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A Dramaturgical Analysis of Latina Influencers Use of Props and Settings to Signal Identity

Arthur D. Soto-Vásquez ^{1,*} and Nadia Jimenez ²¹ Department of Psychology and Communication, Texas A&M International University, Laredo, TX 78041, USA² Department of Communication, University of Texas at San Antonio, San Antonio, TX 78249, USA; nadia.jimenez@my.utsa.edu

* Correspondence: arthur.soto-vasquez@tamiu.edu

Abstract: Dramaturgical analysis has been applied by scholars to social media influencers, but how props and settings are used to signal identity is understudied. This study uses a series of in-depth interviews with Latina influencers who live and work in a mid-size city on the U.S./Mexico border and an analysis of corresponding posts to explore how props and settings can be used to signal gender and race while also communicating authenticity. The findings show that influencers have to carefully and strategically navigate the use of props and settings not to appear fake and contrived. They blend the use of frontstage props with calibrated sharing of backstage settings to approximate an authentic online performance of their branded identity that is approachable but also monetizable. When performing their gender, the influencers adopt a having-it-all performance, balancing family, beauty, career success, and health while using backstage settings to create connection. Finally, Latina influencers on the border portray it as a setting that differs from its mainstream representation as a place to avoid. They also strategically deploy Latina identity to market themselves and localize national trends.



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1. Introduction

Despite being conceptualized decades before social media, dramaturgical analysis has proven a useful theoretical framework to explain performance on social media, particularly for influencers (Hurley 2019; Kersten and Lotze 2020). The concepts of frontstage and backstage, flexible articulations of identity, and facework have been used to contribute to influencer studies. However, an underutilized aspect of Goffman's approach when analyzing influencers is the concept of props. According to Goffman (1956), props are physical objects such as dress, uniforms, and jewelry that function to signal and affirm identity performance through non-verbal communication. How social media influencers use props to signal gender and racial identity is also under-conceptualized and is the focus of this study.

In this paper, the use of props and settings by Latina micro-influencers who primarily live and work on the U.S./Mexico border is explored. Drawing upon nine in-depth interviews along with an analysis of corresponding Instagram posts, this study considers props as objects that “sustain the credibility of the performance” of the self (Langman 1991, p. 109). Influencers think carefully and put a lot of labor into deciding how they portray themselves online, using props such as food, dress, and makeup to signal their brand and generate income through sponsorships. However, the use of certain props and settings carries ideological and cultural baggage that must be contended with.

To begin this paper, a review of the unique aspects of influencing online with attention paid to the labor of presenting gender and race is presented. That discussion is synthesized with Goffman's theories on identity performance, which are reviewed alongside recent

applications of his theories to social media. The paper then covers how the interviews were conducted and how the data were analyzed. It then presents the results of the study.

2. The Social Media Performance of Influencing

Goffman stated that when an individual presents themselves before others, their “performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society” (Goffman 1956, p. 125). As such, influencers develop an online performance that is a heightened version of who they are in real life but reflects the dominant modes of presentation as a branded commodity. What does this mean? Influencers use social media as a performative frontstage where aspects of their personality and interests can become their brand (Abidin 2016). Influencers are internet microcelebrity personalities who utilize their brand and identity to encourage consumers to think and act in particular ways (Senft 2013). Marwick and Boyd (2011) defined microcelebrity work as “using social media to develop and maintain an audience” (p. 140). While we are using influencers and microcelebrities interchangeably for the moment, the definition of an internet microcelebrity is broader (anyone with a following online) with influencers as a type of microcelebrity (those who convert their followings into marketable audiences). Audience metrics such as follower counts, engagement rates, and conversion rates are important because they are the currency influencers can trade to secure sponsorships. For the influencer, social media becomes a front where they perform their various selves for their audience based on the whims of the attention economy (Goldhaber 2006).

This performance subjectivity also serves as a dominant genre on the platform. Every time a user wonders if they should post about an accomplishment or about eating out at a fancy restaurant on Facebook, they are performing impression management, as Goffman might suggest. For example, Duffy and Hund (2015) discussed how feminine-presenting fashion bloggers strive to be authentic by being very choosy about how brands interact with their image. Further, they often endeavor to show that they have it all—a loving family, fulfilling work, and glam. This is what Duffy and Hund call “entrepreneurial femininity”. They find that fashion bloggers often portray their work as something they were destined to do, which blurs the line between work and play. Their glamorous lifestyle is staged with props and settings that include taking international trips, eating fancy food, and going to fun events. This kind of performance has been criticized as placing an unrealistic expectation of “effortless perfection” on young women, which leads to burnout and mental stress (Petersen 2019). In another study, Abidin (2017) discussed how mommy bloggers and influencers also use behind-the-scenes content, such as stories posted in the morning with no makeup on, to portray a “calibrated amateurism,” which is a simulated performance of the backstage self to engender a closer connection to the audience. In other words, the consumption of experiences and products becomes an extension of their brand. Additionally, despite the effortless look, it takes a lot of behind-the-scenes work (and money) to do this.

Creating just one post that features a sponsored product or service includes several steps. The first step is forming agreements with brands about how many and what kind of posts will be made. Next is setting up and taking pictures, which can occur in “instagrammable” settings (Soto-Vásquez 2021), with props, food, and activities/hobbies (i.e., yoga), as well as taking selfies (Abidin 2016). In some cases, a home studio may be used to create “flat lays,” where items are arranged neatly on a surface to show every aspect (Manovich 2017). The photos are then edited using filters to make them aesthetically pleasing and given captions (with tagged locations) that engage Instagram audiences, inspire followers to like/comment, and drive engagement with the brand. Finally, strategizing content before posting includes brainstorming ideas, using apps such as SproutSocial to see top hashtags, checking analytics on Instagram or TikTok to learn which posts are working, observing the competition, and keeping up with changing policy/algorithms (Arriagada and Ibáñez 2020). Influencers also play what Cotter (2019) has called the visibility game—trying to stay at the top of feeds by constantly posting and by commenting on and liking

their fellow influencers' posts. The rules of the visibility game for influencers are set by the platform's algorithm, an instantaneous system that determines which posts appear on your feed based on what (and who) you have interacted with in the past. In addition, it should be noted that influencer labor is also structured by national regulatory regimes. While in some places, influencers are often associated with agencies that also control which advertisers they can work with, in the United States, most influencers are influencers who set up and negotiate their own work.

Finally, influencers are encouraged to keep up with an ongoing series of posts. It is not just one picture that generates revenue, but the whole series surrounding one topic or event that helps sell a product (Soto-Vázquez and Jiménez 2022). There is a large amount of backstage labor involved here, which includes responding to requests for collaboration via direct messages and email. They must negotiate fees and post dates. Every influencer negotiates their fee differently based on the type of sponsorship opportunity, including brand advocates, ads, shopping posts, and story sponsorships. There is no one way to determine fees per post, so the price is left up to the influencer. In addition to influencers' backstage labor, platforms also require a great deal of time engaging with fans. There is also a range in scale of influencers, from mega influencers such as celebrities to nano and micro-influencers whose follower count is under 10,000 (Soto-Vázquez and Jiménez 2022). As Arriagada and Ibáñez (2020) discussed, small-scale nano and micro-influencers are also sought out by companies because they tend to engage more with their audience as compared to celebrity influencers. They are generally more likely to respond to every direct message and comment, allowing followers to feel like they really know the influencer (Chung and Cho 2017). As a result, their product recommendations carry a much more personalized weight, despite their lower follower count.

Applying Dramaturgical Analysis: Props and Settings in the Context of Influencing

Goffman's groundbreaking theory of impression management outlines how people influence the perception of who they are by others by revealing and concealing information, in essence performing a version of themselves (Goffman 1956). A key element of how the self is presented to others is through the use of props. As Goffman writes, the front of performance requires the use of a "setting" that features props that communicate position and status (Goffman 1956, p. 22), such as medical machinery, white coats, and a sterile office setting for medical professionals. It is worth stating that for Goffman at the time, settings were relatively fixed places, such as offices and living rooms, while props are mobile and can travel with the person but are most effective when used in the setting.

Written in the mid-20th century, Goffman's work anticipates many of the disruptions to identity that came in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Contemporary settings and props are increasingly mobile and ephemeral. For instance, the recent phenomenon of telemedicine disrupts the traditional settings and props of the medical profession. Additionally, contemporary settings and props have increasingly lost their social stability. As Langham argues, "for Goffman, selfhood was a situationally specific creation rather than an enduring essence within the person" and "anticipated what is often called the decentering of self, its loss of a stable anchorage and meaningful institutional ties" (Langman 1991, p. 108).

But what replaced stable identities? According to Langham, the destabilization and dislocation of the self led to a turn toward commercialized performances—primarily by shopping to fill in the gaps of identity through branding. Since the late 2010s, marketing and advertising have increasingly used social media influencers to reach new audiences to encourage purchases (Phua et al. 2017). This view of influencers is in line with the chasm between public and private spheres and reflects how microcelebrities are often treated as a commodity or a product to be bought and sold in the entertainment and advertising markets (Senft 2013). Since then, Goffman's theories of impression management have seen a resurgence in the academic literature to explain this new mediated configuration of identity and performance. Hurley writes that "social media provides a digital platform for idealized identity performance and experiment, for example, on Instagram users can make use of

various filters and avatars to alter, enhance, and transform their appearance” (Hurley 2019, p. 4). Beyond the platform affordances provided by social media sites such as Instagram and TikTok, successful influencers find marketing niches, which are reinforced through sponsorship arrangements of items that communicate identity. For example, successful travel influencers will eventually be able to negotiate sponsorship deals that grant them the use of settings such as business-class travel and luxury hotel experiences and props such as premium travel credit cards (Marwick 2015). In other words, props can be used to develop a branded persona online.

Defining the relationship between influencing work and props is vital to this study. Senft (2013) defines microcelebrity as “the commitment to deploying and maintaining one’s online identity as if it were a branded good” (p. 346). Identity as a branded good means a deep investment and entanglement in social media culture alongside developing their personal brand. Since Senft, other researchers have continued to define what it means to be an influencer online. Freberg et al. (2011) see influencers through a strategic media framework as “a new type of independent third-party endorser who shapes audiences’ attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media” (p. 90). As the previous definition suggests, endorsing products and integrating them as props into one’s internet persona is a key part of influencer work and is usually performed through the process of generating “advertorials” (Abidin 2016), which blend advertising with a product review (editorial).

There is, unfortunately, little research on how props used by influencers can also signal racial, gender, and other important forms of identity. One study shows how Arab influencers conform to “hegemonic ideals of beauty” and reproduce dominant modes of “conspicuous consumption of expensive designer bags, fur coat[s], sunglasses, and European locations” (Hurley 2019, pp. 7–9). Similarly, Cano (2018) found that Latina celebrities online often conform to stereotypical tropes of representation such as overt sexualization. However, the purposeful use of settings can also communicate a counter-hegemonic position. For example, a study of Black influencers found that they “use Instagram to challenge erroneous beliefs about Black nations that are routinely dismissed in domestic and global travel markets and affirm and defend the viability of travel to predominantly Black nations” (Arthur 2021, p. 383). Influencers of color negotiate their agency amid dominant modes of presentation and market incentives.

3. Methodology

In this study, we are guided by the question, how do Latina influencers use props and settings to signal gender and racial identity? To answer this question, a mixed-method approach was used. First, we conducted nine in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Latina influencers in a U.S./Mexico border community in February 2021. Second, we conducted an analysis of posts made by the influencers we spoke with. The duration of the interviews ranged from 26 min and 39 s to 38 min and 54 s, with an average of 30 min and 19 s. This approach to interviews is common in the field of communication since they provide researchers with a view of how people interact with and through media (Lindlof and Taylor 2019). The pool of potential participants was limited to those who live in the U.S./Mexico border city (population ~250,000) where the research was conducted. We contacted potential participants via email and the direct message function on Instagram. Later, after the first interviews were conducted, we asked participants to recommend anyone we should also talk to, a practice called snowball sampling (Noy 2008). Participants were offered a digital gift card in appreciation of their participation after their interview. Even though this value of the card (USD 25) might not equal the usual rate of compensation for an influencer, we felt it was necessary to secure their participation in the study.

We used a list of questions to guide the conversation between the researcher and participant while allowing for natural conversation and digressions. We used a video conferencing application to conduct interviews due to the COVID-19 pandemic and directions from our IRB. The meetings were set to invite-only to maintain confidentiality and

privacy. We reassured the participants that this was not a formal job or media interview, it was okay to take time to answer a question, and their responses would be anonymous with pseudonyms applied in the final presentation of results. Since the interviews were limited to one influencer at a time, we were able to ask all the questions while also allowing for digressions and natural conversation in a short period of time. The interviews were wide-ranging, covering several aspects of influencer labors, such as their online persona, how they collaborate with brands, and advice for those starting out. For example, we asked questions such as “Can you describe your Instagram aesthetic and persona in 3 words?” and “Can you describe the process when a brand/local company contacts you for a collaboration?”

After each interview, the audio file was sent to TranscribeMe, an audio transcription service, and then deleted to maintain confidentiality. Transcription of the audio produced 103 pages of text for analysis. Given the wide-ranging nature of the interviews, our dramaturgical analysis was conducted deductively to identify mentions of props. Each researcher independently went through the transcripts in this process. Memo writing was used to identify themes and patterns in how props were used and discussed. Then the researchers met to discuss the initial findings. At this point, it was decided that to fully analyze the use of props, a supplemental collection of corresponding social media posts by each of the influencers was needed. This methodology is inspired by the process [Abidin \(2016\)](#) calls “web archeology,” which utilizes “visual and textual analysis to cover physical and digital platforms on which Influencers operate” (p. 2). Since we used Instagram profiles to find our interview participants, we had access to their public profiles. In order to keep our web archaeology valid, posts were selected for analysis only if they reinforced the themes identified in the interviews. On average, we consulted 3–4 posts per influencer, with a total of 33 posts consulted as supplemental data. The findings are presented next.

4. Findings

“I’m real, I’m a mom, and I’m relatable. What you see is what you get,” stated Leticia, one of the influencers we interviewed. This statement reflects a summary of the findings from our research: Latina influencers think very carefully and strategically about the props and settings they use to portray an authentic self, which is a calibrated mix of a front and back ([Abidin 2017](#)). They also use props to present a having-it-all persona and aesthetic, mixing traditional presentations of femininity ([Duffy and Hund 2015](#)) with behind-the-scenes reveals of the struggles they face as women. Finally, their presentation of being Latina is slightly different, with fewer backstage reveals. The U.S./Mexico border becomes a setting, presented as a vibrant community rather than a dangerous place, as it is often portrayed in the mainstream media. The struggles the border does face are not publicly discussed but are present in the interviews, with the influencers feeling they must present a positive setting using Latina-coded imagery and hashtags as digital props. Most influencers strongly identified themselves with the border city, and that shaped their presentation online.

4.1. Establishing Authenticity

Goffman writes that “we tend to see real performances as something not purposely put together at all” in contrast to “contrived performances [which] we see as something painstakingly pasted together” ([Goffman 1956](#), p. 70.) Under this arrangement, avoiding the contrived, fake, and inauthentic is considered a general good. Despite the consistent acknowledgment that social media influencing is a calibrated performance, the influencers we interviewed strive to present an “authentic” and “organic” performance. For example, Maya, an office administrator and part-time influencer, said, “If you see a photo of me on Instagram, that’s who you’re going to see in real life”. However, it was clear throughout our interviews that maintaining authenticity was a chief concern. In particular, influencers were very conscious of how the props and settings they used in their posts online either enhanced or diminished their authenticity.

According to Goffman, props and settings are often used to present a convincing frontstage performance. The influencers we interviewed consider very carefully whether a prop or setting will convey an authentic image. For example, Itzel contrasted herself with other influencers, saying, “I try to just make it authentic. I don’t try to go out of my way, but I know people who take Instagram really seriously will scout out a location, go there, shoot there”. She noted that “they’ll even change outfits and do another brand thing there as well”. In contrast, she captures what she is “actually wearing” when she is out with her friends, in effect arguing that her social media frontstage is also her everyday frontstage.

The concept of a frontstage on social media is complicated, however. There is tremendous pressure on influencers to develop a brand identity (Senft 2013). In practice, this means identifying a mode of online performance, a specific aesthetic and tone, a range of products promoted, and a niche audience. During our interviews, each influencer was asked to identify their niche, with the responses displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. Local Influencer Interview Participants.

Name	Followers as of 5/1/22 (in Thousands)	Profile Focus
Leticia	40.2	Fashion
Ana	5.36	Fashion, Food, Empowerment
Araceli	2.17	Travel, Fashion, Food
Citlali	2.10	Culture, Fashion
Emily	2.38	Sustainability, Empowerment
Sofia	4.47	Fashion, Business, Travel, Food
Maya	1.13	Travel, Food, Fashion
Bianca	1.97	Fashion
Itzel	7.15	Travel, Business, Fashion

Some of these categories are quite broad, a concept one of our interview participants picked up on. Emily, who, in addition to being an influencer, is also a full-time teacher, said:

Lifestyle is basically a catch-all in my book. It would be home, fashion, beauty. Kind of just it would probably be more about products, like what I use at home, what I buy to decorate, fashion brands I support, overall sense of style, and then beauty as well. So I think that’s why it’s kind of like a catch-all niche.

Despite the fluidity of self-categorization, the influencer participants do think carefully about how they brand their pages. When asked for three words to describe their profile, one influencer responded “multicultural, pink, and mindful”. However, since they were now trying to focus on sustainable consumption, they were careful to stipulate that “what I’ve observed in pink, aesthetic influencers like their rooms, makeup and stuff like that is they consume a lot”. In another case, Sofia, who is a student and part-time worker, suggested that aspirational influencers need to develop “their own little niche,” whether it be having a “music Instagram following or it can be on food or it can be on fashion”. Finally, Ana stated, “I didn’t want to just use it as just a pretty face or just about makeup or just about jewelry”. Instead, her brand focused on the empowerment of women and the local community.

When potential props and settings clash against an identified brand or niche, the influencers have to weigh the upside of brand sponsorship and income against diminishing their social media front. For example, Emily noted that she “unfortunately had to turn down a few small business boutiques” because they did not fit her sustainable fashion niche. In another case, Citlali, an influencer who was seeking to differentiate her own brand, noted how “sometimes it just didn’t feel organic” when she was asked to go to a store she

“never actually shopped at”. In many cases, especially when working with national brands, there is pressure to conform to established modes of presentation. As Itzel said:

Once they send you the product ... they'll send you a PDF or something with their requirements, how they want their picture to look, and how they want it edited basically, because there's a certain aesthetic that their page is trying to fit. And if you want a better chance to be posted on their Instagram, I would follow those.

Thus, influencers have to be judicious in which props are used and how.

Finally, it should be noted that Instagram affords its users various means to communicate beyond just the picture or video shared (Manovich 2017; Rosa and Soto-Vásquez 2022). Captions, hashtags, and geotags provide additional emotional and social context to posts. For the influencers we interviewed, these unique Instagram affordances become additional props and settings where authenticity can be mediated. For example, one influencer stated, “I use my stories kind of as a way to connect with others probably more personally and my feed is more of the ... what's the word? I wouldn't say staged but the planned-out content stuff that I've planned beforehand”. Leticia, a teacher and mother of two, uses her stories to communicate authenticity and relatability by showing less staged content such as a messy kitchen. This strategic sharing of quotidian life reflects what Abidin (2017) calls calibrated amateurism, where aspects of an influencer's backstage are used to engender a closer connection to the audience. In some cases, these habits were picked up by mimicking other larger influencers strategically using backstage settings. For instance, Ana tries to emulate the influencers who post stories “when they're just waking up and they're talking to us and they're drinking their coffee and rubbing their eyes” because the message is, “Oh my gosh, she's real; she's human”. In other words, influencers also have a variety of digital props to make their performances authentic.

To summarize and return to Goffman, props and settings are used to build the performance of a front, or as Langham argued, to establish the “credibility of the performance”. For the influencers we interviewed, the use of props has to be carefully weighed to not suggest an overt performance and must blend front and back into “authentic self”. This requires a conscious weighing of whether the props (clothing, food, and makeup) and settings (restaurants, murals, and environments) align with the overall branded niche of the influencer and using all of the affordances of the platform to communicate authenticity. In the next sections, we discussed in more detail how props are used to communicate representations of gender and racial identity.

4.2. Performing Gender

The results of this study show that influencers signal their gender identity by utilizing various feminine props during their social media performance. Primarily, the influencers we interviewed post their many activities online to portray a busy life full of mom duties, gym workouts, manicures, curating sponsored content, etc. Next, influencers reveal their authentic selves by discussing their personal struggles online and showing their support of other women through comments and direct messages. Finally, gender identity is also accomplished through backstage performance, when influencers express that they feel beautiful and confident while preparing and posing for pictures.

As Duffy and Hund (2015) found, these influencers display “entrepreneurial femininity” by presenting the multiple endeavors they balance in their daily life. The mothers of the group often show their glamorous and seemingly effortless lifestyle in their posts, furthering the idea that women can, and must, have it all when performing online (Duffy and Hund 2015). For example, Leticia and Ana prove that they can participate in events and curate content that is common among younger influencers in addition to being dedicated and loving mothers. They do not put influencing above their family—as Leticia stated, “I am a teacher full-time, a mom-to-be, a wife. And then the influencer part is my part-time”—but they try to show that they can still have it all online. This idea is even taken on by the influencers without children, showing a perpetual expectation of effortless femininity. For example, most of the participants showcase their hobbies and leisure to

create a more attractive lifestyle (Marwick 2015). Itzel said her “lifestyle is basically going to the gym, reading books that are going to help me improve in certain aspects that I’m trying to improve on at the time, going out at night with my friends, but being productive throughout the day,” once again showing how influencers package the idea that women can accomplish anything and everything. In many cases, the influencers directly market to local women, advertising products that they use and approve of. An example of such a post is seen in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Example of Gender Performance.

Furthermore, some influencer niches also align with feminine gendered performances. Araceli explained that she posts her “daily life and what I like to wear, my outfits, my nails”. She discusses how “every time I get my nails done, I post about it, or I went to an event, etc. I’m already posting”. This is especially indicative of gender performance because manicures are often an important staple and talking point but can also be an influencer niche. For example, Araceli mentioned:

Once I start promoting who I’m going with, [it’s] a nail tech, not a specific salon. It’s a certain nail tech. I got 15 loyal girls now to go with this nail tech. So imagine how much I am bringing in, for that amount, just by posting my nails and what I got.

From this experience, we see that nails are a part of developing a glamorous identity online and an affirming behavior.

However, to uphold the image of authenticity, these influencers strategically share backstage behind-the-scenes moments in order to relate to other women, show solidarity, and boost confidence. For example, on a video post that both documents a workout journey and features a product sponsorship, an influencer writes, “I just woke up one morning and decided enough was enough,” referring to her appearance. In another striking example, an influencer shared, “There’s girls out there that I’ve never met in real life and we’re so close because they know these really dark times that I’m having,” after she shared insight into her personal life on a multi-part Instagram story. This sharing also generates a parasocial connection between audience and influencer, as Chung and Cho (2017) found. Further, it is common and even expected for women to be there for one another rather than tear each other down amid the challenges they face collectively. Several of the influencers noted

that they are quick to support one another with comments on each other's posts—not only boosting confidence but also boosting the visibility of posts on Instagram's capricious algorithm (Cotter 2019).

Finally, the last aspect of gender that seeps into influencers' own attitudes while creating content for their profiles is the chance to perform self-love and confidence. For example, Elvia shared, "There's days where you don't feel glamorous, you don't feel pretty. But guess what? If you get to dress up for those six hours or whatever for that partnership, yeah, you feel a little bit pretty". This performance of confidence aligns with the feminine experience in that women often get dressed and do their makeup for themselves. As a younger influencer, Bianca summarized, "It makes you feel confident in a way, posting something out there, as absurd as it sounds. Yes, it's just likes, but it's [also] people commenting . . . on the way you are as a person".

4.3. Visualizing a Latina Performance

Our findings indicate that signaling ethnic and racial identity through the use of props and settings is performed in three predominant ways. First, the influencers situate their portrayal of being Latina by describing how the setting in which they take pictures—in this case, a U.S./Mexico border city—is a place worth showcasing. Second, in the visual language of their posts, the influencers take national trends and promotions and ground the local, Latina/o/x-coded imagery. Last, the influencers use affordances of the platform, specifically hashtags, as digital props to network their posts within an ecosystem of international Latina influencing.

Several of the influencers we interviewed viewed their work as promoting not just themselves but also the local area (Soto-Vásquez and Jimenez 2022). As Ana argued, "Laredo is beautiful" and has a lot to offer. She does not agree with people who say, "*Laredo es aburrido*," and instead focuses on the aspects of Mexican and American cultures that blend into opportunities for entertainment and supporting local businesses. For instance, in an Instagram post, another promoted a local coffee business that operates out of a food truck. The post says, "To all my coffee lovers . . . you are missing out! It's definitely one of the hot spots in Laredo", and shows a photo of her posing in front of a truck that is adorned with *papel picado* designs and offers *horchata* lattes. The influencer displays awareness and appreciation of the cultural synthesis that often occurs in the liminal places of the borderlands. In her interview, that same influencer stated, "I love working with local small businesses to promote their brand and their products". Here, the Latina influencers we interviewed engage in a similar posting strategy as the influencers studied by Arthur (2021), where they purposely and counter hegemonically rebrand settings that are not thought of as desirable locations—in this case, the U.S./Mexico border. Here, there is no reference to the ways in which the border is characterized in the mainstream press as a dangerous setting; rather, Latina influencers portray it as a setting of beauty, community, and fun. In other words, the settings gain a slight political edge, even if it is unacknowledged by the influencer.

Second, national trends and holidays are grounded in the local market with imagery and symbols that signal Latina identity. As Araceli, a local influencer explicitly dedicated to showcasing all that the local community has to offer, described: "Just the other day was National corn on the cob day". She thought, "Let me reach out to him and let me see if you would want to do something with us where we go and promote his *elotes*". In Figure 2, we can see the influencer taking a national trend and adding a layer of Mexican American culture, choosing to showcase a distinct border culture for the branding holiday.



Figure 2. Example of Race and Ethnicity Performance.

In another case, an influencer posted a picture of herself in a stylish embroidered dress with the caption, “heading to the #CincoDeMayo carne asada like: *Chula, Chingona y Comelona*”—taking a holiday that has been criticized as a commercialized appropriation and connecting it to a border vernacular. This grounding of trends into the locality is important to an influencer such as Sofia, who noted, “I just like to keep it local or wherever you can reach things, very accessible to where my followers can actually go and try out the restaurant or try out that workout class”. In fact, many of the Latina influencers made it part of their mission to support local businesses (including tagging posts with #SmallBusinessMonday) and would even avoid charging local businesses: “If it’s a small, locally owned teenager that’s selling fruits and all these fun things during holidays, I’m not going to charge them”. Here, Latina/o/x- and more specifically, U.S./Mexico border-coded props such as food, dress, hairstyles, and jewelry are introduced into social media posts to signal identity amid a larger ecosystem of branded posts.

Finally, Latina influencers also use the affordances of Instagram to signal their identity, often explicitly. Rosa and Soto-Vásquez (2022) describe hashtags as often serving a dual function on the platform. As they write, hashtags “form communicative spaces that allow for the creation of content about marginalized people while also being associated with widespread topics present on Instagram, especially travel and advocacy” (Rosa and Soto-Vásquez 2022, p. 2). In one clear example, an influencer we interviewed networked her post into an ecosystem of Latina creators using the hashtags “#sexylatina #latinasdoitbest #latinasbellas #latinassexys” alongside more conventional and broad hashtags such as #ootd and #fashionblogger on a post that did not advertise any particular product but was designed to stay relevant online. These hashtags allow a post to be discovered by brands seeking advertising partners and audiences interested in that particular affinity. At the same time, it may also suggest that, as Cano (2018) found, the platform may incentivize Latinas to exaggerate sexuality to get traction. In another illustrative example, a different influencer used the hashtags “#laredofoodie #laredotexas #texasblogger #mexicanaamericana” on a post advertising a local shopping mall. Here we can see how different hashtags are used to speak to and engage with different audiences on the platform. For the influencers we interviewed, the constant engagement with the platform is constant work, including using identity hashtags with the goal of growing a following. As Itzel explained, “The more you

post, the more consistent you are, the more people engage and you reach new audiences because you'll get on the explore page". Identity-focused hashtags as digital props are one more avenue for influencers to stay on top of the visibility game (Arriagada and Ibáñez 2020; Cotter 2019).

5. Conclusions

How gender and race are performed online by those who have influence matters quite a bit. As Goffman (1956) writes, "Age, sex, territory, and class status . . . are elaborated by means of a distinctive complex cultural configuration of proper ways of conducting oneself". Further, "to be a given kind of person, then, is not merely to possess the required attributes but also to sustain the conduct and appearance that one's social grouping attaches thereto" (p. 74). However, as this study has shown, the performance of the standards of influencers' social groups is highly fluid in the era of social media, when the sense of self is dislocated from traditional institutions and platforms, and commercial incentives push for a commodifiable identity in the attention economy. An influencer can communicate their position, culture, and persona in a variety of ways, whether through props such as dress, food, and jewelry or through settings. The use of these props and settings both carries cultural baggage and responds to and informs the online system they networked into through the use of hashtags and sponsored products (Arriagada and Ibáñez 2020).

The findings of this study show that influencers must carefully use props and settings to convey an authentic online performance that can be credited to the social position while also attractive to brands for sponsorship. Frontstage props are blended with the calibrated sharing of backstage settings to approximate an authentic online performance (Abidin 2017). When performing gender, the influencers perform a semblance of the effortless perfection often expected of women in contemporary society through posts that show a loving family, impeccable beauty, success in a career, and wellness while also using backstage settings (such as stories) to create a connection with their (mostly female) followers. Finally, Latina influencers on the U.S./Mexico border portray a place that differs from its mainstream representation as a dangerous location. Instead, they often show the best the setting has to offer, even promoting local businesses without pay. Latina identity is also used for marketing their personas by linking up with well-known hashtags and localizing national trends into a Mexican American cultural vernacular of food, bilingual expressions, and dress.

This study is limited by the small number of influencers interviewed and profiled. A larger, more diverse sample could provide additional insight into the phenomenon of gender and racial performance by influencers online. In particular, the specific city and region where the influencers live may have bled into the analysis of their interviews and posts here. In addition, a web archaeology methodology was added after the interviews were completed in our study. One recommendation for future studies is to reverse the process: analyze the media and *then* ask specific questions in an interview setting. Future studies can also adopt our framework and apply it to other affinity groups, both to determine what aspects of online performance remain consistent and also to seek and identify areas of difference.

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