

INFLUENCE AS METHOD AND METHOD AS  
INFLUENCE: COLLABORATIVE PLATFORM WORK  
IN MUMBAI AND DELHI

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In this position paper, the authors discuss the collaborative influencing practices of women beauticians operating online and offline in Mumbai and Delhi, through the lens of the authors' engagements with them as researchers and collaborators. The authors focus on how these beauticians skillfully develop and translate offline networking habits and connections into online engagement on platforms, through a high and continuous level of hidden cognitive labor. The authors reflect on methodological interventions they made to understand the influencing worlds of women beauticians that remain hard to access within biased platform logics. The authors ask: What does it mean to be present in the entangled lives of our interlocutors, not as flies on the wall but as our multiple selves that are called on at different times to co-create the worlds we are supposedly studying?

## Introduction

“*Aap apna number dedo mujhe*” (“you should give your number to me”) was a phrase we both heard as we made our way through the fragmented communities of women beauticians working in Delhi and Mumbai. The exchange of phone numbers and social media information (Instagram handles) emerged as the hidden yet foundational labor for beauticians using digital platforms like Yes Madam, Urban Company and Be U. These platforms promised to “organize” a formerly “unorganized” beauty labor being performed in the narrow bylanes of cities across India. However, the predatory practices of these platforms have resulted in an industrial reserve army [5, 8] of beauty gig-workers waiting for stable sources of income. While these companies promise social capital to the (largely women) workers, they frequently and by design fail to keep the costs and value of labor low [1, 8].

In this position paper, we discuss the collaborative influencing practices of women beauticians in Mumbai and Delhi through the lens of our own engagements with them as researchers and collaborators, showing how they skillfully translate “offline” networking habits and connections into “online” platforms. Through continuous and intense hidden labor, they build their brand, leverage networking opportunities, and cultivate a customer base. We discuss these findings by way of our reflections on the methodologies we used to understand influencing worlds of women beauticians that remain hard to access within racialized platform logics [1, 6].

## Method

IB: I conducted ethnographic fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, and participant observation, with women gig workers in the beauty industry in Mumbai. Over 9 months between April 2022 - April 2023, I accompanied beauticians during their workday, spent time in various platform offices, “modeled” for gig worker trainings and exams in the office, and spoke to beauticians seeking to start their own platforms or small businesses. With 2 interlocutors, I purchased a shared membership on a local platform and we took turns to manage the app, follow up on leads and negotiate with customers.

LM: I conducted in-person and digital ethnography with beauty workers (makeup artists and beauticians) between May 2021 and August 2022. The in-person fieldwork was conducted in New Delhi through a use of semi-structured interviews and participant observation. I followed my interlocutors into the multiple worlds to which they invited me: attending bridal makeup sessions and going

shopping with interlocutors.

## Method as Influence: The Hidden, Collaborative Labor of Influencing

The material evidence of influencing is typically sought in visible forms of engagement (comments, likes, shares, remixes) and a focus on quantity (the more engagement the better). However, here we focus on the category of women beauticians [1, 7, 8] who create markets of consumers themselves rather than relying on pre-established categories of legacy consumers. In market regimes designed to fail them, these women do the labor of building social capital and extending the scope of the beauty market itself. This labor is deeply feminized, invisible and hidden as it does not and may not directly manifest as increased engagement metrics on social media, yet it is foundational to the creation, reproduction and expansion of beauty platforms and markets.

This work involves high and continuous amounts of skilled cognitive labor. First, in remembering and maintaining a detailed mental roster of the hundreds of contacts that are collected. Second, in strategically keeping up and following up with contacts based on need and opportunity - such as painstakingly working to cultivate “repeat” customers on WhatsApp, and connecting with industry professionals on Instagram to collaborate and expand their professional horizons. Third, in carefully managing appearance, tone and language, and utilizing the latest trends in these interactions to maximize the sharing or receiving of influence.

## Influence as Method: Reflections on Positionality

We have indicated that these worlds of micro-influencing are not only situated in physical locations but across several platforms (Instagram, WhatsApp). These worlds would have remained invisible to us had we not seriously engaged with the mixed realities of our interlocutors. When and why were we folded into the social/market networks? As dominant caste, middle-class women working with US based institutions, we are not neutral observers but imbued with familiarity (and differential power) and hence held the potential for being part of these beauty workers’ customer base. How were/are we situated in these networks of micro-influencing? Our time in the “field” in Delhi and Mumbai frequently turned into experimentations with beauty treatments that were not part of our existing beauty routines at the time. Experimenting with nail art, specialized skin care and beauty treatments became a site of socializing and spending time with interlocutors who

often were pressed for time.

We were being called on to share our capital, not only to be influenced, but also to influence by spreading “word of mouth” about the women we were working with. A statement like “*aap apna number dedo mujhe*” has a material afterlife that lives in anxieties and excitement around potentials of gaining (social) capital. We are not suggesting that these social connections are purely transactional. In fact, it is precisely because intimacy of any kind cannot be separated from economic transaction [3, 10] that methodological approaches to studying these interactions must also be muddy. The intersections between the online and offline worlds animate the relationship between us and our interlocutors. Our social media following, presentation, positioning is not “outside” the scope of understanding these relationships and the labor our interlocutors perform. Understanding the cognitive/organizational labor that our interlocutors perform, sometimes to generate clients out of thin air, requires speaking about and with our positionality vis-a-vis our interlocutors.

## Possibilities: People as Platform Infrastructure

Our attempt in this position paper is not to provide neat findings that have a clear place in existing academic discourses. Through our paper we call attention to the inherently messy logics of platform capitalism, and understanding modes of thinking and being, as in conflict with the algorithm which exacerbates narrow identities and allows us to curate our experiences in specific ways [2]. Our foray into micro-influencing was accidental, hinged on our continuous presence in the physical lives of our interlocutors. What might this accidental ethnographic engagement with micro-influencing, built across the user-interfaces of several different platforms and bodies, mean for understanding the cyborg realities (Haraway 1985) we inhabit?

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