The Pangea Dreams Instagram account is, quite literally, picture perfect. Embedded within its alternating pastel pink and white posts are pithy inspirational quotes, images of stunning landscapes and vistas, and promises to teach women new skills in “digital entrepreneurship and marketing through . . . intensive week-long educational retreats” in locations like Bali, Morocco, Peru, India, and Mexico (Pangea Dreams, 2021a). Invoking the name of a supercontinent that was once thought to connect every landmass on Earth, and derived from a portmanteau of two Greek words meaning “whole land,” Pangea Dreams pitches itself as the “#1 leader in women’s educational retreats,” bringing “women together from across the globe to explore bucket-list destinations,” and offering workshops on topics like “Branding and Finding Your Niche,” “Content Strategy and Calendar,” “Instagram Strategy,” “Photography,” “Photo Editing with Lightroom,” and “Brand Partnerships—Contracts, Deliverables, and Professionalism” (Pangea Dreams, 2021e; Spherical, 2019). Chaperoned by up to four “trip leaders” (often travel bloggers and influencers themselves) and accompanied by a professional photographer, participants are given the opportunity to generate—and post—content of their own with specially designated, destination-specific Pangea Dreams hashtags (#PangeaDreams, #PDTRBali, #PDTRPeru, among others).

In addition, the company offers “partnership” opportunities for brands, with tiered levels ranging from “lead sponsorship” to “content creation” to “gift bag” options, promising to put “your brand in front of female travel influencers and bloggers participating in the retreats while building their own online audiences” (Pangea Dreams, 2021b). In utilizing these strategies, Pangea Dreams has created a kind of feedback loop: their retreats and workshops both generate content creation and promotion for their own brand, as well as others, and effectively construct brand ambassadors who share—and reproduce—particular meanings, values, and identities about “womanhood,” “digital entrepreneurship,” and ideas of the influencer industry itself.

Influencer retreats like Pangea Dreams are part of a rapidly emerging organizational infrastructure within the social media entertainment industry that seeks to professionalize (and profit from) aspiring influencers and their labor, as well as mitigate the risks of an industry that is often perceived as
an “unregulated wild, wild, digital West” (Bishop, 2021; Cunningham & Craig, 2019; Lobato, 2016; Mann, 2014; Stoldt et al., 2019). As influencer marketing continues to grow as a lucrative industry (recent estimates by data firm Influencer Marketing Hub position the market to expand to US$16.4 billion by 2022, and travel influencing is one of the more lucrative sectors), and as the industry remains largely unregulated, an expanding network of firms and services have attempted to fill the lacunae of a more formalized industrial terrain (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2022a; Influencer Marketing Hub, 2022b; Bishop, 2021; Lorenz, 2022b). Research has positioned influencer marketing agencies (Abidin, 2016; Arriagada, 2021), multichannel networks (MCNs) (Cunningham & Craig, 2019; Lobato, 2016), influencer membership networks and conferences (Stoldt et al., 2019), and influencer management tools (Bishop, 2021) as intermediaries that operate in the interstice between influencers, platforms, and brands, as well as between the social media entertainment and advertising industries more broadly. Influencer retreats fulfill many of the same functions as these intermediary entities, working to “educate” and discipline aspiring influencers into commercially viable genres through professionalization, thereby limiting cultural production to the dictates of brands, and influencers themselves to the “promise” and “precarity” of platform visibility (Bishop, 2021; Duffy et al., 2021). Yet despite their highly visible role in influencer ecologies, influencer retreats have remained relatively overlooked as sites where powerful assumptions about the influencer industry are produced and circulated, and as mechanisms that attempt to control and guarantee “quality” within the industry.

Using Pangea Dreams as a case study, this article critically examines influencer retreats as important sites of industrialization within the social media entertainment industry. This research contributes to recent scholarship that has outlined the emergence of social media entertainment and its rapid formalization as an industry (Cunningham & Craig, 2019, 2021) by arguing that influencer retreats constitute sites where assumptions about modes of production, labor, and content are produced and circulated, passing industry lore (Havens, 2014) and knowledge onto those aspiring to break into the scene. Positioning influencer retreats as part of a growing influencer para-industry (Caldwell, 2014; Lobato, 2016; Mann, 2014), I argue that influencer retreats like Pangea Dreams operate as an “economic and cultural-industrial interface” that surrounds the social media entertainment industry to produce texts, meanings, subjectivities, and knowledge about the industry itself (Caldwell, 2014, p. 721). Although influencer retreats have often been a site of derision in the popular press and among creators themselves (Anna’s Analysis, 2020), I argue that these sites deserve consideration and critical examination as part of the “extra-textual” field surrounding the rapidly formalizing social media entertainment industry, where meanings about the industry are produced and circulated (Caldwell, 2014, p. 721). As scholars have noted, the “social devaluation” of influencers is often linked to the “presumed feminization of the influencer space” (Abidin, 2016; Duffy & Sawey, 2021, p. 137), and I argue that this logic extends to influencer retreats. While this article uses Pangea Dreams as a case study, this research provides broader insights into processes of industrialization in the social media entertainment industry and its growing para-industry, as well as a critical examination of the ways in which influencer retreats both reflect and reproduce social inequalities and hierarchies within the industry according to familiar patterns of class, gender, and race.

**Literature Review**

**Influencer Marketing and the Rise of Social Media Entertainment**

The emergence of the social media influencer has been well-documented and discussed. Defined as any Internet user who has “accumulate[d] a relatively large following on blogs and social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles,” influencers constitute a category of “micro-celebrity” (Senft, 2008) that has achieved a high level of visibility through practices of self-branding and entrepreneurialism (Abidin, 2016, p. 3; Duffy & Hund, 2015; Marwick, 2015). This category of creative labor emerged against the backdrop of wider political and economic shifts—falling under the broad rubric of neoliberalism and global capitalism—that began in the 1970s and that have had a particularly destabilizing effect within the cultural industries, increasing employment precarity and requiring a high degree of flexibility from workers who take on risks and responsibilities that were once the responsibility of employers, such as training, healthcare, and a stable salary (Duffy, 2017; Hearm & Schoenhoff, 2015; Neff, 2012). Within this context, the emergence of platforms like YouTube in the early 2000s, followed by platforms like Instagram in the 2010s, contributed to an explosion of “do-it-yourself” (DIY) media production practices through low barriers to entry, and entrepreneurial individuals practicing “creative self-enterprise” (Duffy & Hund, 2015, p. 1) have capitalized on partnerships with brands seeking access to the niche audiences and communities influencers have fostered across platforms (Bishop, 2021; Cunningham & Craig, 2019; Duffy, 2017; Duffy et al., 2021; Shtern & Hill, 2021). The rise of influencers, and their focus on brand sponsorship, has transformed apps like Instagram into platforms of “shoppability,” or sites at which social interaction occurs in an environment encoded with “marketplace logics, capacities, and proclivities,” embedded in both the “physical designs and cultural forms” available within the app (Hund & McGuigan, 2019, p. 20). At the same time that platforms increasingly rely on influencers to generate revenue through advertising (Shtern & Hill, 2021), influencers must continuously organize their cultural production around the infrastructures and algorithms of platforms and
the demands of advertisers to remain visible and thus profitable (Bishop, 2018, 2019; Duffy et al., 2021; Poell et al., 2022). The result is a rapidly formalizing and professionalizing industrial space where influencers increasingly occupy niche commercial verticals like travel, fashion, beauty, wellness, lifestyle, sport, and video gaming that are attractive to brands (Bishop, 2018, 2021; Lobato, 2016).

Influencer retreats can thus be positioned within the broader ecology of the social media entertainment industry, defined by Cunningham and Craig as “an emerging proto-industry fueled by professionalizing, previously amateur content creators using new entertainment and communicative formats” (2019, p. 5). The social media entertainment industry is difficult to map and measure due to its rapid iteration, the liminal space it occupies in the media industries between Silicon Valley technologies and Hollywood-established screen media, and the dearth of authoritative or objective data on its scale and scope (Cunningham & Craig, 2019, 2021). This article positions influencer retreats as one site at which to examine the rapid formalization of this industry. Importantly, while social media entertainment has significantly “disrupted the normative route through which media talent is filtered” (Cunningham & Craig, 2019, p. 11), the industry is still characterized by precarity and instability (Bishop, 2019; Duffy, 2017; Duffy et al., 2021; O’Meara, 2019). Ideals of entrepreneurialism and perseverance continue to be pervasive and persistent within this industry and contribute to assumptions that anyone can become a successful influencer (Duffy, 2017; Duffy & Hund, 2015). Yet, in reality, successful influencers are often those with pre-existing forms of social privilege and capital, particularly those who are white and middle class, and becoming an influencer remains merely aspirational for many (Bishop, 2018; Duffy, 2017). Furthermore, scholars have documented the ways in which social media entertainment continues to be structured by exclusionary practices that reify inequality based on race, gender, sexuality, class, and other intersecting axes of identity, particularly in relation to ideas of “brand safety” that privilege unmarked categories of whiteness, cis-genderism, and heteronormativity as mainstream, uncontroversial, and therefore “safe” and profitable for brands (Bishop, 2018, 2021).

While influencer marketing has grown rapidly in scale and volume in recent years (Bishop, 2021), brands have historically been reluctant to advertise on platforms like YouTube given the lack of control they have over user-generated content (Andrejevic, 2009; Bishop, 2018). Concerns from marketers and advertisers that their messaging will be associated with “illegal, inappropriate, sophomoric, amateur or copyright infringing” content (Bishop, 2018, p. 72) have led to changes in the kinds of content platforms value and make visible through their algorithms, and the introduction of influencer management tools to rank and score influencers in accordance with perceptions of brand safety have further entrenched forms of exclusion through algorithmic matchmaking (Andrejevic, 2009; Bishop, 2021; Duffy et al., 2021). As a result, while scholars have argued that platforms like YouTube, and the social media entertainment industry more broadly, are spaces that are more “racially plural, multicultural, and gender diverse by far than mainstream media” (Cunningham & Craig, 2019, p. 11), the prioritization of and investment in branded content across platforms effectively obscures much of this content via algorithms that flag words like “queer,” “gay,” “lesbian,” “bisexual,” and “trans” as “unsuitable for advertisers,” or exclude Black creators from the visible home pages of platforms like TikTok (Bishop, 2018, 2021, p. 5). Consequently, influencers have engaged in informal strategies like trading “algorithmic gossip,” using “algospeak” to evade content moderation filters, forming grassroots groups like “engagement pods,” and doing research and collecting knowledge about how to “play” the “visibility game” in an attempt to circumvent the constantly updating algorithms that render content (in)visible (Bishop, 2018, 2019; Cotter, 2019; Lorenz, 2022a; O’Meara, 2019). These informal strategies can be institutionalized, as with the Internet Creators Guild’s “Changelog,” which formalizes algorithmic gossip by documenting changes to YouTube’s algorithm and circulating this information to paying members (Bishop, 2019). In a similar way, influencer retreats represent more formalized spaces where these forms of knowledge—about brand safety, strategies for navigating platforms, and assumptions about labor—are circulated, ultimately reproducing inequalities and hierarchies within the social media entertainment industry that fall along classed, gendered, and raced lines, and shaping cultural production to the needs and desires of advertisers.

**Influencer Intermediaries and the Influencer Para-Industry**

Complicating what is often considered a “messy” and unregulated industrial space are the “thickening layers” of management and expertise that have accrued around Internet celebrity and influencer economies (Lobato, 2016, p. 349). It is within this context that intermediaries like influencer retreats have risen to prominence, as the growing number of aspiring influencers has far outpaced those who are able to break into the burgeoning industry and as advertisers and brands increasingly exert more control over the industry and cultural producers therein (Bishop, 2021; Duffy, 2017). Consequently, entrepreneurial influencers, among other groups like talent agencies and influencer marketing firms, have identified a gap in the market, providing products and services aimed at teaching aspiring influencers about industry conventions, norms, and practices. These intermediaries have emerged, in part, to fill the lacunae of a more developed regulatory and industrial structure in the social media entertainment industry. Through algorithmic matchmaking (Bishop, 2021), talent management (Cunningham & Craig, 2019; Lobato, 2016), and professionalism services (Stoldt et al., 2019), these intermediaries attempt to further formalize (and stabilize) the
industry by reassuring brands and advertisers through external (and what are often perceived as “objective”) “guarantees of quality” (Bishop, 2021). As scholars have noted, intermediary work is inherently precarious due to its position between industrial spaces and the necessity to innovate across industries, and social media entertainment intermediaries are perhaps even more precarious than influencers themselves (Cunningham & Craig, 2019). This research adds to the growing body of work that examines the ways in which this industry has produced and capitalized on a whole range of products and experiences that promise to launch the aspiring influencer into full-fledged Internet celebrity stardom and guarantee quality for brands—through photography “tutorials” and Lightroom “presets,” online courses and self-published books, podcasts, and even experiential educational “retreats” meant to teach aspiring influencers the digital and proverbial ropes. These professionalization products should not be ignored, as they constitute sites at which the industry itself is reproduced according to economic and cultural logics and standards that largely reflect the interests of advertisers and brands.

It is important to note that these practices and products are not new. Instead, they represent a continuation of the kind of intermediary work that has historically structured the media and cultural industries. Scholars have drawn comparisons between MCNs and the talent agent model that began to coalesce around the studio system in the early days of Hollywood to broker deals between stars and studios (Lobato, 2016). Indeed, although it is “tempting to see the MCN as a wholly new and disruptive phenomenon—a creature of venture capital, platform surveillance and big data,” MCNs perform many of the same tasks as older media professions like media buyers, ad agencies, and agents (Lobato, 2016, p. 353). Rather than entirely new entities, MCNs instead represent “extensions of existing media work,” repackaging multiple roles into “novel combinations” (Lobato, 2016, p. 353). The same can be said for intermediaries like influencer retreats, which bear resemblance to practices in the fashion industry where modeling agencies facilitate connections to brand managers (Wissinger, 2009). These intermediaries “farm out” the production of value to consumers themselves by hosting “modeling parties” and by using the modeling world . . . to produce an ambiance for brands, by playing on the layered associations between models and the products their work advertises, the fashionable and attractive ideal they seek to embody, and lifestyle they strive to create the impression of having. (Wissinger, 2009, p. 289)

Influencer retreats act as conduits for similar forms of content “farming” and connection between aspiring influencers and brands: they not only provide formalized spaces where knowledge about the industry is produced and circulated, but also manufacture “ambiance” for brands through retreats in “exotic” locations and through their aspirational participants, who try their hand at producing branded content under the watchful eye of “professionals.” Indeed, these retreats reflexively create the impression that participants are living the lifestyle of travel influencers. Influencer retreats also share similarities with multilevel marketing companies, which have historically been highly feminized spaces of promotion that use “postfeminist and neoliberal discourses [to] teach consumers to manage risk and ‘dodge’ vulnerability or precariousness” and rely on the “recruitment” of new participants (Prins & Wellman, 2021, p. 4). However, unlike multilevel marketing companies, participants attending Pangea Dreams’ retreats are not compensated for any of their promotional activities or for recruiting new participants.

Influencer retreats like Pangea Dreams can be understood within the broader context of what John Caldwell (2014) has termed the “para-industry,” or the “economic and cultural-industrial interface woven together by socio-professional media communities, by trade narratives, ritualized interactions, and conventionalized self-representations” (p. 721). To be clear, this article does not endeavor to argue that influencer retreats function differently than other intermediary groups, as they fulfill the same functions as any other entity that seeks to facilitate connections between influencers and brands. Rather, I argue that we should instead position these intermediaries within the broader context of the influencer para-industry, or the “organizational structure for intermediary work in digital cultural industries” (Lobato, 2016, p. 354). To focus on the para-industry, then, is to broaden our view to include not only the specific occupational roles that make up this work (Lobato, 2016) or the technologies that facilitate it (Bishop, 2021; see also Morris, 2015 on infomediaries), but the wider industrial infrastructure in which these entities sit, and the “meta-texts” they produce as well (Caldwell, 2014, p. 722). That is, while intermediary groups facilitate the production of branded texts by connecting influencers with brands, these groups also produce reflexive, “scripted,” and “mediated” texts about producing branded texts, and about the industry itself (Caldwell, 2014, p. 721). This article examines influencer retreats and their associated “meta-texts” as part of a burgeoning influencer para-industry where the social media entertainment industry is itself produced.

**Building the Influencer Para-Industry: On the Origins of Pangea Dreams**

Although Pangea Dreams originally started as a production company, founder and CEO Tracy Komlos identified a demand in the market for an educational retreat relatively quickly. As she describes in a 2019 interview,

> The original idea was that we would work with five to fifteen brands, we would pool together the production costs, take the brands, products with us on location somewhere, and shoot all of their marketing materials so they could use it for their newsletters, their websites, their Instagram, social media, anything. (Spherical, 2019, 04:27–05:29)
In their first year as a production company, Pangea Dreams shot content for brands in Bali, Cuba, the Bahamas, and Iceland. After sharing this content on her personal Instagram account, Komlos was inundated with messages from “women all over the world,” who asked her to “teach” them how she was able to travel so frequently (Spherical, 2019, 04:27–05:29). Komlos was thus able to leverage her own personal success and brand as a budding influencer to create an experience for women hoping to break into the industry, one that would feature specific, desirable aspects of the industry for amateurs, like the use of a professional photographer, opportunities to produce “sponsored” content (if only through their affiliation with Pangea Dreams), and an “exotic,” exciting backdrop against which they could position themselves as travelers.

Pangea Dreams first began offering influencer retreats in 2016 (Spherical, 2019), and since that time, influencer retreats have only grown in popularity as influencer marketing continues to increase in scale and volume. Although the brand has since expanded to embrace “female creators, bloggers, small business owners, and entrepreneurs,” the impact of the influencer industry is apparent in the retreat’s design, as well as its founding story (Pangea Dreams, 2021c). Entry into an educational retreat like this one is not free. Women are expected to pay anywhere between US$2,799 and US$7,545 for the opportunity to experience life like a travel influencer for 7 days, and the booking website provides the helpful disclaimer that, “If you put into practice what you learn on the retreat, you should be able to make back the cost of the retreat within 6 months” (Pangea Dreams, 2021e). The aspirational aspect of this labor is evidenced in the cost of the retreat—women pay Pangea Dreams for the opportunity to become an influencer and to create branded content for both sponsors and the company itself. Indeed, Komlos has stated that the company has never spent money on promoting Pangea Dreams as a brand, instead relying on retreat participants to produce and circulate promotional content (Parker, 2018, 18:03–19:40).

Influencer retreats like Pangea Dreams offer participants the opportunity to interact with industry insiders and professionals (trip leaders and sometimes even Tracy Komlos herself), learn insider values and knowledge through the various workshops on offer, and engage in (unpaid) industry work throughout their 7-day experience by producing branded content to share with their own followers and the company. Participants are encouraged to adhere to industry norms, logics, and standards through their production practices during the retreat, effectively reproducing the industry itself. In this way, Pangea Dreams is able to manage both amateur consumption and production practices by incorporating participants into the cultural logics of the industry. Aspiring influencers are encouraged to incorporate the industry norms, logics, and standards Pangea Dreams imparts through workshops and production practices into their own personal brands, thus shaping and informing the cultural texts these participants produce. In this way, systems of power and knowledge governing the influencer industry are reproduced, replicated across “alumni” accounts and posts.

Method

This research is informed by a critical media industry studies approach, outlined by Havens, Lotz, and Tinic as centrally concerned with the “corporate dimensions of the media as a cultural system with its own tacit and explicit, yet contested, rules,” as well as the “everyday practices of cultural producers and their subsequent translation into the popular texts that contribute to larger sociocultural dialogue” (2009, p. 248). As such, a critical media industry studies approach takes a “midlevel” or “helicopter” level view (Havens et al., 2009, p. 237), focusing on industry operations, the human capacity for agency therein, and a “productive” idea of power that extends beyond economic control to encompass “specific ways of conceptualizing audiences, texts, and economics” (Havens et al., 2009, p. 237). A critical media industry studies approach allows for an examination of “how knowledge about texts, audiences, and the industry form, circulate, and change,” providing a framework with which to examine the intersection of production and consumption practices that arise in the context of influencer retreats, which complicate traditional boundaries around categories like “audience” and “fan,” “consumer” and “producer,” “professional” and “amateur.”

In keeping with this “midlevel” approach (Havens et al., 2009, p. 237), I examine both industrial discourses and textual artifacts, drawing from interviews with Pangea Dreams’ founder Tracy Komlos, popular press articles, Pangea Dreams’ website and social media pages, and individual participants’ and employees’ Instagram posts, identified with official hashtags like #PangeaDreams, #PDTRPeru, #PDTRBali, #PDTRTulum, and #PangeaDreamsAlumni. Searching these hashtags produces thousands of posts. To offer a brief sense of scale: #PangeaDreams has 6,502 posts; #PDTRBali has 2,089 posts; #PDTRTulum has over 628 posts; #PDTRPeru has over 228 posts; #PDTRGreece has 138 posts; #PDTRSriLanka has over 315 posts; #PDTRCambodia has 199 posts; and #PDTRMexico has 503 posts. With over 4 years of material to examine, it was not possible to analyze every single post. Instead, I focused on posts that included brand partnerships (identified through hashtags or tags), reposting and tagging strategies, and patterns in image type and style. As such, my analysis includes Instagram posts from 2017 to 2019. I examined these materials using discourse analysis. This approach involves developing “interpretive repertoires,” or “patterns,” in discourse, understood as “recurrent themes or ideas or tropes” across texts (Gill, 2018, p. 26). Within the field of communication studies, discourse analysis has developed a broader approach known as “multimodal analysis” that expands the site of analysis from language to include sound and image as well.
Ideas of entrepreneurialism and investment in the self were prevalent patterns across these materials, as were the tropes of "boss babes," and "girl bosses."

These various sources provide a perspective that approximates the "helicopter" view of critical media industry studies, allowing me to examine both the influencer industry as a cultural system and, to an albeit limited extent, the practices of the cultural producers therein (Havens et al., 2009, p. 237). By tracing the content participants generate and post on this particular influencer retreat, we can begin to see the ways in which the "alumni" of Pangea Dreams take up and incorporate the strategies they learn on retreats into the content they create, "translating" their everyday practices into the popular texts they produce. In addition, I will argue that these popular entertainment texts contribute to the larger "sociocultural dialogue" by reproducing particular social categories and positions, particularly through constructions of class, gender, and race. My findings demonstrate the ways in which influencer retreats work to construct ideas of the ideal influencer, drawing on and reproducing aspirational labor and highly visible forms of popular feminism to do so. Crucially, this construction of the ideal influencer is produced in accordance with ideas about brand safety and sponsored content, thereby "educating" and disciplining retreat participants and their forms of cultural production into the highly commercialized goals of brands and advertisers.

Findings

Constructing the Ideal Influencer: Aspirational Labor and the "Fake It 'Til You Make It" Mentality

In interviews and promotional materials, Pangea Dreams constructs the idea of the ideal influencer. She is a cisgender woman between the ages of 27 and 35, a demographic that Komlos calls the brand’s "sweet spot," although the retreats are open to women 18 and up (Solomon, 2020, 31:11–32:12). She is ready to "invest" in herself and make a change in her life, hoping either to pivot her career from her 9 to 5 desk job to something more creative, or interested in pursuing a "creative passion on the side" (Parker, 2018, 12:43–13:54; Solomon, 2020, 31:11–32:12). She is a "girl boss" who embraces "girl power" and is ready to "turn her passion into purpose" (Pangea Dreams, 2021a). She is what Brooke Erin Duffy calls the aspirational laborer, and she seeks to combine "pleasure and profitability" to thrive as a "female entrepreneur" (2017, p. 15; Pangea Dreams, 2021e). Pangea Dreams' ideal influencer is young, 'female', and empowered. She embraces popular forms of feminism and wants to lift other women up (Banet-Weiser, 2018). She is also able to afford the cost of one of Pangea Dreams' retreats, as well as airfare to a 'bucket-list destination' (Pangea Dreams, 2021a). In constructing both their intended audience and their own brand, then, Pangea Dreams simultaneously draws from and reproduces generational and gendered ideas of the influencer, reproducing forms of popular feminism in the process.

In doing so, Pangea Dreams reproduces rather than challenges the conditions under which the rise of the influencer has become possible, namely, the neoliberal, heteronormative, cisnormative, and patriarchal logics that structure aspirational labor and popular articulations of feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Duffy, 2017).

These popular forms of feminism and exhortations to aspiration are prominently displayed across Pangea Dreams’ Instagram account and promotional materials. Pangea Dreams’ Instagram grid is studded with inspirational quotes and directives foregrounded against pastel pink backgrounds: “Be the girl that never apologizes for chasing her dreams”; “Be the girl who just went for it”; “Here’s to becoming the breadwinner your parents wanted you to marry”; “Here’s to strong women. May we know them. May we be them. May we raise them.” The company’s website includes a “Testimonials” page, where past retreat participants praise the brand for bringing “boss babes” and “soul sisters” together and detail their achievements as budding travel influencers who have landed deals with brands, hotels, and tour companies in destinations like Iceland, Peru, and Colombia, all thanks to the skills Pangea Dreams (2021f) taught them. As a “female founded, female made, and female run” company offering experiences exclusively for women, Pangea Dreams has fully embraced the ethos of “girl power” and the archetype of the “girl boss” (Pangea Dreams, 2021a). In doing so, Pangea Dreams proffers its participants the promise of empowerment through self-employment and the prospect to prosper by “doing what they love” (Duffy, 2017, p. 4).

However, the opportunity to do so comes at a steep cost. In an interview on The Influencer Podcast with influencer Julie Solomon, founder Tracy Komlos encouraged women who were just starting out to “manage expectations” and “shift [their] mindset” when it came to securing brand deals and partnerships, especially in the travel industry (2020, 24:00–27:27; 17:35–18:35). Speaking about her own attempt to break into the industry, Komlos noted that, in the beginning, she had to “pay her dues,” adopting a “fake it ‘til you make it” attitude and suggesting that other women should follow suit:

... in order to really build a credible kind of media kit and case studies I had to do things for free and that was just part of me being like alright this is part of the journey, this is part of the steppingstones and building and building and building ... if you want to do this as a business, then isn’t you buying a flight and paying for an experience to create the data that you need to create so you can start pitching, that’s you investing in your business ... this is you investing in and so just shifting your mindset from like this is a vacation to like this is a business opportunity is crucial in that, especially if you do want to turn it
Edwards

into that business and that’s how you see your life playing out and how you want to start generating an income. You need to invest in it before you can start to expect making money like any business that’s out there. (Solomon, 2020, 13:42–18:35)

In doing so, Komlos acknowledged some of the obstacles aspiring influencers face in securing stable employment in the industry, namely, the need to generate desirable content and “evidence” of audience engagement with that content before brands are willing to sponsor them, give them free or discounted products, or pay them for their efforts. In encouraging aspiring influencers to “shift their mindset,” “manage expectations,” and “pay their dues,” Komlos uses the rhetoric of “investment” to frame success in her industry as an individual choice, one that depends on sufficient “buy-in” and perseverance, rather than the whims and marketing budgets of brands and other factors outside of individual control. Those who have the means to buy flights to faraway destinations and produce content without brand sponsorship or compensation are at a much greater advantage than those who do not. Furthermore, in encouraging women to start thinking of their vacations as “business opportunities,” Komlos illustrates the ways in which labor and leisure, profit and pleasure are blurred in an industry in which distinctions between professional and amateur collide. In this way, aspiring influencers’ leisure time and forms of creative self-expression are seen as professionalizing opportunities and resources. Participants are thus encouraged to take on significant financial risk as an investment into their own empowerment, which can only be achieved through the logic of the market.

This call to “fake it ’til you make it” in the industry is also highly gendered. It is not insignificant that Pangea Dreams’ retreats are exclusive to women and ask participants to embrace the rhetoric of aspirational labor to achieve economic empowerment and “girl boss” status. Komlos articulated as much when asked in a 2019 interview why she thinks women, in particular, have been so successful in travel marketing and promotion:

I think that there was a recent [statistic] that said that women have 70% of the buying power or something like that, and so I think that the travel industry has really embraced women travelers, as they know that we are the ones that actually do have the control, or the “power” so to say, to be like we’re going on this vacation or we’re taking the kids here or like we’re gonna do our honeymoon here, so I think that within the travel industry they are really favoring women travelers. (Spherical, 2019, 13:30–14:06)

Here, Komlos draws attention to women’s “power” as consumers who are able to effectively and affectively manipulate their families or partners into their preferred consumption practices. It is worth noting here that, during the interview, Komlos uses air quotes around the word power, and positions women in relation to their compulsory and assumed cisgender heterosexual partners and families. Women’s “power” is thus placed in relation to cisnormative, neoliberal, patriarchal, and heterosexual norms, in which women marry, have families, and their “power” is subsequently relegated to consumption practices and decisions within the domestic sphere. The “girl boss” who “chases her dreams” and “just goes for it” is thus constrained by these larger forces: she is a “girl boss” only inasmuch as she dictates the consumption practices of her family and others through her promotion of particular brands and destinations with her affective skills.

This aspirational labor is also notably positioned as personally and emotionally fulfilling. When asked why she chose to limit her retreats to women on The Lucky Few Podcast in 2018, Komlos spoke about the affective benefits of creating a women-only space, stating that,

when women come together . . . it creates a magical environment for these women to come together and truly speak about themselves, what their struggles are, what their strengths and weaknesses are, and how we can all work together to rise above it. (Parker, 04:00–04:29)

The retreats are thus framed not only as professional opportunities, but as opportunities for personal enrichment, emotional fulfillment, and intimate connection as well. Indeed, beyond the workshops run by trip leaders on digital entrepreneurship and strategy, participants also partake in gratitude journaling and intention setting every morning, as well as yoga or movement classes (Pangea Dreams, 2021e). In “following their passion” and “doing what they love,” women are promised careers that can enrich and enhance their lives, providing empowerment through market logics rather than in opposition to them. Furthermore, although Pangea Dreams offers the promise of connection and community among its participants, this connection comes at a cost (between US$2,799 and US$7,545, to be specific) that excludes many women on the basis of price, thereby creating an exclusive enclave of women who can afford to be empowered. Although Pangea Dreams began offering scholarships of US$1,000 to two to four women per each retreat in 2020 (a total of 16 women), the cost of these retreats is still largely prohibitive to many (Pangea Dreams, 2021c).

In addition to the prohibitive costs of these retreats, which effectively exclude women who cannot afford the high price of “investing” in their dreams, Pangea Dreams retreats are also overwhelmingly white. According to an email addressing the company’s goals to embrace racial diversity and address racism in the industry, only 18 of 63 women (28.5%) joining Pangea Dreams for retreats in 2019 were Black creators, bloggers, entrepreneurs, or business owners, while only 1 in 5 (20%) of Pangea Dreams team members were Black women in 2019 (Pangea Dreams, 2021e, personal communication, 23 June). These statistics are reflective of the ways in which racism and white supremacy continue to
structure both the cultural industries (Saha, 2018) and forms of popular feminism in which whiteness is positioned as both universal and mainstream, and thus more profitable for brands (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

While Pangea Dreams represents just one of many influencer retreats available to aspiring influencers, examining this particular retreat within the context of a growing influencer para-industry reveals the ways in which the cultural logics of the influencer industry are reproduced and circulated. Importantly, these logics are highly gendered, classed, and raced, and the subjectivities constructed by Pangea Dreams benefit the industry itself by reproducing assumptions about labor, risk, and success within the social media entertainment industry.

“An Animal That’s Just Feeding Itself”: Producing Branded Content on Influencer Retreats

The construct of the ideal influencer or aspirational laborer that emerges from these materials is reproduced at least somewhat consciously by Pangea Dreams. Women who want to participate in a retreat are subject to a screening process and required to fill out an “application” that must be approved by the company to attend. According to Komlos, the application process is meant to ensure that “expectations are aligned” between the organization and participants, emphasizing that the retreats are not “sightseeing” or a “vacation,” but an “opportunity” for women who want to “learn new skills” to “start a business, whether it’s digital based, personal, [or] a product” (Solomon, 2020, 31:11–32:12). Although the Pangea Dreams’ website states that women interested in their retreats do not need a specific number of followers (or even an Instagram account), this screening process acts to ensure that women who attend their retreats will effectively represent their values by embodying the ideals of the aspirational laborer who takes the retreat “seriously” as an opportunity to learn new skills and, perhaps most importantly, produce branded content. The application asks for website and Instagram URLs, as well as the main goals and expectations of applicants, further reinforcing the professionalizing aspect of their retreats and signifying concerns over “brand safety” (Bishop, 2021; Pangea Dreams, 2021c). These concerns over brand safety translate to the production of branded content on retreats, as this section details.

The “opportunity” to produce branded content has been a steadfast aspect of Pangea Dreams’ business model since its founding. Although Pangea Dreams has shifted from a production company to one that focuses primarily on offering educational retreats, brand partnerships are still a central aspect of the “experience” offered to women who attend. As one participant noted in a promotional video from 2017, “What you see out on blogs and Instagrams, that’s what we’re creating here at the retreat and we’re getting pictures taken of us, we’re learning how to pose, we’re learning, you know, how to move when we’re taking pictures, the editing, and then how to put those into our Instagrams and so I have this great, you know, just arsenal of amazing photos from Bali, from Nicaragua” (Pangea Dreams, 2017, 01:02–01:20). This content is perceived as vital to landing future brand sponsorships and deals, constituting a “portfolio” that participants can use after the retreat ends. As one 2017 HuffPost article about the company notes, “Building a portfolio and getting first-hand experience also helps show off your business savvy and dedication, which is why Pangea Dreams works closely with various lifestyle, fashion, and travel brands to give women the opportunity to create content for real-life campaigns while on the retreat” (Migdal, 2017).

According to its website, Pangea Dreams has worked with Hawaiian Tropic, Schick Hydro Silk, and a slew of swimwear and clothing brands, and has claimed that “86% of alumni got brand collaboration offers just two weeks after their retreat ended and 70% were able to turn their social media channels into their full-time jobs in less than a year” (Migdal, 2017; Pangea Dreams, 2021d). Such claims promise to “transform” participants into successful influencers, and the retreat blurs the boundaries between consumption (participants pay for the experience) and production (participants produce branded content for both Pangea Dreams and brand sponsors). Most recently, the company has partnered with Reebok and Les Mills, a fitness celebrity collaboration, to produce content on the “alumni retreat” in Palm Springs, California. Evidence of brand partnerships can be found on Instagram with designated hashtags like #PangeaDreamsxArdene, a clothing brand that got its start in Bali, from Nicaragua” (Pangea Dreams, 2017, 01:02–01:20). Pangea Dreams’ model, generate an enormous amount of content for both participants and brands.

However, “lead partnerships” are not the only opportunities for brands to work with Pangea Dreams. In her interview with The Influencer Podcast, Komlos claimed that, in exchange for the amount of exposure they are able to generate, boutique hotels will usually give the brand “anywhere between 25-50%” off their stay (Solomon, 2020, 18:49–21:12). Pangea Dreams has also found success in generating deals with tourism boards, with Komlos noting that, working with tourism boards has been amazing for us. We just worked with the Palm Springs tourism board. They even paid us to provide what we were providing, and they offered us an incredible day experience. A lot of tourism boards have a budget for stuff like that. (Solomon, 2020, 18:49–21:12)

The content produced on retreats becomes fodder not only for hotels, tourism boards, and clothing brands, but for Pangea Dreams’ own Instagram account as well, which often reposts images of “alumni” taken on retreats by the professional photographer that accompanies them. Individual participants are
also able to use these images for their personal accounts, often giving credit to both the photographer and Pangea Dreams in the captions of their posts, as well as any sponsoring brands, typically formatted, for example, as “@PangeaDreams@Light.Travels #PDTRPeru #PangeaDreams.” In doing so, both the brand itself and participants gain extended audience reach and increased exposure, as each party is introduced to new audiences and followers.

Searching these hashtags on Instagram produces results that, at times, are strikingly similar in both aesthetic and content. For example, searching #PDTRTulum surfaces many images of the same turquoise tuk-tuk positioned in front of what appears to be a bamboo forest. Each post, uploaded by a different Instagram user, attributes credit to Pangea Dreams (@PangeaDreams) and whoever took the photograph (in some cases, this is a fellow participant on the retreat, the professional photographer that accompanies the women, or one of the various trip leaders). Similarly, searching the hashtag #PDTRPeru produced many images of participants standing in the same wheat field, albeit in slightly different positions. Although not every hashtag produces the same strikingly similar results, these examples illustrate the ways in which the knowledge taught in workshops on the retreats (“Photography 101,” for example) is taken up and incorporated into the content participants subsequently produce. Participants reproduce and embody this knowledge in the very way they move and pose. These images thus hint at the ways in which Pangea Dreams encourages the production of certain kinds of branded texts for their own use, as well as the ways in which the retreat reproduces industry norms and standards in the production of branded content.

Participants on retreats thus become vital to the visibility of the company, which relies on the content they produce to both market themselves and secure brand partnerships. Incredibly, Komlos has claimed that Pangea Dreams has not spent “a dollar on marketing” or promoting their own brand, instead describing their rise to prominence as an “organic” process and an “animal that’s just feeding itself” (Parker, 2018, 18:03–19:40). In one particularly apt moment, Komlos states that,

> every single woman that has been on our retreats literally becomes an ambassador for Pangea without even knowing because the second they’re on a retreat, there’s like an influx of questions that they’ll start receiving the second they start posting that they’ve been on a Pangea retreat. (Parker, 2018, 18:03–19:40)

In this way, Pangea Dreams not only reproduces content, but a community of “alumni,” “#BossBabes,” and brand ambassadors as well.

These past participants proselytize for the Pangea Dreams brand among their own followings, recruiting new participants who aspire to influencer stardom, and support one another by liking, commenting on, and sharing each other’s content. Indeed, Komlos has noted that Pangea Dreams sees “so much more value in working with microinfluencers,” those who have followings between 5,000 and 50,000, because “their audiences are typically a lot more engaged, the people are a lot more authentic, and they really do connect with their community,” thus reinforcing the idea that influencers with smaller followings and less visibility can ultimately succeed in the industry (Solomon, 2020, 24:00–27:27). Furthermore, participants are encouraged to adhere to the values and standards of the company because Pangea Dreams trip leaders are often alumni of retreats. Although Komlos describes brand ambassadorship as “organic” and “out of our control,” the creation and use of brand and destination-specific hashtags indicates otherwise. In addition, Pangea Dreams asks participants to “share their numbers,” collecting data on “how many stories they posted throughout the retreat, how many times did they tag our brand sponsors,” and more, calculating the “impressions” this content generates “based on their followings [and] based on how many times they tagged” brand sponsors and Pangea Dreams (Solomon, 2020, 13:42–15:04). Komlos estimates that Pangea Dreams retreats “generate anywhere between 3 to 8 million impressions for one week of . . . sharing content,” data that she says are “really attractive” to the various hotels, brands, and tourism boards the company pitches to (Solomon, 2020, 13:42–15:04). Attendees on Pangea Dreams’ influencer retreats thus become useful participants within the industry, and their consumption and production practices are effectively managed through their incorporation into industry norms and practices, including ideas of brand safety.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

Influencer retreats like Pangea Dreams rely on and reproduce forms of aspirational labor and popular feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Duffy, 2017) as structuring logics within the influencer industry, and discipline aspiring influencers into commercialized forms of cultural production. If we look beyond the aesthetic markers described above, we can begin to see powerful assumptions surrounding the industry itself. Indeed, particular social categories, including age, gender, class, and race, among others, are encoded into the organization’s rhetoric. This rhetoric acts to hail particular audiences and aspiring cultural producers, interpellating and constructing certain identities as central to some types of media production and consumption over others. The imagined audience of these educational retreats is young, white, Western, and wealthy, cisgender, and traditionally feminine, capable of adopting “digital entrepreneurship” as a lifestyle, and possessing of a certain voice, image, and style that is compelling to some online audiences and brands. Pangea Dreams thus works to reproduce an ideal influencer in their own image, drawing on popular feminism and the rhetoric of aspirational labor to do so (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Duffy, 2017).
As scholars like Brooke Erin Duffy have argued, aspirational labor is imbricated with processes of aspirational consumption, in which “feminine ideals” are associated with consumption and the desire for class mobility (Duffy, 2017, p. 22). Although binary divisions between women as consumers and men as producers have been troubled by political and economic gains, namely, through the movement of women into the “employment economy,” these stereotypes remain significant in “pink ghettos”—a disparaging term used to reference career paths that are considered highly feminized and structured by gendered stereotypes (Duffy, 2017, pp. 30, 33). Public relations, as well as social media work, represent two such examples, in which historical perceptions and stereotypes of women as consumers first and foremost, and thereby more suited to the creation of ads and the promotion of products, are reproduced, structuring the industry in a way that keeps women in lower-paying, less prestigious creative roles (Duffy, 2017).

Furthermore, aspirational labor is vital to popular feminism’s growth, as the success of a few cisgender women in the digital economy space authorizes the belief that “everyone” can succeed in these conditions (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Instead of challenging patriarchal and neoliberal structures, popular feminism embraces and incorporates these structures, becoming visible in its refusal to challenge broader systems of oppression or inequality (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Thus, while Pangea Dreams acts to critique the exclusion of cisgender women in media industries by creating an all-women space and encouraging women to produce and own their creative ventures and projects, it does so through the framework of neoliberalism, in which “ever-expanding markets, entrepreneurialism, and a focus on the individual” structure its articulation of feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018, pp. 11–12). These cultural logics are reproduced and replicated in influencer retreats, which serve to “educate” and discipline aspiring influencers into commercially viable genres through professionalization, thereby limiting cultural production to the dictates of brands, and influencers themselves to the “promise” and “precarity” of platform visibility (Bishop, 2019, 2021; Duffy et al., 2021; Lobato, 2016). In using the word “reproduce” here, I aim to signal the continuation of these structures through Pangea Dreams’ model. Indeed, we can understand these structures as a kind of cultural logic that allows for some possibilities while foreclosing others, providing the context in which a few aspiring influencers, often those who fit this ideal, are launched into Internet-enabled forms of celebrity stardom while others are rendered invisible therein.

I offer the influencer para-industry as a concept that can help us think through the cultural logics that structure this industry. I contend that influencer retreats are an important site at which to examine not only the production of branded texts, but of “meta-texts” as well. These findings demonstrate how Pangea Dreams has harnessed the cultural logic of the industry, creating a feedback loop in which their retreats and workshops both generate content creation and promotion for their own company, as well as brands, and effectively construct brand ambassadors who share and reproduce particular meanings, values, and identities about “womanhood,” “digital entrepreneurship,” and the industry itself. In doing so, Pangea Dreams contributes to shaping cultural production to the needs and desires of advertisers and brands.

In closing, I call for additional research into the influencer para-industry, its various products and services, and on influencer retreats themselves. Indeed, this article has not considered influencer retreats to their fullest extent, presenting only a limited view of one influencer retreat and the ways in which these entities shape the cultural production of those seeking to enter the industry. Important contributions are yet to be made about the geographies of these retreats, as well as their connection to longer histories of colonization and imperialism given their focus on travel. Research into these avenues will constitute an important contribution to the growing literature on the social media entertainment and influencer industries.

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Notes

1. Pangea Dreams is not currently operating retreats. The company offered its last retreat in 2020 after the COVID-19 pandemic stalled much of the world’s travel industry. The company’s Instagram and Facebook accounts are still accessible, but their website is no longer operational (although it has been documented by the Wayback Machine Internet Archive), and it is unclear whether there will be retreats offered in the future. Primary research for this article was conducted in 2020.

2. Lightroom presets are custom-made filters and settings that can be applied to photographs using Adobe Lightroom, a popular photo editing software. Influencers often create and sell their own “preset packs” that mimic their personally branded aesthetic.

3. At the time of writing, Tracy Komlos (@TracyKomlos) had 92,500 followers on Instagram.
4. Komlos claims that Pangea Dreams was the first influencer or blogger retreat (Galbato, 2020; Parker, 2018; Solomon, 2020), although there is no way to substantiate this claim.

5. It is important to note that not all of this content is produced by Pangea Dreams or retreat participants. Some posts are “re-posts” from other brands, some posts are “cross-listed” so that they appear in multiple hashtag searches, some are mistakenly tagged, and some posts are, perhaps, intentionally mis-tagged in an effort to enhance the visibility of those who aspire to attend a Pangea Dreams retreat.

6. All Pangea Dreams retreats scheduled for 2020 were postponed or canceled due to the coronavirus outbreak (Solomon, 2020). Analysis of Instagram posts spans 2017–2019, because the account only posted four times in 2016 and because primary research for this article was conducted in 2020, when many Pangea Dreams retreats were put on pause due to the COVID-19 global pandemic.

7. The term “grid” refers to the intersecting vertical and horizontal arrangement of images on a particular Instagram account’s page.

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