


# Navigating Recognition: The Symbolic Struggles in the Biographies of Young Polish Internet Content Creators

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to examine the symbolic struggles embedded in the biographies of internet content creators. Pursuing a relatively new profession that lacks symbolic legitimization necessitates both explanatory and emotional labor to justify a “biographical action scheme” that does not align with existing “institutionalized schedules for organizing biographies,” in Fritz Schütze’s sense. Drawing on interviews with young Polish internet content creators, I analyze these struggles through the lens of Axel Honneth’s concept of the “struggle for recognition” and Michèle Lamont’s notion of “symbolic boundaries.”

The empirical analysis suggests that the initial struggle involves proving their worth to close family and friends, who may question the legitimacy of being an influencer compared to a stable 9-to-5 job. This tension is particularly pronounced in intergenerational relationships, such as between children and their parents. The second struggle occurs between content creators and their audiences. Here, the challenge is defending oneself against justified or unjustified accusations and hate speech. The third struggle is inherent to those operating at the intersection of various social fields. For these influencers, who build their content on popular science, the lack of recognition or hostility from the academic community is another serious biographical problem.

The necessity to engage in constant power struggles, which demand considerable skill, challenges the widespread perception of internet influencing as a “childish” profession—one that offers an enjoyable job paired with undeservedly high earnings.

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**A**xel Honneth (1996) famously argued that the struggle for recognition, alongside the fair distribution of material goods, lies at the heart of social conflicts. He posits that autonomy in the modern world depends on developing three fundamental modes of self-relation: self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem. Cultivating these modes requires recognition from others, who are, in turn, also recognized. Although Honneth does not explicitly present media or social media as “institutions of recognition,” it is difficult to deny—as Bruno Campanella (2024:1) emphasizes—their crucial role in struggles for social recognition in Western societies.

While evaluating the overall validity of this social theory or determining the status of media as institutions of recognition lies beyond the scope of this paper, I focus on a more specific research problem: examining the various recognition processes within the biographies of a largely under-researched group—internet content creators (henceforth: ICCs). This group primarily includes influencers and internet journalists, individuals who earn their livelihood through online activities. What remains particularly unclear is how individuals in this relatively new profession navigate justifying their professional activities to various “significant others.” These include family members and close friends, their audiences, and other professionals within their social field and related fields. The research gap identified here does not concern studies on ICCs in general but rather those focusing on their occupational careers. While there is an abundance of both English-language and local studies on topics such as influencer collaboration in business, personal branding, influencer marketing, and manipulation strategies, as well as psychological studies on the desire to become an influencer—which, although country-specific, has been linked to traits such as

extraversion, narcissism, and histrionism (Misiak et al. 2025)—a sociological account of content creation as a profession remains largely absent.

An important exception is the study by Renata Dopierała (2023), who examined these careers through a generational lens. However, fundamental questions drawn from the sociology of professions remain unanswered. For example: How do ICCs draw boundaries between work and leisure? Is their professional activity symbolically recognized? These questions become particularly intriguing in societies where the profession of an ICC is not only relatively new—emerging after the formation of well-established capitalist professions—but also shaped by the legacy of socio-political transformation from socialism. In such contexts, private entrepreneurship was historically viewed with suspicion, and individualized capitalism, including self-employment, continues to occupy an ambivalent position, often perceived as inferior to stable working conditions.

This paper, thus, investigates the biographies of young Polish ICCs to delve into the “recognition” processes and “symbolic struggles” pertinent to their profession. For this reason, I analyze a sub-sample of autobiographical narrative interviews drawn from a broader project devoted to the biographical experiences of young Poles.<sup>1</sup> Being an influencer is simultaneously a highly desirable profession with great financial prospects for those who succeed and a symbolically contested way of making a living. The lack of symbolic recognition is evident in research on the prestige of professions, where “Youtuber” and “Influencer” have consis-

<sup>1</sup> The project “Post-Transformation in the Perspective of Biographical Experiences of People Born Between 1980 and 2005. A Sociological Analysis,” carried out with funds from NCN within the OPUS 21 competition, conducted in the Department of Sociology of Culture at the University of Lodz in the years 2022-2026 (no. UMO-2021/41/B/HS6/02048).

tently ranked among the lowest in recent years, in contrast to traditional professions such as firefighter, medical doctor, or university professor (SW Research 2024a; 2024b). Unlike traditional professions, people in “new internet-based professions” must engage in a symbolic struggle for legitimization to prove the worth of their work in the eyes of others.

In this paper, ICCs are defined as individuals who produce and share content on social media as their primary source of income. They exhibit a professional level of skill in communication (e.g., writing, photography, or video editing), producing what can be described as “stylized creations that emphasize unique content” (Kozinets, Gretzel, and Gambetti 2023:11). This distinguishes ICCs from influencers, who deliberately “gather a focused or niche audience on social media platforms” and offer “authentic performances, such as personal life experiences, resulting in strong personal branding” (Kozinets et al. 2023:11). Despite the overlap between these two categories, ICCs prioritize content quality over personal branding and audience engagement (Kozinets et al. 2023). Many of the ICCs interviewed in this study could be classified as internet journalists or science popularizers, leading to an intersection of multiple social fields. This is where Bourdieu’s concept of the field provides valuable insights into the dynamics of symbolic processes at play.

## Conceptual Framework

Drawing on Honneth’s (1996:1) theory, this paper analyzes three types of relationships associated with social recognition: (1) love—linking the individual with people one interacts in private, (2) rights—legally institutionalized relations of universal respect, and (3) solidarity—shared values within which the community of practitioners can assign

the particular worth of individuals. Recognition, or the lack thereof, can be granted or withheld at each of these levels, with profound implications for an individual’s identity (Honneth 1996:92-130). In this theory, love corresponds to building basic self-confidence (or trust in oneself<sup>2</sup>), rights to self-respect, and solidarity to self-esteem.

This study is also grounded in the tradition of examining symbolic boundaries across different social worlds (Pugh 2013; Sølberg and Jarness 2019; Drewski 2023), a perspective I view as complementary to Honneth’s moral grammar of social conflicts. Dating back to a classic Bourdieusian study on the intersection of social stratification and cultural sociology, symbolic boundaries are believed to be “lines that include and define some people, groups, and things while excluding others” (Lamont, Pendergrass, and Pachucki 2015:850). These distinctions can be expressed through normative interdictions (taboos), cultural attitudes and practices, and patterns of likes and dislikes. Thus, symbolic boundaries are never sharp. According to Pierre Bourdieu (1987:13), the boundaries between theoretical classes are like the boundaries of a cloud, a forest, or a flame, “whose edges are in constant movement, oscillating around a line or surface”:

These boundaries can thus be conceived of as lines or as imaginary planes, such that the density (of the trees or of the water vapor) is higher on the one side and lower on the other, or above a certain value on the one side and below it on the other.

Symbolic boundaries are being built between various social groups or cultural products across all human societies. In the class context, people use various

<sup>2</sup> See translators’ Introduction (Honneth 1996:XIII).

criteria “to define and discriminate between worthy and less worthy persons, i.e., between ‘their sort of folks’ and ‘the sort they don’t much like’” (Lamont 2000:254). In other words, symbolic boundaries are different ways of believing that “we” are better than “them.” Symbolic boundaries are often defined in terms of what it means to be a “worthy person.” For instance, American upper-middle classes may want to distinguish themselves from the lower- and working-class by the means of possessions but also cultural resources—the cultural references in their everyday speech and the very manner of speech (Bourdieu 1994; Streib 2011). At the same time, East European intelligentsia, a fraction middle-class, put a premium on the latter but not necessarily the former (Hołówka 1997; Zarycki 2008).

Symbolic boundaries can be constructed not only between people but also between cultural products. One of the most well-researched examples is musical taste (cf. Cicchelli et al. 2023). For decades, cultural sociologists have examined the relationship between taste and class position. Early Bourdieu-inspired studies confirmed the simple reproduction of class distinctions, highlighting certain genres as markers of cultural prestige or degradation. In most cultural contexts, classical music has traditionally been associated with cultural capital; however, recent Polish research suggests that alternative rock also serves this function (Domański et al. 2021). Meanwhile, genres associated with lower-class status vary significantly across contexts. In Poland, for example, disco polo is widely perceived as a lower-class genre (Łuczaj 2020).

Over time, research on musical taste has evolved, engaging with the “cultural omnivorousness” hypothesis. Scholars have debated whether musical taste continues to serve as a marker of distinction in

the postmodern world, with studies either supporting or challenging this idea (Grodny, Gruszka, and Łuczaj 2013; Domański et al. 2021). The same theoretical assumptions, namely, that 1) people use symbolic goods to make distinctions marking their position in the social structure, 2) these boundaries are effective in structuring social words, but yet 3) are subject to historical changes, are useful in studying the so-called new professions.

Another research tradition that informs this study is the sociology of professions. Traditional career models, such as the “employment lifecycle”—moving from joining an organization to contributing, growing, plateauing, and ultimately passing on wisdom (Lavelle 2007)—are not easily applicable to ICCs. This is due to the highly individualized nature of their work, carried out in a digital, non-unionized environment. Under these conditions, professional identity—or the absence thereof—becomes a key research problem that cannot be assumed. What makes this particularly intriguing is not only the unclear identity of individuals within this “new” profession but also the broader question of recognition: what they do may not necessarily be regarded as legitimate work or as morally valuable labor. In this respect, studying ICCs departs from the long-standing tradition of research on occupational careers rooted in the Chicago School of sociology. Questions of recognition—on multiple levels, as outlined by Honneth—and the emotional labor that accompanies them (Hochschild 1979) seem more central than the “classic” concerns of the sociology of professions, such as working conditions, labor protections, struggles for fair remuneration, professional burnout, or a sense of agency within an organization. Nevertheless, examining this social world from a sociological perspective still requires situating individuals as “members of social structure”

(Strauss and Becker 1975:81). A recent meta-analysis suggests that the most common forms of online hate are related to religion, racism, political views, and gender (Castaño-Pulgarín et al. 2021). While hate speech targeting professions was not explicitly listed, there are compelling reasons to expect that certain professions are particularly vulnerable to such abuse due to stigmatization. Examples include occupations physically stigmatized, such as butchers (whose “dirty” work can be viewed with some disdain), or professions marginalized for social reasons, like correctional officers (who deal primarily with convicted criminals in prisons, which makes their job undesirable). Similarly, massage therapists may face moral stigmatization due to societal stereotypes and misconceptions about their work (Butler, Chillias, and Muhr 2012:263). Interestingly, stigmatized professions are often both well-paid and highly skilled. For example, in some cultural contexts, advertising has long been criticized as complicit in exploitative capitalist mechanisms and cultural degradation (Cohen and Dromi 2018:175). In this context, the profession of ICCs is likely to be contested due to the lay perception that posting content online is not a “real” job. According to proponents of theories of moral worth, such perceptions may position individuals in such roles at the margins of societal esteem.

## Methods

The data analysis for this study was conducted as part of the research project “Post-Transformation in the Perspective of Biographical Experiences of People Born Between 1980 and 2005. A Sociological Analysis.” Adopting a biographical perspective enables the research team to examine the dynamics of “post-transformation change”—a distinctive aspect of ongoing social transformations in Polish

society shaped by global processes. Specifically, the study analyses the biographies of individuals born between 1980 and 2005, focusing on the growing influence of social media and the internal logic of the virtual world in reshaping lives, widening intergenerational gaps, and driving cultural shifts in values and attitudes. The interviewees were selected based on several sampling criteria. All internet content creators fall into the category of the so-called new professions. The entire primary dataset consists of 80 autobiographical narrative interviews (Schütze 1983; Domecka et al. 2012). The broader project aimed to compare diverse life stories against the backdrop of historical events and media discourses surrounding the post-transformation period.

The interview process began with a broad, open-ended question inviting participants to share their life stories. This was followed by probes to explore themes that emerged spontaneously during the narrative. The conversation concluded with a series of targeted questions on key areas of interest, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, attitudes toward religion, political views, and media consumption habits. All interviews were fully transcribed, pseudonymized, and subsequently discussed in research seminars (Każmierska and Wygnańska 2019).

The interviews used for this analysis were selected through a two-step procedure. First, a sub-sample of internet content creators was drawn from the full dataset, resulting in 25 cases. In the second step, I identified those interviewees who explicitly problematized the recognition of their professional status. For this reason, the findings focus primarily on seven unambiguous cases of internet content creators who struggled with social recognition. The remaining cases were excluded either because the



individuals combined content creation with other primary occupations or activities (e.g., university studies), or because their professional identity was not contested (as in the case of some online journalists).

To address the research question of this paper—What symbolic struggles related to their profession are embedded in the biographies of internet content creators?—I conducted a re-analysis of selected biographical cases. I focused on ICCs who problematized the issue of symbolic boundaries in their autobiographical interviews, even if they framed it in different ways. Following the approach used by Michèle Lamont (1992)—who examined symbolic boundaries by analyzing both the standards underlying status assessments and the characteristics of symbolic boundaries themselves—I identified sections of the interviews that illustrate the construction of symbolic boundaries. My analysis considers both explicit and implicit narratives of boundary-making.

The interviews were interpreted during regular seminars, with the participation of both senior and early-career scholars. For the purpose of this paper, I subsequently re-analyzed selected cases. Thus, the data analysis strategy was two-tiered. The first step involved a collective interpretation of each complete interview, while the second consisted of an individual re-analysis conducted in the spirit of classical qualitative thematic analysis rather than a biographical approach to address the specific research question of this study.

This mixed approach allowed me to identify three key types of symbolic tensions and the associated boundaries. The first struggle involves proving one's professional legitimacy to close family and

friends, who may question the value of content creation compared to a conventional 9-to-5 job. The second concerns the interaction between content creators and their audiences, where boundaries emerge in defining expertise and authenticity. The third struggle arises for those operating at the intersection of multiple social fields, who may encounter a lack of recognition or even hostility from adjacent fields—for example, science popularizers striving for symbolic legitimacy.

## Findings

### Struggle for Private Recognition: Influencers and Their Families

The biographical analysis of moral boundaries through professional choices and career paths is particularly well-suited to indicate moral worth for two key reasons. First, in most Western-like societies, professional work serves as a primary marker of social status. Second, the boundaries between professions are often blurred, creating space for boundary-making processes, as Bourdieu theorized. This is especially relevant for emerging professions. For example, in the following passage, Aleksandra, a parenting influencer born in the late 1980s, reflects on how her work on the internet is not always regarded as legitimate or “proper” work.

And it's mainly the family that doesn't understand, well, what can I say? Well, my family doesn't understand what I do on the internet.

**Family in the sense of your parents or what?**

No, my husband's family.

**Husband's family? OK, can you tell me about a time when they made you feel like they didn't understand, so I can get a better feeling for it?**

Well, it's like, yes, every day there is some commenting that I am doing something wrong or that I am educated but I'm doing something like that. Well, I don't know how familiar you are with what I do. Mainly, I like to laugh, I like to distance myself, maybe distance myself from the fact that motherhood is difficult and parenting is difficult, that there's always a mess or something, and that it's just not appropriate to do such things. [Aleksandra]

The lack of recognition for Aleksandra's work primarily arises from cultural expectations that associate higher education with highly skilled, white-collar jobs. Agata Bachórz (2023:64) explored a similar tension between hegemonic career visions and alternative pathways, focusing on highly educated professionals who opted for "work with food," which included elements of manual labor. Such choices were often difficult for older generations to understand, particularly those unacquainted with the processes of re-skilling and the increasingly blurred boundaries between work and leisure (Stebbins 2014).

Aleksandra's professional choice might be perceived as a form of declassing, as she holds a diploma in a field that traditionally offers straightforward employment opportunities. Moreover, the content she produced challenged the revered figure of Mother the Pole (*Matka Polka*) (see: Kaźmierska 2025 [in this issue]). Consequently, the skepticism surrounding Aleksandra's work can be linked to shifting cultural norms regarding professional identities and motherhood—changes that younger generations are more likely to embrace. Subsequently, in her distinctly "feminine" narrative—largely centered on childrearing, family life, and religious communities—Aleksandra frames her decision not as an economic one but rather as a lifestyle choice.

[In my professional career, I believed that] You have to work all the time. So I kind of feel, I feel like a talented person from the 1990s who will just go to college, finish it, and make a career. Not that I will work, I will make a career. And, of course, family life will also be at a high level here, and I will be very happy. Well, it turned out a little different, so. I mean, it turned out a little different. It's just that this professional work no longer seemed to me as something very, umm, I don't know, prestigious, well, more/ but, I mean, it was a process that, at some point, I decided that I had to match the profession to my family, not the other way around. 'Cause it simply costs me too much. [Aleksandra]

The narrative of Anastazja—a well-known parenting influencer and performer—seems to reflect both the societal expectations from her family of origin and her unspoken concerns about her daughter. Perceived as a "loser" throughout her childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood, her family began to regard her as a valuable individual only after she gained public recognition.

I'm starting to break away from this, uh, cliché of being "Little Nastka," who, no matter what she achieved—even if she's on national TV—was still seen as "Little Nastka," the one who tended to lose her wallet as a child. I remember this conversation with my sister, who's now very proud of me, brags about me, and her friends from the mothers' forum even attend my performances. She even bought a ticket to one of my shows. And my brother-in-law, who treated me my whole life as, well, just because my sister presented me that way—as a bit of a klutz—came to my performance too. He laughed his head off. [Anastazja]

This family could benefit not only from Anastazja's popularity but also from tangible material bene-

fits—for instance, they could choose shoes from the brand that sponsored the ICC. All of this contributed to a sense of private recognition. On an emotional level, Anastazja describes the pride of her relatives, all of whom live in a rural area and work manual jobs. However, she also notes that this pride is often accompanied by jealousy.

Well, they're supposedly proud, supposedly supportive, but then there are texts like these...That I don't have a normal, real life, no responsibilities, because I have a fun life, and then this line came: "Aren't you bored driving around those cities and repeating the same things over and over?" I fired back: "Aren't you bored going to the same houses and cleaning the same toilets?" And that, for me, was symbolically important. Look, I'm in my thirties now. Right? I am, I have/ and I don't feel like explaining myself to my family anymore. Also, I kind of do this to show that influencers aren't just some pathology from the internet, because behind it, there can be a really cool topic. [Anastazja]

Anastazja felt the need to explain herself not only to her parents but also to her growing daughter. In this case, the inadequacy that required explanation was again linked to the blurring of boundaries between leisure and work (Stebbins 2014).

[In my daughter's life,] however, more and more, her peers have a say, and I'll be honest, it's a bit of a pickle because "My mom is from the internet, does funny things, dresses up, goes out." And I already hear from my daughter: "You call this work? Really? Is that why I should study? So I can host events, for example?" And like, no, it's to find yourself and build your life the way you want it, but my child keeps throwing arguments at me because she's so sassy. [Anastazja]

Anastazja, whose decision to become an ICC was driven in part by the economic challenges of previous unengaging and low-paid jobs, places significant emphasis on the role her child played in her career planning. However, in this case, family considerations led her to refrain from certain professional activities.

I feel like I don't only do meaningless things. Of course, that might be a naive belief because, to some people, I'll be an idiot on the internet, but for a year, there has been nothing on my blog. My personal life really fell apart, and I paid a heavy price for it. Ten years ago, no one thought about the impact that sharing personal things could have on you. I didn't write about my child's pooping because I thought that was absurd, but I did openly write about my parental doubts, and that helped a lot of girls...It was therapeutic for me. Many girls saw themselves in it, but, for example, as a consequence, I later read comments like, when I admitted that my pregnancy wasn't planned and was a huge, huge surprise... well, I had to read comments saying that one day my child would read that they were an accident, that their mother didn't want them. [Anastazja]

In this passage, Anastazja discusses the adverse impact of her professional activities on her beloved daughter while simultaneously addressing public recognition. She mentions young mothers who are inspired by her critical stance on motherhood and reflects on the positive emotional influence this has on her professional motivation. This perspective captures an important aspect of the story. However, at the level of public recognition, we also observe power struggles.

The narratives of Aleksandra and Anastazja predominantly centered on non-material disputes re-



garding the “worth” of their profession. In contrast, many of the male narrators emphasized that their career-planning strategies were intrinsically linked to the economic field and the necessity of making a living. This framing, which applies exclusively to the male interviewees, aligns with the traditional social role of the male breadwinner. Tymoteusz, Zbyszek, and Szymon all stated that the decision to become an ICC was only possible once their internet job began generating significant profits—despite the fact that some of these narrators could have easily relied on their parents’ substantial financial resources.

Tymoteusz, a former civil engineer and now a popular YouTuber, initially began his online activity as a form of serious leisure (Stebbins 2014). From a professional standpoint, it was a side activity. However, as his popularity quickly grew, he was able to transform his channel into a family business, with his partner collaborating with him and subcontractors being hired to assist.

That was also a moment when I was essentially working two full-time jobs—I was employed as a civil engineer while simultaneously running two YouTube channels, and those channels were really growing, right? So, we [me and my partner] thought that, at some point, I would have to give up one of these things, right? But I was always thinking in terms of quitting my job as an engineer because, well, it was simply the safer option, so to speak...I was happy to work in that role, but it was never my passion... Whereas what I do now genuinely fascinates me, and I’ll say it again—it fascinates me. [Tymoteusz]

Szymon, a former journalist in traditional media and business owner, now a podcaster who covers events rarely discussed in public discourse in Poland, recalls his transition from a conventional pro-

fession to online content creation in a strikingly similar way. None of them chose to pursue an ICC career until they had achieved dual recognition. They likely would not have made that decision if they had not been recognized in their private lives—particularly by a partner. More importantly, as men, they wanted to ensure they were recognized publicly enough to sustain a livelihood. Their decision, therefore, represents an entanglement of two types of recognition struggles—individual and structural—shaped by social expectations, or feeling rules (Hochschild 1979).

**And did you start the podcast after closing down your business, or was it before?**

I was still doing both at the same time. But mentally, we were [me and my partner] already withdrawing from the company, really. However, the podcast was never meant to be a way of making a living. It was simply... I see journalism as a social mission, and one of the reasons I started the podcast was to provide information to people who don’t speak other languages well enough to find such information on their own but might still be interested in it...I soon realized that it was extremely time-consuming and that I would have to dedicate an entire day each week to it—literally from six in the morning until one at night, right?...I thought, okay, if that’s the case—if I have to spend that much time just on the technical side, and the creative part [laughs] is already connected to my work, or at least it was, because, on the same day, I published the first material online, I also submitted a job application to a multinational consulting company. That was supposed to be the moment when I finally left journalism behind and just did this in my free time. But then I thought, well, I don’t know if they’ll actually hire me, and so on, and so on. And after some encouragement from my girlfriend, I set up an account on a crowdfunding platform.

For Zbyszek, the transition from a standard service job to creating internet content was characterized by a unique blend of a desire for independence and uncertainty about the financial prospects of their new profession.

I had a few smaller successes like that, but there was no money in it that would allow me to live normally. It was more like, "Wow, I'm doing something with soccer and getting some pocket money." But apart from that, I still had to go to work. Umm, after a while, I was in a steady relationship, and I wanted to start living more like a normal, adult person... Eventually, I decided that I was missing soccer in my life, so I created a YouTube channel...I just played soccer games, FIFA, and at the age of 28, 27, I started feeling old and like it wasn't really appropriate anymore, but I already knew that I was somewhat recognizable in the soccer world through my website, writing for newspapers, and appearances. I didn't want people to associate me with playing games and wasting time on that. But it turned out that within a year of running this channel, I gained a few thousand subscribers, then it went up to tens of thousands. In the meantime, besides the games, I started talking more about soccer, about the Champions League, not just about the games. And it turned out that people definitely preferred the videos where I talked about soccer, not where I played soccer games. [Zbyszek]

Zbyszek's narrative highlights the perception that being an influencer may not be regarded as a serious profession ("it wasn't really appropriate anymore")—a concern initially raised by Aleksandra and Anastazja—along with the pressure to achieve financial independence. Like Tymoteusz and Szymon, Zbyszek emphasized that the decision to assess whether they could sustain themselves

through their creativity was a deliberate part of their biographical action scheme (Schütze 2014).

Patryk, in turn, recounts "a typical maternal concern," which forced him to explain his professional decisions. His mother was concerned about the professional opportunities offered by his new career path—internet content creation—compared to the stability of a job in the advertising industry, which led him to defend his moral worth in her eyes. Being an advertising executive represented an institutionalized career path for organizing one's biography (Schütze 2014), which conflicted with Patryk's biographical action scheme because, in post-socialist Poland, advertising is not seen as a stigmatized profession (cf. Cohen and Dromi 2018) but rather as one of the stereotypically well-paid jobs (Luczaj 2016).

Yeah, I mean, I spent a lot of time at the computer, so my mom sometimes told me to go outside, but it wasn't like... No, I wasn't really persecuted for that at home. In fact, my mom didn't get too involved in what I was doing. She was more excited that I was doing something, you know, something I was passionate about. My mom always supported me strongly. And, of course, when I got older and the time came, for example, to choose my studies, I was still doing it. So, my mom would ask questions like, "But do you want to keep doing this? Do you have a plan for it? How do you imagine it, or will you be able to support yourself from it?" I told her, "Don't worry, I've got it covered, I have things to do, etc. I know how to make money from it, so you don't need to worry." My mom suggested things like maybe working for an advertising agency. I explained to her, "Mom, I didn't spend all these years working to be on the other side because I work with advertising agencies." [Patryk]

In another part of the interview, Patryk explains that agencies typically demand “overly polite” (Polish: *ugrzeszniony*) content, which does not align with his preferred style. This highlights his decision to collaborate with agencies rather than work for them, emphasizing his commitment to preserving his creative autonomy.

### Struggle for Public Recognition: Influencers and Their Audiences

ICCs earn money because they are deemed worthy of being followed by various audiences. Through their clicks, subscriptions, and follows, ICCs receive payments either directly from major tech companies like YouTube or indirectly through sponsorship deals. All the individuals analyzed were successful enough to make the internet their primary source of income. However, this did not shield them from numerous waves of disrespect (German: *Misachtung*)—to borrow Honneth’s term—particularly from those who openly contest their content. This is evident in Julka’s narrative. The supportive community she has built as a lifestyle influencer helps offset the negative comments she faces as an online creator, particularly for addressing controversial topics within the Catholic Church.

I had a big problem for a long time because I took those relationships [with the audience] very personally, and actually, only in the last few months have I really learned to distance myself a bit, to focus more on myself rather than the audience. It was always for them and so on because it also made me dive into topics where I felt uncomfortable, whether they were related to the Church or some social dramas. I felt like people needed it or that if someone asked me, I should do it for others. It was always that pattern. So, I fought for myself, setting the boundary that “No,

I want to talk about something else, in a different way.” Umm, and so, yes, definitely, I’m really happy because I managed to build a community of people who are also reflective, interested, and at the same time open to lighter, soothing content, not judgmental ones. And I think they’re quite aware of mental health and overall care for their well-being, as well as a community that takes care of that, and people for whom it’s also important. [Julka]

Criticism, which seems to be a natural epiphenomenon of all human creative endeavors, especially when social topics are discussed, is separated by only a thin line from the internet hate experienced by Klaudia and Anastazja. What is at stake is one’s “face” (in Goffman’s sense [Goffman 1955]), necessitating either biographical work to defend it or the capacity to ignore critics and haters.

I don’t know if they’re trying to degrade me or if they really don’t see, er, um, they too/ I don’t know to what extent they are trying to put me down or to what extent they really don’t see the difference between me and some influencer like, I don’t know, Aniamaluje [an Instagram account with 159K followers], some lifestyle girl who sells them some stuff, products, ebooks. Where I don’t do that, and I never wanted to do that, but they somehow force me into this role that I’m one of those girls. They don’t notice that I don’t advertise things, that I have 5,000 followers, that I care about a career in journalism and writing, etc. [Klaudia]

In Klaudia’s case, internet hate stemmed from two key aspects of her online creativity, which focused on commenting on culture and societal issues. While not fully aligning with either right-wing commentary or the leftist ideological package, she had a clear worldview and presented a new perspective, which made her susceptible to attacks from both

ends of the political spectrum. At the same time, as she emphasizes throughout her narrative, being a young, physically attractive female ICC made her even more vulnerable. However, the attackers were not who one might expect. They were, in fact, other females.

In Anastazja's case, the trigger for attacks was not the seriousness of her content but rather the perceived lack of it, as a significant portion of her creativity involved humorous short films, many of which went viral. In this instance, the criticism seems tied to her mass popularity. Unlike Klaudia, Anastazja struggled to move past this and continue as usual.

Many years of writing a blog, despite the popularity of these texts, didn't achieve as much as a few, unfortunately, recorded videos. A couple of them went viral, much to my despair, so I know what it means to be insulted on all platforms. I experienced that when I was 20-ish. I read that I was "a fucked-up whore not wanted by anyone," while I was struggling with my identity and depression, so I think it was a very unfortunate time for something bad to happen to me. [Anastazja]

Typically, cyberhate took the form of internet-based activity analogous to "slacktivism," where individuals engage in actions requiring minimal effort, time, or commitment (Żuchowska-Skiba 2023), usually without active mobilization, as seen in the narratives of Klaudia and Anastazja. However, Tymoteusz, perceived as controversial (though he saw it quite differently), experienced real threats. In his case, real-world violence was, if not likely, at least possible.

I had a situation where someone sent me threats. Umm, well, I mean, they specified exactly what they

would do to me and my family. Right? But I even asked some people once, you know, about reporting such things, right? But generally, the police would say that such threats can always be reported [only] if you're [really] worried about their execution. So the thing is if someone even writes to you that they'll kill you, well, you're probably not worried about it actually happening. Another thing is that once, umm, someone sent me screenshots from a forum where a group of people, umm, were agreeing that it would generally be good to kill me, and even my address was given, fortunately, an old one, but if it had been my current address, I would have probably really been concerned at that point because, well, this was... I mean, without any details, they were just considering ideas, right? [Tymoteusz]

For Anastazja, a significant boundary-making moment occurred during a live event in her hometown, where she was invited as a rising celebrity alongside Adrian Nowak,<sup>3</sup> a very well-known singer, also "from here." This was part of her biographical action scheme to have a career outside the internet, a decision she made confronting the image of an ICC with the social need to have a respected profession. Her performance was not very successful at first.

And so, I walk out, and the audience is practically all seniors. It just didn't land—not at all, not even a little. Right? It didn't land so badly that my mum, sitting in the first row, was in tears. And I was terrified, thinking she was offended by the jokes, that I'd have no home to return to. Right? I was so stressed that I was literally hitting the microphone with my teeth. I came off stage crying and said, "Fuck, I'm never performing again." Even my own father said, "Well, you've got a lot of work ahead of you." So I had a total breakdown

<sup>3</sup> Throughout the paper, I use pseudonyms.



because this was supposed to be a turning point [*moment graniczny*], a shift where I committed to this path. Right? My fate was supposed to change here. But there was also an evening performance. My friend, who organized the event, came to me with a [alcoholic] drink and said, “Nastka, you’re either going to go out there and screw it up again, or you’re going to learn from it.” So I just downed the drink and thought, “Screw it, whatever.” And it turned out that the second audience was younger, and I just didn’t care as much this time. It also turned out that the first performance didn’t have Nowak’s manager in the audience, but he was there for the second one. It went so well—people were laughing so much at the jokes [about the region where the show took place]. [Anastazja]

The struggle for public recognition is evident not only between creators and their audiences but also within broader social circles, as is particularly clear in another excerpt from Anastazja’s interview. Continuing her “feminine” narrative focused on maternity posited that her occupation resulted in some identity dilemma, giving rise to a need to perform emotional labor (Hochschild 1979).

I was already under the care of a psychiatrist and psychologist, but, you know, this process of building an identity online couldn’t go unnoticed. So, it was at that time when my daughter was in kindergarten that my, let’s say, professional journey related to the internet began to develop a bit, but I still didn’t know what I was supposed to answer the kindergarten teacher. Who am I? An influencer, a girl from the internet? What do you do?...What does your job involve? And I was looking for an idea for myself. [Anastazja]

Anastazja’s identity struggle arose from a perceived lack of dignity associated with her profes-

sional role. The emotional labor (Hochschild 1979) she performed stemmed from two sources, which, at times, required contradictory actions. First, there was the need to manage her emotions to meet the expectations of her audience. In her role as a live performer, she was constantly required to amplify or suppress her feelings to remain entertaining and engaging. This pressure led her to refer to herself as an “internet ninny” (Polish: *dziewucha z internetu*), highlighting her sense of being trivialized and her efforts for recognition continually dismissed. She also described her work as “childishness” (Polish: *dziecinada*), further emphasizing her feelings of invalidation.

At the same time, Anastazja was bound by the obligations associated with her social role as a mother—a role that is both highly stigmatized and burdened with high expectations, as articulated by Aleksandra in her narrative. She found herself fighting not only to be famous and entertaining but also to gain respect from people important to her and her daughter, many of whom did not recognize content creation as a legitimate profession—especially when it was pursued in unconventional ways. In this case, Anastazja, like other influencers (Hemming Pedersen 2022), had to struggle not only for affirmational recognition, which “constructs and affirms their personal identities and their place in society,” but also for transformational recognition, aimed at addressing “instances of misrecognition that seek to rectify perceived injustices” (Giles 2020:209-210). Additionally, the inevitable ups and downs of every public career meant that recognition was never stable. For ICCs, this struggle is intensified when they must navigate multiple audiences: online and offline, younger and older, urban and rural, male and female, public and private.



## Struggle for Symbolic Power: ICCs and Traditional Professionals

The professional status of an ICC can be questioned not only by close family and friends, as well as those with whom they interact in their professional and social lives (as illustrated by Anastazja), but also by individuals from adjacent social fields. According to Pierre Bourdieu's theory (1994; 1996), such fields can interact with the power struggles within the primary field being analyzed. For instance, a journalist, typically operating within the journalistic field (Bourdieu 2005), may find the political field and the academic field important. The political field might offer the journalist political power or financial rewards, while the academic field could serve as a source of inspiration, offering a form of cultural ennoblement. This latter dynamic is similar to the case of Tymoteusz, whose work often intersects with the academic field. In the interview, he recalls that one of his controversial videos on abortion rights was a response to what he saw as a pseudo-academic debate published by a Research University. Tymoteusz was frustrated by the one-sidedness of the perspective presented in the material, which not only conflicted with his worldview but, as he pointed out, was framed as an idea grounded in legitimate academic research.

She simply adopted/presented the, well, affirmation paradigm, right? The goal of this approach is not to describe the phenomenon—its declared purpose is to change social attitudes toward abortion. The aim is to influence actions, not to provide a descriptive account of the phenomenon. However, she didn't say this outright—in the sense that she presented these ideas as if they were self-evident truths, revealed truths. In reality, what she was doing was activist work, right? And this was under the banner of a Research Univer-

sity, advertised as a legitimate source of social science from a Research University. So, I just recorded a video in which I said that this is all nonsense...And she has every right to preach her views, absolutely, but maybe not under the university's logo and not, um, presenting herself as an authoritative source of knowledge. [Tymoteusz]

In this material, Tymoteusz points to several academic papers highlighting the negative aspects of abortion, but he does so in a way that diverges from accepted academic standards. He admits to having only skimmed these papers, explicitly stating that he relied on details from their abstracts rather than conducting a thorough analysis. Furthermore, as someone without formal training in the social sciences, Tymoteusz failed to recognize that the research he pointed to might not be directly comparable to studies cited by university experts due to differences in methodology, scope, and objectives.

Tymoteusz's case reflects a typical conflict between social fields, where the academic approach to presenting knowledge—especially social knowledge—often clashes with the journalistic approach, which tends to simplify complex phenomena. Symbolic power-related tensions of this kind may arise for various reasons, including ideological beliefs (liberal doxa versus more conservative views), the contrast between disinterested scholarship and a business-driven mindset, and the aesthetics of content production (a hermetic message shaped by formalized poetics and hierarchized power relations versus an accessible message crafted for the general public). As a result, while Tymoteusz garnered significant support from his internet audience, his contributions were largely ignored by the academic community. Solidarity, grounded in shared values, was evident among academics, but

there was little overlap between their approach and that of an internet science commentator, who embraced a different mode of knowledge production. This divergence likely contributed to Tymoteusz's frustration when the same female expert released another video.

And she directly says to the camera: "Such data doesn't exist, or at least I've never come across it. I've never seen such data." But in my first video, I showed her that data, and she saw it because she emailed me, saying, "Your video is unsubstantiated. I watched it." So, she saw it and still claims she's never seen it. That's just—you have to have no shame. With all due respect. [Tymoteusz]

The customary expression "with all due respect" contrasts sharply with the (mutual) lack of respect evident in this debate. Zbyszek, whose content creation aligns more closely with the journalistic field rather than the academic one, highlights a source of this disrespect: the perception that an internet journalist is not a "real" journalist. When explicitly asked whether he feels marginalized in Poland, Zbyszek acknowledges:

Maybe in the soccer industry, there are moments when I feel marginalized, but those are petty issues because it's just about the soccer industry, umm, because, you know, I'm a YouTuber, not a professional sports journalist.

**So there's the difference? I was wondering about that.**

I mean, I consider myself a sports journalist, just that I do it in a way that's more approachable and easier to digest. But you know how it sounds: "I'm a YouTuber." And it doesn't matter what you do—if you're a YouTuber, people assume you're probably doing something for kids, right? [Zbyszek]

## Discussion

Becoming an ICC means entering a profession fraught with challenges, ranging from income instability to the ongoing struggle for social recognition—what Axel Honneth famously termed the struggle for recognition or, in Michèle Lamont's terms, the constant need to prove one's social worth. The biographical experience of being an ICC involves three levels of symbolic struggle: the quest for private recognition, public recognition, and symbolic power, corresponding to Honneth's (1996) concepts of love (associated with care), respect (associated with rights), and esteem (associated with solidarity).

The first level, love, pertains to the fight for being recognized as a morally valuable person engaged in serious work that deserves respect. A lack of such recognition can result in feelings of inadequacy, such as those expressed by Anastazja, who described herself as an "internet ninny," or in assumptions like the one Zbyszek encountered, where YouTube is dismissed as being "for kids."

The second level, rights, represents a broader struggle for societal recognition and respect, particularly from an ICC's followers. Like other cultural producers, ICCs face criticism, with their competence and expertise frequently challenged. Despite efforts to establish hierarchies in the field—whether through rankings based on technocratic metrics or earnings—no definitive order emerges, leaving ICCs locked in a constant symbolic struggle intrinsic to their profession.

The final level, symbolic power, lies at the heart of an ICC's professional identity. While being an ICC is socially desirable in certain circles (e.g., among younger audiences), it remains a relatively unstruc-

tured and non-institutionalized profession. This lack of institutionalized schedules for organizing biographies (Schütze 2014:254) creates a power imbalance when representatives of traditional professions encounter their counterparts in the digital sphere. For instance, when a journalist from a respected newspaper or television station debates with an internet journalist, the former often holds a position of initial advantage due to the established legitimacy of their field.

These levels align with Honneth's types of recognition, reflecting the nature of the relationships that connect the ICC with various social agents (e.g., love links them with family). Simultaneously, the analysis suggests that the social boundaries significant in the biographies of ICCs encompass all the types identified by Michèle Lamont (1992): socioeconomic, cultural, and moral boundaries. Socioeconomic boundaries, arising from judgments about one's social position based on wealth or power, were particularly evident in the "male" breadwinner narrative, where success was perceived as dependent on financial standing. This was also evident in Anasztazja's case, where her nearest and dearest closely associated wealth with professional success.

Moral boundaries, defined by assessments of moral character, appear in the material in two distinct forms. First, the internal reflection on whether one's job is meaningful and serious enough cannot be separated from individual qualities such as work ethic, consideration for others, and personal integrity. ICCs also faced the critique of "living beyond one's means" (Polish: *życie ponad stan*), which served as a form of moral judgment. Second, their audience questioned their moral judgments, views, and opinions. In this same relationship, cultural boundaries were also constructed, as not only the ICC's moral

character but also their intelligence, manners, and tastes were subject to scrutiny. The struggle for cultural recognition was particularly evident in interactions with professionals from other social fields. Education and standards of judgment—what might be termed the aesthetics of content creation—played a crucial role in the contest for symbolic power.

## Conclusion

Being an ICC is often perceived as an easy profession, one that many young people worldwide covet—a profession where creators can do what they love and make a living. Despite this common yet simplistic view of turning a passion into a profitable career, this analysis suggested that an ICC performs three types of work. The first two can be summarized as proper work and work-for-labor (Standing 2011). The first type involves tasks such as finding a topic and preparing content, which includes subsequent steps like recording and editing. The second type encompasses everything required to create content and financially benefit from it. This includes, but is not limited to, promoting one's material, attending professional events, and engaging in activities such as reading, watching, or playing games that will inform the content produced.

Lastly, the paper argues that ICCs must also perform emotional labor to justify their profession to those unacquainted with this social world—most notably to family members but also to others they interact with, such as teachers. This emotional labor becomes indispensable throughout the ICC's career, though it is most intense at the outset when the identity of the ICC is being formed. Later, substantial emotional labor is required to maintain relationships with the online community. While positive bonds are easier to sustain, a significant

challenge arises in dealing with online adversaries who often become haters. For various reasons, ICCs face criticism, slander, and even threats from individuals they have never met in person. Depending on the context and individual resilience, this may require social strategies, such as focusing on supportive community engagement, as Julka described, or psychological methods, such as therapy, which helped Anastazja.

Finally, the world of influencers is far from an autonomous social field. The emotional consequence is that whenever an ICC's activity intersects with more legitimized social fields, such as journalism or academia, they must fight for recognition. ICCs are often not treated as a legitimate voice in debates, whether on topics such as abortion rights or the latest season of the UEFA Champions League.

This final type of symbolic struggle is a particularly clear example of the theoretical significance of this paper, as it directly engages with Bourdieu's

theory of social fields and symbolic struggle. The various symbolic struggles analyzed here through a biographical method confirm that the careers of ICCs, operating within the broader field of cultural production, are influenced not only by market forces but, perhaps more significantly, by the intangible rules of the field of cultural production. In this context, navigating symbolic capital and establishing social boundaries becomes a crucial skill that ICCs must master to succeed within the field.

This finding further demonstrates that the profession of an ICC is far more complex—and demanding—than a simplistic, layperson's analysis might suggest. Moreover, the biographical experiences of ICCs indicate that any analysis conducted purely from a technological, economic, or psychological standpoint fails to capture the unique nature of this new profession. In contrast, the biographical perspective allows uncovering this complexity, offering deeper insight into the multifaceted realities of the ICC career.

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