Eliza Doolittle's Transformation in *Pygmalion* and the Journey of Modern Influencers (A Comparative Analysis)

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Abstract:

This paper explores the intricate parallels between Eliza Doolittle's transformation in George Bernard Shaw's Pygmalion and the performative self-reinvention undertaken by modern social media influencers. By drawing upon theories of identity performance articulated by Erving Goffman and Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, this study examines how both Eliza and influencers navigate external validation, mentorship, and the commodification of selfhood. The influence of social hierarchies and power structures is explored, particularly how both Higgins and digital platforms function as gatekeepers, determining who achieves social elevation and at what cost.

Through a comparative analysis, this paper highlights the tension between self-empowerment and systemic constraints, questioning whether true autonomy is possible within a structure that commodifies personal identity. This study argues that both narratives reflect the paradox of self-reinvention: while transformation can provide opportunities for social mobility, it is ultimately dictated by external forces that shape both success and self-worth.

By positioning Pygmalion as a timeless reflection on the complexities of identity in an era of digital self-branding, this paper contributes to ongoing discussions in media studies and literary analysis. It examines how individuals who seek reinvention must continually perform versions of themselves that conform to marketable standards, often at the cost of authenticity. As identity increasingly becomes a commodity in the digital age, the study underscores the ongoing struggle between personal agency and external control in shaping social mobility.

Keywords: *Pygmalion*, influencers, identity performance, self-reinvention, commodification, digital labor

1. Introduction

Eliza Doolittle's transformation in George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* remains one of literature's most striking depictions of self-reinvention. Her journey from a Cockney flower girl to a refined lady under the direction of Professor Henry Higgins is not just a personal metamorphosis—it is a negotiation with rigid social structures that dictate identity and class (Shaw, 2003, p. 74). Eliza's speech, appearance, and behavior are reshaped to conform to the expectations of the upper class, making her transformation less about personal agency and more about social conditioning. The conditions of her reinvention suggest that personal success is contingent upon acceptance by those in positions of power, a theme that remains relevant in contemporary digital culture.

This struggle finds a modern parallel in the world of social media influencers, who carefully construct and curate their online personas to secure visibility, status, and financial capital (Marwick, 2013, p. 93). Just as Eliza undergoes rigorous training to assimilate into high society, influencers engage in strategic self-presentation, carefully managing their content, appearance, and branding to attract audiences and business opportunities. The desire for upward mobility drives both Eliza and influencers to adopt identities that may not entirely reflect their authentic selves but are instead molded by external expectations. Social media algorithms, like the rigid class structures in *Pygmalion*, function as gatekeepers, determining who gains visibility and success in the digital space (Duffy, 2017, p. 56).

The reinvention of self in both *Pygmalion* and influencer culture is a complex process that highlights the tension between self-determination and external validation. In both cases, identity performance is dictated by forces that lie beyond the individual's control. Higgins, as the mentor figure, exercises authority over Eliza's transformation, much like branding agencies, sponsors, and digital platforms exert influence over influencers (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 141). Without the approval of these entities, neither Eliza nor influencers can access the social and economic mobility they seek. This raises critical questions about the extent to which self-reinvention is an act of autonomy or if it is merely a response to external pressures that shape and regulate access to success.

This study explores the ways in which identity performance, mentorship, and commodification operate in both *Pygmalion* and modern influencer culture. It examines how individuals in both contexts reshape their identities to gain social and economic capital, often conforming to externally

imposed standards to achieve success (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 141). Just as Eliza's transformation hinges on Higgins' approval and the acceptance of high society, influencers rely on social media algorithms, branding partnerships, and audience engagement to maintain their visibility (Senft, 2008, p. 28). The research questions whether self-reinvention is ever truly an act of autonomy or if it remains a process dictated by hierarchical structures that control access to success.

By drawing connections between Shaw's critique of social mobility and the pressures of digital self-branding, this study provides insight into the broader implications of self-reinvention in contemporary culture. It examines the tensions between authenticity and marketability, empowerment and exploitation, visibility and vulnerability. Through a literary and media studies approach, this research not only contextualizes *Pygmalion* within modern digital labor but also interrogates how identity has increasingly become a product for public consumption, shaped by forces beyond the individual's control (Marwick, 2013, p. 72).

1.1. Study Problem:

The research problem addressed in this study is the paradox of self-reinvention as a means of social and economic mobility, particularly in contexts where identity itself is treated as a performance and commodity. While the ability to transform oneself is often framed as a personal choice, this study argues that such reinvention is largely shaped by external forces, gatekeeping mechanisms, and economic structures that dictate access to success (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 162). The commodification of identity—where selfhood is strategically molded for social acceptance and financial gain—creates a tension between authenticity and performativity, raising critical questions about the extent to which individuals can truly control their own transformation (Marwick, 2013, p. 72).

This issue is particularly evident in two contrasting but structurally similar contexts: Eliza Doolittle's transformation in *Pygmalion* and the curated self-branding practices of social media influencers. Eliza's journey from a working-class flower girl to an upper-class lady under Professor Henry Higgins' mentorship mirrors the strategic self-reinvention that influencers undertake to achieve visibility, financial stability, and social capital (Shaw, 2003, p. 97). Both narratives reveal that self-reinvention is not merely an act of personal willpower but a negotiation with external forces, including mentorship, audience expectations, platform algorithms, and social hierarchies (Duffy, 2017, p. 56).

A key dimension of this research problem is the role of mentorship and external validation in shaping self-transformation. In *Pygmalion*, Higgins dictates Eliza's every move, reinforcing the idea that social mobility requires the endorsement of those in power rather than individual merit (Shaw, 2003, p. 128). Similarly, influencers depend on branding agencies, sponsorship deals, and algorithmic favorability to attain success, making them reliant on a system of digital gatekeeping that privileges specific aesthetics, behaviors, and engagement strategies (Abidin, 2018, p. 78). Despite the perception that influencers are autonomous creators, their self-reinvention is guided by economic imperatives and platform-driven incentives rather than purely personal expression (Marwick, 2013, p. 105).

Furthermore, this study examines the commodification of identity—a phenomenon in which personal image and selfhood become economic assets. In *Pygmalion*, Eliza is transformed into a symbol of Higgins' expertise, her identity reshaped not for her personal fulfillment but to fit an upper-class ideal (Shaw, 2003, p. 88). Likewise, influencers craft marketable personas that align with brand partnerships and audience expectations, often at the cost of authenticity (Duffy, 2017, p. 139). The influencer economy turns self-expression into a transactional enterprise, where visibility and economic gain are contingent on aligning with dominant cultural and corporate narratives (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 173).

The research also addresses the psychological and emotional costs of self-reinvention. Eliza experiences an identity crisis upon realizing that her transformation has not granted her true belonging or autonomy (Shaw, 2003, p. 145). Similarly, influencers suffer from performance fatigue, anxiety, and burnout, as the pressure to maintain relevance in digital spaces requires constant self-curation and engagement (Marwick, 2013, p. 158). The expectation to remain perpetually visible and marketable creates a tension between personal identity and professional branding, leading to emotional exhaustion and blurred boundaries between personal and public life (Abidin, 2018, p. 91).

Ultimately, this study interrogates whether self-reinvention is ever a truly autonomous process or if it remains bound by hierarchical structures that regulate access to success (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 188). While both *Pygmalion* and influencer culture present transformation as a means of upward mobility, the reality is that reinvention is dictated by external expectations, systemic constraints, and the commodification of identity (Duffy, 2017, p. 139). By examining these parallels,

this research contributes to broader discussions on social mobility, identity commodification, and digital labor, revealing the complexities of self-performance in both historical and contemporary contexts.

1.2. Study Objectives:

This study aims to:

• Analyze identity performance in *Pygmalion* and influencer culture, focusing on how individuals construct and modify their personas in response to external validation and societal expectations. By applying Erving Goffman's theory of identity performance (1959) and Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) concept of cultural capital, the study will explore how self-presentation is strategically adapted to fit dominant social and economic structures.

• Examine the role of mentorship and institutional power in shaping self-reinvention, comparing Higgins' influence over Eliza to the algorithmic and branding structures that dictate influencer success. This objective will assess how mentorship, corporate sponsorships, and digital gatekeeping mechanisms determine who achieves visibility and social elevation in both historical and modern contexts.

• Investigate the commodification of selfhood, analyzing how personal identity is transformed into a marketable asset in both Edwardian society and the digital economy. The study will assess how Eliza's transformation into a socially acceptable figure mirrors the way influencers curate personas to align with branding opportunities, raising ethical concerns about authenticity, autonomy, and labor exploitation.

• Assess the psychological and emotional impact of continuous identity curation, including the effects of performance fatigue, loss of authenticity, and the pressure to maintain relevance. By examining literature on digital labor and influencer burnout, the study will explore how perpetual self-presentation affects well-being, drawing parallels between Eliza's identity crisis and modern influencer struggles.

• Critically evaluate the myth of self-made success, questioning whether personal transformation is ever truly self-directed or if it is dictated by broader social and economic structures. Using Bourdieu's (1984) framework on social mobility and economic capital, the study will explore how success narratives obscure the systemic barriers that regulate access to upward mobility.

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• Draw connections between historical and modern forms of social mobility, analyzing how individuals navigate transformation and access opportunities within structured hierarchies. This objective will highlight the parallels between Edwardian class structures and digital economies, questioning whether self-reinvention leads to genuine social elevation or reinforces pre-existing inequalities.

1.3. Study Importance:

This study is significant in both literary and media studies as it bridges the gap between classical literature and contemporary digital culture, demonstrating how the themes of self-reinvention, performance, and commodification persist across different historical periods. By linking *Pygmalion* with modern influencer culture, the research offers valuable insights into how individuals navigate identity construction within systems that prioritize external validation over intrinsic self-definition.

Furthermore, this study contributes to ongoing discussions on digital labor by highlighting the challenges influencers face in balancing authenticity and marketability. It addresses the emotional and psychological toll of self-commodification, shedding light on the pressures that arise from maintaining a carefully curated public persona. The findings may offer practical implications for content creators, digital marketers, and policymakers by emphasizing the need for ethical labor practices, mental health support, and greater transparency in platform-driven economies.

Additionally, this research enriches our understanding of social mobility by examining how mentorship and gatekeeping continue to dictate who succeeds in both historical and digital contexts. By comparing Higgins' role in Eliza's transformation to the power of algorithms and branding agencies in shaping influencer careers, the study underscores the limitations of self-made success narratives.

Beyond theoretical insights, this study has important interdisciplinary implications:

• For literary studies, it deepens our understanding of *Pygmalion* as a text that critiques social mobility, identity construction, and power dynamics, reaffirming its relevance in contemporary discussions about digital labor and self-performance.

• For media and digital culture studies, it provides a historical lens to analyze modern influencer culture, offering critical perspectives on how identity curation, economic incentives, and social hierarchies function in the digital economy.

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• For social sciences, particularly in sociology and psychology, it contributes to research on identity formation, self-branding, and the emotional labor required to maintain public personas.

• For policymakers and industry professionals, it calls for greater awareness of platform-based labor exploitation, advocating for fair compensation, algorithmic transparency, and mental health resources for digital workers.

Ultimately, this research contributes to critical media literacy, encouraging audiences to recognize the broader structural forces that shape digital self-presentation and engagement. By drawing connections between historical and contemporary identity commodification, it fosters a more nuanced understanding of the social, economic, and psychological stakes involved in self-reinvention.

2. Theoretical Framework:

2.1. Identity as Performance:

Identity, as theorized by Erving Goffman (1959), is not an inherent or static characteristic but a fluid and performative construct shaped by social interactions and audience perception (p. 17). His concept of the "front stage" and "back stage" self highlights how individuals modify their behavior, language, and mannerisms depending on the context in which they are presenting themselves. This framework is central to understanding both Eliza Doolittle's transformation in *Pygmalion* and the ways influencers curate their digital personas.

Eliza's self-presentation is carefully reconstructed by Higgins, who trains her to speak and behave in a manner befitting high society. Her transformation is less about intrinsic change and more about fulfilling the expectations of those around her, particularly those in positions of power (Shaw, 2003, p. 74). Similarly, influencers actively shape their identities based on the perceived preferences of their audiences. Their online personas are crafted to align with branding opportunities and social capital, often blurring the boundaries between genuine self-expression and market-driven identity curation (Senft, 2008, p. 55).

Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) concept of cultural capital further helps explain how identity performance is used as a tool for navigating social mobility. In both *Pygmalion* and digital culture, individuals who seek to elevate their status must acquire specific knowledge, behaviors, and skills deemed valuable by their respective audiences (p. 162). Eliza's mastery of refined speech and

manners mirrors the way influencers refine their content strategy, aesthetics, and communication styles to gain higher engagement and economic opportunities. The process of identity formation in both cases is not autonomous but dictated by external expectations that determine success or failure.

2.2. The Role of Mentorship and External Validation:

Mentorship plays a crucial role in both *Pygmalion* and influencer culture, functioning as a system of guidance that also reinforces power imbalances. In Shaw's play, Henry Higgins assumes the role of a mentor who dictates every aspect of Eliza's transformation. His control over her speech, dress, and mannerisms highlights how upward mobility often requires the approval of gatekeepers rather than individual merit (Shaw, 2003, p. 97). Eliza's ability to succeed in high society is not solely based on her personal efforts but on Higgins' endorsement and the validation of the elite class.

In the digital age, influencers similarly depend on external validation to build their success. Branding agencies, sponsorship deals, and social media algorithms all act as contemporary gatekeepers, deciding who attains visibility and financial prosperity (Abidin, 2018, p. 78). Success in these online spaces is rarely self-determined; rather, it is contingent upon a system that privileges those who conform to predefined aesthetics and engagement-driven metrics (Duffy, 2017, p. 122). Just as Eliza must prove her transformation to the upper class, influencers must continuously adapt to the changing demands of digital platforms to maintain relevance and monetization potential.

The dependency on external validation creates a paradoxical relationship between empowerment and control. While influencers and figures like Eliza seemingly have agency over their reinvention, the approval of those in power—whether a social elite or a social media algorithm—ultimately determines the legitimacy and success of their transformation. This raises important questions about whether self-reinvention is ever truly an act of personal agency or if it remains a process controlled by structural hierarchies.

2.3. Commodification of Selfhood:

Both *Pygmalion* and influencer culture reveal how selfhood is increasingly treated as a marketable commodity rather than an intrinsic aspect of identity. Eliza's transformation is framed as a project wherein her value is increased through refinement and assimilation into upper-class

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norms (Shaw, 2003, p. 88). Her worth is measured not by her inherent qualities but by how well she conforms to societal expectations of grace, speech, and sophistication. This commodification of selfhood is similarly evident in the world of influencers, where personal identity is packaged and marketed as a brand (Marwick, 2013, p. 105).

The concept of "performed authenticity" is central to influencer culture, as articulated by Alice Marwick (2013). Influencers must maintain an illusion of relatability while simultaneously crafting aspirational lifestyles that appeal to their followers (p. 129). This paradox mirrors Eliza's predicament—she must embody the traits of high society while remaining aware that her identity is a construct rather than an organic development. The expectation to perform identity for public consumption places immense pressure on both literary characters like Eliza and modern influencers, as failure to meet external expectations results in diminished status, lost opportunities, and financial instability.

Moreover, digital capitalism amplifies the commodification of selfhood by turning online personas into economic assets. Influencers monetize their identities through sponsorships, advertisements, and brand collaborations, making their self-expression inseparable from economic incentives (Duffy, 2017, p. 139). This mirrors how Eliza's transformation is not merely about self-improvement but about her ability to be accepted and utilized within the social economy of the upper class. In both cases, identity becomes a transactional entity, shaped by market forces rather than personal authenticity.

2.4. The Illusion of Self-Made Success:

The prevailing narrative in both *Pygmalion* and influencer culture is that of self-made success—the idea that individuals can reinvent themselves and achieve upward mobility solely through hard work and determination. However, both Shaw's play and modern digital realities deconstruct this notion by revealing the structural dependencies that enable such transformations. Eliza's success is not solely a product of her own efforts but is heavily mediated by Higgins' mentorship, the social elite's acceptance, and the systemic barriers that dictate who can access higher status (Shaw, 2003, p. 130).

Similarly, the myth of meritocracy within influencer culture suggests that digital visibility and financial success are earned through personal effort and creativity. However, research on social media economies shows that influencers' success is significantly influenced by algorithmic

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favoritism, economic investment, and industry gatekeeping (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 173). Visibility on digital platforms is not equally accessible to all; those with early industry connections, financial backing, or platform-specific advantages are more likely to attain large audiences and brand deals (Duffy, 2017, p. 139).

This constructed nature of self-made success reinforces existing power structures rather than dismantling them. Just as Eliza's transformation does not grant her true independence—since she remains subject to societal judgment—many influencers find themselves trapped in a cycle of continuous self-promotion, algorithmic adaptation, and brand dependency to maintain relevance (Marwick, 2013, p. 114). This illustrates how self-reinvention is rarely an autonomous process but one that is contingent on external forces that regulate social and economic mobility.

2.5. Emotional and Psychological Toll

− Self-reinvention in *Pygmalion* and influencer culture creates significant emotional and psychological burdens.

− Performance fatigue results from the constant need to maintain an idealized persona.

− Eliza's identity crisis mirrors influencers' struggles with separating their real selves from their curated public image (Shaw, 2003, p. 145).

− Burnout, anxiety, and depression are common due to audience expectations and platform pressures (Marwick, 2013, p. 158).

− Reliance on audience validation leads to emotional instability and performance anxiety (Abidin, 2018, p. 91).

− Blurred boundaries between personal and professional life create ongoing stress, with influencers feeling they are never "off the clock" (Duffy, 2017, p. 163).

− Loss of personal autonomy occurs as success depends on external approval rather than individual self-worth.

− Commodification of identity results in a sense of loss and psychological distress, showing the hidden costs of self-performance.

3. Conclusion

This study highlights the striking parallels between Eliza Doolittle's transformation in *Pygmalion* and the experiences of modern social media influencers. Both narratives demonstrate how identity is constructed, performed, and shaped by external forces, whether through social

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expectations, mentorship, or economic pressures (Shaw, 2003, p. 130). While Eliza initially believes that changing her speech and manners will grant her complete social mobility, she soon realizes that true belonging remains out of reach. Similarly, influencers invest in their digital self-branding, but their success is determined by platform algorithms, audience engagement, and brand sponsorships (Marwick, 2013, p. 114). The study argues that in both contexts, reinvention does not equate to autonomy; rather, it is mediated by the systems of power that define and regulate success.

The illusion of self-made success is challenged in both *Pygmalion* and influencer culture, revealing that upward mobility is often contingent on institutional gatekeeping rather than individual effort (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 188). Eliza's refinement is orchestrated by Higgins, whose approval determines whether she is accepted into high society. Likewise, influencers are often portrayed as self-made entrepreneurs, but their visibility and financial stability are controlled by external forces such as sponsorship deals, platform guidelines, and audience algorithms (Abidin, 2018, p. 91). Despite appearing independent, both Eliza and influencers remain dependent on structures that dictate their worth and success.

Furthermore, the commodification of selfhood is a key theme in both Shaw's play and digital culture. Eliza is transformed into a symbol of Higgins' expertise rather than an autonomous individual, while influencers turn aspects of their personal lives into consumable content (Duffy, 2017, p. 139). The necessity of maintaining a marketable identity forces both groups into a cycle of performance, where authenticity becomes secondary to social validation. This process not only reinforces existing hierarchies but also results in significant emotional and psychological costs. The pressure to maintain a curated persona can lead to identity crises, burnout, and anxiety, as both Eliza and influencers struggle to reconcile their constructed identities with their personal sense of self (Marwick, 2013, p. 158).

Ultimately, this research underscores the broader consequences of living in an era where identity itself is a form of capital. Whether in Edwardian society or the digital economy, individuals seeking self-reinvention must conform to external standards that determine their legitimacy. The comparison between *Pygmalion* and influencer culture reveals the complexities of self-branding, where personal transformation offers opportunities but remains bound by societal and economic constraints. By examining these parallels, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the

evolving nature of identity in an age where visibility is currency, and reinvention is a performance shaped by forces beyond the individual's control.

3.1. Results

- Identity in both *Pygmalion* and influencer culture is a performance shaped by external forces rather than an autonomous expression of self.

- Mentorship and industry gatekeeping determine success, reinforcing existing power structures that privilege those with access to institutional or algorithmic validation.

- The commodification of selfhood is central to both narratives, as individuals must transform their identities into marketable personas to gain visibility and social mobility.

- The illusion of self-made success is challenged, revealing that upward mobility is rarely achieved without external validation and support.

- The psychological and emotional toll of continuous self-curation is significant, leading to performance fatigue, identity crises, and the blurring of personal and public personas.

- The parallels between Eliza's experience and influencer culture highlight the enduring struggle between authenticity and marketability, questioning whether true independence is possible in a system driven by visibility and commercial appeal.

3.2. Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the researcher recommends a set of recommendations for the research community, for Media, Digital Labor, Influencers and Content Creators, Policy Makers, and Social Media Platforms, as follows:

- Develop interdisciplinary approaches linking literature and digital media to analyze identity commodification.

- Examine ethical concerns regarding labor exploitation in influencer marketing and digital branding.

- Advocate for better transparency in platform algorithms to ensure fair opportunities.

- Establish support networks for influencers to navigate the pressures of online self-curation.

- Promote mental health awareness in digital labor to mitigate burnout.

- Establish greater algorithmic transparency and reduce the monopolization of content visibility.

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– Encourage ethical branding partnerships that prioritize influencer well-being over profit.

– Conduct further studies on the psychological effects of self-curation in digital spaces and how influencers navigate identity performance over time.

– Expand research on the economic and social structures that dictate success in both historical and digital self-reinvention.

– Investigate policy recommendations for fair digital labor practices, ensuring influencers receive adequate protections.

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