigating how values like care and ethical consumption are translated into strategic digital practices (Harrison, 2024).

Data collection unfolded in two interconnected phases. The first consisted of a digital ethnography conducted between October 2022 and October 2023, focusing on a sample of 30 micro-influencers. Ethnographic observations were non-intrusive, involving the systematic tracking of content creators' online activities, and accompanied by fieldnotes in the form of screenshots, screen recordings, and analytical memos. The aim of this phase was to map the aesthetic and discursive conventions surrounding second-hand fashion content, and to identify relevant cases for further investigation. The second phase comprised 15 semi-structured interviews with Italian micro-influencers selected through snowball sampling, starting from creators observed during the ethnographic phase. Participants met the following criteria: (1) they were active on Instagram and/or TikTok; (2) had more than 2,000 and less than 100,000 followers; (3) regularly produced content on second-hand and vintage fashion; and (4) were based in Italy. The recruitment process occurred through direct contact via social media messaging and email, with interviews conducted remotely via video calls. Interviews lasted approximately one hour and were recorded and transcribed with participant consent. The interview guide was informed by the ethnographic observations and covered a range of topics: personal motivations for engaging with second-hand fashion; their use of digital platforms; perceived audience interactions; and broader aspirations regarding work and visibility. The final sample was composed almost entirely of women, with only one male participant. The sample was composed predominantly of women, with only one male participant. This gender imbalance reflects broader trends in the domains of second-hand fashion and micro-influencing, where women represent a significant majority of active creators. Most participants were aged between 25 and 35 and had a background in communication, fashion, or related creative sectors. Many combined platform work with other jobs or freelance activities in social media, fashion retail, or cultural production.

All interviews and field materials were anonymised and analysed through thematic coding. An inductive approach guided the identification of recurring themes across the dataset (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Themes were not defined solely by frequency but also by analytical relevance. The main categories emerg-

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ing from the analysis included: (a) content monetisation strategies; (b) motivations for engaging with second-hand fashion; (c) differences in platform affordances; (d) time management and work-life balance; (e) emotional impacts and stress; (f) relationships with followers; (g) tactics for maintaining visibility; (h) employment; (i) self-perceptions of digital labour. These categories were later regrouped into four broader dynamics [sections 4], within which the different aspects are addressed: familiarity as an easier entry point (d, i), platform demands and the pressure to perform (c, e, g), adding value caring for a sustainable niche (b, f) and legitimacy and precarity (a, h). The integration of interview data with the ethnographic fieldwork enabled a holistic understanding of platform practices and their role in shaping new forms of visibility labour and professional identity.

4. Findings

The analysis identifies four interrelated dynamics of second-hand content posting. First, second-hand fashion appears as a low-cost, high-familiarity content niche, offering an intuitive entry point into content creation. Second, this familiarity is strategically mobilised to meet the demanding rhythms of platform productivity, which require constant posting, engagement, and optimisation. Third, the content is often framed as a form of ethical or affective contribution to a community, producing a reputational rhetoric of care that resonates with platform values. Finally, these practices unfold against the backdrop of structural precarity, where visibility is used as a form of professional capital in unstable labour markets. Together, these dimensions show how second-hand content posting becomes a performable resource through which creators manage both algorithmic pressure and work uncertainty

4.1 Familiarity as an easier entry point

For many micro-influencers interviewed and observed, second-hand fashion was not a strategic choice planned in advance, but rather an intuitive decision driven by familiarity, personal history, and everyday practices. This pre-existing knowledge made the topic not only emotionally resonant but also operationally efficient: they already knew which flea markets visit, what to say, and how to visually frame their content. In a platform environment that demands consistency and recognisability, this familiarity reduced the cognitive and emotional cost of content creation. In other words, second-hand fashion emerged

as a performable niche not simply for ideological reasons, but because it was already embedded in their routines and identities.

As A., a luxury fashion employed, put it:

It came naturally to me because the world of flea markets and vintage was already very familiar... when I started posting on social media, it was natural for me to talk about this topic.

Her interest had already made her a reference point in her offline community, where she helped friends and classmates organise ‘swap parties’ during high school. The decision to post about second-hand was not premeditated but prompted by friends who already perceived her as an expert. Once she started sharing her finds, an online feedback loop quickly developed. During the interview she recalled an early post about a vintage shop in her city, that resulted in a crowd outside the store the next day.

The shop contacted me: ‘you did those stories and the next morning we had people queuing outside’... That’s when we thought we should structure a better collaboration.

Other interviewees shared similar trajectories. D., a communication student, noted that her commitment to second-hand fashion preceded her presence on social media. She had always embraced what she called “poor fashion,” a style ethos that mixed creativity and constraint, later reinterpreted as sustainable and political. I., a creative sector worker, began documenting markets around Italy as a personal archive, a simple way to flag local flea markets mostly for herself:

I didn’t remember them all, so I said ‘come on, I’ll make a post, I’ll write them down... they’re useful for me and for whoever wants them.

What began as passion or habit quickly became a content reservoir: something that could be transformed into stories, posts, and reels without artificiality. This easy entry point is not trivial, as platforms reward volume and repetition. The algorithmic demand for quantity leads many creators to anchor themselves in topics that are already familiar, reducing the labour of constant reinvention. As such, second-hand becomes a resource not only cultural or ethical, but logistical.

In all these cases, second-hand fashion functioned as a ready-made content universe: a niche they didn’t have to invent but could simply extend from offline

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to online. This pre-existing knowledge allowed them to begin posting consistently, without the burden of creating a persona from scratch. While the strategic function of this choice will be explored in later sections, it is important to underline how familiarity shaped the origin of their content trajectories. Rather than being framed by the dichotomy of care or branding, second-hand was, for these creators, something intuitive and meaningful, something they could draw on, both emotionally and practically, to begin navigating the platform ecosystem.

4.2 Platform demands and the pressure to perform

Despite the emphasis on passion and community, micro-influencers are acutely aware of the performative labour required by platforms like Instagram and TikTok. To maintain visibility and grow their following, they must continuously produce content that is not only visually engaging but also frequent, responsive, and aligned with the shifting rules of platform algorithms. The pressure to be constantly present creates a form of affective and logistical strain, which many interviewees described as exhausting, overwhelming, and sometimes harmful to their mental health.

M., social media strategist, outlined the level of planning required to remain visible:

I made a quarterly plan according to which I have to publish three TikToks a day, which is a huge commitment, but it actually pays off.

Her words reveal both the awareness of platform mechanics and the weight of the commitment they entail: she need to create a precise and strict plan for her Instagram and TikTok profiles because she needs to feed the need of relevance. Similarly, H. explained how her interactions on Instagram are not spontaneous, but algorithmically motivated:

Instagram works with visible interactions. Every day you have to stand there for 15 minutes in the morning and in the evening with spontaneous comments... but for me it's not spontaneous, it's just a way to make the algorithm happy.

The practices these micro-influencers learnt to follow illustrate how even actions framed as engagement are embedded in a tacit knowledge of platform logic. The demand for consistency is internalised as a rule of survival for their personal profiles. The cumulative effect of this pressure was described most

vividly by D., who reflected on the long-term psychological toll of content creation:

You get tired because it's so mentally exhausting to make content... You sprint, you get tired, and you have a burnout that can cost you months of creativity... From the moment you wake up to the moment you close your eyes, this is a job you never stop thinking about.

Even if D. in this passage is not talking openly about her life, as she is commenting other creators' experience, her comment incapsulates the exhaustion the visibility labour requires. The performativity the platform is constantly requiring is a draining force which can cause physical and emotional fatigue, leading also to states of mental struggles. The necessity to post everyday impose to micro-influencers tight rhythms and, considering that content creation is not even their main work activity, burnout becomes a recurrent risk.

To cope with this demand, many of the micro-influencers interviewed reported relying on topics that were already familiar to them (as explored in the previous section). Having deep knowledge of second-hand fashion allowed them to reduce the effort required to invent new content from scratch, enquire topics, staying update... In this sense, the niche becomes a buffer against platform exhaustion, not only a personal interest. While their public-facing narratives emphasise joy, community, and sustainability, the backstage reality often tells a more precarious story: one where digital labour is intense, unpaid, and algorithmically governed.

4.3 Adding value caring for a sustainable niche

In their narrative, several micro-influencers frame their content as a form of contribution to their community, rather than a way to construct their visibility. More precisely, they address niche communities centred around second-hand fashion, sustainability, and vintage culture. By positioning themselves as knowledgeable and approachable figures within these niches, micro-influencers are able to add value, foster trust, and differentiate themselves from commercially driven influencers. This justification helps to distinguish them from commercial-driven goals. As presenting themselves as generous and community-oriented, they perform a reputational form of care that is common to online spaces. D., a communication student, explicitly articulated these dynamics through her social media profile, where she writes:

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Enter my universe to change yours.
My mission is to educate future and present generations.
You can start making a difference now

Her rhetoric combines affective mobilization (“my universe”) with activist tones (“mission”, “educate generations”, “make a difference”) and create a balancing between her personal project and collective purposes. This form of self-presentation, while enables to light the focus on her activity, it also create a ecosystem of trust and solidarity within a specific niche community. During the interview D. also said:

I consider [the community members] friends, you know? Because I talk to people, and they answer me...

D.’s word choice, “friends”, reinforces a non-hierarchical relationship with her audience, while also strengthening the perception of herself as caring and trustworthy, which are key qualities for perceived authenticity.

Sustainability, in this context, is often invoked not only as a value in itself, but as a further justification for content creation. M., a social media strategist, described her journey into second-hand fashion not as a sudden ethical awakening, but as the reorientation of a deeply ingrained consumer habit:

I’ve always had this almost compulsive need to buy things... At some point I realised I couldn’t go on like that, not for economic reasons, but for ethical ones. I’m also vegetarian, I try to be coherent. I live in a big city where alternative consumption is easy. So, I shifted that impulse toward flea markets.

Over time, this shift also became a topic of her online presence. Not because she wanted to become an influencer, but because she was already obsessed with ‘stories’, both in the narrative sense and the Instagram format:

Second-hand comes with stories. And I love stories. I love telling them, listening to them. That’s why it made sense to bring this into my posts.

M.’s narrative exemplifies how sustainability becomes a way to perform coherence between her personal ethics and her digital presence, allowing her to anchor her storytelling within a niche audience passionate about second-hand fashion. In this sense, ethical consumption is not only a private choice, but a communicable asset, something that can be storified, shared, and recognised within platform cultures.

A similar framing appears in L.'s experience. While she began posting simply out of interest in vintage fashion, she later found herself offering what she calls a "service" to her followers:

I show what I like, and people know what they can find in different specific vintage shops... This service is useful both to get to know this world and for those who may be lazy... not everyone can manage piles of stuff.

In the framing of her activity, L. presents herself as a curator caring for her niche audience, positioning her expertise in second-hand fashion as a valuable service. Her second-hand knowledge is made available for unskilled or lazy consumers and transforms the perception of social media influence into facilitation.

I., a creative-sector worker, described her content as a tool to "bring people together who have this passion," suggesting that her Instagram page functions as a space of connection and recognition:

I thought, gosh, it would be great to go there with someone who has the same passion as you!

This emotional dimension of content creation reinforces the idea that what is being offered is not just fashion advice, but a sense of belonging. The platform becomes a site not only of visibility, but of social cohesion brought together by second-hand fashion interests.

Across these cases, the act of adding value to others is a recurring rhetorical frame. It creates a niche-driven form of visibility in which micro-influencers justify their presence not as self-promotion, but as a service to others. Yet this framing, while rooted in genuine personal motivations, also functions strategically: it allows micro-influencers to claim cultural legitimacy, distinguish themselves from commercial influencers, and build a recognisable identity within niche audiences. In a crowded attention economy, portraying oneself as useful, trustworthy and community-driven becomes a key tactic of reputational labour.

4.4 Legitimacy and precarity

Underlying the narratives of passion, care, and community lies a shared condition of structural precarity. Many of the micro-influencers interviewed are students, freelancers, or workers with unstable or fragmented career paths mostly in the ambitus of communication or fashion. Their presence on Instagram and TikTok reflects not only a desire for self-expression, but a strategic attempt to professionalise and legitimize their interests within their fields. In a

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labour market that offers few guarantees, platforms become spaces of possibility, but also of intense self-exploitation.

S., a communication freelancer, clearly framed her activity as a form of portfolio building:

I don't have direct economic returns because I never do adv... but I've been able to earn money through work activities. For example, I'm collaborating with a second-hand event... I conducted interviews and run many workshops for them.

Here, visibility becomes a currency for accessing remunerated opportunities outside the platform. Rather than aiming for direct monetisation via ads or sponsorships, S. uses her profile to signal competence, style, and professionalism in ways that might appeal to future collaborators or clients.

D., similarly, stated that her goal was to build a professional reputation, even as she continued to describe her work in altruistic terms. This duality, helping others while helping oneself, is central to the micro-influencer's negotiation with visibility:

All my energies online are to build a professional reputation.

What emerges is a platform-mediated form of reputational labour, in which creators are both workers and brands. Their legitimacy is not granted by institutions or employers, but constructed through ongoing performances of taste, expertise, and care positioning. In this sense, second-hand fashion serves not only as content, but as a vehicle for professional identity: it allows creators to appear informed and skilled.

An illustrative case of platform-based professional repositioning is A., at the time of her interview social media manager and consultant. Prior to this freelance job, she worked in the fashion and events industry, which came to a halt during the 2020 pandemic. As she recalled:

In 2020 I was working in fashion and events, and everything had stopped. I was on furlough, so I tried Vinted, which had just launched. I had time, I was at home, and I started decluttering.

What began as a pastime gradually evolved into a professional turning point. TikTok, which she used to educate her followers about Vinted strategies, provided an initial boost and led to an unexpected visibility and demand:

I used TikTok as a launchpad. Then I opened Pinterest, uploaded a couple of videos, and between Friday and Sunday I received around thirty requests for courses and consultations. I didn't even have a service offer yet, but of course I said yes. (...) It all came in passively.

A.'s accidental experience highlights the potential of online positioning. Without an initial plan to monetise, A. responded to audience demand and formalised her activity into a new professional path. This experience reinforces how platforms can function as informal marketplaces of legitimacy, reputation and audience engagement are quickly converted into perceived expertise and income-generating opportunities. A2's story also reflects the broader post-pandemic reconfiguration of digital work, where creative labour becomes both a fallback and a way forward for precarious workers navigating unstable economies.

Across all cases, a recurring tension emerges: the micro-influencers interviewed and observed are navigating not only the instability of their personal and professional lives, but also the demanding, often overwhelming nature of platform engagement. While their official (or potential, if they are still students) jobs are often precarious, highly competitive, or poorly paid, their work on Instagram and TikTok adds a parallel layer of labour: one that is emotionally intense, reputationally driven, and algorithmically conditioned. Posting is not a casual hobby, but a necessary performance of visibility. Faced with this dual instability (economic on one side, digital on the other) these micro-influencers appear to mobilise two main coping strategies.

First, they frame their presence as a contribution to a community, constructing bonds of trust, intimacy, and shared values. This helps them gain recognition and moral legitimacy in a saturated market of attention. Second, they build content around something they already know intimately, which is second-hand fashion, transforming a personal interest into a productive niche. This familiarity reduces the cognitive load of constant content production, while reinforcing their authority and authenticity.

Across the cases, care and branding emerge not as separate or conflicting practices but as intertwined dynamics. Caring for the community, advocating for sustainability, and offering services are rhetorical and practical strategies that simultaneously allow micro-influencers to strengthen their authenticity and professional visibility. In a platformized context where emotional resonance and niche expertise are rewarded, positioning oneself as caring is a way to perform value, enhance symbolic legitimacy, and manage reputational labour.

5. Conclusions

This study set out to explore how second-hand fashion is represented and performed by micro-influencers on TikTok and Instagram, and to what extent these practices reflect care toward the community or the environment, or rather as strategic acts of self-branding. While second-hand fashion is not consumed principally for the sake of content, its consumption is platformized and transformed into a performative and visible act that aligns with social media economies. This paper contributes to broader discussions on digital labour, platform economies, and platformized consumption by illustrating how second-hand fashion becomes a symbolic and material tool for micro-influencers navigating the contradictions of platform capitalism. Far from being marginal, these actors offer a lens onto the everyday labour of making oneself visible, valuable, and employable in the social media economy while staying consistent with their everyday life and values. Drawing on digital ethnography and semi-structured interviews, the analysis has uncovered the complex interplay between visibility, community, and professional identity within platform cultures. Micro-influencers in this study transform their existing familiarity with second-hand fashion into a strategic content niche, something they already consume and know well, which makes it easier to produce consistent and authentic posts. They frame their activity as a form of social and environmental care, positioning themselves as mediators and community-builders. In this sense, care is not limited to emotional support but also takes the form of service provision, through practices such as sharing knowledge about second-hand fashion, recommending shops, or curating accessible vintage styles. This narrative not only aligns with platform values like relatability and niche-orientation but also helps them meet the constant pressure to perform. In doing so, they gain symbolic legitimacy and find ways to cope with the double precarity of social media labour and unstable career paths.

The analysis contributes to the growing body of research on visibility labour (Abidin, 2016b; Gandini, 2016; Duffy, 2017; Bainotti, 2024), by showing how second-hand content becomes a vehicle for micro-influencers to perform reputational work and negotiate legitimacy within platform economies. In line with previous studies on production (Burgess, 2006; Gerlitz & Rieder, 2018; Caliandro et al., 2024), the findings illustrate how content is co-produced through the interplay between individual identity and platform affordances. While content is often framed as altruistic or community-oriented, these acts of sharing are also imbued with implicit strategies of distinction and professionalization (Harrison, 2024).

Importantly, these practices are located within the specific context of micro-influencers. Compared to mainstream influencers (Marwick, 2015), these

actors navigate a more fragile ecosystem, where visibility must be continuously earned and where professional opportunities are often informal, uncertain, and contingent on algorithmic performance (Bainotti, 2024). In this sense, the findings show how content niches like second-hand fashion function as low-cost but high-symbolic-value strategies to resist platform exhaustion and maintain creative consistency. To a certain extent, these conclusions resonate with the notion of platformised consumption as a reputational practice rather than a random or incidental one (Bainotti, 2024; Caliandro et al., 2024). As it is situated within the intersection of sustainable consumption, acts of caring for a community and self-branding, this work also aligns with existing debates on performative activism, a concept that describes how political or ethical values are communicated through highly aestheticised and publicly visible gestures, often shaped by platform affordances and visibility demands (Thimsen, 2022; Dean, 2024). What emerges is a discursive style that is affective and platform-responsive, confirming both the ambivalence and potentialities of connective action within digital environments (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Papacharissi, 2010). These dynamics should not be dismissed as inauthentic: rather, following Pham (2015), we interpret them as socially coded performances of care and value, shaped by the socio-technical logic of platforms.

These ethical and care-oriented gestures appear sincere, but also strategic: they allow micro-influencers to distinguish themselves in a competitive field and to frame their presence as meaningful beyond self-promotion. At the same time, these practices are profoundly shaped by the logic of the platforms themselves. Instagram and TikTok demand regular posting, emotional appeal, and algorithmic optimisation. Within this context, even caring becomes stylised and platform-dependent. What appears as community-based advocacy often conforms to the formats, aesthetics, and rhythms rewarded by the platforms, raising critical questions about how digital infrastructures frame the visibility of value claims. This does not mean these micro-influencers are cynical or calculating. On the contrary, many of them are (or know they will be) navigating unstable labour conditions such as precarious jobs, interrupted careers, or low-paid freelance work. Their platform activity reflects an effort to resist this precarity: by transforming personal knowledge into content, by performing expertise, and by carving out a niche through something they are already well familiar with. Their passion for second-hand fashion becomes not only a thematic choice, but a practical solution: something they already know deeply, which they consider of great importance and so that can be mobilised with little cost but high symbolic value. In this sense, community-building and content production about second-hand fashion are not only strategies of visibility but also forms of labour and identitarian surviving.

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A key to understanding these dynamics lies in the very subjects of this study. The micro-influencers interviewed do not identify as “influencers,” nor do they claim to aspire to become such. Instead, they frame their activity as a strategic use of their profiles in the pursuit of a “real” job. For some, this job remains closely tied to the world of second-hand fashion (for instance, reselling vintage pieces or organising events around this scene), for others the ultimate goal extends beyond fashion altogether, towards roles such as social media manager, consultant, or PR professional. In both cases, their content production is less an end in itself than a means: a portfolio to showcase skills, a rehearsal of professional expertise, and a gateway to more stable and recognised forms of employment. This study focuses on content practices but does not trace their long-term role in users’ professional lives. Future research will expand on this by exploring how young women use platforms like Instagram and TikTok not for fame, but to remain visible, employable, and credible in a precarious labour market, while also negotiating shifting cultural meanings of work and identity in post-Fordist societies.

In conclusion, the research highlights how second-hand fashion functions as both a personal and sustainable passion to be transmitted and a professional strategy for micro-influencers navigating platform precarity. Their practices offer a lens through which exploring everyday realities of platform capitalism, and the new forms of labour and value it reproduces.

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