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Social Justice as On-Brand: Social Causes, Monetization Traces, and the Logics of Visibility in the Dutch Influencer Industry

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As part of navigating the visibility logics of the creator economy, influencers may leverage their visibility to promote social justice by drawing attention to specific social causes and political issues. This article analyzes the 15 most-followed Dutch influencers on Instagram and TikTok to explore when and how social justice is invoked within the blurred boundaries between promotion and expression. Findings reveal the (1) visibility of social justice through brand alignment, (2) construction of platform relevance through temporal references and templates, and (3) divergent approaches to monetization. Social justice can be a narrative in monetized content, and monetization can serve as a vehicle for promoting social justice or remain entirely disconnected from it. Uniting these practices is the shared logic that social justice must align with the influencer as brand—whether articulated through organic content, where personal beliefs advance self-branding efforts, or through monetized content, where politicized themes intersect with commercial strategies—ultimately rendering social justice as "on-brand" for only some.

Keywords: social justice, influencers, brand, monetization, visibility

The promotion of social issues and political causes by influencers unsettles the moral judgments and gendered critiques leveled at the industry, which suggest that influencers are shallow, narcissistic creators motivated solely by commercial gain (see Duffy, Miltner, & Wahlstedt, 2022). From environmental activism and advocacy surrounding mental health to endorsing political candidates and raising funds for people in Gaza, influencers direct attention toward social justice. These influencers initiate and amplify social justice messages and political activism (Abidin & Lee, 2022; Arnesson & Reinikainen, 2024; Goodwin, Joseff, Riedl, Lukito, & Woolley, 2023; Lewis, 2020; Riedl, Lukito, & Woolley, 2023), demonstrating how their skills cultivated within personal and commercial spheres can be used for prosocial and public purposes. Social media platforms also push influencers in this direction. TikTok and Instagram, respectively, implore creators to "create real change" (TikTok, 2025, para. 1) and "inspire real change" (Instagram for Creators, 2025, para. 1).

Corporate narratives around impact and purpose suggest that influencers have an opportunity—and even a responsibility—to consider the positive impact their content can have on their followers as citizens. However, it also smooths over the risks that influencers face when invoking social justice and

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sharing politicized content, including the (mis)alignment with their brand identity and audience expectations, as well as negative feedback and harassment. These challenges are compounded by the "nested precarities" (Duffy & Meisner, 2023) and structural inequalities (Glatt, 2022) within the industry, which restrict influencers' ability to engage with politicized topics consistently, absorb backlash, and earn a living through their content production.

While much of influencers' engagement with social justice occurs through unpaid, personal expression, some influencers generate revenue through sharing politicized messages. As the influence of influencers becomes apparent, politicians, political parties, and organizations are increasingly enlisting influencers for promotional purposes, ushering in collaborations between influencers and political or third-sector actors. Similar to brand activism, wherein social justice serves as a marketable narrative (Sobande, 2019), influencers may also weave social issues and political causes into their promotion of goods and services. Furthermore, social justice themes can be integrated into content production and embedded within monetization models, such as creator funds, revenue-sharing donations, and subscriptions, enabling influencers to receive compensation for their advocacy efforts. Rather than viewing monetized social justice content as opposed to organic content, I propose approaching social justice as promoted. Thus, the endorsement of social justice by influencers may include elements of monetization, requiring us to tease out the entanglement between the commercial and the political. This approach acknowledges how authenticity, relatability, and parasociality shape how influencers promote social justice in their content. It also draws attention to how the emerging influencer industry—marked by a portfolio of business models—reconfigures the boundaries between commercial endorsement and political expression.

Drawing on content and multimodal analysis of the 15 most-followed Dutch influencers on Instagram and TikTok, I explore how social justice is promoted. Unlike political or social justice influencers, social justice topics are not the primary focus of these influencers' brand identities. This distinction enables this research to examine how commercial influencers with the largest followings in the Netherlands selectively share content for prosocial and public purposes as part of their ordinary influencer activities, aligning with platform-driven and audience expectations about responsibility. The analysis examines the content and form of social justice within the content, as well as how it connects with influencers' identities and monetization practices.

Based on this analysis, I argue that we must conceptualize social justice as on-brand. This allows us to understand the visibility of social causes in content production by commercial influencers. Influencers strive for consistency and alignment between social justice topics and their branded self, which can be further demonstrated through commercial collaborations with third parties or personal initiatives. Importantly, these dynamics are not evenly distributed; not everyone is "rewarded" or compensated for social justice through monetization opportunities, nor is the distribution of the risks associated with invoking social justice equally borne. Influencers who are implicated by social justice causes share more social justice content, indicating that precarity and structural inequalities (Bishop, 2021; Christin & Lu, 2023; Duffy & Meisner, 2023; Glatt, 2022) are consequential for how social justice is promoted.

This article opens by synthesizing the literature on social justice and political influencers, paying close attention to how influencer practices of authenticity, self-branding, and endorsement are presented. I

also turn to the concept of visibility to conceptually ground the empirical study of social justice promotion and endorsement by influencers. Next, I outline the methodological approach, including the selection of Dutch influencers, the operationalization of social justice in data collection, and the methods of analysis. The findings are then presented in three sections. First, I introduce the social justice themes that are promoted and how they align with personal and brand identities. Second, I consider how influencers promote social justice as timely and resonant with platform cultures, often by aligning it with contemporary events and audiovisual styles. Third, I examine how traces of monetization shape the visibility of social justice themes, revealing the blur between commercial and political logics in influencer cultures. These empirical insights into how social justice is endorsed across the Dutch influencer ecosystem highlight how advocacy around social issues and causes is presented through the lens of self-branding, personal identity, and monetization opportunities, rendering social justice content as "on-brand" for only some influencers and thereby unevenly distributed across the influencer landscape.

Influencers as Endorsers of Political and Social Causes

One way to understand the distinctive nature of influencers as content creators who engage in monetization practices is through their skills and expertise in promotion. A promotional register also underpins how influencers tell relatable stories about their lives, authentically share their beliefs, and disseminate information. Such acts draw on the entrepreneurial imperative of strategic self-promotion that characterizes neoliberal society (Neff, Wissinger, & Zukin, 2005) and is advanced through social media platforms (Banet-Weiser, 2012), taking on additional contours in the creator economy. Influencers direct their promotional efforts toward third parties through producing commercial content when they endorse brands and products (Abidin, 2016; Wellman, Stoldt, Tully, & Ekdale, 2020) and political content when they "promote political or social causes" (Riedl et al., 2023, p. 2).

Understanding the promotion of social justice and the expression of political beliefs by influencers has largely coalesced around the figure of the political influencer. The political influencer is conceptualized as an actor in the communication process, examining their function as opinion leaders within networks (see, for example, Dubois & Gaffney, 2014) as well as situated within the development of the creator economy (see, for instance, the special issue on political influencers in *Social Media + Society* that brings together eight studies using a creator studies framework). The latter grapples with the intersection of political expression and social justice within influencer cultures, highlighting continuities in practices from personal to political and civic applications and unpacking how so-called political influence is operationalized. For example, scholars have identified how political influencers incorporate authentic self-performance and cultivate parasocial relationships into their political expression (Abidin & Cover, 2019; Peterson, 2024). Echoing Arnesson and Reinikainen (2024), I argue that the commercial core of influencers, in terms of their self-branding practices and their embrace of monetization, could be centered further through a focus on how promotional work is enacted and the tensions that arise between the commercial and political.

The intersection of monetization and political beliefs is conceptually addressed in the theorization of the political influencer (Goodwin et al., 2023; Lewis, 2020; Riedl et al., 2023). Riedl, Schwemmer, Ziewiecki, and Ross (2021) propose that it produces an "integrated mixture of commercialization and political activism" (p. 3), which Arnesson and Reinikainen (2024) further develop as a convergence of the

promotional, personal, and political, as commercial practices of influencers are mobilized in the political sphere. However, empirical work tends to focus on how influencer practices are deployed for political purposes, overlooking how influencer marketing and other forms of monetization might serve political interests. In their analysis of Twitch political influencer HasanAbi, Harris, Foxman, and Partin (2023) describe his use of ratioing as a strategy for engendering political participation, which produces both social and monetary capital. This hints at how political actions can be leveraged for financial gain but does not systematically analyze how such monetization occurs.

A perceived incompatibility between the commercial and political is observed in research addressing how the financial dimension of political content is understood or negotiated by stakeholders and audiences. Interviews with influencer campaign stakeholders reveal that political influencers often create political content without monetary compensation, distancing themselves from financial incentives (Goodwin et al., 2023). Instead, news events and the audience's expectation to express support publicly incentivized their political content. Audience perception can also have an inverse effect. Arnesson (2022) identifies how followers politicized influencer collaborations with Visit Dubai, highlighting how discussions of authenticity and influencer marketing (Wellman et al., 2020) spill into perceptions of both the influencer's and the brand's political beliefs. This underscores the challenges that influencers producing politicized content face in balancing social expectations, their influencer brand, and personal beliefs with the necessity to generate income responsibly.

Engagement with social justice and political topics is also not limited to political influencers. Less is known about whether nonpolitical influencers disseminate political and social justice content as part of their regular sharing routine, beyond their content niche or area of expertise. When and how social justice is promoted by influencers in general matters for how they exercise "influence" over audiences, engage in responsible, purposeful content production, and take on positions in the political information ecology, especially given young people's reliance on influencers for access to politics (Harff & Schmuck, 2023). Gonzalez, Schmuck, and Vandenbosch (2024) found that 7.8% of Instagram content shared by celebrities, athletes, and influencers was political, focusing on the type and framing of content across these different actors. Building on this holistic perspective, I narrow my research focus to how Dutch influencers share social justice content, examining how promotion by this actor is conveyed through content and considering how visibility shapes influencer practices and intersects with identity.

Logics of Visibility

The promotion of social justice by influencers can be situated within discussions of visibility, which shapes influencer labor and serves as a mechanism for achieving social justice. Bucher (2012) considers social media platforms to generate new modalities of visibility, conceptualizing visibility as a disciplinary apparatus that governs how participating subjects—users, including influencers—interact. As Cotter (2019) puts it, influencers must play the visibility game by learning the rules of specific platforms and formulating tactics to generate engagement and followers. This pursuit of visibility involves developing and deploying curatorial practices to achieve visibility and a positive presence (Abidin, 2016), which critically impacts monetization opportunities. Engagement metrics and follower counts, mediated by platforms' visibility logics, are used to negotiate brand deals and calculate ad-sharing revenue and creator funds administered

by platforms. This means that visibility is linked to value at the level of monetary compensation and commercial worth, as well as social capital and recognition.

Yet visibility is not always empowering. Although visibility can be a conduit to success, it also generates vulnerabilities. Visibility can lead to surveillance and harassment, particularly for marginalized groups (Duffy & Meisner, 2023), because of the way specific identities and politics circulate within economies of visibility (Banet-Weiser, 2018) and are encoded into algorithmic recommendation systems (see, for example, Rauchberg, 2025). As such, visibility can engender both progressive social politics and problematic surveillance (Duffy & Hund, 2019), bringing to the surface issues about who is made visible in content, to whom content is made visible, and the value and impact of visibility. The potential harms, as Suuronen, Reinikainen, Borchers, and Strandberg's (2022) research with Finnish influencers indicates, can be attributed to imagined audience reactions, as some influencers avoid discussing political topics because of anticipated backlash. Additionally, it stems from opaque governance structures, expressed through inconsistent and ambiguous corporate communication about content moderation, particularly for politicized content (Divon, Are, & Briggs, 2025), which potentially disincentivizes production.

In the context of social movements, achieving visibility is assumed to be crucial. Jiménez-Martínez and Edwards' (2023) theoretical work on modalities of visibility identifies parallels between the strategic management of visibility in social movements and that of influencers. Visibility can be understood as a source of recognition—both a means to gain awareness and empowerment and a transient experience perceived as a reward because of its scarcity. These nuanced understandings of visibility are vital for addressing the complexities of promoting social justice: Influencers learn to navigate the logic of visibility across platforms, carefully pursuing being seen by the right audiences and advertisers, while considering what they (seek to) make visible through their content and what visibility achieves.

As commercial actors, particularly when engaging in influencer marketing, influencers' promotion of social justice can be viewed as a continuation of other advertising practices. Sobande (2019) critiques brands for utilizing the discourse of wokeness and adopting the language of intersectionality in their advertising, which misappropriates ideas of social justice activism. How influencers make social justice, then, brings with it issues around leveraging awareness for commercial gain and the performativity of online visual content. This is exemplified in discussions of Blackout Tuesday, where Instagram users shared black squares to show alignment with the Black Lives Matter movement following the murder of George Floyd in 2020. Wellman (2022) proposes that some White wellness influencers' participation was premised on securing credibility with followers, leading to a "memeification of social justice" (p. 2). This critique emphasizes the importance of the influencer's identity and their relationship to the social issue, as well as the content shared, its form, and the motivation behind sharing. Her analysis suggests that invoking social justice can be limited when disconnected from meaningful engagement with underlying issues and focused on visual representation.

To understand the form, structure, and platform-specific aesthetics of social justice content shared by influencers, I draw on the concept of platform vernaculars. This refers to the "unique combination of styles, grammars, and logics" produced through the interplay of mediated practices and conventions within the community of users and affordances (Gibbs, Meese, Arnold, Nansen, & Carter, 2015, p. 257).

Specifically, I focus on how influencers use "repeatable aesthetics" (Leaver, Highfield, & Abidin, 2020)—the remediation of aesthetic choices and practices by users with and through algorithmic systems—in social justice content. Existing literature has examined the use of Instagram's templates (Rintel, 2013) for activism, such as Blackout Tuesday posts (Wellman, 2022) and social justice "slideshows," which present information and calls to action as visual and rhetorical political tactics (Dumitrica & Hockin-Boyers, 2023). On TikTok, imitation and replication occur through the circulation of multimodal content, such as audio and video memes (Abidin & Kaye, 2021) and challenges (Zhao & Abidin, 2023), which can be politically oriented. For instance, Cervi and Divon (2023) explore how ordinary Palestinian users engage in "playful activism" within different #challenge templates as a form of political participation. Abidin (2020) suggests that such political engagement is part of TikTok's culture, arguing that social justice content thrives under TikTok's specific conditions of visibility. This implies that influencers might find TikTok better suited than Instagram for promoting social justice content, emphasizing the importance of understanding the particularities of templates and repeatable specifics within platform cultures.

Building on these insights, this article seeks to understand how popular Dutch influencers promote social justice on TikTok and Instagram within the logics of visibility that structure how their content is recommended and seen, their personal identities and beliefs, and expectations and pressures from platforms, audiences, and brands. It addresses the following questions:

RQ1: What social justice topics are shared by Dutch influencers in their TikTok and Instagram content?

RQ2: How does this promotion take place within platform cultures?

RQ3: How are monetization traces visible within social justice content?

Method

To explore how influencers make social justice visible, I identify and examine how social justice is promoted in content shared by popular Dutch influencers on TikTok and Instagram. While the Dutch influencer industry is relatively small, with only 150 influencers meeting the threshold of national law requiring registration with the Dutch Media Authority, it is increasingly professionalized, featuring a range of business models (Gui, Bertaglia, Goanta, de Vries, & Spanakis, 2024) and a self-regulation certification scheme focused on ethical advertising. Drawing on a dataset of Dutch influencers curated from the Dutch Media Authority registry (Gui et al., 2024), I selected the 15 most-followed influencers based on their combined followings across TikTok and Instagram. The visibility of monetization practices in their content and bios, such as brand collaborations, affiliate marketing, subscriptions, and merchandise, suggests a successful translation of fame into income, raising the question of whether they also use their platforms to influence followers on social justice issues and causes. This is particularly relevant in the Dutch context, where social justice awareness is high (Hellmann, Schmidt, & Heller, 2019), but declining rates of civic engagement (Meijeren, Lubbers, & Scheepers, 2023), coupled with a belief among Dutch Gen Z that influencers should create positive change (Joosten, 2021).

Drawing on the TikTok and Instagram accounts of these 15 influencers, I identified social justice content available in September 2024 (see Annabell, 2025, for the dataset). I classified content as "social justice content" based on the following definition, which builds on Abidin and Lee (2022): content that promotes fairness and equality in society by drawing attention to systemic barriers and social divisions, distributions of rewards and burdens, and issues of representation. Rather than relying on keywords or hashtags, I sought to qualitatively identify whether the content addressed any elements in the definition, thereby capturing both explicit and implicit expressions of social justice. The dataset was reviewed multiple times to ensure that all identified posts (n = 88) could be considered as promoting social justice without evaluating the authenticity or commercial co-optation of claims.

Data collection was limited to Instagram posts and reels as well as TikTok videos shared between January 1, 2020, and August 2024. This period was marked by social justice movements, including Black Lives Matter, climate activism, the invasion of Ukraine, and the war on Gaza, which is reflected in the dataset. Data collection was also shaped by availability, excluding ephemeral content, such as stories, content subsequently archived or deleted by the influencer, and moderated by highly dynamic political content policies.

Using this dataset, I conducted a content analysis to systematically examine each post, following an iterative process to develop content categories. This included inductively creating and refining clusters to identify, for each post, the social justice topic (what systemic barrier, social division, or inequality was being addressed), monetization traces (what business model or income generation practice was visible), temporal reference, and cross-platform sharing.

I analyzed specific posts qualitatively through multimodal discourse analysis (Kress & Bezemer, 2023). Posts are understood as texts composed of different modes, made coherent through their use of semiotic resources and platform affordances. Posts that best represented variation in the dataset were analyzed to better understand how social justice was promoted, focusing on the visuality and templatability of social justice, as well as its integration with the branded self. These examples were chosen based on a "preliminary long soak" (Hall, 1975, p. 15) conducted before and during content analysis.

Analysis

Promotion of Social Justice Topics Through the Personal and Branded Self

Among the 15 most-followed Dutch influencers, 10 directed attention toward social justice through 51 Instagram posts and 37 TikTok videos. The promotion of social justice in the dataset was anchored in issues of unfairness, inequality, or social division, rather than in social justice as a concept itself. Thus, the broad and abstract notion of social justice becomes shareable in content through the following eight topics:

- LGBTQ+ rights and discrimination faced by the queer community
- Gender inequalities and sexism
- Racism and celebration of racial differences as a means to address misrepresentation

- Financial inequality and the unequal distribution of wealth
- Environmental issues arising from the (unequal) exploitation of natural resources and the impact of climate change
- Rights of animals and the unequal treatment of species
- Social divisions and inequalities expressed through wars and conflicts
- Allocation of resources after natural disasters

As Figure 1 shows, different levels of visibility, measured by the quantity of content, were given to the topics present in the social justice content. The most frequently shared topics were LGBTQ+ rights, environmental issues, and war, illustrating the landscape of social justice in the Netherlands through the specific lens of promotion by popular Dutch influencers and, in some instances, aligning with contemporary news events, as discussed in the following section. Neither social justice issues related to age or disability nor formal politics, for example, are visible in the TikTok videos and Instagram posts shared by this cohort.

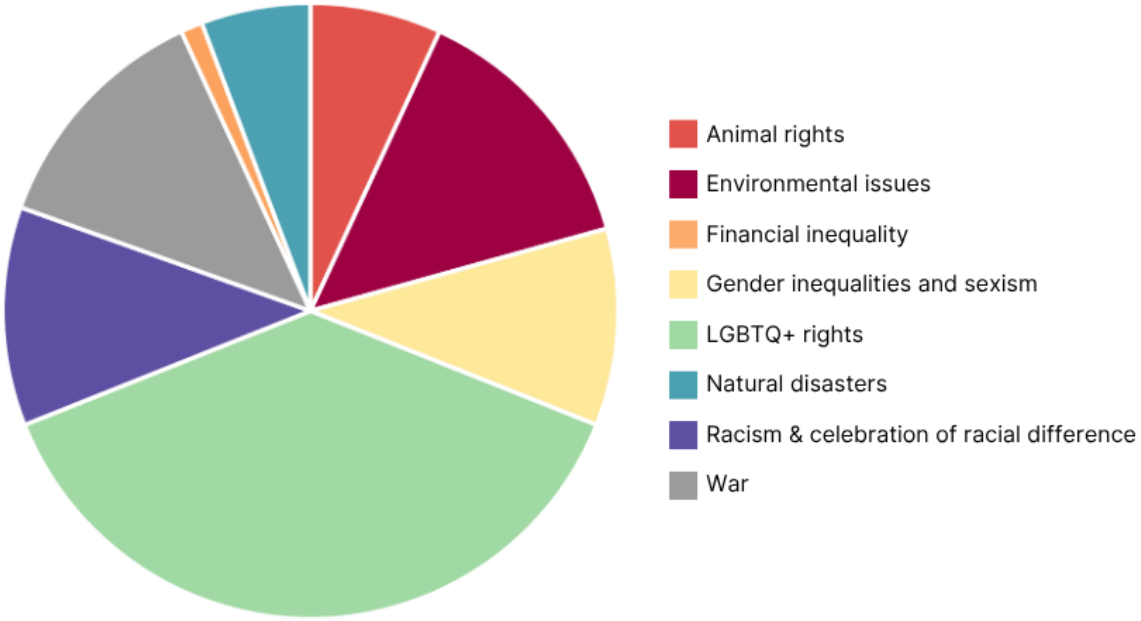

Figure 1. Classification of social justice content by topic.

Influencer Identity and Alignment with Social Justice Topics

Turning to the influencer as an individual with lived experiences and as a self-brand allows us to understand the promotion of these particular topics. LGBTQ+ rights content (n = 33) is shared exclusively by trans beauty influencer NikkieTutorials, and much of the content raising awareness about wars and earthquakes in Afghanistan and Palestine (n = 11) was shared by Afghanistan-born Nilab Kar. For both influencers, social justice is "on-brand" because their identity characteristics align with the visibility of social

justice. This suggests that influencers from marginalized groups may carry a burden of representation and use their accounts to promote social justice in ways that differ from their counterparts, creating an uneven distribution of who produces social justice content among popular Dutch influencers.

The relationship between social justice themes and influencer identity extends beyond identity characteristics. There is also a strong alignment between social justice and the brand identity of the influencer, as demonstrated by Wim Hof, a health and wellness influencer. The environmental rights content he produces integrates seamlessly into his brand identity. For instance, an Instagram post includes a caption with three "COOL facts" and "not so COOL facts" related to the melting ice sheets affecting the polar bears, seals, and orcas in the Arctic featured in photos (Hof, 2021a). Without explicitly naming climate injustice, the hashtag #noplanetb and the encouragement to "share this post to spread awareness 🌎" convey an activist intent (Hof, 2021a). Although this is more explicit in his content on climate change, CO_2 emissions, and human impact, the focus on ice underscores the connection established between his brand, *Ice*man Hof, and the representation of the climate crisis through melting ice.

Authenticity in Narrative Framing

The need for the social justice topic to authentically align with the influencer's self-brand shapes the centrality of social justice promotion within the content. In some cases, social justice is presented as a motivation for sharing. Through an Instagram video, food influencer KEVIN from KWOOWK (2022) expresses his support for Ukraine and the people affected by the war. The post follows his typical format, showing the process of cooking a dish with voice-over narration, but the underlying reason is constructed as different ("I'm making this to raise awareness for ways that we can help"; KEVIN from KWOOWK, 2022). In his caption, he also states, "I will stop all content output this weekend until we can all process what's happening" (KEVIN from KWOOWK, 2022). Consequently, he suggests that social justice can be integral to content production, wherein content can serve as a vehicle for social justice, particularly in raising awareness and encouraging donations. Additionally, the absence of content production can also be viewed as an act of social justice, providing space for other voices within the logics of visibility.

Rather than being central to production, some influencers integrate social justice themes alongside the narrative focus. One of Van Oostenbrugge's (2024) video montages of working out at the gym begins with screen text critiquing gender stereotypes. She recalls growing up "hearing that women need to be as small as possible . . . it didn't even cross my mind that women could build strength," which is reinforced by a similarly worded sentiment in the caption (Van Oostenbrugge, 2024). Although sexism is not explicitly mentioned, by subtly weaving unfairness in society and alluding to gender division in gym content, this post is oriented toward promoting social justice.

Regardless of the prominence of social justice, the message is integrated through the branded self and influencers' personal lives and experiences. This extends Abidin and Cover's (2019) work on the personalization of political messages through lifestyle content by drawing attention to what constitutes the personal in the conceptualization of the influencer: the strategic and intentional positioning of self in genre niches, as well as the showcasing of personal identity characteristics, such as belonging to social groups.

Conversely, five of the 15 influencers did not share social justice content, suggesting potential perceptions of incompatibility between the branded influencer self and social issues.

Social justice content accounted for only 0.5% of Instagram and TikTok content during the time period, despite social involvement being expected as a trend for influencers in the Netherlands (Joosten, 2021). It suggests a tension between understanding visibility as transient and as a source of recognition (Jiménez-Martínez & Edwards, 2023). Influencers face the challenge of making social justice visible in their content to garner awareness against the scarcity of visibility in the attention economy. While understanding the impact of this content is beyond the article's scope, the low proportion does not represent a lack of care or interest from nonpolitical influencers, as exemplified by the posts examined thus far.

Platform Relevance of Social Justice

Along with promoting social justice through personal and branded identities, influencers draw on platform vernaculars (Gibbs et al., 2015) to integrate social causes and issues into content. Within the logics of visibility and recommendation, influencers establish the relevance of social justice issues through temporal references as well as the mobilization of platform-specific repeatable formats and audiovisual aesthetics, which shape how social justice becomes legible and affective within the logics of Instagram and TikTok.

Temporal References

Influencers evoke the present moment in social justice content through references to unfolding events. As Figure 2 illustrates, this occurs in just over a third of the dataset, following the temporal logic of "the now" on social media (Coleman, 2018). Along with news events, which Goodwin et al. (2023) also found to be a motivating factor for political sharing, I also identify media events. While news and media events rely on mediation processes, media events, like award ceremonies, magazine covers, and television shows, aim to generate positive attention for the promotional object. Critically, the timeliness of events serves as a means to make social justice visible and deserving of attention in the stream of content.

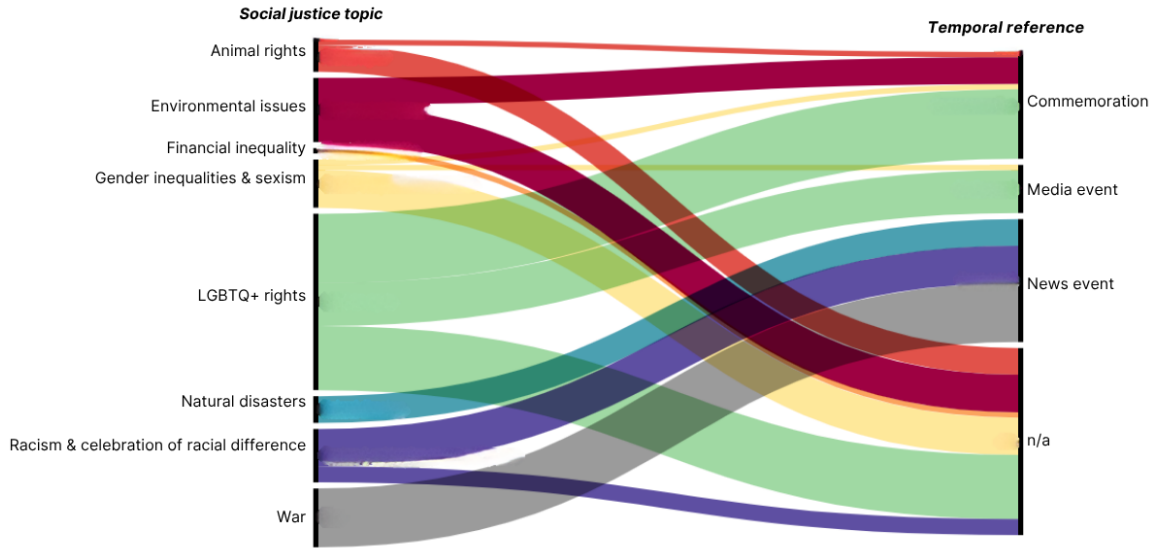

Figure 2. Distribution of temporal references in social justice content.

Social justice content also mobilized cultural and national acts of remembrance, such as posts for Transgender Day of Visibility or World Bee Day, as well as past moments of personal significance. For example, each year, NikkieTutorials commemorates her coming out in 2020 on YouTube. Not only does this reinforce prior work on coming-out narratives by Queer beauty vloggers (Homant & Sender, 2019), but it also demonstrates how this script of establishing identity is reproduced over time. In her 2022 Pride makeup video (NikkieTutorials, 2022), multiple layers of remembrance were evident. She revealed her new tattoo, which served as a physical reminder of coming out, and created a makeup look to mark that moment and celebrate Pride Month. The screen text "Celebrate being more free than ever" captures this entanglement of lived and mediated experiences, personal and cultural commemoration, and LGBTQ+ advocacy (NikkieTutorials, 2022).

Mobilization of Platform Vernaculars

Influencers use platform-specific, socio-technical repertoires in their social justice content, leveraging templates and repeatable aesthetics for political purposes. The black squares shared on Instagram following George Floyd's murder in 2020 were a specific template reproduced to express support for Black Lives Matter. Van Vliet (2020a) is one of several Dutch influencers who shared a Blackout Tuesday post. Her caption, "Muted. But listening. But learning 🖤" reveals an understanding of what Blackout Tuesday is (Van Vliet, 2020a). The term "muted" resonates with the earlier point about withdrawing regular content as a way of highlighting significant issues, along with the aim of cofounders Brianna Agyemang and Jamila Thomas (Coscarelli, 2020). Van Vliet (2020a) also elaborates on what she is doing while not sharing: listening and learning. This alludes to and, thus, makes visible the online and offline practices in which she

is engaged, preempting critiques that social justice content treats visibility as an end in itself (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Jiménez-Martínez & Edwards, 2023).

Three days before sharing this Instagram post, Van Vliet (2020b) also shared a TikTok video to support Black Lives Matter. In this, Van Vliet lip-syncs to a song with social justice lyrics about marriage equality, which she repurposes to call for racial justice. This video aligns with TikTok's audiovisual culture, indicating how she mobilizes specific-platform vernaculars to make systemic racism and police brutality shareable and showable across Instagram and TikTok.

Participatory lip-syncing, as part of TikTok's vernacular ecologies, is used by Nilab Kar on five occasions. To draw attention to the war in Afghanistan, she lip-syncs to a popular love song as her eyes fill with tears, her face is painted with the Afghanistan flag, and barbed wire is wrapped around her throat (Kar, 2020). While lip-syncing exemplifies the circulation of memetic content on TikTok, it becomes imbued with expressions of sadness and anger in social justice content. The (re)framing of lip-sync content for social justice purposes is established in this example through the opening slideshow of war images, which creates a dialogue with Kar's (2020) performance. These images also indicate the cross-platform migration of this repeatable aesthetic from Instagram (Dumitrica & Hockin-Boyers, 2023), potentially used for its familiarity within platform culture as a means to highlight social justice.

Similar to the integration of social justice issues into TikTok genres, AR filters are also used. An example is Kar's (2023) use of the "filter by good" in one of her TikTok videos. This AR filter, known as an Effect in the TikTok ecosystem, was intentionally created by designer Jourdan Johnson to raise money "to help the people of Gaza," leveraging the TikTok Effect House Rewards program (Louise, 2023). The "filter for good" requires the user to move a watermelon slice along a grey path, collecting watermelon seeds. The watermelon, a symbol of Palestinian resistance, along with the filter's name displayed as metadata on the video, subtly implies how the interactive game supports humanitarian work. Kar (2023) does not elaborate further or explicitly connect the content to social justice. There is no caption. However, she encourages participation in what Maris, Caplan, and Thach (2025) term "mutual algorithmic aid" (p. 4072) with the screen text "Y'all try this filter" (Kar, 2023). The filter exemplifies how users collaborate to redirect the value they create on-platform toward specific needs, people, and causes (Maris et al., 2025).

TikTok's platform vernaculars of imitation and replication in video memes (Abidin & Kaye, 2021) are also repurposed to promote social justice. NikkieTutorials (2021) illustrates this with her video "Put a Finger Down: Trans Edition." Following the meme template, she puts her fingers down to indicate she has experienced the moments she verbally lists, in this instance, transphobic ones (e.g., people telling you it is just a phase; parts of your family have rejected you; you've been attacked). Rather than being humorous, the format allows NikkieTutorials to make discriminatory experiences visible and provides a space for connection over shared experiences. She also breaks from the template by speaking about Trans Visibility Day and addressing trans people directly: "We are here and not going anywhere" (NikkieTutorials, 2021), demonstrating how existing memes are reworked to become a mechanism for participation in activism.

The examples analyzed in this section suggest that Dutch influencers are sensitive to platform-specific vernaculars on Instagram and TikTok when producing content. These vernaculars enable

expressions of social justice, rendered legible in platform cultures, but also constrained by enforcing scripts of "appropriate" engagement and aesthetics. The development of social justice-specific vernaculars on TikTok resonates with Abidin's (2020) assessment that social justice content performs well on TikTok, and Divon and Krutrök (2025) research on how war influencers use TikTok vernaculars to share war narratives and promote civic engagement. The prevalence of platform templates and audiovisual aesthetics reflects the pervasiveness of visibility logics, in which achieving visibility for social justice is tied to how platforms reward visibility. This also plays out in cross-posting. For example, although the "put a finger down" format is attributed to TikTok, NikkieTutorials (2021) first shared her version on Instagram and then posted it on TikTok the following day. Of the 88 posts in the dataset, 28 were shared across Instagram and TikTok, indicating efforts to avoid overdependence on a single platform through content recycling (Glatt, 2022).

Social Justice as a Monetizable Endeavor

The promotion of social justice by popular Dutch influencers often translates into monetized content. I approach this by examining practices of monetization visible in content through monetization traces. For example, in the list of products NikkieTutorials (2020) includes in the caption for a Pride makeup look, she includes a promo code for foundation. In an Instagram post promoting environmental rights and highlighting plastic in the oceans, Hof (2021b) reminds his followers to visit his link in bio, where they can purchase his T-shirts, produced in collaboration with a sustainable print company. These examples illustrate the commercialization of social justice rhetoric as influencers incorporate social justice into their advertising, including their own brands, and demonstrate how the blurred boundaries between commercial speech and political activism (Goodwin et al., 2023; Lewis, 2020; Riedl et al., 2023) take many forms.

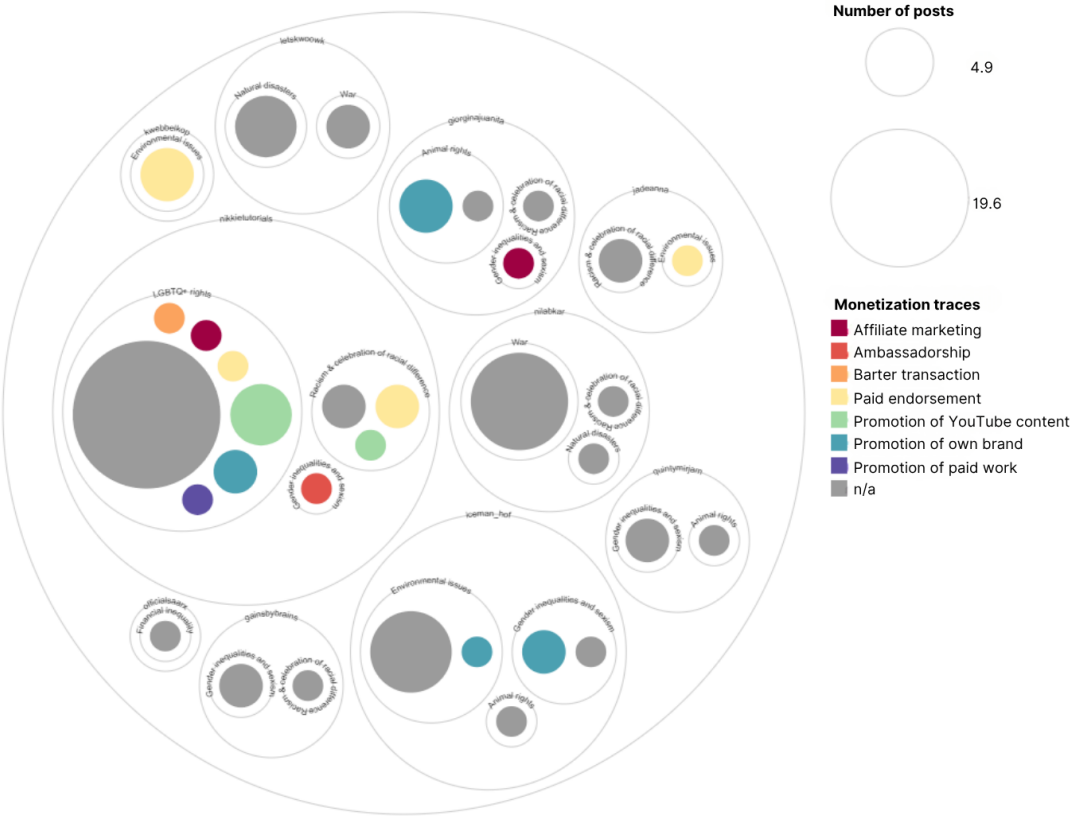

Figure 3. Distribution of monetization traces in social justice content.

Figure 3 shows the distribution of monetization traces, distinguishing between types of influencer marketing (barter transactions, affiliate marketing, ambassadorship, and paid endorsement) and other forms of promotion linked to payment (promotion of paid work, promotion of own brand, and promotion of YouTube content). It illustrates the various ways this group of influencers navigate the commercial and political. Five influencers shared social justice content with no monetization traces, suggesting a clear division. This promotion of social justice can thus be considered part of their freedom of expression as influencers, suggesting a moral stance. There are also no monetization traces in content addressing war, natural disasters, and financial inequality, indicating a potential incompatibility between some issues and monetization.

This differs from Kwebbelkop's (2023) engagement with social justice, which is exclusively monetized, indicating that income generation is another way social justice becomes shareable and "on-brand." In his three-part TikTok series, he is invited on a brand trip where he learns to "eat different, to save the planet" as part of World Eat for Good Day, integrating discussions on environmental issues (Kwebbelkop, 2023). His approach to social justice and monetization aligns with the critique leveled at brands for co-opting social justice activism language in advertising culture by Sobande (2019).

Other influencers promote social justice topics through both organic and monetized content. The proportion of monetized social justice content by NikkieTutorials, particularly about LGBTQ+ rights, illustrates how the close alignment between social justice and her self-brand can be effectively integrated into her monetization portfolio, enabling her to receive compensation for her social justice efforts. The social justice content shared by Giorgina Juanita sometimes includes monetization traces. For instance, her message of advocacy around body positivity and women is packaged through collaboration with a body care brand (Juanita, 2020), whereas her self-promotion of her beauty brand emphasizes how the product itself is cruelty-free, drawing on animal rights discourse (Juanita, 2021). This indicates how social justice can serve as a promotional narrative in branded content and be embedded in the promoted object. Paying attention to how monetization connects to social justice in promotional influencer culture is vital for understanding what role social justice plays in promotion. That is, influencers not only promote social justice themes through monetized content but also make monetized content the vehicle through which social justice becomes visible.

Conclusion

As platforms implore creators to use their influence "for good" and audiences anticipate and expect influencers to speak out on unfolding social justice issues, our social media feeds are increasingly populated by political, educational, and activist content. This article empirically examines how this plays out within the TikTok and Instagram content shared by popular Dutch influencers. By starting with influencers who have large followings, rather than social justice or political influencers (Abidin & Lee, 2022; Arnesson & Reinikainen, 2024; Goodwin et al., 2023; Lewis, 2020; Riedl et al., 2023), I argue that we can explore how visibility is leveraged to promote social justice outside of expected expertise. This provides a productive avenue to think through the mobilization of visibility in social justice and activism within the operationalization of visibility in the creator economy. Influencers must navigate the visibility logics that define their work (Cotter, 2019; Duffy & Meisner, 2023) when promoting social justice, and the visibility of social justice becomes tied to the promotional culture of the influencer industry.

The Netherlands serves as a valuable case study for examining nonpolitical influencers, considering its local context and the global reach of influencers. Although social justice is embedded (at least on a global comparative level) in Dutch society, and influencers are expected to engage with social and political issues by younger audiences, social justice content remains relatively scarce among popular Dutch influencers, with a few influencers producing the majority of content on social justice topics. As this research demonstrates, these influencers employ transcultural practices, necessitated by the small Dutch market, as also indicated by previous findings on the use of English in 43.5% of Dutch influencer content (Gui et al., 2024), to make social justice visible.

The analysis of social justice content shared by the 15 most-followed Dutch influencers reveals how visibility logics pervade the promotion of social and political issues, enriching the theoretical work of Jiménez-Martínez and Edwards (2023). Influencers attribute relevance to specific social justice themes by (1) situating them in media and news events and annual patterns of commemoration, drawing on recognizable temporal templates; (2) developing and mobilizing platform vernaculars, including repeatable aesthetics of social justice content and memetic formats; and (3) authentically aligning social justice issues

with their personal or brand identity. These efforts demonstrate how the need for content to be recommended and seen by platforms and audiences structures the expression of social justice. Promoting social justice does not disrupt or unsettle underlying influencer practices, necessitating radically different approaches to content production. Rather, influencers use their skills to produce social justice as showable, shareable, and legible within the competitive, attention-driven circulation of visibility.

Additionally, the analysis advances work on the intersection of the political and commercial, which is often addressed conceptually (Arnesson & Reinikainen, 2024; Goodwin et al., 2023; Lewis, 2020; Riedl et al., 2023) rather than empirically. Among popular Dutch influencers, social justice is monetizable, with issues made visible through the promotion of brands, products, and paid work. In some cases, monetization serves as the vehicle through which social justice is invoked, reinforcing the similarity between influencers and other commercial actors, such as brands, who use social justice language to advance a commercial agenda (Sobande, 2019). However, this does not mean that there should be a normative requirement to separate social justice content from monetization. Especially for influencers like NikkieTutorials, who draw on their experiences of inequality, being compensated for social justice work ensures that their labor is not exploited within the creator economy.

I argue that the way Dutch influencers produce social justice content reveals an understanding of social justice as *on-brand*. This situates social causes, inequalities, and injustices firmly within the realm of promotional culture and the boundaries of the influencer as a personal and commercial actor. Understanding the influencer as both an individual who narrates their personal life and a commercial actor who monetizes their parasocial relationships and self-branding, and the entanglement of these two aspects, underpins the promotion of social justice. As I have argued, approaching social justice as *promoted* is sensitive to how influencers can engage with social justice, as well as to the monetary value that social justice content can hold. Because the influencer industry is shaped by visibility logics and precarity that affect, among other things, monetization opportunities (Christin & Lu, 2023; Duffy & Meisner, 2023; Glatt, 2022), a framework of social justice as on-brand minimizes the risk of deviating from the cultivation of a self-brand while also contributing to the unequal promotion of social justice. It also highlights the structural inequalities at play. Belonging to marginalized groups affected by social justice issues appears to entail a responsibility to share content, leading to an uneven distribution of social justice content within the Dutch ecosystem.

While this research focused exclusively on the most popular Dutch influencers, future studies could examine how this operates within different cultural and political settings, allowing for comparative reflections. Moreover, using interviews and focus groups with influencers to explore social justice as part of branding would also generate insights into the processes of making sense of and self-branding practices that create social justice content, as well as how to tease out its intersection with platform governance. Furthermore, the conceptualization of social justice on-brand invites further theorization of the phenomenon beyond the influencer as it creeps into both commercial actors' and ordinary users' social media use.

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