

The Authentic Brand: The Rise and Mechanics
of Corporate Influencership

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ABSTRACT

The Authentic Brand: The Rise and Mechanics of Corporate Influencership

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This thesis examines how brands utilize the marketing tactics of social media influencers to promote themselves in platform spaces in order to connect with their users. While contemporary netizens have become increasingly resistant to most forms of digital advertising (Ramadan 2017, Ariagada 2021), influencers have found success in promotional campaigns due in large part to their ability to appear authentic and demonstrate their relatability through the content they produce. Due to the success of these marketing strategies, several brands have altered their approaches to social media and incorporated aspects of influencership into their presentation in these spaces or attempted to become influencers themselves as a means of circumventing the ad resistance of their userbases. This thesis explores this phenomenon through examinations of two brand social media accounts that have found success through utilizing influencer marketing tactics: the Twitter profile of the fast food chain Wendy's and the TikTok account of the language learning app Duolingo. By examining these brand accounts through the lens of existing research that defines the promotional strategies of influencers, this thesis highlights the aspects of influencership that both companies have incorporated into their respective approaches and illustrates the rationale behind these choices in digital presentation. Ultimately, this thesis seeks to expand the definition of influencership by demonstrating its potential as a tool of the market as its strategies continue to be co-opted by corporate entities and to encourage further academic scholarship that recognizes the steady progression of this phenomenon.

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Introduction

In 2016, NPR's Planet Money radio show did a short piece examining a marketing campaign enacted by the Japanese car manufacturer Subaru in the 1990s as a last ditch effort to bolster their sales in North America which were middling at the time. The company had been retooling its advertisements for years at this point trying to find the right marketing approach that would make the difference for them, but despite working with acclaimed advertising firms like Wieden and Kenny, Subaru had no luck in finding mass appeal. As a result of these failures they shifted gears and began to conduct large scale market research to discover who was actually buying their cars with the intention of altering their approach to meet the demands of these niche groups instead. These studies identified several small markets the car was performing excellently in, but most surprising was that there was one demographic that had numerous members in each of these social circles: lesbians. Queerness in the 90s was still heavily stigmatized and very few companies wanted to take the risk to advertise directly to queer folks in fear of alienating their mainstream audience, however for a company experiencing little popular success this wasn't a significant concern. Subaru decided to explore their options within this community and hired Mulryan Nash, a small agency specialized in marketing to queer folks, to create a series of advertisements that could be targeted at lesbians without overtly advocating queerness.



Figure 1.1. Examples of Mulryan Nash's Subaru ads.

Mulryan Nash put together a selection of cheeky ads that subtly alluded to lesbianism (fig. 1.1) and the wider queer community utilizing language that would allow the jokes to soar right over the heads of uninitiated heterosexuals, signaling to the queer community that Subaru understands their culture well enough to make casual reference to it. This campaign was a success and within two years, Subaru's sales saw a significant improvement as lesbians continued to support the brand so diligently that lesbians owning Subarus is now a popular queer meme in the 2020s.

The effectiveness of this campaign was due in large part to the, at the time, unwillingness of brands to market to queer people and in doing so, Subaru provided recognition to an oft maligned community. However, an equally important aspect of this campaign was its ability to directly relate to lesbians through its numerous in-jokes, all of which projects the implication that the company cared enough about their demographic to learn about their culture and participate in it in an authentic manner. Authenticity has long been a crucial tool for brands as crafting an appearance of relatability allows these corporations to connect with consumers on a more personal level, endearing them to the brand and encouraging them to invest in a product that would seem to share their values¹. Jennifer Aaker's research notes the crucial role that brands play in contemporary self actualization: the average consumer views the companies they support as part of their identity and by investing in products from a brand that publicly shares their values, they are expressing those same values to others (55, 1999). This paradigm informs which traits companies choose to ascribe their brand with as through the expression of specific values, they can inform what kinds of customers invest in their product. As such, Subaru's queer humor allowed lesbians to believe that in buying a Subaru they were both supporting a company that understood their identity and signaling to others that they valued a company that viewed their sexuality as valid. Perception is key here however as a company doesn't have to actually support those values in practice, they just need the general public to believe that they do: when interviewed by Planet Money, several Subaru employees expressed that despite the pro-lesbian stance taken in their advertising, the atmosphere inside the company was still very homophobic². There are no shortage of brands who act in a similar manner, pledging their support for a cause

¹ Michael B. Beverland, Adam Lindgreen, and Michiel W. Vink, "Projecting Authenticity through Advertising: Consumer Judgments of Advertisers' Claims," *Journal of Advertising* 37, no. 1 (2008): 5–15 and Beverland, Michael B., Francis J. Farrelly, and John Deighton served as editor and Eric Arnould served as associate editor for this article. "The Quest for Authenticity in Consumption: Consumers' Purposive Choice of Authentic Cues to Shape Experienced Outcomes." *Journal of Consumer Research* 36, no. 5 (2010): 838–56. <https://doi.org/10.1086/615047>.

² Planet Money, "When Subaru Came Out," Episode 729, National Public Radio, Oct 14, 2016.

or community in words while donating money to opposing groups behind closed doors, and despite this dichotomy often being public information these companies can get away with this fake empathy because this knowledge isn't being as widely projected as their branding is. Expressions of authenticity are ultimately a performance put on by a brand through their marketing, and while little credence should often be given to the truth of their support the positive effect on sales is undeniable.

While the modes of authentic expression fit cleanly into established marketing tactics in the 20th century, these mechanisms would change significantly in the early 2000s with the advent of digital platforms which would rapidly begin to reshape the contemporary political, economic, and media landscapes. As the cultural capital of platforms increased, huge swaths of society migrated to these digital spaces in a process called platformization, a term Thomas Poell and David Nieborg define as “the penetration of economic, governmental, and infrastructural extensions of digital platforms into the web and app ecosystems, fundamentally affecting the operations of the cultural industries” (4175, 2018). As Adrian Athique describes, platformization is primarily interested in combining the acumen of contemporary technologies with the basic functions of society, creating a selection of digital tools that allow for new experiences and theoretical optimizations of social mechanisms (3, 2020). Through this process, digital platforms have become essential cornerstones of contemporary life as almost every quotidian activity has been tied to specific platforms with varying levels of dependencies such as online marketplaces serving the functions of in-person shopping or ride-share apps acting as an alternative to taxi services. On a corporate level, the societal shift towards platformization has been a significant boon thanks to the capitalistic focus of this movement: corporations are the owners and operators of the digital tools that society has come to rely on and as such, they have have been given immense power over essential infrastructure that has not yet been thoroughly regulated, allowing them to optimize these spaces for their own monetary gain³. As global economic systems have shifted to reflect this new market, advertising too has become deeply intertwined within platformization thanks to the new promotional opportunities afforded by platform ecosystems. These new digital spaces are largely governed by what Nick Srnicek calls “advertising platforms” which are designed to harvest information from their users, analyze their findings to

³ Jathan Sadowski, “The Internet of Landlords: Digital Platforms and New Mechanisms of Rentier Capitalism,” *Antipode* 52, no. 2 (2020): 562–80, <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12595>.

identify the preferences of each of these individuals, then show that person ads relevant to their interests (50, 2017). Whereas Subaru had to carefully hide its allusions to queerness in plain sight, brands could now construct ads designed to directly speak to specific demographics and ensure that those individuals would see those promotions.

In theory this new ad space provided an effective vehicle for delivering brand messages, however these advertising platforms make money on each ad they show to a user which incentivizes them to display as many advertisements as possible on their websites. As a result, advertising platforms have overly-saturated their space with ads: whether it be the numerous promoted posts that appear when scrolling through Instagram or the sponsored results at the top of a Google search, advertising platforms are almost all relentless in the presentation of sponsored content. This high saturation of ads has trained the contemporary netizen to often ignore promotional content regardless of its relevance to their life as the constant barrage of commercial messaging has resulted in users who are tired of being advertised to⁴. Thus, regardless of the targeted authenticity of a digital promotion, their effectiveness can vary as the message is lost beneath a deluge of other targeted ads that a user is likely to ignore. However, amidst the mass platformization of the early 2000s, a new profession emerged whose practitioners excel at performing authenticity to a select group of people: content creators, individuals that Stuart Cunningham and David Craig define as “commercializing and professionalizing native social media users who generate and circulate original content in close interaction and engagement with their communities on the major social media platforms as well as offline” (2020, 1). Many platforms rely on what Cunningham and Craig call “user-generated content” or any media created by the users of that platform: video hosting sites such as YouTube and Vimeo are primary examples of this model, as well as live streaming platforms like Twitch and many forms of social media (2). While many users might post on these platforms for fun or as a means of connecting with others, content creators produce media in these spaces as a means of professional practice and monetize their work through income systems integrated within the platform, selling merchandise, and corporate sponsorships. In order to achieve this professionalization, content creators need to attract fans that enjoy their work to form a community that can buy their merch and interact with their sponsored content, a process that is

⁴ Zahy Ramadan, “Examining the Dilution of the Consumer-Brand Relationship on Facebook: The Saturation Issue,” *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal* 20, no. 3 (2017): 335–53, <https://doi.org/10.1108/QMR-07-2016-0064>.

assisted by the inherent appearance of authenticity that many content creators possess. Until this point, incorporating authenticity into marketing was a tactic enacted primarily by brands, conglomerates with the clear expressed goal of convincing consumers to buy their product, however content creators were most often seemingly average “everyday” people: these individuals were primarily native netizens with lives that bared significant resemblance to the ones led by their followers. This apparent normalcy lends most content creators a significant edge over brands when it comes to authenticity as their lives, likes and dislikes, concerns, and wishes seem far more genuine and relatable coming from an individual rather than a faceless corporate conglomerate.

While most content creators are capable of utilizing this inherent authenticity, a specific subset of creators called influencers have shaped their entire presentation and the content they produce around this marketing approach. Crystal Abidin conceptualizes influencers as "vocational, sustained, and highly branded social media stars...[who] attract and maintain a sizeable following on their social media platforms, through highly engaging and personalized content production, which can be used as conduits of information to amplify messages" (2018, p. 71). While the term has been deployed in a variety of different contexts across academic literature⁵, Abidin's definition reflects the contemporary popular usages of the designation, encompasses the multiple emergent media spheres within which influencers can operate, and describes the means through which they perform labor in platform spaces. As described, influencer's are a subset of content creators whose content focuses primarily on the creator's lifestyle: their routine, relationships, friends, family, all of these elements are at the forefront of their image. Because the way their life appears on social media effectively *is* their brand, influencer's curate a digital persona through their posts designed to attract and maintain the interest of an audience that fits the image they'd like to have. Influencers maintain this audience by forging connections with their followers through emotional labor that creates the illusion of a close relationship between the influencer and their audience, a phenomenon called a parasocial relationship⁶. Through this connection, influencers gain the ability to perform what Michael

⁵ Brooke Erin Duffy and Megan Sawey, "Value, Service, and Precarity among Instagram Content Creators," in *Creator Culture: An Introduction to Global Social Media Entertainment*, ed. Stuart Cunningham and David Craig, (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 136-137.

⁶ Crystal Abidin, "Communicative ♥ Intimacies: Influencers and Perceived Interconnectedness," *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, no. 8 (2015), doi.org/10.7264/N3MW2FFG and Brooke Erin Duffy, *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love: Gender, Social Media, and Aspirational Work*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 72-74.

Serazio refers to as “word-of-mouth marketing”: because an influencer’s followers view them in a similar manner to a friend or family member, the recommendations of that influencer carries significant weight as the follower far more likely to view such an endorsement as genuine (2013, 94). Serazio further elaborates that this specific mode of branding is effective at circumventing the ad resistance of native platform users, a concept supported by Arturo Ariagada who argues that the marketing performed by influencers is especially effective as the emerging media ecology places significantly more value on authenticity which is what allows influencers to act as such effective advertisers (2020).

Due to the effectiveness of word-of-mouth marketing, numerous brands will pay influencers to endorse their products to their followers which is one of the primary means through which these creators achieve professionalization. However, this business model places significant pressure on influencers to maintain an appearance of authenticity and consistency in their online image, regardless of how true to their actual life that image was. In interviews with a diverse selection of influencers, Brooke Erin Duffy notes that many believed that they needed to appear as “regular people” to their followers and that it was this apparent “realness” that separates their content from that of other forms of media (99, 2019). Although their followers might view influencers as powerful celebrities, the interviewees expressed the belief that they must disavow the appearance of high social status in order to maintain an appearance of ordinariness that better reflects the experiences of their followers. Loes van Driel and Delia Dumitrica note the realities of these beliefs in their own research, expressing that “[an influencer’s] ‘power’ stems from being ‘laypersons’ whose cultural content production is grounded in their personal lives. Yet, it is precisely this authenticity that influencers have to carefully produce and manage in their online persona, by selecting and sharing intimate and personal snippets from their everyday life,” (2020, 68-69). The “personal snippets” Driel and Dumitrica reference are communicated largely through an influencer’s content: because the digital profile of influencers is concerned primarily with their lifestyle, their posts are the ideal vehicle to convey details of their quotidian routines that would appear relatable to their fanbase. As some of Duffy’s interviewees describe, regardless of their actual social and economic status an influencer needs to maintain a relatable appearance and as such their expressions of authentic ordinariness can be just as constructed as their persona. Regardless of its actual authenticity, the information expressed through these personal snippets is often knowledge that would ordinarily

only be gleaned through friendship which furthers the parasocial relationship followers develop for the influencer as they feel as though they are growing closer to the individual as they learn these details.

Integrating promotional material with content production requires a delicate approach, for as van Driel and Dumitrica describe, "...as soon as influencers write about commercial products, followers can perceive it as a loss of authenticity, accusing the influencer of selling themselves out and of writing for the money rather than for the community. As a result, influencers seek to proactively balance the perceived expectations of their followers with those of the advertisers they work with," (2020, 69). The authors outline a few methods through which influencers can achieve this balance, all of which involve casually working promotional material into their content. This tactic effectively imitates product placement in other forms of media: for example, an influencer might make a video in which they go over their daily routine in which they use a specific brand of makeup or drink a branded soda, which indicates to the viewer the influencer's preference towards specific products as subtle form of endorsement. However, promotions like these are largely dependent on the relationship an influencer has with their audience. Stuart Cunningham and David Criag present the argument that "authenticity is not established in a monadic relationship but in a dialogic relationship with the fan base generated by the creator, through his or her 'affective' and 'relational' labor. Any and all claims to authenticity are tested continuously in a call-and response rhetorical field" (2019, 155). In essence, influencers must consistently reassert their authenticity which requires additional work on top of the visibility labors they must engage in to maintain and grow their audience in the first place. The creation of promotional content demands not only the labor of producing that content, but the labor of offsetting these sponsorships with demonstrations of authenticity.

Considering the advantages the appearance of authenticity lends to influencers it is logical that brands would seek to replicate these connections with consumers, however, given Cunningham and Craig's attestation, the concept of a brand attempting to present themselves as authentic would appear to be counterintuitive as brands are inherently commercial. As Duffy explored, brands that attempt to communicate authenticity to the public mostly perform this work through other individuals who appear authentic enough on their own to sell the brand's product rather than attempting to directly relate to their audience. Sarah Banet-Weiser partially attests to this as she agrees that the desire for authenticity stems from contemporary brand culture in which

the commercial is often framed as inauthentic and as such, it is necessary to counterbalance commercial messaging with expressions of “realness” (2021, 10). However, she also emphasizes that the black and white perception of the commercial as inauthentic and the noncommercial as authentic lacks the reality of a gray area: the popular conception of authenticity is inherently shaped by culture which creates a degree of complexity that a binary view neglects (11). Instead, Banet-Weiser encourages a mode of scholarly examination in which “authenticity is itself a brand” (14) in order to properly acknowledge the potential for its utilization by corporate entities, recognizing the important role that authenticity already played in brand advertising and speculating that realness content creators marketed themselves on could be adjusted to fit the needs of branded content. As content creation grew in popularity, brands recognized the potential marketing value of these individuals and began to pay them to advertise their products, providing the aforementioned sponsorship income streams that many creators have become reliant on. However, from the perspective of brands this is an imperfect methodology: sponsoring numerous creators is expensive and they can negotiate the manner in which a promotional message is expressed, both factors that could hinder a brand’s advertising goals. Due to these factors, brands have been incentivized to find an alternative means of communicating on an authentic level with platform users.

While brands did post regularly on social media platforms as they began to rise in popularity, these expressions did not serve the purposes of authenticity and their profiles largely acted as simple extensions of their traditional marketing campaigns, primarily being used to post product advertisements, articles that discussed their work as a company, and responses to customer comments or concerns. However, this would change in the late 2010s when several brand accounts on the microblogging platform Twitter began to experiment with integrating authenticity into their presentation: instead of outsourcing their marketing work to content creators, these brands replicated the social media strategies utilized by influencers in an attempt to appear authentic. Just as Subaru had done with their lesbian-targeted ad campaign, these brands wanted to give platform users the impression that they genuinely understood contemporary netizens and sought to achieve these connections through posts that made it appear as though the brands themselves were native platform users, a mode of expression they sought to achieve by emulating the presentation styles of influencers. For many brand accounts, this strategy proved to be massively successful and quickly spread across multiple platforms with

brands developing their own iterations on the approach in order to achieve their individual marketing goals. Through these evolutions, the lines between brand and creator have blurred as brands take on roles that further resemble influencers to the point where some have arguably become individual influencers themselves. This thesis seeks to clear that fog and determine whether the brands that utilize this methodology can be considered influencers, explore how brands alter their presentation on digital platforms to accomplish this goal, and identify the marketing tactics utilized by influencers that brands have incorporated into their own approaches. In order to examine this phenomena, I analyze the Twitter profile of the fast food company Wendys and the TikTok account of the language learning app Duolingo, both of which incorporate elements of influencers into their marketing but take unique approaches to this methodology.

Chapter one explores the goals of this approach and the strategies used to achieve it through an examination of the Wendy's Twitter account, one of the first brand accounts to visibly perform influencers. Building upon Marta Dynel's own research into the account (2020) as well as the work of Brooke Erin Duffy (2017), Theresa Senft (2008) and Ryan Milner (2016) (2017), this section examines the strategies influencers use to brand themselves as authentic and explores how Wendy's imitates these practices through their use of memetic posts and alterations made to their rhetoric on the platform. I demonstrate that through this performance of authenticity, Wendy's has ascribed themselves with a persona that Twitter's users regularly interact with as though it were a celebrity and argue that these interactions constitute what Crystal Abidin calls "visibility labor" (2015) work influencers perform to draw further attention to their account and engage their pre-existing userbase. This portion of analysis concludes with an illustration of how far this approach has spread across Twitter and other platforms as other brands recognized the successes of Wendy's methodology and integrated it into their own marketing strategies. Chapter two elaborates on these ideas through an exploration of Duolingo's TikTok account which takes the Wendy's approach further by forgoing any traditional marketing on their profile and exclusively devoting it to influencers. Utilizing the concepts established in the previous chapter, I analyze the persona of Duo, the green owl mascot who is the subject of Duolingo's TikTok account, which is far more fleshed out than the persona of Wendy's or any other brand social media account and uses these traits as a means to express authenticity at a higher level of efficacy and complexity than the brand's peers. This section then utilizes

McKelvey and Hunt's (2019) exploration of platform discoverability frameworks and Tania Bucher's (2017) concept of algorithmic imaginaries to examine how influencers adapt their visibility labors to fit TikTok's mechanics and illustrate the ways that Duolingo actively utilizes these same strategies to improve their outreach on the platform. Ultimately, chapter two demonstrates an evolution of brand influencers that achieves a more effective means of authentic expression by avoiding direct advertising and creating a persona that more closely mimics the presentation of individual influencers. In tandem, these analyses serve to communicate why influencers is an appealing mode of presentation for brands and the goals this strategy achieves that are unavailable to other forms of marketing. Through this thesis, I hope to draw attention to a growing, under-researched market trend within platform spaces and determine whether it is necessary to broaden the popular conception of what influencers can describe as its aspects are retooled by corporate organizations.

Chapter I

Never Frozen: Wendy's Twitter and Influencership as Branding

On September 1st, 2022, the Twitter account for the national passenger railroad company Amtrak tweeted a single word, “trains,” with no provided context. The post was, in essence, the briefest possible description of the company’s purpose, the core of its brand. Within minutes, the tweet received unprecedented levels of engagement for the Amtrak Twitter account as thousands of users liked and shared it across the platform. A few hours later, other corporate, government, and NGO accounts took notice of the tweet’s popularity and, recognizing a potential marketing opportunity, other brands began to post their own one word descriptions meant to encapsulate their identity (fig. 2.1). By the end of the following day, hundreds of brand accounts had participated in the trend, many receiving the same high levels of engagement that Amtrak had.

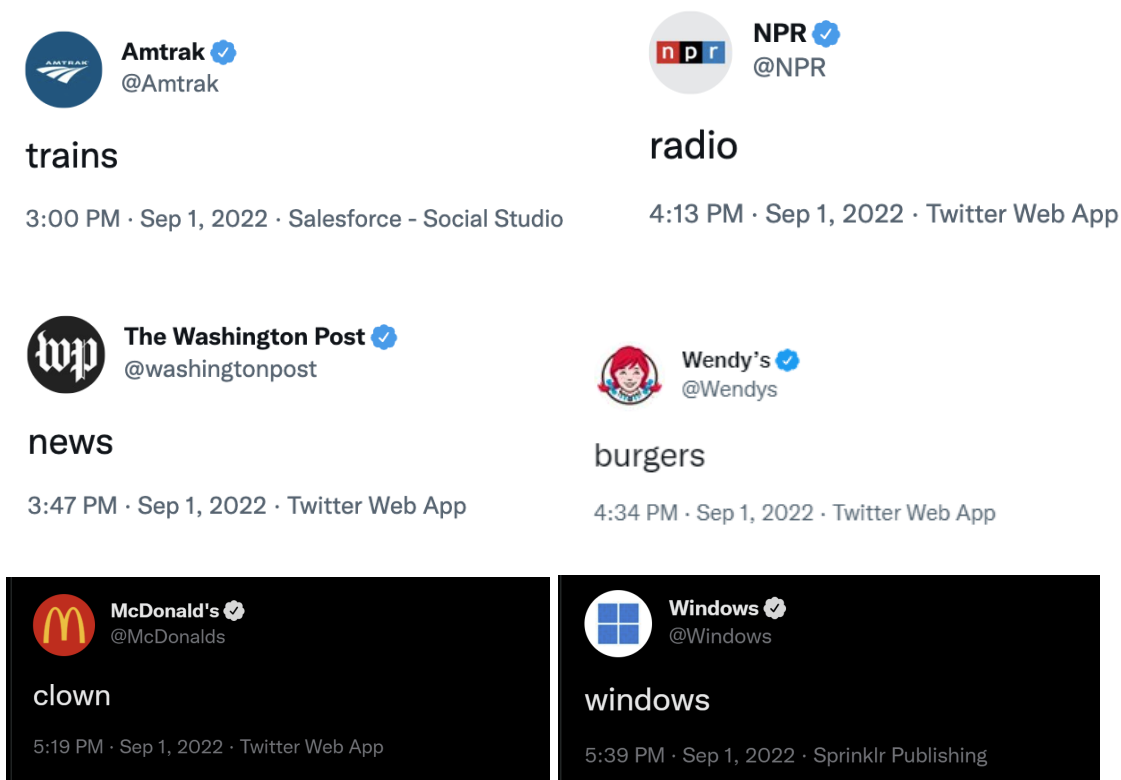


Figure 2.1. Examples of the single word tweet trend.

The incident caught the attention of news media who called the event a “viral marketing campaign⁷,” a category of branding practice that had begun to propagate across Twitter in the late 2010s. Despite the descriptor of “campaign” primarily being associated with sustained, thoughtfully conceived advertising schemes, events like the single-word tweet trend are spontaneous and extremely short-lived. While it is difficult to ascertain a concrete reason for the popularity of instances like this, the engagement received by these posts indicate that Twitter’s users find value in the novelty of brands demonstrating humorously non-normative behaviors.

Viral marketing campaigns like the single-word tweet trend are reflective of a shift in the platform’s popular branding methodology as brands began to experiment with new approaches to their presentation based on the promotional strategies of influencers in the late 2010s. This change can be primarily attributed to the American fast-food company Wendy’s, who experienced a surge of viral attention in 2017 due to a series of humorous tweets posted by the corporation that poked fun at several of their customers, a practice commonly referred to as roasting by Twitter users. Following their virality, the Wendy’s’ social media managers leaned in to the company’s newfound popularity and altered their language and behavior on the platform: the account diverged from the traditionally sterile dialect of corporate customer service utilized by most other branded accounts and adopted the persona of a wisecracking, sarcastic master of roasts. Though this approach largely defied the traditional conventions of branded social media use, the tactics being utilized by Wendys bore a strong resemblance to the promotional methodologies employed by influencers. This was one of the first attempts made by a brand to adopt the appearance of influencers on a social media platform and its massive success would shape the presentation of numerous other brands on Twitter that quickly sought to replicate the virality that Wendy’s had managed to achieve. This chapter seeks to thoroughly examine the Wendy’s Twitter account’s shift in presentation between 2017 and 2022 in order to demonstrate how their approach was achieved and as a means of understanding its viral success. This chapter explores why brands might seek to utilize this promotional methodology through an examination of Wendy’s Twitter account’s shift in presentation between 2017 and 2022. I explore the means through which the company’s account attempts to emulate influencers through its use of roasting, changes in rhetoric, interactions with followers, and posts of memetic content for the

⁷ See Kalhan Rosenblatt, “Why one-word tweets from brands briefly took over social media,” NBC, Sep. 2, 2022, and “Brands Tweeting One Word,” Know Your Meme, Accessed November 14, 2022, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/brands-tweeting-one-word>

purposes of appearing authentic to the platform's userbase. I then explore the celebrity persona donned by the Wendy's Twitter account and its role in utilizing authenticity to form personal connections with users as well as the labor Wendy's engages in to attract more followers and expand their influence. Through this analysis, I identify the goals and benefits of this approach as well as its limitations in order to form a point of comparison from which to examine the use of influencer marketing tactics by other brands across multiple platforms.

Methodology

The analysis in this chapter is based primarily upon the content of tweets posted by the Wendy's Twitter account between 2017 and 2022. These posts each featured either examples of roasts as defined by Marta Dynel (2020), engagement with internet memes, or clear displays of other behaviors that are classifiable as visibility labor or authenticity branding. When I began research for this project, I noted that one of the more common approaches to data collection in Twitter studies involves the utilization of Twitter's Search Application Programming Interface⁸, which allows researchers to efficiently access the metric information collected by the platform. However, the identification of the branding behaviors that this project examines requires qualitative analysis skills that were outside of the API's ability, as well as a degree of coding knowledge. As such, I opted to perform this sorting and aggregation of tweets manually. In order to collect these tweets, I utilized Twitter's advanced search function, which allows users to specify a variety of parameters such as engagement numbers or types of post and will return posts that meet these qualifications. Dynel notes that Wendy's' tweets that featured roasts often had higher levels of engagement than their other content (4), and as such I used advanced search to aggregate every post made by Wendy's that had over 1000 likes which successfully returned thousands of tweets that exhibited roasting behaviors. This approach was also effective in aggregating posts that featured internet memes, another aspect of Wendy's' branding this chapter investigates, as posts with memes also appeared to receive higher than average engagement. In total, 116 relevant tweets were collected in a spreadsheet and screenshotted. Due to visual glitches in several of these pictures, the screenshots were later retook in order to maintain both

⁸Adrian Rauchfleisch and Julia Metag, "The Special Case of Switzerland: Swiss Politicians on Twitter," *New Media & Society* 18, no. 10 (2016): 2413–31 <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444815586982> and Daniela Dimitrova, Tobias Heidenreich, and Teodor Antonio Georgiev, "The relationship between humanitarian NGO communication and user engagement on Twitter," *New Media & Society* 0, no. 0 (2022): 1-21, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221088970>

the graphical fidelity and visual consistency of the images. In addition to the examples I pulled from Wendy's, I collected several examples of tweets that engaged in roasting behaviors or memetic humor from other branded Twitter accounts. Dynel notes that much of her data collection was performed through a Google search for "Wendy's roasts" which brought her to numerous articles and "best of" lists that had aggregated hundreds of Wendy's' tweets that demonstrated roasting behaviors (2020, 4). Utilizing this approach, I performed a Google search for "funniest branded twitter accounts" that returned many similar "best of" lists. I examined lists from the first two pages of this search and noted the Twitter most common accounts that were repeatedly cited across these articles. I then returned to Twitter and performed advanced searches for tweets over 1000 likes for each of these respective accounts. Through this process I collected an additional 47 examples, which were cataloged in the same manner as the posts made by Wendys.

Brands on Twitter

Twitter launched in 2006 as an SMS-based microblogging site where users could share 140-character or less text posts called "tweets" with the site's other users. A few years later between 2008 and 2009, the platform experienced a rapid surge in popularity and its user base increased by 1448%, reaching 18.2 million users by the end of 2009.⁹ As the platform continued to grow into the 2010s, its cultural relevance expanded alongside its user base as celebrities and corporations began to make their own profiles. During this time, Twitter's identity expanded from its initial configuration as a social network and into a tool of information dissemination: mainstream media took note of the platform's role in the coverage of events as participants in calamities and social movements alike provided first hand accounts of their experiences in real time.¹⁰ This media narrative further legitimized the platform and as it continued to evolve, it would become a space cohabited by both the ludic and the newsworthy. While Twitter would continue to grow in popularity and garner over 200 million daily active users by the end of 2020¹¹, in 2023 the website's place in the platform ecosystem has become far rockier due to the company's controversial acquisition by Elon Musk. Since its purchase, the company has experienced numerous layoffs, fundamental changes to its verification systems, and a rebranding

⁹ The Nielsen Company, "Nielsen's Social Media QuickTake: May 2009." The Nielsen Company, May 2009.

¹⁰ Jean Burgess and Nancy Baym, *Twitter: A Biography*, (New York: New York University Press, 2020): 14-15.

¹¹ Twitter, Inc., "Q4 and Fiscal Year 2021 Letter to Shareholders, Twitter, Inc., February 10, 2022.

that would see the platform's name changed to "X." The future of this new platform remains uncertain as the company continues to face numerous challenges brought on by Musk's stewardship, however as of the writing of this piece in 2023 it remains the primary platform for microblogging though its position at the top certainly has grown more precarious. This project will primarily be focusing on Twitter as it once was between 2017 and 2022, and as such for the purpose of this thesis I will continue to refer to the platform as Twitter despite the changes in its branding and features.

While the platform has incorporated a variety of new features since its inception, its core focus as a microblogging site has been retained. Users post and view tweets on Twitter's Home page, which features a scrolling feed of posts that the platform believes are relevant to each particular user. In order to determine the types of content they'd like to see on their Home page, users "follow" other accounts, an action that tells Twitter to display that account's tweets on the user's Home page feed. As a user follows and interacts with content on the platform, an algorithm attempts to determine a user's interests and will add additional suggested content to that user's feed based on its assumptions. When a user finds a tweet they wish to interact with, they have the option to like, comment, or share the post in a similar manner to other social media platforms such as Facebook or Instagram, however they also have the option to "retweet" the post. Doing so reposts the content to the feeds of that user's followers and indicates their desire to have other users see that post. This feature plays a significant role in defining Twitter as a platform for information dissemination, allowing a piece of data to be rapidly spread while accrediting its original source. Twitter's informative abilities are further bolstered by its "hashtag" and "@" features, which assist in the categorization of data shared on the platform. Users can add a tag to a tweet in the form of a word or phrase that is precluded by the pound symbol to indicate that a post is part of a larger conversation. This hashtag can then be selected or searched to view other posts that include the same hashtag which makes it easier to locate tweets relating to a specific topic. The @ feature on the other hand is more of an accountability and communication measure: when a user tweets, they can add an @ symbol followed by the username of a Twitter account to tag that user in the post. This can be used either to get that account's attention or to directly tie that account to what's being discussed in the tweet. Both of these features streamline categorization and assist users in following trends and conversations that are relevant to their interests.

Twitter's effectiveness as an information disseminator goes beyond its social or journalistic capabilities: the same tools that allow users to rapidly spread and organize data can be applied to dissemination of advertisements. The company recognized this as a potential source of revenue early in their lifespan and in 2009 they introduced the promoted tweet, a feature whereby a third party could pay Twitter to have a specific tweet show up in the home feeds of multiple users¹². These tweets function and look exactly like any other tweet aside from a small bit of gray text at the bottom of the post that says "promoted," which can make these advertisements difficult to immediately distinguish from a non-branded post. The effectiveness of these ads are further bolstered by Twitter's recommendation algorithm which the platform utilizes to target users with promoted tweets it believes will be relevant to their interests. It would be difficult to hypothesize the exact success of these promoted tweets, however Twitter reported a net income of \$4.5 billion USD from advertising alone in 2021¹³, which is indicative of the service's value to advertisers. In addition, brands would often find use Twitter to interact directly with consumers. Dhiraj Murthy explains that Twitter has taken on the role of a customer service platform, acting as an open forum through which users can comment on a company's products or service and receive a personal reply (2018, 181). These interactions allow a corporation to respond quickly to a customer's needs while simultaneously providing opportunities to gather consumer data and having the added benefit of acting as a public demonstration of a corporation's perceived care for their consumer base, furthering the rapport between the company and Twitter's user base. In effect, branded Twitter accounts already used the platform in a similar manner to influencers in that they shared the goal of establishing relationships with a platform's userbase, however these connections still lacked the personal bond that influencers were able to foster.

Wendy's: Twitter's Newest Influencer

Wendy's joined Twitter in 2009 amid the slew of celebrities and other corporations that had begun to participate in the platform. The first eight years of their tenure on the platform was, for the purposes of this thesis, rather unremarkable. Before 2017, the majority of posts on larger

¹² See Charles Arthur, "Twitter unveils 'promoted tweets' ad plan," The Guardian, April 13, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2010/apr/13/twitter-advertising-google> and Twitter, Inc., "What are Promoted Ads?"

¹³ Twitter, Inc., "Q4 and Fiscal Year 2021 Letter to Shareholders, Twitter, Inc., February 10, 2022.

corporate Twitter accounts were advertisements or promotions for new products and company events. Social interactions with other users initiated by these accounts were performed with a tone appropriate for customer service and, as Murthy noted, were usually for the express purpose of fielding questions or concerns about the company. Wendy’s early tweets reflect the goals and intentions of this strategy until January 2nd, 2017, when a Wendy’s social media specialist named Amy Brown responded to a user who was questioning the truth of Wendy’s’ claim that they never serve frozen beef at their restaurants. Brown replied quite cordially to the comment, but the user kept pressing, culminating in them snidely inquiring as to how Wendy’s was able to transport their beef without freezing it. Fed up, Brown sardonically pointed out that the user must have forgotten that refrigerators existed (fig. 2.2). This exchange experienced immediate virality as numerous users across the internet found the snarky tone of a major corporate Twitter account to be greatly humorous¹⁴.



Figure 2.2. Twitter exchange between user @NHride and @Wendys.

The comment that Brown had formulated is reflective of an act known on the internet as “roasting” whereby a target is humorously disparaged through the hurling of witty and contextually specific insults¹⁵. Roasting began as a formal practice of collective humor: held in private and comedy clubs, a roast event would single out a specific person who would be heckled by a panel of club members in front of an audience. These events were not meant to sincerely

¹⁴ Emmanuel Ocbazghi, “Wendy's is roasting people on Twitter, and it's hilarious,” Insider. Jan 3, 2017, <https://www.businessinsider.com/wendys-roasting-people-twitter-hilarious-mcdonalds-retail-2017-1>

¹⁵ Marta Dynel and Fabio I. M. Poppi, "Quid rides?: Targets and referents of RoastMe insults" HUMOR 33, no. 4 (2020): 536-537. <https://doi.org/10.1515/humor-2019-0070>

lambast the roastee, rather they were performed in good nature with the consent of everyone involved. The jibes of the roasters were not meant to be taken seriously and were meant to bemuse both the roastee and the audience. This format persists today with televised events such as the *Comedy Central Celebrity Roast* series, though it has proliferated even further in digital spaces. On the website Reddit, there is a subsection called “RoastMe” where users will post pictures of themselves for other users to roast in the comment section in a platformized version of the old club format. While these roasts retain the consensual nature, the use of roast-based humor has expanded beyond its initial purview and is now utilized as a method of genuine disparagement across the internet. Roasts often ride the line between genuine degradation and jovial ribbing, and context into the situation can be required to identify whether a roaster is attempting to wound a roastee or not.

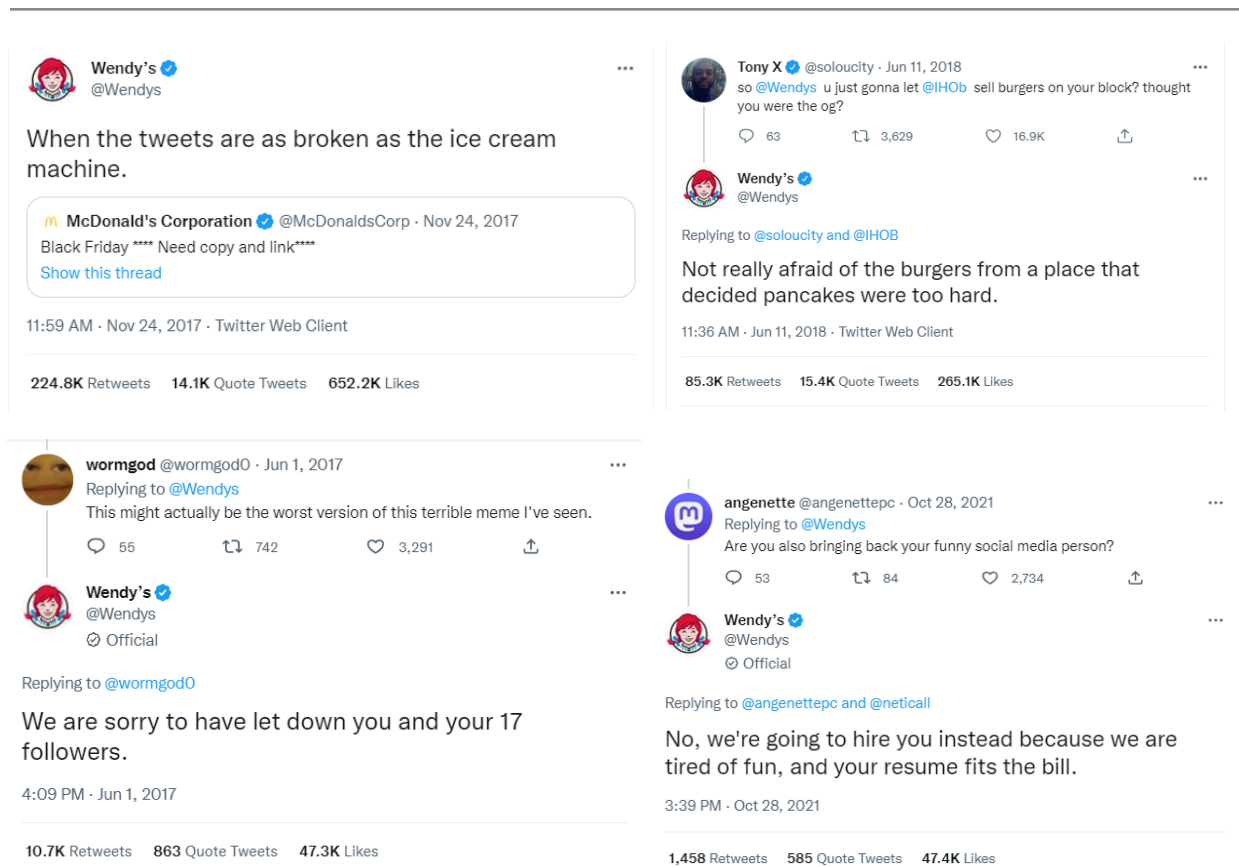


Figure 2.3. Wendy's roasting Twitter users and McDonalds.

Brown's initial use of roasting certainly rides that line: she even profuses that her glib response was one of annoyance with the prickly user¹⁶. However, it is because roasting often rides the line between genuine and good-natured that it is a perfectly suited form of humor for a corporate agenda. Roasting pushes the boundaries just enough to break the general expectation of traditional customer service for the sake of amusement while simultaneously not going so far overboard as to alienate potential consumers.

Within days of the initial wave of virality, the Wendy's Twitter account doubled down on their snark and integrated further dry wit into their responses to users and other corporate entities (fig 2.3). The dialect utilized by Brown and her team shifted away from a corporate customer service voice in favor of a casual, sarcastic tone. This new approach brought with it further virality as both internet and mainstream news sources took notice of the account's burgeoning popularity and covered its growth which in turn drew more attention to Wendy's. In an effort to understand what prompted this surge of interest, humor scholar Marta Dynel performed an in-depth analysis of the Wendy's Twitter account's approach to roasting. Dynel concluded that while multiple factors contributed to this virality, one of the most significant factors was novelty: the public was drawn to the oddity of a corporate entity publicly behaving in a manner that did not reflect traditional formal behavior. Humor is already an essential component of contemporary branding strategies¹⁷, however Dynel stresses that what separates the Wendy's' approach from other forms of humor-based marketing is direct interactivity: instead of the generalized messaging present in most advertising, here Wendy's was speaking directly to the userbase of Twitter through a medium that the platform's communities regularly engaged with. Now anyone could tweet at the company and likely receive a snarky response unique to them.

The Wendy's Twitter account continued to gain traction throughout 2017, steadily gaining more followers and increased engagement levels as their roasts grew in popularity. In March, Amy Brown would depart from Wendy's, but the momentum of the strategy devised by her and her colleagues would remain. Roasting had become more than just a practice that the company's Twitter participated in: it was their persona. Though Wendy's still engaged with Twitter like most

¹⁶ Amy Brown, "That Time I Went Viral While Running the Wendy's Twitter Account," *Splinter*, September 29, 2017, <https://splinternews.com/that-time-i-went-viral-while-running-the-wendy-s-twitte-1819001087>

¹⁷ Gabe Zichermann, and Joselin Linder, *Game-Based Marketing : Inspire Customer Loyalty through Rewards, Challenges, and Contests*, (Hoboken: Wiley Press, 2010), 72, and de Vries et al., "Popularity of Brand Posts on Brand Fan Pages: An Investigation of the Effects of Social Media Marketing." *Journal of Interactive Marketing* 26, no. 2 (2012): 85.

of the other brands on the platform through regular product updates and the fielding of customer concerns, the voice of the account was now that of a jovial roastmaster as the company's newfound tone of sass was brought to posts outside of just their roasts. With this change in rhetoric, the Wendy's Twitter account now took on the additional purpose of generating brand awareness through its novelty as the sassy, "misbehaving" corporate entity.

Marketing Authenticity: Branded Appeals to the Authentic

At the core of Wendy's attempt to perform authenticity on Twitter was their integration of roasts into their content and user replies. As Dynel discussed, roasts are a practice commonly engaged in by the laymen of the internet, however the performance of such humor and the language involved in their employment is distinctly anti-corporate as roasts involve direct attacks on an individual's self through often crass and snarky vernacular. Despite this contradiction, it is precisely the antithetical nature of a brand performing a roast that enables this mode of humor to act as a form of authenticity branding: because roasts were primarily performed by non-corporate individuals, Wendy's demonstrating their ability to engage with those behaviors indicates to Twitter's userbase an understanding of humorous conventions that are usually only understood by native platform users. In other words, by engaging in roasting behaviors Wendy's is attempting to demonstrate their appreciation and participation in the culture of Twitter as well as their willingness to disengage from the sanitized customer service dialect of most brands on the platform and approach Twitter users on their level. This is particularly effective due to the often difficult to quantify nature of internet humor: Whitney Phillips and Ryan Milner describe it as "ambivalent," specifying that most digital comedic expression operates on a spectrum of meaning, simultaneously embodying a multiplicity of elements that shift depending on the digital experience of the viewer and the context of the joke's deployment (2017, 10). Phillips and Milner explain that the complexity of this humor often requires learned-experience to parse and that demonstrating proficiency in the humor specific to a digital space can endear its inhabitants to the comedian. Roasts operate within this vein, acting as a badge of supposed authenticity that attempts to prove that Wendy's and their employees wish to shed the conventions of corporate speak in favor of engaging with the platform's users on a "real" level through modes of humor that are usually only understood by the internet's active denizens.

For these same reasons, Wendy’s will often integrate memes into their Twitter posts. While the nature of digital memetic expression is difficult to discern in a clear cut manner, Limor Shifman encapsulates the multifaceted nature of these artifacts as “(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users,” (2014, 41). While this definition has a degree of broadness to its indicators, this is by necessity: memes take on a wide variety of forms and as long as a type of media can be shared through digital means, it can be utilized for the creation and distribution of memes.

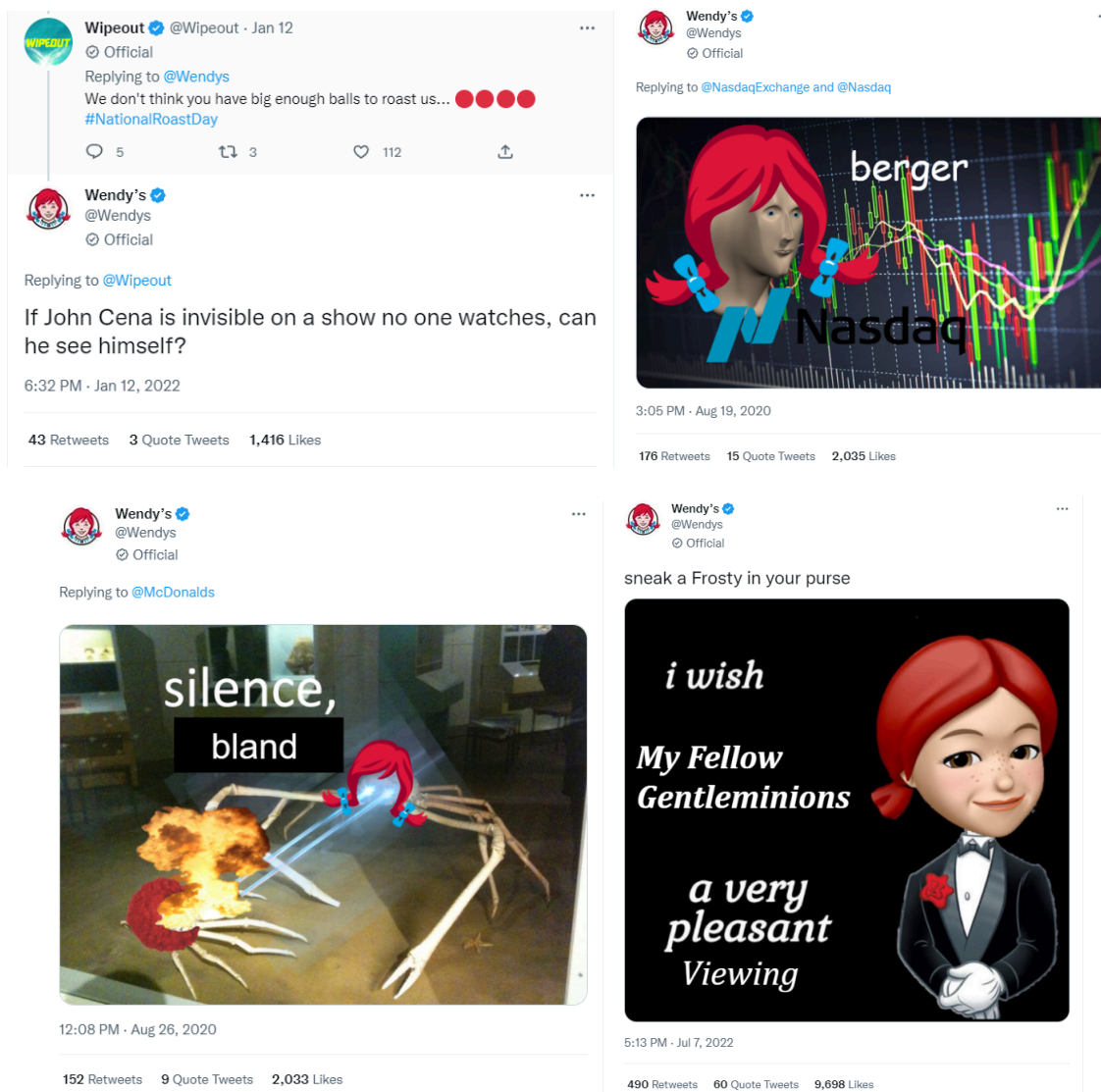


Figure 2.4. Examples of tweets from Wendy’s featuring or referencing memes.

This wide range of usages is encompassed by what Shifman describes as “hypermeme logic” (23), the contemporary cultural state of being in which memes are valued as a form of vernacular and as “highly valued pillars of participatory culture, part and parcel of what is expected from a “digitally literate” netizen” (23). Milner has expressed similar thoughts on the role of memes as a form of cultural participation and argues that the processes through which memes proliferate and the ways in which they are valued in digital spaces is reflective of oral and folk traditions (2016, 34). Milner describes memes as a “bridge between the individual and the collective” (34), allowing those who are literate in memes as a form of expression to identify themselves within a community in a similar manner to members of a culture distinguishing themselves to one another through tradition. Just as with roasts, by demonstrating literacy in the conventions of memes, Wendy’s can further endear themselves to Twitter’s userbase. Wendy’s former social media specialist Amy Brown expressed that she deliberately integrated her own memetic literacy and awareness of Twitter’s cultures into the persona she began to construct for the company, traits it continues to exhibit today through regular posts that demonstrate a continuous understanding of the platform’s memetic culture (fig. 2.4).

Through these dialectic and memetic appeals to authenticity Wendy’s is not attempting to make themselves appear as a relatable individual influencer, rather they want to create the impression that Wendy’s the corporation can understand the digital cultures of its customers. Wendy’s does not attempt to disguise their corporate identity and instead chooses to lean into it, going so far as to often incorporate branding messages into their roasts such as references to their products or common promotional messages such as the never-frozen nature of their beef (fig. 2.5). The success Wendy’s had found in its performance of authenticity despite the focus that the company places on its corporate identity appears to directly contradict the experiences of influencers who find their authenticity called into question when displaying any commerciality, however this is largely a contextual issue. As Banet-Weiser expressed, authenticity is itself a brand and, like any marketing tactic, the perception of its usage changes depending on who is employing it. When an influencer who presents themselves as an “ordinary” individual attempts to sell a product, it interrupts the parasocial connection between creator and follower while distracting from the content that the follower sought to engage with. The expectations for a company like Wendy’s on the other hand are entirely reversed: instead of shattering an illusion of authenticity, expressions of commercialism are expected by their followers given that Wendy’s is

a brand. Thus, when they begin to post content demonstrating their authenticity it is viewed as novel and won't be interrupted when the company posts accompanying advertisements. In other words, Wendy's doesn't need to balance authenticity and commerciality because their authentic expressions are novel deviations from the norm.

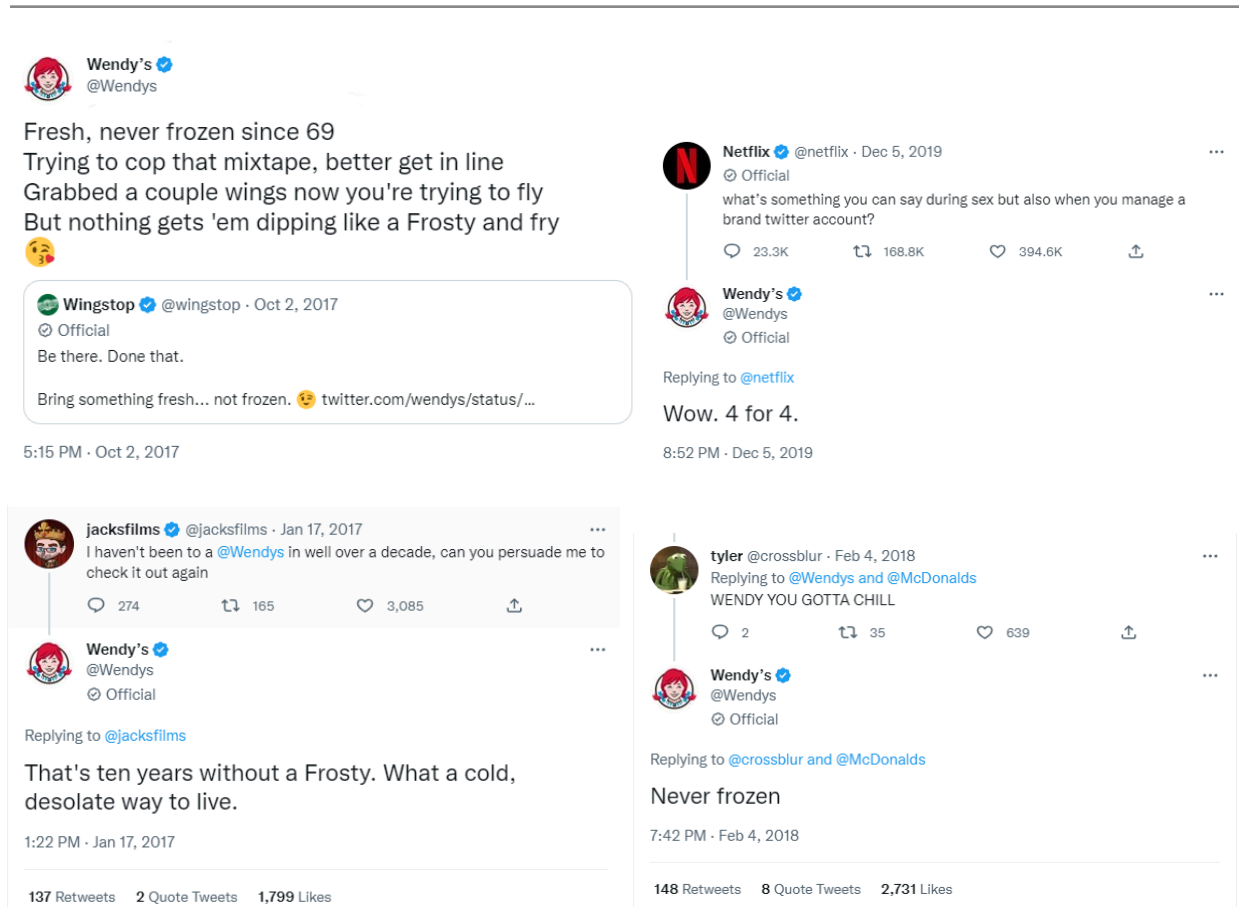


Figure 2.5. Wendy's replies that include references to their products.

While the branded nature of Wendy's allows them to circumvent many of the challenges influencers face when attempting to present themselves as authentic, they still face some risk in this approach. In specific regard to memetic expressions, Millner describes several instances in which brands have integrated memes into their marketing campaigns and notes that those who failed to deploy those memes within their proper context often faced hostility and mockery (2016, 206-207). Wendy's itself has experienced this shaming as a result of their infamous Jalapeno Fresco Spicy Chicken commercial, which was lampooned for its outdated and improper

usage of multiple memes¹⁸. This is where a memetic approach to authenticity marketing can backfire: should an individual fail to demonstrate a proper understanding of the memes they utilize, they risk alienating any potential customers that might identify with that meme. Because digital collectives are deeply and culturally tied to their memetic references, when their identifying memes are used improperly these communities view this as a slight not just against themselves but their sociocultural unit as well; this potential ostracization is applicable to misuse of lingo unique to a digital community or the creation of a subpar roast. This is where the inherent commerciality of Wendy's can be a disadvantage as failure to correctly utilize the techniques through which the company hopes to appear relatable can result in hostility from platform users as the marketing goals of their appeals to authenticity become transparent. Rather than manage a balance between the commercial and the authentic like an individual influencer, Wendy's as a brand must bear in mind that the novelty of their expressions of authenticity is conditional on their correct performance and thus an intrinsic awareness of a platform's culture is likely necessary to the success of this particular marketing strategy.

The Celebrity Persona and Visibility Labor

While the branding strategies of influencers offer the benefits of parasociality and subsequently word-of-mouth marketing, they also provide the means through which to further grow an audience which, in the case of Wendy's, means the potential to garner a larger customer-base. Performances of authenticity are still closely linked to these strategies as parasociality brings with it a phenomenon useful for garnering followers: celebrity. In the twentieth century, celebrities grew in cultural significance due to the rapid propagation of the media they were tied to as public fascination with well-known individuals shifted from figures renowned for their positions within corporations and government to those "known for their well-knownness" as described by Daniel Boorstin (32, 1964). These celebrities were entirely dependent on their relevance in popular media such as films, magazines, music, and television, to maintain their influence over the zeitgeist, however through maintaining this relevance they

¹⁸ "The Memer / Eats Spicy Goodness Like a Boss," Know Your Meme, Accessed Nov. 18, 2022, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/the-memer-eats-spicy-goodness-like-a-boss>. The memes utilized by the commercial at the time of its airing were considered extremely outdated and thus made the company appear as though they lacked knowledge about contemporary meme culture, ultimately alienating the memetically literate netizens that Wendy's was likely targeting with the ad.

commanded immense cultural power¹⁹. This conceptualization of celebrity remained relatively unchanged until the late 1990s as the internet grew in power as a cultural driver and the traits that the general public sought in a celebrity figure began to shift. Through the propagation of reality television, tabloids, and early social media, “everyday individuals” began to achieve massive fame in large part due to the perception of their perceived “realness”. Consumers began to place more value on how authentic their celebrities seemed as these new forms of media granted deeper access to the personal lives of these individuals: shared interests, media preferences, and lifestyle choices were all becoming increasingly important metrics for the public in assessing their connection to the famous²⁰. While celebrities would often construct an outward-facing persona to maintain a consistent and cordial appearance in the public eye, there was now an even greater demand that this persona be relatable to the average individual.

As authenticity became further essentialized in culture as a result of social media platforms in the mid and late 2000s, a large portion of the public shifted their focus away from reality television stars and onto content creators who were able to achieve a more convincing approximation of everydayness than any other kind of popular figure. While these figures did find fame within the ecosystem of their respective platforms, the cultural power and economic status was not at the level of celebrities who achieved their status through older media formats. Instead, content creators experience what Theresa Senft describes as microcelebrity, or “a new style of online performance that involves people ‘amping up’ their popularity over the Web using technologies like video, blogs, and social networking sites,” (2008, 25). Senft further elaborates that microcelebrities differentiate themselves from traditional celebrities through their connection with their audience as while Hollywood’s most famous deliberately separate themselves from the laypeople of the world, microcelebrities must work to maintain as deep of a connection as possible with their audience. Content creators and their subsets such as influencer therefore directly fall into the category of microcelebrity as the conditions microcelebrities must meet to maintain their fame mirrors the performance of authenticity enacted by content creators outlined by Brooke Erin Duffy as well as Loes van Driel and Delia Dumitrica. Senft’s concept of microcelebrity provides a means through which the fame of content creators can be analyzed as a

¹⁹ Susan J. Douglas, and Andrea M. McDonnell. *Celebrity : A History of Fame*. (New York: New York University Press, 2019), <https://www.degruyter.com/isbn/9781479882793>.

²⁰ Emily Hund, *The Influencer Industry: The Quest for Authenticity on Social Media*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), 22.

form of celebrity which allows for an understanding of the behaviors creators engage in when interacting with their audience. While microcelebrity was conceived to describe individuals, because of Wendy's' integration of influencer strategies into their branding practices, studying the company's account as a microcelebrity provides similar insights into their presentation. Wendy's of course was introduced to Twitter with a significant degree of pre-existing fame due to their status as a well known brand, however the nature of their fame has evolved with their influencer-based approach and now more closely resembles the microcelebrity status of content creators.

This difference in fame is made tangible primarily through the persona adopted by the Wendy's Twitter account after their initial virality; while it would be difficult for a large corporation to fake the multifaceted life and personality of an individual influencer, Wendy's does not attempt to achieve this level of complexity and instead opts to ascribe their Twitter account with a few simple characteristics that reflect and reinforce their change in presentation. This is communicated largely through their use of roasts and memes as well as their shift in rhetoric, both of which made the Wendy's account appear to be a wise-cracking sarcastic native Twitter user. These traits would not be enough to define a human being, however the novelty of a corporate entity displaying human traits regardless of their simplicity is enough to draw users in while the common nature of these characteristics ensures that a wide spectrum of users will be able to relate to the account's posts. On a deeper level, the company's apparent fluency in roasts and memes suggests that the people behind the Twitter account are native users of the platform themselves which lends further authenticity to the Wendy's persona. The account works to encourage this narrative as well, such as in a series of tweets in which they offer to convince the company's management to bring back the fan favorite spicy chicken sandwich (fig. 2.6): through these tweets, the Wendy's account casts themselves as scrappy underdogs, working on the side of their customer-base to fight for the changes that the people truly want. Regardless of the truth behind this implied authenticity, this "for the people" attitude assists in strengthening the parasocial relationships between the brand and Twitter's userbase. All together, the simple roster of characteristics being communicated by the Wendy's Twitter account work in concert to create a tangible persona for the platform's users to connect with on a level far more akin to that of a microcelebrity and their followers rather than a brand and a platform's userbase.

The large influx of engagement Wendy's began to receive after building their new persona goes beyond just expressions of authenticity however as it also serves to potentially attract new followers and subsequently, new customers. As discussed, regular interactions with their audience is crucial for microcelebrities seeking to maintain and grow their following, a type of work that Crystal Abidin describes as "visibility labor," or "the work enacted to flexibly demonstrate gradients of self conspicuousness in digital or physical spaces depending on intention or circumstance for favourable ends. Visibility labor is the work individuals do when they self-posture and curate their self presentations so as to be noticeable and positively prominent among prospective employers, clients, the press or followers and fans, among other audiences," (2016, 5). The practices of visibility labor include previously mentioned modes of interaction with one's audience such as responding to follower comments or conversing with followers during a live stream, but it also includes most other activities that engage a specific audience or make the fanbase feel heard, such as the production of content geared towards specific followers or made in response to fan suggestions: any actions that further a microcelebrities connection with their community can fall under the purview of visibility labor. Another important aspect of this work is "[curating] self presentation," which refers to demonstrations of the creator's persona. The interactions microcelebrities have with their followers are opportunities to reinforce assumptions about their persona and demonstrate the traits they'd like associated with their brand in a direct and personal manner: by expressing these characteristics through conversations with followers, it furthers that follower's parasocial assumptions about the influencer's personality and projects these beliefs to the rest of their audience that witnesses the interaction. When employed in concert, Abidin expresses that the work of visibility labor is designed to draw further attention to the influencer, ensuring the growth of their fanbase as well as maintaining their presence in the mind of their current followers. Given that a celebrity's fame is the source of their power, it is no wonder that the activities of visibility labor are crucial tool for these individuals as a means to retain their influence.

Wendy's is no different and utilizes visibility labors to support their internet celebrity status, retooling their customer service behaviors and posts to attract further attention in Twitter's ecosystem. Most of the company's initial fame was due to due to the novelty of their behavior in comparison to other brand accounts, and as such many of the actions performed by Wendy's that

draw attention to this novelty acted as a form of visibility labor: their roasts, memetic posts, and shifts in rhetoric all drew significant attention and assisted in the Twitter account's growth towards celebrity status. Once the media buzz that surrounded the company began to wane these behaviors became less impactful from a visibility perspective, however this decrease in efficacy was supplemented through other modes of visibility labor that Wendy's would come to employ. Currently, this work is primarily executed through interactions with the platform's userbase which, as Abidin described, offer opportunities for a microcelebrity to reinforce their persona and attract new followers through parasocial engagement. Wendy's' regular engagement with the platform's userbase goes beyond their role as demonstrations of the company's authenticity as they also expose more users to the brand's novel behavior: if an interaction Wendy's has with a user appears in the feeds of that user's followers, then there's a chance that they will develop similar parasocial feelings towards the brand. A similar effect occurs when Wendy's incentivizes interaction on a particular post such as their tweets concerning the return of the spicy chicken sandwich as it sees far more comments and retweets than an average post, ensuring a larger body of users will see this expression of authenticity and forge a parasocial connection with the company. These behaviors allow Wendy's to market their Twitter account on a broad scale and serve the additional purpose of reinforcing their persona as their rhetoric in these interactions reflects the sassy authenticity they hope to project. In addition, while the strategies of visibility labor were formulated by individual microcelebrity influencers, the large corporate structure of Wendy's provides a substantial advantage in the execution of this strategy despite its original purpose as a tool of smaller scale individually run operations. Consistently replying to the comments of followers becomes increasingly difficult for a microcelebrity as their fame increases which limits their ability to engage digital audiences through this method once they are popular enough. Wendy's on the other hand is able to employ a large team of social media managers who can field far more user comments than an individual influencer, allowing this mode of visibility labor to remain effective even as the company's celebrity profile grows. By operating on this scale, Wendy's is able to push the efficacy of visibility labor beyond its limits and demonstrate its potential as a practical means of digital branding.

Conclusion

While it is difficult to approximate the exact impact Wendy's' Twitter presence has had on their profit margins, their approach was one that clearly appealed to other branded Twitter accounts as it rapidly gained ubiquity across the platform. The wisecracking persona Wendy's forged has since been co-opted by numerous other corporate, government, and NGO Twitter accounts that adopt a similar wisecracking persona and utilize the same visibility labors, authenticity branding, and demonstrations of memetic proficiency as their progenitor. While very few of these accounts have experienced the same level of virality that Wendy's initially did when they shifted their social media strategy, the witty banter and meme-based tweets of these companies still achieve significant rates of engagement (fig. 2.6). In practically all of these cases however, the formula established by Wendy's is barely pushed: these accounts still stay largely within the purview of what can be considered acceptable levels of deviation from the corporate customer service voice and the personas they adopt are rarely more complex than just a wittier, comical version of this presentation. In addition, much of the humor these accounts engage in is based on established comic formats like roasting and the memes they create rarely deviate from well-known successful templates. All of this appears to be done in the name of safety, for as radical as Wendy's' approach was, there seems to be hesitation to deviate too far from what is socially accepted from customer interactions.

Despite this risk averse attitude, Wendy's' entry into the role of influencer reveals just how financially safe this approach is for established brands. This chapter has touched on the differences in the scale of labor between individual influencers and brands, however there is an even greater monetary disparity between these groups. For companies or organizations that wield operating budgets in the hundreds of thousands or more, the adaptation of influencer marketing strategies is likely more cost effective than a large-scale advertising campaign. Wendy's for instance did not incur any additional cost when generating their initial virality as this fame came solely from Brown and her team adjusting the tone and content of their replies to users, labor they were already being paid to perform. On the other hand, individual influencers do not have the luxury of this financial security: often their work is a hobby enacted with the aspiration of potentially achieving a high enough celebrity status to create content full time²¹.

²¹ Brooke Erin Duffy, *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love: Gender, Social Media, and Aspirational Work*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017): 15-16.

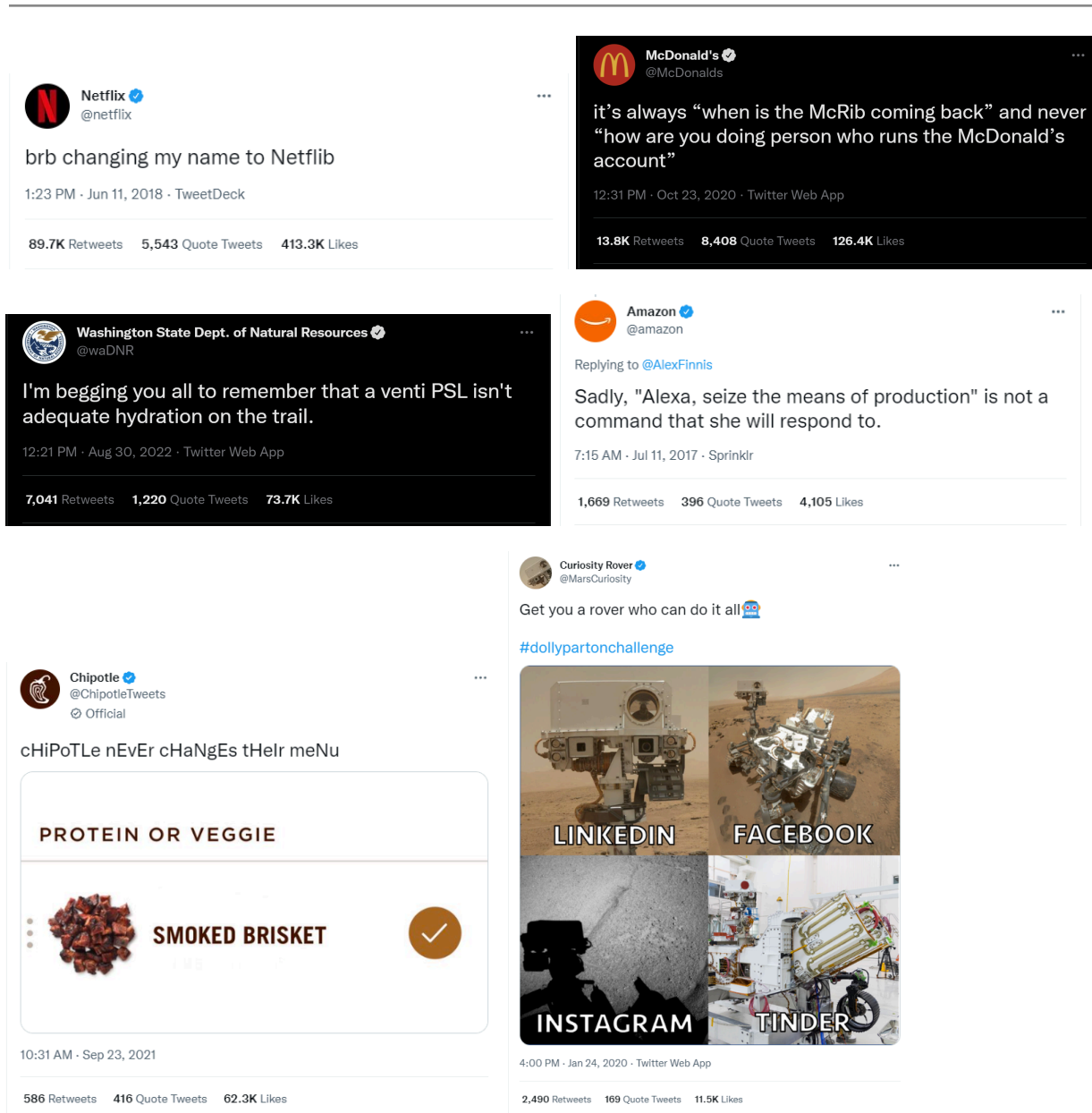


Figure 2.6. Other branded Twitter accounts mimic Wendy's' approach.

Influencers are further challenged by the constantly shifting platform ecosystem, and issue known as platform precarity²². Should a platform cease to be culturally relevant, significantly alter its content policies, or shut down all-together, the livelihood of an influencer can be obliterated in an instant. Brands on the other hand are usually not entirely reliant on their digital presence as their image is often supported by a wide variety of promotional means. As such,

²² Thomas Poell et al., *Platforms and Cultural Production*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022): 126.

should they lose an account to platform precarity or if their attempts at achieving virality fail, they stand to lose far less than an individual influencer.

This low potential for risk as well as their viral success are both likely contributing factors to Wendy's continuous experimentation with influencer branding practices. The company has attempted to bring their format to other platforms aside from Twitter: shortly following their initial virality in 2017, they created an account on the live-streaming platform Twitch where they would host company employees playing video games or present live footage from events the company was hosting. Wendy's often advertises their streams on Twitter in a manner similar to that of Twitch streamers, which is yet another mimicked visibility labor utilized by the corporation. Additionally, the Wendy's Instagram account is primarily dedicated to posting memes, often attempting to create meme formats from their television commercials which, should any of those formats catch on, would garner these commercials significant viral attention. Despite these efforts, their success on other platforms has thus far been limited in comparison to the virality of their Twitter account. The novelty that came from a brand roasting users and posting memes has begun to fade, likely expedited by the rising ubiquity of this strategy's adoption by other brands. The normalization of this approach further hampers its ability to generate an appearance of authenticity as consumers come to realize the corporate nature of the method and become unresponsive to its charms. Should brands seek to continue to capitalize off the potentiality of influencer approaches to marketing, they'll have to be willing to emerge from their comfort zone. The boldness and novelty of Wendy's' earliest roasts could still be captured again, but fresher methodologies will need to be formulated that are in-line with the evolving platform ecosystem as new emergent platforms rise to prominence in contemporary culture.

Chapter II

Dulapeep: Duolingo's TikTok and Brands as Influencers

Scrolling through the posts made by the language learning app Duolingo on the short-form video platform TikTok, there is a commonly repeating hashtag included within the text portion of numerous posts: #Dulapeep. These tags appear seemingly at random with no clear correlation between the phrase and the content of the posts it accompanies, only standing out due to the uncanny frequency with which it occurs. Performing some cursory research into the term easily reveals that in 2018 while discussing the red carpet event at the Billboard Music Awards, talk show host Wendy Williams mispronounced the name of British pop singer Dua Lipa as “Dula Peep.” While this moment experienced some virality, a greater mystery has now presented itself: why on earth is a small viral moment appearing as a tag in the videos of a language learning app? In fact, what is going on with Duolingo's TikTok account in the first place? The content is at first glance jarringly odd, with the vast majority of the account's videos appearing to follow the hijinks of a six-foot tall lime green owl mascot named Duo as he harasses the employees at Duolingo's offices while posting numerous memes that directly reference popular TikTok trends. Diving further into these strange posts reveals that the account has created an entire fictional narrative around this mascot and presents him as a high ranking employee at Duolingo who uses the company's TikTok account to promote himself as an influencer at the extreme displeasure of the company's other executives. Duo's videos reveal him to be self absorbed, petulant, ill mannered, and a potential stalker, with the latter of these traits finally revealing a connection to the account's repeated use of #dulapeep: in several posts, Duo is depicted as having an unhealthy obsession with Dua Lipa that stems from the similarity of their names, often expressing romantic and sexual interest in the pop single while implying that he stalks her. While this clue leaves the impression that #dulapeep is a means through which Duo expresses his manic infatuation with Dua Lipa, there is another layer to the phrase that is key to its usage. In the spring of 2021, the soundbyte of Wendy Williams saying “Dula Peep” experienced a second surge in virality through TikTok where it became the subject of several memes and was regularly quoted by the platform's creators. As such, its common inclusion in Duolingo's posts not only acts as an inside joke reminding users of the owl's love of the pop singer but also as a timely memetic reference relevant to the app's userbase.

This condensed explanation of #dulapeep captures just a few of the components of this inside joke, the complexity of which practically demands that its audience be long-time native users of TikTok in order to reach a complete understanding of its facets. What this joke ultimately represents is Duolingo's ability to present themselves as an authentic participant in TikTok's culture which the company has chosen to achieve through a familiar mode of presentation: influencership. The previous chapter explored the potential of a brand marketing themselves as an influencer through an exploration of Wendy's' popular Twitter account which saw significant success on that platform, however what Duolingo has built on TikTok stands out as a further evolution of this concept. Through the fictional life and persona they have built for their mascot Duo, Duolingo has adapted the Wendy's strategy to a visual platform and created a character of deeper complexity that is capable of achieving parasocial connections with TikTok's userbase on behalf of the company. This chapter explores the development and implementation of the Duo influencer persona on TikTok, examining the origins of his character and the reasons his odd collection of traits have allowed the owl to succeed as an influencer on the platform. I analyze the choices Duolingo has made concerning their account's presentation and illustrate their direct correlation to the strategies of influencers as well as how the company has adjusted these approaches to better serve their goals as a brand. As part of this analysis, I explore TikTok's unique memetic culture and its use as a tool for influencers to express their personality, increase their visibility, and to add further credibility their performance of authenticity before examining how Duolingo engages in these same practices to create layered memes like #dulapeep in order to serve those purposes. Ultimately, this chapter seeks to demonstrate the efficacy of brand influencership as a marketing strategy on platforms outside of Twitter as well as the approach's potential for growth and iteration as company's discover new ways to apply this methodology.

Duolingo and TikTok as a Case Study

Duolingo's purpose as a case study goes beyond its unique influencer behaviors as it also serves as a lens through which to examine how brands interact with TikTok and the short-form video medium as a whole. Kaye, Chen, and Zeng conceptualize short-form video as "video content that is shorter than 5 minutes distributed via digital media platforms. Short video features include low-cost production, highly spreadable content, and blurry boundaries between

producers and consumers,” (2021, 229). Throughout the mid to late 2010s numerous platforms worldwide began to experiment with the format as some added short-form video features to their existing infrastructure while new app-based experiences with the format at the core of their design emerged simultaneously. Among these new apps was Douyin, a platform released in 2016 by the Chinese tech company ByteDance that sought to break into the short-form video space²³. After experiencing steady rates of domestic growth, ByteDance decided to expand their venture internationally and acquired the North American short-form video app Musical.ly which they would redevelop into TikTok in 2017²⁴. Over the next four years, TikTok would experience massive success worldwide and recorded one billion active users in 2021, making it the most popular short-form video app by a significant margin. Despite TikTok’s ubiquity, short-form video remains a competitive space with established platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat all developing their own successful short-form video experiences that have each incorporated multiple elements of TikTok’s mechanics into their own designs. Given both the app’s popularity and the numerous platforms that have taken inspiration from its architecture, TikTok is an ideal subject through which to examine short-form video and branded content on these platforms.

This potential for study is further bolstered by the unique promotional methodologies brands and influencers would develop to capitalize on the strengths of this new platform. Despite the unfamiliarity of the format, these groups approached the medium of short-form video with many of the same promotional methodologies they utilized on other platforms. Brands in particular carried over the approaches to marketing they were already utilizing on other platforms and generated videos that focused primarily on commercial advertisement²⁵ and TikTok offered features to support these commercial methods. In particular, the platform utilizes a promote feature which is functionally similar to Twitter’s promoted tweets: brands can pay to have one of their videos shown to a number of the platform’s users proportional to the amount of money they’ve spent. Also like Twitter, the commercial nature of these ads is not made immediately obvious as they are only distinguished from other videos on the platform by a small

²³ Chris Stokel-Walker, *TikTok Boom: China’s Dynamite App and the Superpower Race for Social Media*, (Kingston: Canbury Press, 2021).

²⁴ Rebecca Fannin, “The Strategy Behind TikTok’s Global Rise,” *Harvard Business Review*, September 13, 2019.

²⁵ Lin Yuan, Hao Xia, and Qiang Ye, “The Effect of Advertising Strategies on a Short Video Platform: Evidence from Tiktok,” *Industrial Management & Data Systems* 122, no. 8 (2022): 1956–74, <https://doi.org/10.1108/IMDS-12-2021-0754>.

gray panel labeled “sponsored” at the bottom of the video, a design choice made likely with the intention of preventing users from being able to immediately recognize a branded video giving its message more time to play before a user skips it. However, as discussed in the introduction of this thesis, the average consumer has become increasingly resistant to traditional modes of advertisement and often will not respond positively to branded content, weighing the recommendations of individuals they saw as friends or family members much higher than the word of a brand. As such, sponsored creator advertisements are still widely utilized as a form of marketing on TikTok as brands will pay influencers to use their products or star in videos for the brand. However, several brands sought to emulate the approach taken by Wendy’s on Twitter in order to form connections based on an appearance of authenticity with their consumerbase through which they could more successfully market their products.

TikTok presents its own unique set of challenges for brands seeking to utilize this methodology largely due to the visual nature of the platform: while maintaining a persona on Twitter wasn’t a challenge for brands like Wendy’s because they could communicate their character entirely through text, the short-form video format places far more demand on an account’s ability to represent themselves visually. For many brands this has meant the selection of an individual or groups of people to fill this position as stand-in influencers, often using employees for these roles or paying established influencers to create content on the brand’s account. Others assuage the use of individual representatives at all and create posts lacking a human subject, instead using TikTok’s synthetic voice generation feature or placing text over the video in order to communicate with the viewer. While these methods are widely utilized, Duolingo has set themselves apart from this standard through a strategy of their own that falls somewhere in between both of these techniques. Duolingo incorporates aspects of both approaches into the presentation of their owl mascot Duo who acts both as an individual stand-in influencer and as a voiceless entity, requiring the use of text and synthetic speech to communicate with his audience. While the company’s choice to incorporate two of the most popular approaches to branded content on TikTok is in part what makes Duolingo’s account an ideal subject for this case study, their profile is made a further object of interest by the company’s dedication to presenting Duo as an authentic influencer. None of the videos I watched for this project advertised the company’s product, with these posts instead focusing on showcasing Duo’s chaotic personality, participating in TikTok’s memetic culture, and communicating with

his fans: Duolingo's TikTok account is presented not as a corporate account, but the profile of Duo the influencer. This choice of presentation sets Duolingo's TikTok account apart not just from other brand's on the app, but from brand accounts on the majority of other social media platforms as well. Duolingo's attempt to approximate true influencership illustrates what brands stand to gain from committing to this strategy as well as the techniques they might utilize to achieve this mode of presentation, making their account an important object of study in an examination of branded influencership.

Methodology

This chapter utilizes the walkthrough method of app analysis developed by Ben Light, Jean Burgess, and Stefanie Duguay, an approach widely utilized in the scholarly examination of emergent apps including TikTok²⁶. This approach consists of a period of direct engagement with an app during which a researcher moves through all of an app's various feeds, pages, and mechanisms in order to identify its "mediator characteristics" (11), design choices that reflect the app developer's goals for its experience. My decision to utilize the walkthrough method is primarily informed by the need to illustrate the manner in which several of TikTok's specific design choices have shaped the labor of its influencers as well as its memetic culture, connections which the walkthrough method excels at revealing. The walkthrough method was selected for my research as much of this chapter is concerned with the role TikTok's design has played in shaping its content and the labor of its influencers. In order to gain an academic understanding of this relationship, I utilize the walkthrough method as a means of identifying the connections between specific mechanics and cultural phenomena. My walkthroughs focused primarily on interacting with the For You page, the Discovery page, the account pages of creators, influencers, and myself, and the friends page, as well as direct usage of the social features present on each of these pages and the app's video creation suite. Through this process I noted the correlations between the app's visibility labors with specific regard to how individual mechanics informed the platform's algorithmic imaginary and the visibility labors of its influencers.

²⁶ Aparajita Bhandari and Sara Bimo, "Why's Everyone on TikTok Now? The Algorithmized Self and the Future of Self-Making on Social Media," *Social Media + Society* 8, no. 1 (2022): <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221086241> and Xiaoci Fan et al., "Understanding Tiktok Usage: Communication Strategy of Bytedance Based on the Background of New Media" Essay. In *Proceedings of the 2022 4th International Conference on Literature, Art and Human Development*, (Paris: Atlantis Press SARL, 2023): 226–236, https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-494069-97-8_29

Much of the analysis in this chapter observes the content of Duolingo's TikTok videos posted between the account's creation in February 2021 and July 2022. In order to aggregate and identify relevant posts, I watched each of the videos posted within this timeframe and input each video's metadata into a spreadsheet: this included each video's description, the date it was uploaded, the number of views, likes, and comments the video had received, the number of times the video had been shared within the app or to other platforms. In addition, I applied tags to each video based on their content in order to track similarities such as recurring hashtags or subjects. I regularly refer back to this data as a means of highlighting production choices that were successful for Duolingo, the visibility labors they integrated into their content, and the common aspects of Duo's persona. I performed a similar collection process while identifying other brand content that was relevant to this chapter, though to a less intensive degree. The additional brand accounts examined in this chapter were selected through largely the same means as in the previous chapter, beginning with Google searches for "funniest brand accounts on TikTok" and examining the numerous best of lists that populated the first two search pages. This was largely a means of being thorough in my examination process: I was already aware of most of the brand accounts I wanted to utilize for this video as I had spent a significant period of the time I had spent recreationally on TikTok examining branded content out of personal interest. These Google searches allowed me to confirm many of my account selections and yielded a few additional objects of study.

Duolingo's Turn Towards Influencership

Duolingo is a North American app-based language learning platform that attempts to create an approachable educational experience through an instructional regimen designed to mimic mobile games. This is a design approach known as "gamification," which describes the process wherein systems, services, and other interfaces take on the quality of games with the intention to create a more enjoyable and interactive experience for users of these products²⁷. Zan Gilani, a product manager at Duolingo, cites gamification as a key element of their design

²⁷ Hamari J, Parvinen P, and 49th Annual Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences, HICSS 2016 49 2016 01 05 - 2016 01 08. 2016. "Introduction to Gamification: Motivations, Effects and Analytics Minitrack." Proceedings of the Annual Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences 2016-march: 1307. <https://doi.org/10.1109/HICSS.2016.165>.

philosophy²⁸: in order to make the practice of learning a new language a more approachable prospect, the app breaks the process down into short daily lessons that users are given in-app rewards for completing . Users are further invested through the app’s “streak” feature, which provides additional rewards for doing at least one lesson every day, a leaderboard that publicly ranks the best performing users in each language category in order to provide motivation in the form of competition, and a deluge of constant notifications and emails that remind users to do their daily lesson.

This stream of notifications became a particular source of attention in the late 2010s when Duolingo became the subject of a viral meme. On March 26th, 2019, Duolingo posted an image on Twitter depicting the app’s mascot, a lime green cartoon owl, entering a darkened home with the caption “Coming Soon” (fig. 3.1). The company did not explain the meaning of this post and Twitter users jokingly chose to interpret it as a threat, composing memes that depicted the Duolingo owl mascot as a violent instructor who sought to break into the homes of the app’s less active users and assault them for their failure to consistently do their lessons. This initial group of posts was later expanded upon with further images that portrayed the Duolingo owl as a vengeful and obsessive entity, with numerous memes made about the app’s overbearing notification regimen and the passive aggressive tone these messages often took²⁹. Duolingo would only encourage this narrative less than a few weeks later with a joke-advertisement video for a made up new feature called Duolingo Push, which depicted a mascot costume version of the Duolingo owl named Duo stalking and threatening its users in order to remind them to complete their lessons (fig. 3.1).

The company would make a few more jokes along these lines over the remainder of the year, but humorous asides such as these did not define the bulk of their social media branding. Duolingo’s presence in digital spaces more often reflected the sensibilities of normative corporate brand activity: their content primarily discussed upcoming features for the app, advertised events or initiatives the company was participating in, or reminded users to do their daily lessons. Much of this activity was centralized on Twitter which served the additional purpose of facilitating customer service interactions, adhering to Murthy’s conceptualization of

²⁸ Richard Draycott, “Gamification is the key to Duolingo success says product manager Gilani at Canvas conference,” The Drum, Oct. 26, 2017, <https://www.thedrum.com/news/2017/10/26/gamification-the-key-duolingo-success-says-product-manager-gilani-canvas-conference>

²⁹ Know Your Meme, “Evil Duolingo Owl,” <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/evil-duolingo-owl>

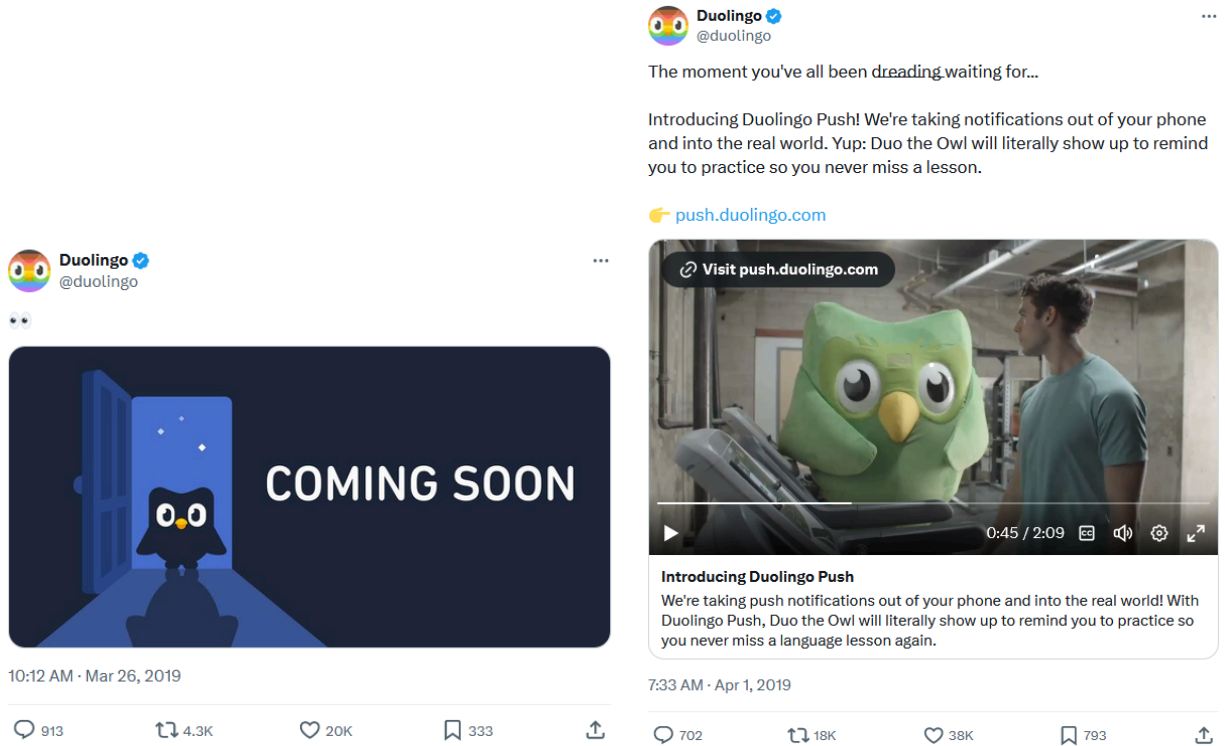


Figure 3.1. Duolingo leans into the stalker Duo meme.

Twitter as a customer service platform (2018, 181). The company’s collaborations with content creators largely adhered to corporate sensibilities as well, with Duolingo’s largest attempt at creator-based marketing being their “featured streamer of the week” program in which multilingual creators would stream their content on Duolingo’s Twitch channel, often providing basic language lessons as they performed and encouraging viewers to try the app³⁰. While initiatives like their Twitch streams as well as the company’s active participation in memetic jokes about their brand demonstrated a willingness to engage with social media as a marketing tool, Duolingo’s content remained quite reserved: never pushing the content of these campaigns beyond a traditionally corporate tone.

Upon joining TikTok in early February of 2021, the company’s initial posts were similarly in-line with their other platform content. Most of Duolingo’s early videos are similar in concept to their Twitch streams, featuring a TikTok influencer providing a short anecdotal

³⁰ Stephen Bijan, “Duolingo partnered with Twitch to help you learn languages better,” *The Verge*, July 26, 2019, <https://www.theverge.com/2019/7/26/8931676/duolingo-twitch-verified-streamer-program-partnership-languages-learn>

language lesson with a humorous undertone. The majority of their content utilized this structure until May 25th, 2021, when the account uploaded their first video that participated in a viral TikTok trend. The meme, known as “trade offer,” depicts a man in a suit with the tips of his fingers pressed together and text above his head describing a deal the individual wishes to make³¹. This image was accompanied by a musical sting most commonly associated with the North American National Basketball Association’s draft event, in which the jingle is played to let viewers know that an important trade of players is about to be made. This trend found significant purchase on TikTok in April 2021, where iterations on its form quickly achieved virality and by the time Duolingo had posted their own version of the meme, its popularity had long since waned. Despite this, Duolingo’s variant quickly became the account’s most successful video by a wide margin, achieving over a million views and one hundred thousand likes³².

Following this video, there is a significant change to the content and tone of Duolingo’s next posts, as well as a new subject: the character of Duo himself. Duo was now represented in the form of a new mascot costume that bore a greater resemblance to the in-app art of Duo in comparison to the costume’s former iteration that was featured in the Duolingo Push video. In his debut appearance, Duo walks around Times Square, interacting with other mascots and reminding passing New Yorkers to do their lessons with a passive aggressive sign. This video achieved comparatively significant engagement for the Duolingo TikTok account with over 800 thousand views and 100 thousand likes³³, however the mascot-featuring content would find even greater success over a month later with a video in which a Duolingo employee lip-syncing along to a viral sound would express their distress at working in an office with Duo, who was apparently threatening staff to complete their lessons in a timely manner. The camera then pans over to the Duo mascot costume positioned behind the employee to appear as if it's staring at her. On screen text reads: “When you’re just tryna do your work without being terrorized by an owl.”³⁴ This combination of a viral sound, the mascot costume, and the characterization of Duo

³¹ Know Your Meme, “Trade Offer,” <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/trade-offer>

³² Duolingo, “As they say, education is the best investment. Are you in or what? 🍷,” TikTok, May 25, 2021, https://www.tiktok.com/@duolingo/video/6966265804660722950?is_from_webapp=1&web_id=7119752388042966533

³³ Duolingo, “Be honest. Who are you picking...Pikachu or Duo? 🤔❤️,” TikTok, July 29, 2021, https://www.tiktok.com/@duolingo/video/6990362646419754246?is_from_webapp=1&web_id=7119752388042966533

³⁴ Duolingo, “This is an SOS,” TikTok, Sep. 30, 2021, https://www.tiktok.com/@duolingo/video/7013717358359383302?is_from_webapp=1&web_id=7119752388042966533

as a persistent and wrathful being proved to be wildly successful, with the video clocking in at over 3.6 million views and 724 thousand likes. This formula would become the standard for the Duolingo TikTok account: their most successful content primarily featured Duo, characterized in physical form by the mascot costume, participating in a viral trend with an unhinged or rebellious undertone to it. The videos that adhered to this structure received significant engagement, and over the next few months, Duo's antics would attract over 500 million views to the company TikTok account³⁵.

This focus on trend participation is a deliberate one: Zaria Parvez, the social media manager in charge of Duolingo's TikTok account, has outlined that the company's marketing team designs their content with the intention of incorporating popular trends and memes³⁶. Duolingo is not alone in this focus as numerous other brands also add their own spin to popular trends, however Duolingo sets itself apart through its mascot. While another brand might have staff members perform in their videos, there won't be a consistent face to associate with the brand's identity. Duolingo circumvents this issue by making Duo and his persona the subject of their content, condensing the corporate entity into a single recognizable individual that acts as the face of the company. This choice is what has placed Duolingo peculiarly in the realm of influencers: Duo is selling the Duolingo brand through his personality which the marketing team makes an effort to distinguish from the rest of the corporation. Over the next few months, Duolingo's marketing team developed a fictional narrative for their TikTok page, presenting it as though it was Duo's personal influencer account that he had seized control of. There was no longer a direct focus on the company as the account pivoted in the wake of Duo's growing celebrity status and became focused on displaying the owl's unhinged persona through humorous video posts. This strategy continued to prove successful as the account continued to accrue millions of followers and views in a matter of weeks as Duo experienced a burst of virality on the app and by mid-2022, Duolingo's account boasted over 4 million followers and their videos regularly garnering a million or more views.

³⁵ Duolingo, Inc., Shareholder Letter Q4/FY 2021, Pittsburgh, PA: 2018.
<https://duolingo.gcs-web.com/static-files/68e16a0b-f189-4e37-b5ad-97a27a6dfca6>

³⁶ Rachel DuRose, "How to excel as a social media manager, according to the 24-year-old mastermind behind Duolingo's viral TikTok account," *Business Insider*, March 29, 2022,
<https://www.businessinsider.com/duolingo-tiktok-social-media-manager-shares-strategy-2021-11>

The Duosona: Authenticity Branding through a Mascot

There is a particular degree of absurdity to this success: Duo is transparently an employee in a mascot costume acting out a persona ascribed to him by a marketing team and yet a quick glance into any comments section on a Duolingo video will reveal hundreds of users speaking to him as though he were a real celebrity influencer. Duo's performance of influencership asks TikTok's userbase to suspend their disbelief and treat this green owl mascot as though he were a real person, a prospect which has successfully allowed the brand to generate a rapport on the platform. The persona is quite simple when contrasted with TikTok's human influencers as just as in the case of Wendy's, a brand deviating from the sanitary marketing language they traditionally employ is novel enough to draw attention from netizens. However, Duolingo went beyond the barebones persona that Wendy's had ascribed their Twitter account and would develop Duo into a full-fledge celebrity character with several consistent personality traits that inform his voice and interactions with TikTok's userbase. These characteristics are not particularly complex but lend the account a depth not present with other brand social media accounts: when interacting with Duolingo's profile, users speak to the character of Duo rather than the company he represents. Through their TikTok account, Duolingo has created an interactive theatrical experience capable of serving as an influencer on the company's behalf that has succeeded in forging parasocial connections with the platform's userbase through his celebrity, a mode of presentation made possible due to the personality quirks that form Duo's persona.

At the core of Duo's character is the stalker Duo meme from which the persona draws clear inspiration as much of the account's content supports the image of the mascot as a petulant and violent individual singularly focused on forcing language learning on anyone he can find. Many of Duo's earliest TikTok appearances call back to the fake advertisement for the Duolingo Push feature as each of these initial videos depicts Duo reminding users to do their lessons in an either passive aggressive manner or with the implied threat of hostilities hanging over the interaction (fig. 3.2). When the account decided to expand Duo's persona and express his taste in media, his stalker behavior remained entangled with these interests: several of Duo's videos express his appreciation for various forms of media such as his enjoyment of musical artists like Dua Lipa or Taylor Swift, as well as his engagement with television shows including iCarly and Stranger Things. While these videos communicate Duo's participation within these fandoms, the

content Duolingo makes in reference to these properties often still features his stalker nature such as the #dulapeep meme. Duo's obsessive nature colors almost everything he decides to do, a choice that at first glance might seem to make Duo appear off putting to viewer though in reality it is precisely this personality trait that has played a significant role in attracting Duo's viewership. Just as with the Duolingo Push commercial, the Duolingo TikTok account serves as a consistent reminder that the company appears to enjoy this meme to the point that they wanted to make the joke central to their brand. Duolingo's continued engagement with the stalker Duo meme represents the brand's willingness to not only participate in internet culture but to understand it on the level of a memetically literate platform user which, as Ryan Milner explained in the previous chapter, allows Duo to ingratiate themselves to TikTok's userbase. As such, Duolingo has continued to work jokes about Duo's regular stalkerish activities into the majority of their content that features the green owl as each time they chose to do so serves to remind the platform of their apparent authentic participation in TikTok's culture.



Figure 3.2. Examples of Duo's stalker behaviors manifesting in Duolingo's early content.

That said, the choice to center Duo's stalker tendencies seems an oddly risky and potentially harmful choice: though it is contextually clear that the company is attempting to be humorous through the posts made about Duo's behaviors, Duolingo's execution of this joke

crosses uncomfortable lines with regard to their comments about Dua Lipa. Much of the company's content makes light of both the sexualization that celebrities face and the dangers that stalkers pose, and while it's doubtful that Duolingo is intentionally seeking to cause harm through their posts, they still contribute to undermining the real-life impact of these issues. Despite this, their blase attitude towards stalking and sexualization does not appear to have reduced the account's popularity and has not negatively impacted Duolingo's public image, likely due in part to the memetic origins of the Duo's stalking tendencies. Netizens across multiple platforms had already decided that they found the concept of Duo being a violent stalker to be a humorous prospect and as such when Duolingo decided to lean into this joke, they come across as a company attempting to participate in the culture of a platform by utilizing the communicative methods of its native users rather than a brand creating and promoting a distasteful advertising campaign. In addition, the more explicit jokes Duolingo attempts to make are primarily executed through TikTok trends that focus on the sexualization of others such as the #itsyou and snack trends, both of which Duolingo made videos for as a means of expressing Duo's interest in Dua Lipa³⁷. TikTok has seen numerous trends such as these in which sexualizing celebrities is directly encouraged which has likely contributed to a cultural sentiment that posting about the famous in the manner that Duolingo does isn't entirely abnormal. Because of these norms, it seems likely that Duolingo will not face admonishment for emphasizing Duo's stalking behaviors in their content, however this appears to be more of a symptom of an often lackadaisical attitude towards celebrity sexualization within TikTok's own culture. Regardless, it is important to acknowledge that despite the unserious tone of Duolingo's attempts at humor, their attitude still has the potential to cause harm as by making light of the very real danger that stalking poses as it can instill the perception that these behaviors are not as alarming as they actually are.

While Duo's stalker personality serves as the basis for his character, the Duolingo account further fleshes out his fictional persona through a constructed narrative in which they depict Duo as an employee at their company. Many of the account's videos concern Duo's day-to-day activities at Duolingo Headquarters where it is implied he works as the brand's

³⁷ Duolingo, "whoever gets @dualipaofficial to respond is best man at our wedding 🍷," TikTok, Nov. 5, 2021, https://www.tiktok.com/@duolingo/video/7027099793218489646?is_from_webapp=1&web_id=7119752388042966533 and Duolingo, "not me waking up every morning practicing for my queen," TikTok, Jan. 20, 2022, https://www.tiktok.com/@duolingo/video/7055417718748695855?is_from_webapp=1&web_id=7119752388042966533

dedicated influencer, however his relationship with the company is shown to be extremely turbulent. Most of the videos that include other staff members depict Duo actively terrorizing the office by threatening employees with violence and monitoring their work in an exceedingly overbearing manner. In other videos, Duo expresses his immense displeasure with the company's executive board as they work to restrict his activities on the platform which has caused Duo to rebel through the posting of "explicit" videos in which he twerks or models his feet. Duo's activities regularly result in trouble with a character named Legal Steve played by the company's actual general counsel Stephan Chen, who takes significant issue with the unlawful activities Duo engages in. These elements form the basis of the office narrative which appears consistently in the account's videos, usually in the form of short one to three video long subplots in which Duo performs an ethically questionable action that results in suffering for his co-workers or a swift reprimand from the legal department, though Duo does his best to completely ignore the consequences of his actions³⁸. These short skits serve to situate Duo in the physical world and contextualize him not just as the nebulous voice of a social media page but as a character capable of person-to-person interactions: each video emphasizes that Duo is an individual beyond just his image as an aspect of the brand. More importantly, the skits allow Duolingo to explore new elements of Duo's character which are then communicated through his interactions with his coworkers such as his intense self obsession, disregard for the lives of others, and desire to post explicit content. Parvez has stated that the goal of these videos is to imitate the tone of workplace comedies like *The Office*³⁹, however they are also highly reminiscent of a persona-building method regularly employed by influencers. As Driel and Dumetrica discussed in the previous chapter, influencers often provide short glimpses into their day-to-day activities in their content in order to communicate the authenticity of their lives and to engender parasocial feelings of

³⁸ See Duolingo, "direct your concerns to Legal Steve @stephenchen623 cuz my list of wrongs is as long as a CVS receipt." TikTok, Oct. 26, 2021, https://www.tiktok.com/@duolingo/video/7023394897390537990?is_from_webapp=1&web_id=7119752388042966533, Duolingo, "we love a forced promotion," TikTok, March 30, 2022, https://www.tiktok.com/@duolingo/video/7080958631591791918?is_from_webapp=1&web_id=7119752388042966533, Duolingo, "all interns must wear green 🟡🟢," TikTok, July 28, 2022, https://www.tiktok.com/@duolingo/video/7125495571107826987?is_from_webapp=1&web_id=7119752388042966533, and Duolingo, "this "legal oversight" is getting out of hand," TikTok, July 29, 2022, https://www.tiktok.com/@duolingo/video/7125828814998981930?is_from_webapp=1&web_id=7119752388042966533

³⁹ Rachel DuRose, "How to excel as a social media manager, according to the 24-year-old mastermind behind Duolingo's viral TikTok account," Business Insider, March 29, 2022, <https://www.businessinsider.com/duolingo-tiktok-social-media-manager-shares-strategy-2021-11>

closeness through the sharing of these personal details with their fanbase. While the workplace skits fail to express authenticity given the transparently fictional nature of these videos, they effectively emulate a type of content that influencers would produce which reinforces the narrative of Duo's influencership.

This emulation is similarly expressed through Duolingo's choice to have Duo participate in brand deals and influencer collaborations. The account has created several videos that utilize the aesthetics of an influencer brand sponsorship beginning with a series of posts the company made in partnership with Scrub Daddy, a cleaning product company known for their polymer sponges shaped like smiley faces. These videos depict Duo and a mascot for Scrub Daddy participating in a TikTok trend, attending the Coachella music festival, and showing off a limited edition version of the Scrub Daddy sponges that resemble Duo which was announced in a post that depicts Duo giving birth to the cleaning products. This series of videos is largely representative of Duo's future brand collaborations, which usually feature the owl participating in a TikTok trend which the company has themed to a specific brand or Duo causing chaos at a location related to the participating brand. Duolingo's decision to engage in brand deals is, at a glance, an odd prospect: most influencers advertise for brands exclusively for the monetary benefits as these sponsorships can often damage their appearance of authenticity, however Duolingo as a company doesn't need the income that would come from such a deal. In these particular instances, the primary benefit for Duolingo is a mingling of audiences as it exposes users who follow the collaborating brand to the language app's content and, in the case of brands with a fandom, can signal Duolingo's membership with that community. Within the data gathered for this project, Duo's two most significant brand collaborations outside of their videos with Scrub Daddy were with Illumination Studios to promote their upcoming film *Minions* and with Warner Brothers as part of an advertisement campaign for their *Game of Thrones* prequel show *House of the Dragon*. Both of these properties held positions of significant cultural relevance in 2022 and experienced significant coverage on TikTok, thus in collaborating with these properties Duolingo is able to bolster their own popularity as their brand becomes linked to relevant cultural moments. In addition to assisting in visibility generation, the similarities these promotions share with influencer brand deals assists in Duo's performance of influencership as the mascot once more adopts a practice commonly employed by these content creators and retools it to fit the goals of the company. Through the use of these labor practices, Duolingo

continues to color their performance of influencership with the aesthetics of content creation despite the lessened economic incentive to engage in collaborations.

While Duo's presentation emulates influencership on multiple levels, the mascot still ultimately serves as a vehicle for expressing brand values. The stalker Duo meme offered Duolingo an ideal marketing opportunity as though the joke presented the owl as obsessive, his obsession is encouraging people to do their Duolingo lessons and learn new languages. By placing the meme at the center of Duo's personality, the company is also choosing to emphasize his love of language learning which is exactly the kind of core value Duolingo would want to impart. Much of Duo's content plays into this trait with the owl making regular posts threatening users with consequences if they don't do their lessons or decrying the use of Google Translate as an alternative to learning a language. Furthermore, the company utilizes the fictional narrative they've built for Duo as a means through which to present the company and its employees as fun relatable people. Each of the workplace skits implies that Duolingo headquarters provides an easy going work environment as the fact that the company allows its employees to take time out of their workday to participate in the production of these videos demonstrates an apparent casual style of office management. The brazenly risqué humor of the Duo persona further supports this presentation as the very fact that the company allows their marketing team to make the jokes that they do demonstrates their relaxed attitude when it comes to the individuality of their departments. In a similar vein, Duo's regular expressions of fandom allegiance both to artists and media properties signal to users that the employees behind the mascot are likely participants in these communities themselves which serves to humanize the marketing team and provides a degree of authenticity to their performance. This is the key to Duo's presentation: the parasocial relationships that Duolingo fosters between its mascot and TikTok's userbase act as a means through which the brand can make their workplace and employees seem authentic. Duo's celebrity status and influencer behaviors not only work to increase the account's visibility but additionally attempts to illustrate the company's humanity outside of their corporate goals. This is likely why the brand, despite their large platform, almost never mentions the existence of their product on their account as directly advertising to their audience would betray their commercial intent and push users away, an issue that Duffy as well as Driel and Dumetrica outlined in chapter one. Duolingo places the fiction of Duo's influencership front and center, creating a joke

that they are in on with TikTok's userbase and through the relationships built with their followers through this joke, the company can attain a modicum of authenticity.

The FYP and Utilizing Algorithmic Discoverability

In addition to donning the persona of an influencer, Duolingo similarly utilizes influencer modes of visibility labor to draw attention to their account. This means specifically adjusting their visibility strategies to fit the demands of the app, which on TikTok means understanding and engaging with the platform's discoverability framework. Fenwick McKelvey and Robert Hunt describe discoverability as the experience of content discovery that is generated by a platform's "flow," or the way a platform organizes and distributes media (2, 2019). On Twitter for example, discoverability is facilitated through features such as retweets, which allow users to share content they find interesting with their followers, or suggested tweets, which algorithmically distributes content to its users based on the platform's assumptions about each individual account's interests. Discoverability frameworks are a crucial means through which creators build their audience and can have a considerable impact on the type of content that is produced on a platform, a reality that TikTok's creators are no stranger to as the app's almost singular focus on an algorithmic discoverability architecture has played a significant role in shaping the platform's trends and subsequently the visibility labors of its influencers. TikTok's content discovery experience is driven by the For You page (often abbreviated to FYP by the app's users), an endlessly scrolling feed of algorithmically selected videos. The platform's design places the For You page at the forefront of its experience: it is the first page shown to users when TikTok is opened and is accessed in-app by selecting a tab labeled "Home," further suggesting the importance that Bytedance places upon the feed. When the For You page is opened, the first video in the feed will immediately begin to play and loops indefinitely until the user performs an upward swipe to bring them to the next piece of content. As a user continues to interact with videos on their For You page, the app's algorithm will attempt to determine their interests and will add content that reflects these perceived preferences into the user's feed. Most of these interactions such as liking, favoriting, subscribing, and commenting require little effort on the part of the users and can usually be performed entirely from the For You page without necessitating any interaction with other interfaces outside of it.

All of these features work in concert to create an experience that requires minimal input from its users as the “burden” of content selection is placed on TikTok’s algorithm. McKelvey and Hunt offer two paradigms to describe the nature of this particular platform experience: rabbit holing, which describes the process whereby an algorithmic recommendation engine encourages perpetual use of an app by providing a continuous stream of content, and gorking out, which refers to the experience of endlessly consuming this content without breaks often due to an addictive design philosophy centered on creating these rabbit holes (5, 2019). In regard to both concepts, McKelvey and Hunt emphasize how algorithmic recommendations and video autoplay features encourage these viewing habits through the removal of “cognitive labor” from the media selection process, providing no interim periods between content. Despite the unhealthy content consumption patterns created by this design philosophy, developers are encouraged to incorporate these features into their products as they increase the time users spend on their platforms, which in turn nets them greater profits. McKelvey and Hunt specifically reference the algorithmic and autoplay functions of YouTube and Netflix, however both of these platforms support additional forms of discoverability through organized pages that users can browse to consciously select new videos to watch. TikTok on the other hand lacks few non-algorithmic modes of content discovery outside of its search function, which ensures that users will be more likely to fall into gorked out rabbit holes that will retain their attention for as long as possible.

TikTok has two other primary feeds aside from the For You page: Following, which features videos from any accounts followed by a user, and Friends, which shows content from accounts that the user both follows and is followed by. When scrolling the For You page, users can select a small pink plus symbol interposed against the bottom edge of the user’s profile picture to follow that account (fig. 3.3) or navigate to that account’s profile page which prominently features an additional follow button. Videos from these accounts are then algorithmically distributed under the Following and Friends tabs based on each feed’s respective parameters, which both utilize the same bottomless scroll design as the For You page. While these feeds offer additional modes of content discovery in theory, in practice they are made somewhat redundant as the app’s algorithm automatically disperses content from both of these feeds into the For You page. TikTok users also have the option of navigating directly to the profile pages of accounts that they follow and viewing specific videos there, however the design of these pages is inimical to this mode of interaction. Each account’s body of work is presented

in paneled rows of three videos that are organized by release time and are only labeled with their respective view counts (fig. 3.3), which makes it exceedingly difficult for users to find specific pieces of content based on title or video subject. The threadbare nature of these features in combination with the platform's algorithmic selection deemphasizes the need to follow a multitude of accounts with relevant content and encourages the use of the For You page as the primary mode of content discovery which is supported by TikTok's own internal metrics: TikTok reported that in 2021, 96.96% of the platform's video views came from the For You page⁴⁰, indicating their users' preference for the feed.

Due to these factors, creators are encouraged to prioritize courting TikTok's algorithm when attempting to garner fame as it is the most likely route through which their content would be discovered. This paradigm manifests itself in the visibility labors of TikTok creators which are largely shaped by the userbase's interpretation of the platform's algorithmic logic.

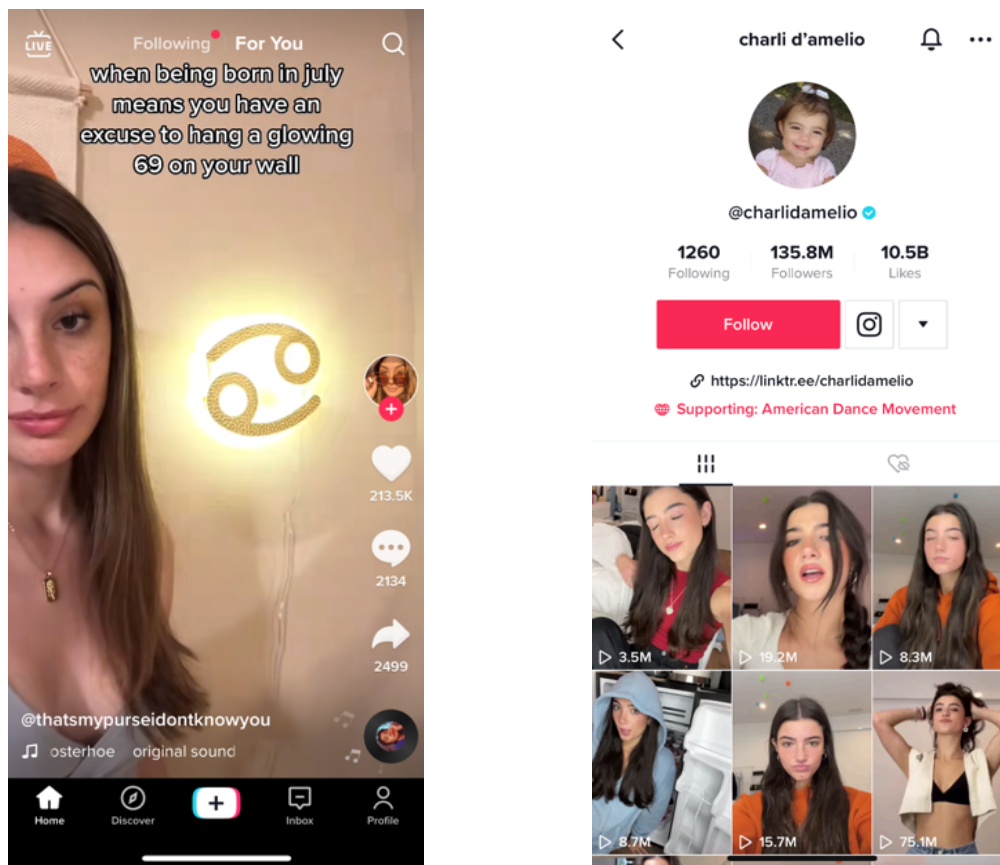


Figure 3.3. The For You page (left) and an example account page (right).

⁴⁰ TikTok Pte. Ltd., What's Next Report 2022: Insight into culture drivers on TikTok, February 24, 2022.

The exact mechanics of TikTok's algorithms are kept secret by ByteDance as they are a key component of their IP, a practice that is prevalent across the entire tech industry. This creates an issue known as the black box in which the mechanics of an algorithm are rendered inaccessible, halting the attempts of any curious parties to determine the exact nature of these systems⁴¹. Instead, users form an understanding of a platform's algorithmic logic through their experiences with its mechanics, creating what Taina Bucher calls "the algorithmic imaginary" (2017, 40): users note recurring elements present in popular content on a platform as well as the content that is regularly suggested to them, and from this information they extrapolate their own conclusions as to how the platform's algorithm likely functions. While these imaginaries are constructed through unverifiable discourse, Bucher stresses that it is still important to acknowledge the power algorithmic imaginaries wield as these ideas tangibly effect how users engage with a platform and its community (2017, 41). More specifically, she notes that platform users will alter the content they post and the content they view as a means of shaping how the platform's algorithm perceives them, whether that be their specific interests or the communities their content is recommended in.

Imaginaries are then taken beyond their individual conceptualization through what Sophie Bishop calls "algorithmic gossip," or "communally and socially informed knowledge about algorithms and algorithmic visibility," (2019, 2590). As communities form in algorithmically governed digital spaces, users will often share their own conceptualization of the platform's algorithmic logic with one another. Through this exchange of imaginaries, the users generate a set of collective assumptions about the algorithm often based on the consistent observations that are present across multiple conceptualizations. These theories subsequently inform the future experiences of these users with the platform as they alter their interactions to reflect the beliefs present within this communal imaginary (2019, 2590). Bishop contextualizes this process through its effect on YouTube creators, who integrate tactics spread through algorithmic gossip into their creation process in the hopes of making their content appear more appealing to the platform's algorithm. This paradigm is similarly present on TikTok: because the For You page algorithm is the primary method through which the overwhelming majority of content discovery occurs, the platform's most prevalent visibility labors are singularly focused on maintaining algorithmic appeal. Because algorithmic gossip lacks clear evidence as to its

⁴¹ Frank Pasquale, *The Black Box Society*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).

legitimacy the actual effectiveness of these strategies remains nebulous, however this does not stop content creators from utilizing them.

Like many of these creators, Duolingo has incorporated multiple forms of visibility labor derived from algorithmic gossip into their content. On TikTok many forms of content and creator practices act as secondary forms of visibility labor and as such, it is difficult to ascertain whether or not Duolingo's decision to engage in these practices was for the intentional purpose of expanding their audience or as a means of imitating the influencers from which the account derived its aesthetics. In interviews concerning the account, Zaria Parvez largely spoke to the goals of the accounts content and the design of Duo's personality without disclosing whether or not the company's marketing team was deliberately engaging in these practices for visibility purposes, however regardless of the Duolingo's intentions these strategies are still transparently present in their videos. The earliest form of visibility labor that Duolingo would utilize was adding specific hashtags in their description that the platform's creators believe cause TikTok's algorithm to favor their video. TikTok's hashtag system is very similar to Twitters, allowing creators to add tags in the description of their videos that would categorize the post that, when selected by a user, would allow them to view other posts that had the same hashtag. Over time many TikTok creators gained the belief that using the tag "#fyp" would cause the algorithm to prioritize placing that video on the For You page of other users and thusly this became a common practice among the platform's creators⁴². Similarly, creators will use hashtags to categorize their videos by subculture with short, snappy tags like "BookTok" or "WitchTok" in the hopes that the algorithm will prioritize and show their videos to users who regularly engage with similar content⁴³. These are both practices that Duolingo has regularly engaged in, using both the #fyp as well as categorizing their videos with tags like #BrandTok, #OwlTok, #LegalTok, and more specific tags when the video pertains to a specific fandom such as #SwiftTok or #DuaTok. As stated, it is not entirely clear whether Duolingo is participating in this practice as a means of visibility labor or simply doing so to support the image of Duo as an influencer: tags like #OwlTok do not refer to an existing community on TikTok and suggest that the company is poking fun at the practice of tagging as a whole. However, the presence of legitimate tags within

⁴² D. Bondy Valdovinos Kaye et al., *TikTok : Creativity and Culture in Short Video*, Digital Media and Society Series, (Cambridge: Polity, 2022): 53.

⁴³ Crystal Abidin, "Mapping Internet Celebrity on TikTok: Exploring Attention Economies and Visibility Labours," *Cultural Science Journal* 12, no.1 (3920): 77-103, <https://doi.org/10.5334/csci.140>

Duolingo's description would still serve to increase the account's discoverability if the platform's creators are correct in their assumptions about the algorithm and thus even in parody, the account is still engaging in visibility labor.

While hashtags are an essential tool for visibility on TikTok, Duolingo's primary mode of visibility labor on TikTok is their consistent participation in the platform's trends. The term "trend" as it applies to TikTok is described by the company themselves as "creative formats, ideas, and behaviors that get a lot of attention on TikTok, and in turn influence what people do on the platform," (2023), a definition that sufficiently encapsulates the varieties of content that are given the trend moniker by the platform's userbase. At their mechanical core, TikTok's trends are effectively memes as these "creative formats, ideas, and behaviors" are spread memetically, however in the case of many trends this memetic process is heavily influenced by the templatability of these memes, a term that refers to the ease at which other creators are able to mimic the audiovisual and structural elements of a piece of content and incorporate it into their own work⁴⁴. Many of TikTok's trends begin with a video that becomes successful either within a community or across the platform as a whole which is then replicated by other creators who might alter a few aspects of the video while keeping its core structure the same such as changing the punchline to a joke if the post was humorous. Sometimes creators won't alter the original video and will directly replicate its content with the only changes being the subject and the environment such as in the case of dance challenges, an early trend on the platform in which creators would post videos of themselves dancing that would then be copied by others who would create their own videos with the same choreography in a different setting. In both instances, these trends were predicated on the success of a video that was directly replicated and iterated upon en masse, making that original post a template that other creators were directly drawing from. Using these templates is a means of participating in TikTok's memetic culture and thus it acts as a mode of visibility labor, a tool through which creators can communicate their personality and demonstrate their memetic literacy to the platform's denizens.

This form of memetic visibility labor is further proliferated by TikTok itself through the app's design choices and video production features which encourage creators to participate in the platform's memetic culture through the direct replication of each other's content. The first of these features are similar in function: the Duet feature which allows users to respond to a video

⁴⁴ Tama Leaver et al., *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020), 205-207.

with one of their own that would be displayed simultaneously side-by-side with the original post and the Stitch feature which is similar though it combines both videos into one, showing a short excerpt from the original post before then playing the respondee's video in its entirety. The third feature, Use This Sound, is an auditory version of the other two functions as it allows creators to import the audio from one video into the platform's internal video production suite and film their own post over the original audio. All three of these features are made accessible through the platform's user interface: selecting the "Share" button on any TikTok video brings up the option to duet or stitch it if the creator allows it, and a TikTok's sound is displayed in a spinning record icon at the bottom of the screen that, when selected, brings the user to a page of other videos that use that same audio and prompts users to create their own video with a large red button at the bottom of the page labeled "Use this sound." TikTok's video production suite is equally intuitive with a simplistic and informative design, further reducing the complexity of utilizing these features to create content. Working in concert, all of these design elements both encourage creators to engage with videos through these features and ensure that the process of doing so is as accessible as possible which incentivizes content creation through the replication of other creators' posts. Diana Zulli and David James Zulli reached this same conclusion through their own walkthrough of TikTok but elaborate further by postulating that these features have resulted in a culture constructed around "imitation publics," or "a collection of people whose digital connectivity is constituted through the shared ritual of content imitation and replication," (2022, 1882). Within the platform's imitation publics, copying the work of other creators is viewed as a valid mode of content production and is a means through which creators connect with the platform's cultures as they are taking part in the shared experience of a trend through this replication. This is especially true of the Use This Sound feature which is accredited by Bondy Kay and Crystal Abidin as having resulted in an "aural turn" within TikTok's memetic culture as trends have become constructed around the en masse use of viral audios in content due in large part to this feature (2021, 61). As a result of these factors, content replication is one of the primary means of memetic participation for the TikTok's creators and is thus an essential tool for creators seeking to utilize memetic visibility labors on the platform.

Duolingo's TikTok account engages with the app's trends through these tools, primarily employing video templates that utilize the Use This Sound feature as a means to produce regular memetic content. Several of these posts directly replicate the video templates they draw from and

make no significant changes to the trend they're drawing from such as Duo's version of the "I wanna ride" trend in which creators lip synched along to a viral sound taken from the Joseline Hernandez song "Vegas" over an image of a popular celebrity to imply their desire to sleep with them, with Duo using this to further express his infatuation with Dua Lipa. Even though Duolingo does not alter the core structure of the trend, the company is still able to express Duo's persona through the video without having to perform any significant creative labor and in a manner that will demonstrate the company's memetic literacy, all factors that are consistent across each of the viral video templates Duolingo chooses to copy⁴⁵. While these examples represent the primary mode of the company's direct trend participation, Duolingo will also on occasion utilize trending sounds in their work without directly correlating it to an existing trend, instead constructing an entirely new video around the audio. This is most often in the service of constructing skits such as a two-part series in which the fictional version of the Duolingo legal department removes Duo from power, only to be usurped in the next video as Duo returns to reclaim his position at the company. Both videos are set to the song "abcdefu" by Gayle which was primarily used to accompany videos of women expressing their frustration with men they were dating or had dated in the past, but Duolingo ignores this template entirely and recontextualizes the song within their own post. Despite this shift away from the sound's established templates, this recontextualization still recognizes the content of the original audio: just as it was used to express anger towards bad partners, Duo and the fictional legal team use it to express their anger with one another respectively. These templateless videos go beyond the basics of trend participation and not only act as a means of visibility but as a further demonstration of Duolingo's memetic literacy as the company exhibits its ability to create its own memes that engage with the conventions of humor on the platform.

Duolingo's ability to utilize the memetic conventions of TikTok as well as the platform's algorithmic imaginary is further illustrated in how the company combines these two branding tactics in their creation and proliferation of the #dulapeep meme. As discussed Duolingo

⁴⁵ See Duolingo, "idk why y'all are so pressed??" TikTok, Jan. 27, 2022, https://www.tiktok.com/@duolingo/video/7057954924478401838?is_from_webapp=1&web_id=7119752388042966533, Duolingo, "L8R H8Rs," TikTok, March 29, 2022, https://www.tiktok.com/@duolingo/video/7080585627980533038?is_from_webapp=1&web_id=7119752388042966533, Duolingo, "beak freaks plz rise 🤪," TikTok, June 20, 2022, https://www.tiktok.com/@duolingo/video/7104659512283368747?is_from_webapp=1&web_id=7119752388042966533, and Duolingo, "i can't help myself," TikTok, July 5, 2022, https://www.tiktok.com/@duolingo/video/7116981778593910062?is_from_webapp=1&web_id=7119752388042966533

regularly posts content that mentions Duo's infatuation with Dua Lipa: Of the 141 videos that feature Duo examined for this project, 21 focused on Duo's obsession with Dua Lipa, making Dua the most common recurring topic within Duolingo's posts as it comprises approximately 14% of the account's Duo videos as of August 2022. These videos are presented through the template of a popular trend or is set to a viral sound just as with Duolingo's other content, however what has set #dulapeep apart from the company's other videos of the same nature is the algorithmic practices incorporated into its presentation. Each of these videos is tagged with the hashtag "#dulapeep" as an algorithmic means of marking its memetic category, but this tag's usage goes further, appearing in the description of 74 of the videos observed for this thesis, even ones that don't remotely relate to Dua Lipa. Beyond this, the hashtag "#dualipa" appears in the description of 113 videos on the account and in all but four of the videos released in 2022 and is the most used tag across the company's content. Following the beliefs about tagging postulated by users with regard to the platform's algorithmic imaginary, these tags would raise the chances of anyone who had interacted with content related to Dua Lipa seeing Duolingo's post and given the extreme popularity of the artist, this is likely to be a high number of users: even if the post has nothing to do with Dua, Duolingo has tied the singer to their brand in a way that their deluge of Dua Lipa hashtags can be perceived as part of the joke. Within the span of a few months, Duolingo turned a viral soundbyte that had nothing to do with their brand into a viral meme and spread it utilizing the visibility strategies employed by content creators on the platform. It is this subversion of traditional marketing tactics in favor of platform-specific visibility labors that continues to be a significant factor distinguishing Duolingo's approach to presentation on TikTok from other brands on the platform.

Conclusion

As this chapter has previously explored, Duolingo's success is somewhat of an outlier: other brand's have incorporated aspects of the company's approach into their own marketing strategy but usually not with the same goal of developing an influencer persona. One of the most similar and successful cases of this incorporation is the account of Irish airline company Ryanair, which utilizes a production feature available in TikTok's video editing suite that allows creators to edit video elements of their eyes and mouths over static images to make it appear as though their planes could talk. The planes would then participate in TikTok sounds and trends by both

reacting to and mouthing along to viral sounds, enabling the brand to engage with trends through a consistent visual representative. However these planes have no developed personas and are not the only means through which Ryanair participates in trends as they often utilize unnamed employees as performers as well as the planes. These employees aren't ascribed additional personas and are essentially visual tools through which engagement in a trend can be communicated. The sitcom-esque vision of its workplace accompanied by a singular clear persona is what ultimately sets Duolingo apart from other brands who utilize similar practices and is in part why this strategy is so effective. Duolingo simultaneously has developed an influencer who can communicate the values of their brand while also presenting the vision of a laid back and fun-loving workspace, marketing both their product and the reputation of their company to TikTok's userbase.

Despite the unique nature of Duolingo's approach to TikTok, their content still retains an unmistakable air of clean corporatization. This is not based on any quantifiable metric, however after spending weeks pouring through Duolingo's videos I found it difficult to ignore that watching them felt akin to making small talk with your manager: as friendly as they pretend to be there is a distinctive professional social script that lurks beneath their friendly conversation that they will never deviate from. As raunchy as Duolingo has allowed their account to be, there are still lines they refuse to cross. During their collaboration with ScrubDaddy, Duolingo originally included the caption "I'm glad you 🦋 CAME 🦋" in their video of Duo giving birth to the Duo Sponges . This video was eventually taken down and replaced with the current "non-explicit" version where the text has been changed to "I'm glad you had some good old fashion fun" (fig 3.4). Duolingo as a company is still clearly scared to cross some lines, and to be fair this is a somewhat justifiable fear: the International Paralympic Committee's TikTok for example has regularly toed the line between appropriate and offensive, with the organization receiving significant flack on several occasions for content that proved to be ableist⁴⁶. It is understandable that Duolingo wants to avoid a situation like this, however playing it too safe results in content that feels inauthentic, devoid of the novelty that initially drew users to the

⁴⁶ Rachel Treisman, "Edgy or insensitive? The Paralympics TikTok account sparks a debate," *NPR*, April 24, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/04/24/1171333573/paralympics-tiktok-controversy#:~:text=paralympics%2FTikTok-,The%20Paralympics%20TikTok%20account%20combines%20sports%20footage%20with%20viral%20audio,say%20it%20mocks%20them%20instead.&text=The%20next%20Paralympic%20Games%20are,%E2%80%94%20and%20controversial%20%E2%80%94%20TikTok%20account.>

account. The company has been more successful than many of their peers at scrubbing the corporate tone from their account but still subjects itself to a similar level of professionalism .

Duolingo’s approach to TikTik presents an interesting possible direction for the future of branded content on short-form video apps.



Figure 3.4. The original Scrub Daddy partnership video (left) and the revised version (right).

While it is by no means a definitive methodology for brands seeking to develop their identity in these spaces, the company’s methodology demonstrates an emergent mode through which brands might integrate themselves into the cultures of new platforms. Regardless of the new challenges a medium may present, if a platform’s ecosystem supports an influencer community, then the strategies employed by those creators are exploitable by brands. Just as with Wendy’s on Twitter, Duolingo faced none of the challenges that usually hound influencers when attempting to build a career on a new platform due to their corporate status and was able to build a following with little risk to their image and practically no risk to their bank account, even bragging about the

minimal resources needed to maintain their rising fame within TikTok's culture in their Q4 2021 letter to shareholders⁴⁷. Despite these self assured successes, what Duolingo has created is still a prototype: a potential model of an approach to branding in platform spaces that is still hindered by a few shortcomings, the largest of which being their authenticity branding. While the company is still able to perform authenticity to great effect through their methodology, this connection lacks the same depth as the parasocial relationships between users and human influencers. Though Duo's simple image and persona are great for a quick bit of novelty, Duo's inhuman nature prevents him from becoming truly relatable. Of course Duolingo isn't trying to accomplish anything beyond this novelty with their account and ultimately Duo has achieved their explicit goals, however the success of their approach leaves the door of possibilities wide open: what would an human branded influencer look like and could they build true parasocial connections with a platform's userbase? As short-form video continues to evolve and as new technology generates new expressive mediums to be incorporated into platform spaces, Duolingo's approach to marketing through influencers presents a potential solution for brands seeking to integrate themselves into these new ecosystems and the possibility that soon the labor of many influencers may be supplanted.

⁴⁷ Duolingo, Inc., Shareholder Letter Q4/FY 2021, Pittsburgh, PA: 2018, <https://duolingo.gcs-web.com/static-files/68e16a0b-f189-4e37-b5ad-97a27a6dfca6>

Conclusion

The rapid and continuous platformization of contemporary society has completely altered the means of authentic expression that brands must contend with in digital spaces: though the message of the tongue and cheek ads Subaru crafted to reach the queer community in the early 1990s would likely still be effective in 2020, as Arturo Ariagada describes the oversaturated wall of promotional messages that are deluged across most of the most popular platforms would prevent these signals from even reaching their target audience. Brands themselves needed to adjust their marketing approach to meet the challenges presented to them by platforms and for companies like Wendy's and Duolingo, the solution was found within the promotional techniques of influencers. By applying academic literature that defines the goals and strategies of this subset of content creators to the approach being taken by these two companies, this thesis has sought to illustrate how the presentation that both brands have adopted is itself a form of influencership and examine the effectiveness of this strategy as a means to overcome the ad resistance of the modern market. Through their chosen modes of advertising, Wendy's and Duolingo have resisted the well-documented conceptualization held by influencers and platform users of the commercial as incongruent with digital authenticity, instead reaffirming Sarah Banet-Weiser's attestation that authenticity exists first as a market tool and can be manipulated for advertising purposes by corporate interests. As Jennifer Aaker expressed, consumers often use brands to express their identity by supporting products from companies that support their values and thus being able to communicate the values they wish to be perceived as having is of significant import for brands and influencership presents a route through which this specific goal can be achieved, utilizing marketing techniques designed specifically for the purposes of signaling authenticity within platform spaces. Through the well-received presentation shift engaged with by both Wendy's and Duolingo, this thesis has demonstrated the potential marketing power of these influencer techniques as an approach to the contemporary advertising challenges posed by platformization.

As one of the earliest adopters of the strategy, the Wendy's Twitter account illustrates both the potential and limits of utilizing influencership in commercial contexts. Despite the contextual validity of Banet-Weiser's conceptualization of authenticity, brands must still contend with the reality that their image is representative of a massive corporation rather than an individual human content creator and are, as a result, limited in the kinds of expression they can employ: the company's choice to shift their rhetoric on the platform away from sanitized

corporate speech and towards a casual tone constructed around comic roasts is emblematic of this reality as Wendy's cannot relate to its consumer base through lived experiences and instead opted to achieve authenticity through language. These limitations did not significantly hinder the brand's shift in presentation however as they were not attempting to attain the appearance of a human influencer, instead opting to retain the guise of a corporate entity while adjusting their communication style to fit the dialectics and cultural proclivities of Twitter's userbase in order to posture themselves as a fellow native user. Wendy's' use of roasts, engagement with the platform's meme culture, and rhetorical adjustments collectively work to create feelings of endearment towards the company among their followers as is consistent with Whitney Phillips and Ryan Milner's conceptualizations of internet humor and memetic subcultures, creating a parasocial bond between the brand and its consumers. While these marketing strategies demonstrate the potential for corporations to foster influencer-like parasocial relationships, Wendy's would go a step further in adopting influencer marketing tactics through its utilization of visibility labors: by crafting a celebrity persona and communicating to its customers in character, the company draws attention to the novelty of its presentation and draws in new followers that might become similarly endeared to the brand. As Marta Dynel expresses, it was this novelty of Wendy's' non-normative approach to marketing that caused the account to experience its initial wave of virality, and by drawing attention to itself Wendy's was able to achieve success through its unique presentation and overcome the aforementioned potential restrictions of utilizing influencer tactics as a corporation.

What Wendy's created for itself on Twitter was not true influencership however, rather a form of presentation that incorporated many of its tactics. The novelty of the Wendy's approach would wane following its virality as numerous other brand Twitter accounts came to adopt it and its stylings spread to other social media platforms. While many brands have since attempted to iterate upon the strategy, Duolingo's TikTok account has managed to stand out through their attempts to achieve an appearance of genuine influencership rather than simply utilize the branding tactics of these creators. In practice the basic concepts of the Wendy's approach still remain, however Duolingo has put their own spin on it by focusing their TikTok page's content on the fictionalized activities of Duo the owl, making him the face of their company on the platform. Duo's persona is far more realized than the one designed for the Wendy's Twitter account and the account succinctly communicates this character through both its content and its

interactions with users in order to create the appearance that users are communicating with a distinct entity, not just a personification of the brand itself. The Duo persona itself also incorporates several memes directly into its character and focuses the vast majority of its content on making memetic references of relevance to TikTok's userbase, all of which deepens the connection between the brand and its followers per Ryan Milner's conceptualization of memetic cultural relationships. Duolingo pushed the Wendy's concept further through its incorporation of visibility labors as well through its incorporation of the same visibility strategies into its approach alongside the algorithmic practices utilized by other creators on the platform to ostensibly manipulate TikTok into prioritizing the distribution of their content, a strategy that Duolingo used in spite of its nebulous efficacy. All of these factors have led to a TikTok account that is approximating a presentation as close to influencers on the platform as is possible for a fictional character to achieve; there is no attempt to sell Duolingo's app or any other products of the company here, rather it is entirely focused on fostering a positive connection between the brand and TikTok's userbase. Given Duolingo's corporate status the account is not entirely divorced from the commercial, however by not using the account as a platform for traditional advertisements the brand is able to prioritize achieving authentic connections with their consumers without the potential of pushing them away from their content with excessive marketing.

While Duolingo's success through its particular approach has remained somewhat of an outlier, it represents one of several different attempts by brands to discover new ways to integrate influencers into their marketing strategies: the now commonplace mode of presentation popularized by Wendy's has lost some of its novelty due to its widespread adoption and thus there is significant appeal in finding a new approach. Brands have since continued to experiment with new approaches to influencers with brands such as Shell attempting to follow in Duolingo's footsteps and rebrand their social media profiles as influencers⁴⁸ while other companies are integrating influencers into their work force and encouraging them to post about their experiences working for the corporation in order to lend their work culture an appearance of

⁴⁸Kevin Simauchi, "Shell Is Seeking Applications to Dominate Your TikTok Feed," Bloomberg, June 29, 2022. https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-06-29/shell-is-hiring-a-tiktok-channel-manager-to-reach-gen-z?utm_campaign=instagram-bio-link&utm_medium=social&utm_source=instagram&utm_content=businessweek&leadSource=verify%20wall&embedded-checkout=true

authenticity⁴⁹. Though the long term success of these attempts has widely varied, they represent the continued desire of brands to attain the benefits of influencers themselves without engaging with human content creators, a possibility that has been proven realistic by companies like Wendy's and Duolingo. The conception of influencers as individual has been strained: just as Sarah Banet-Weiser calls for a perceptual readjustment of authenticity to fit its potential as a market tool, this thesis asks that influencers not just be considered as a profession, but more broadly as a mode of presentation through which authentic expressions can be communicated. While approaches more appropriately tailored to the goals of brands may emerge, in this contemporary moment the effectiveness of influencers as a means of endearing a corporation to a digital community remains unmatched and brands show no signs of ceasing their attempts to utilize it as a promotional strategy. As the practices of influencers continue to evolve, it is imperative that future scholarship recognizes this reality and examines further the effects of the corporate co-option of influencer practices as it pertains to the culture of platform ecosystems and the marketing strategies of corporate entities in digital spaces.

⁴⁹ Emmy Lucas, "Bosses Are Training Employees To Be Influencers—After Long Discouraging Social Media Posts About Work," *Forbes*, April 7, 2023. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/emmylucas/2023/04/07/bosses-are-training-employees-to-be-influencers-after-long-discouraging-social-media-posts-about-work/?sh=32c52fd16d8e>

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