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Localising the Creator Economy: How South African Student Influencers Adapt Global Monetisation Strategies on TikTok and Instagram

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Abstract

The global creator economy has generated standardised monetisation strategies, yet their effectiveness varies significantly across regional contexts. This study examines how South African student influencers adapt global monetisation approaches to local market conditions on TikTok and Instagram. Using a mixed-methods approach, we collected data from 20 student influencers (aged 18–28, 1000–50,000 followers) through structured surveys and thematic coding of social media content across diverse categories including beauty, lifestyle, and gaming. Our findings reveal three key adaptation patterns: (1) Strategic localisation— influencers modify brand partnership approaches to align with local business practices and payment capabilities; (2) Platform arbitrage—creators leverage platform-specific features differently than global best practices due to regional access limitations, particularly TikTok’s creator fund restrictions; and (3) Resource-constrained innovation—student influencers develop alternative monetisation methods, including direct product sales and educational content, to overcome socio-economic barriers. Beauty influencers demonstrate the highest adaptation success with brand sponsorships (35% of participants), whilst micro-influencers pivot towards affiliate marketing and entrepreneurial ventures. The study contributes to platform economy literature by demonstrating that successful monetisation requires strategic adaptation rather than direct replication of global models. These findings offer practical insights for creators in emerging markets and platform developers seeking to support regional creator economies. The research highlights the need for context-sensitive approaches to digital entrepreneurship in the Global South.

Keywords: platform economy; digital entrepreneurship; influencer marketing; social media influencer; South Africa; monetisation strategies; social media platforms



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1. Introduction

The global creator economy has emerged as a transformative force in digital entrepreneurship, with social media platforms becoming pivotal spaces for monetisation and economic activity (Rieder et al., 2023). As digital platforms reshape traditional labour relationships and create new forms of economic participation, understanding how creators navigate these complex monetisation landscapes has become increasingly critical (Vallas & Schor, 2020; Wang & Tomassetti, 2024). This evolution is particularly pronounced in developing economies, where digital entrepreneurship represents both unprecedented opportunities and unique challenges shaped by local socio-economic contexts (Guerrero et al., 2021; Soluk et al., 2021).

The rise of influencer marketing, now valued at over USD 21 billion globally, has created standardised monetisation strategies that promise universal applicability across diverse markets (Joshi et al., 2023; Pan et al., 2025). These strategies, predominantly developed and tested in Western contexts, include brand partnerships, affiliate marketing, sponsored content, and platform-specific creator funds (Chen et al., 2024; Ryu & Han, 2021; Vrontis et al., 2021). However, recent research suggests that the effectiveness of these global strategies varies significantly when applied to different regional contexts, particularly in the Global South where institutional voids, resource constraints, and unique market dynamics create distinct challenges for digital entrepreneurs (Mafimisebi & Ogunsade, 2022; McAdam et al., 2020).

South Africa presents a compelling case study for examining this global-to-local adaptation process. As the continent's most digitally advanced economy, South Africa has witnessed rapid growth in social media adoption, particularly among young people (Astuti & Ayinde, 2024; Shava & Chinyamurindi, 2018). Yet despite this digital engagement, South African creators face distinct challenges that differentiate their experiences from those documented in the existing literature, including limited access to platform monetisation features, constrained local advertising markets, and socio-economic factors that influence both content creation and audience engagement (Rani & Furrer, 2021).

Student influencers represent a particularly understudied segment within this landscape. As digital natives navigating the intersection of academic responsibilities and entrepreneurial aspirations, student creators embody the tensions between global platform capabilities and local constraints (de Klerk et al., 2025). Their monetisation strategies often reflect innovative adaptations to overcome resource limitations whilst maintaining authentic connections with their audiences—a critical factor in influencer success across cultural contexts (Belanche et al., 2021; Hornikx et al., 2023).

TikTok and Instagram, as the dominant platforms for short-form video content and visual storytelling respectively, have become central to influencer monetisation strategies globally (Koay et al., 2021). However, platform-specific features such as TikTok's Creator Fund and Instagram's Shopping tools often have limited availability or functionality in emerging markets, necessitating alternative approaches to monetisation (Syrdal et al., 2023). This platform dependency, combined with the algorithmic nature of content distribution, creates additional layers of complexity for creators in regions like South Africa (Gandini, 2021; Mears, 2023).

The theoretical understanding of how global monetisation strategies adapt to local contexts remains limited. Whilst platform capitalism theory provides insights into the structural dynamics of digital labour (Langley & Leyshon, 2017), and cultural adaptation research offers frameworks for understanding localisation processes (Hornikx et al., 2023), there is insufficient empirical evidence on how these theoretical perspectives apply to creator economy practices in specific regional contexts. This gap is particularly pronounced regarding student influencers, who represent a growing segment of the creator economy but remain underrepresented in academic research.

This study addresses these gaps by investigating how South African student influencers adapt global monetisation strategies to local market conditions on TikTok and Instagram. Drawing on platform economy theory and regional adaptation frameworks, we examine the specific mechanisms through which universal monetisation approaches are modified, the factors that influence adaptation success, and the implications for both creators and platform developers. Through a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative survey data with qualitative content analysis (Harris, 2022; Snelson, 2016), this research provides empirical insights into the localisation of global digital entrepreneurship practices.

The study's significance extends beyond the South African context, offering a framework for understanding strategic adaptation processes that may be applicable to other emerging markets. As digital platforms continue their global expansion, understanding how local contexts shape monetisation practices becomes essential for supporting inclusive creator economies and developing context-sensitive platform policies (Counted & Arawole, 2015; Nkoa & Song, 2023). Furthermore, by focusing on student creators, this research illuminates the intersection of education and digital entrepreneurship, providing insights relevant to youth development and digital skills policies across the Global South.

Our research is guided by two primary questions: How do South African student influencers adapt global monetisation strategies to local market conditions on TikTok and Instagram? And what factors influence the effectiveness of these adapted strategies across different influencer categories and audience sizes?

These research questions are theoretically grounded in complementary frameworks. RQ1 draws on platform economy theory (Vallas & Schor, 2020) to understand structural constraints, cultural adaptation theory (Hornikx et al., 2023) to examine localisation processes, and entrepreneurship theory (Soluk et al., 2021) to explain innovation under constraint. RQ2 is informed by micro-influencer effectiveness research (Chen et al., 2024) and digital entrepreneurship literature (de Klerk et al., 2025) that examines success factors across different creator categories and market conditions. By addressing these questions, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on platform economy dynamics whilst providing practical insights for creators, educators, and policymakers navigating the evolving landscape of digital entrepreneurship in emerging markets.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Platform Economy Theory and Regional Adaptation

Platform capitalism theory, as outlined by (Langley & Leyshon, 2017; Vallas & Schor, 2020), offers a foundational understanding of how digital platforms shape economic relationships through intermediation and data extraction. However, this theoretical approach shows notable limitations when applied to emerging market contexts. While Vallas and Schor (2020) highlight platform dependency as restricting worker agency, their analysis presumes the universal availability of platform features and standardised monetisation pathways that do not exist in South African contexts. The systematic exclusion of African creators from key monetisation tools—such as TikTok's Creator Fund being accessible in only three African countries—illustrates how platform capitalism functions through what can be described as “infrastructural exclusion” rather than simple dependency.

Recent scholarship by (Steinberg et al., 2025) challenges monolithic conceptualisations of platform capitalism, advocating for an understanding of “platform capalisms” that recognise diverse state-market-culture relationships across geocultural contexts. This theoretical intervention directly addresses the inadequacy of Western-centric frameworks for understanding South African creator economy dynamics, where cultural authenticity and community relationships may be more valued than scale-based metrics emphasised in global monetisation models.

2.2. Cultural Adaptation and Authenticity in Digital Contexts

Cultural adaptation theory, especially (Hornikx et al., 2023) meta-analytical findings that cultural value adaptation in advertising is “effective but not dependable,” offers important insights into localisation processes but remains limited for understanding creator economy contexts. Their framework emphasises content adaptation rather than business model innovation, failing to address how creators modify fundamental monetisation strategies to suit local market conditions. This limitation is especially evident in South

African contexts, where creators must navigate between global platform requirements and local cultural expectations, payment systems, and audience purchasing power.

The concept of “digital glocalization” (Roudometof, 2023) provides a more nuanced understanding of global-local tensions by distinguishing between locally authentic adaptations and foreign-influenced hybridity. However, this framework demonstrates an inherent power blindness, highlighting user agency while under-theorising how platform architectures and monetisation structures systematically favour Western cultural forms and business models, leading to what can be described as “cultural value extraction” challenges for creators in emerging markets.

2.3. Creator Economy and Monetisation Strategy Research

Existing creator economy research exposes fundamental contradictions between theoretical assumptions and emerging market realities. Meta-analytical research by (Chen et al., 2024) reveals that micro-influencers achieve higher engagement rates and ROI than macro-influencers, yet platform monetisation structures favour large-scale creators through substantial follower requirements. This “scale economy assumption” in creator economy theory fails to account for the inverse relationship between audience size and engagement quality, which characterises South African markets where personal relationships drive commerce.

The literature consistently neglects resource constraints as key factors affecting the success of monetisation strategies. Studies by (Koay et al., 2021; Syrdal et al., 2023) investigate platform-specific monetisation features while assuming universal access and functionality, overlooking how infrastructure limitations, payment processing issues, and local market conditions require alternative approaches. This theoretical gap is especially problematic for understanding student creators who face dual constraints from educational responsibilities and limited financial resources.

2.4. Entrepreneurship Theory and Resource-Constrained Innovation

Entrepreneurship literature on emerging markets offers valuable insights into innovation under constraints but has limited applicability to digital contexts. (Soluk et al., 2021) demonstrate how institutional voids in developing economies drive entrepreneurial innovation, while (de Klerk et al., 2025) show how young entrepreneurs leverage technology to overcome market barriers. However, these frameworks do not sufficiently address the unique characteristics of platform-mediated entrepreneurship, where creators simultaneously navigate local constraints and global algorithmic systems.

Recent research on frugal innovation (Guerrero et al., 2021) indicates that resource constraints can drive innovative solutions, but this literature fails to differentiate between enablers and constraints or to explore how creators in emerging markets compete in global digital markets with significant resource disadvantages. The lack of “platform-constrained innovation” frameworks that consider algorithmic governance, monetisation restrictions, and infrastructure limitations marks a critical theoretical gap.

3. Materials and Methods

This section presents the research design and methodological approach employed to investigate how South African student influencers adapt global monetisation strategies to local market conditions on TikTok and Instagram. Our methodology addresses the complex nature of strategy adaptation through a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative survey data with qualitative content analysis, following established frameworks for social media research in developing country contexts (Harris, 2022; Snelson, 2016).

3.1. Research Design

This study employs an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, where quantitative data collection precedes qualitative analysis to provide a comprehensive understanding of monetisation strategy adaptation. This approach aligns with established practices in social media research, which require both breadth and depth to capture platform-specific dynamics and user experiences (Snelson, 2016). The sequential design allows quantitative findings to inform qualitative data collection. The mixed-methods approach is particularly appropriate for emerging market research, where cultural sensitivity and contextual understanding are essential for valid findings (Harris, 2022). By combining structured data collection with interpretive analysis, we address the complex interplay between global platform structures and local adaptation strategies that characterise contemporary creator economy practices (Vallas & Schor, 2020).

Our research design specifically addresses calls for methodologically rigorous approaches to influencer research that move beyond descriptive studies to examine underlying mechanisms and processes (Vrontis et al., 2021). The focus on strategy adaptation rather than general monetisation practices requires analytical frameworks capable of identifying modification processes and their contextual determinants. RQ1 (adaptation mechanisms) is addressed through the following:

Quantitative surveys measuring strategy prevalence, adaptation frequency, and perceived effectiveness using 5-point Likert scales developed from platform monetisation literature (Koay et al., 2021; Syrdal et al., 2023).

Qualitative content analysis identifying specific adaptation techniques through systematic coding of monetisation-related posts using categories derived from influencer marketing research (Vrontis et al., 2021).

On the other hand RQ2 (effectiveness factors) is addressed through the following:

Quantitative analysis examining correlations between creator characteristics (follower count, engagement rates, content category) and monetisation success indicators.

Qualitative thematic analysis of survey open-ended responses identifying success factors and barriers.

3.2. Population and Sampling

3.2.1. Target Population

The target population consists of South African student influencers aged 18–28 who actively use TikTok and Instagram for content creation and monetisation purposes. This demographic selection reflects the intersection of student status and influencer activity that characterises our research focus. The age range captures traditional university students whilst accommodating postgraduate and mature students who may extend beyond typical undergraduate ages.

Student status was defined as current enrolment in any South African higher education institution, including universities, universities of technology, and technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges. This broad definition acknowledges the diverse educational pathways available to South African youth whilst maintaining focus on formal educational contexts (de Klerk et al., 2025).

Influencer status was operationally defined as having a minimum of 1000 followers on either TikTok or Instagram, combined with evidence of monetisation activity within the preceding 12 months. This threshold acknowledges the micro-influencer category that dominates the South African market whilst ensuring participants have sufficient experience to provide meaningful insights into monetisation strategy adaptation (Chen et al., 2024).

3.2.2. Sampling Strategy

We employed a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques to recruit participants who met our specific research criteria. Purposive sampling ensured that all participants possessed the characteristics essential for investigating monetisation strategy adaptation, whilst snowball sampling leveraged existing networks within the South African influencer community to identify additional eligible participants.

The sampling process commenced with identification of initial participants through social media platform searches using relevant hashtags and location-based filtering. This approach acknowledges the inherently digital nature of influencer communities whilst ensuring geographic representation across South African provinces. Initial participants were contacted directly through platform messaging systems, with recruitment messages explaining the research purpose and participation requirements.

Snowball expansion occurred through participant referrals, with each recruited participant invited to suggest additional eligible influencers from their networks. This approach proved particularly effective for accessing smaller creators who might not be visible through hashtag searches but possess valuable insights into niche monetisation strategies.

3.2.3. Sample Size and Justification

The final sample comprised 20 student influencers, distributed across different content categories and follower ranges. This sample size reflects practical constraints of accessing specialised populations whilst providing sufficient diversity for meaningful analysis of adaptation patterns. For mixed-methods research in emerging market contexts, sample sizes between 15–25 participants are considered appropriate for exploratory studies that prioritise depth over breadth ([Harris, 2022](#)).

The sample size determination considered both quantitative adequacy for basic descriptive statistics and qualitative sufficiency for thematic saturation. Whilst larger samples would enhance statistical power, our focus on strategy adaptation processes requires detailed analysis that benefits from smaller, carefully selected samples rather than large-scale surveys ([Snelson, 2016](#)).

Sample composition included representation across content categories (lifestyle, beauty, gaming, education, activism, comedy, fashion), follower ranges (1000–10,000, 10,001–25,000, and 25,001–50,000), and platforms (TikTok-focused, Instagram-focused, and dual-platform users). This diversity ensures that findings reflect varied adaptation experiences rather than category-specific patterns.

3.3. Data Collection Methods

3.3.1. Quantitative Data Collection

Quantitative data were collected through structured online surveys administered via Google Forms. The survey instrument was developed specifically for this research, incorporating validated scales where available whilst addressing the unique aspects of monetisation strategy adaptation. Survey development followed established principles for social media research, ensuring that questions captured both platform-specific behaviours and cross-platform patterns.

The survey comprised four main sections: (1) demographic and educational background information, (2) platform usage patterns and follower characteristics, (3) monetisation strategies employed and their perceived effectiveness, and (4) adaptation processes and local market considerations. Each section included both closed-ended questions for quantitative analysis and open-ended questions to capture qualitative insights.

Monetisation strategy questions specifically addressed the adaptation theme by asking participants to compare their current practices with global best practices they had encountered, rate the effectiveness of different adaptation approaches, and identify factors that influenced their strategic choices. This approach ensures that quantitative data directly addresses research questions rather than providing only descriptive information.

The survey was piloted with five student influencers not included in the main study to identify potential issues with question clarity, survey length, and technological functionality. Pilot feedback led to revisions in question wording and the addition of platform-specific terminology to enhance participant comprehension.

3.3.2. Qualitative Data Collection

Qualitative data were collected through thematic analysis of participants' social media content, focusing on evidence of monetisation strategies and adaptation processes. This approach acknowledges that influencer practices are best understood through examination of actual content rather than relying solely on self-reported behaviours (Mears, 2023).

Content analysis focused on the most recent 20 posts from each participant's primary platform, supplemented by examination of specific monetisation-related content identified through survey responses. Analysis criteria included identification of monetisation strategies evident in content, assessment of local adaptation elements, and documentation of platform-specific optimisation techniques.

The qualitative analysis employed a deductive–inductive approach, beginning with theoretically informed categories derived from the literature review and allowing additional themes to emerge from the data. This approach ensures theoretical grounding whilst remaining open to novel adaptation strategies not captured in existing literature (Gandini, 2021).

Content analysis was conducted systematically using a standardised coding framework that captured both manifest content (explicit monetisation elements) and latent content (implicit adaptation strategies). Inter-coder reliability was not feasible given resource constraints, but analytical rigour was maintained through detailed documentation of coding decisions and regular reflection on emerging patterns.

3.3.3. Measurement Instruments

Survey constructs were developed through a combination of adapted validated scales and study-specific measures designed for the South African creator economy context. Monetisation strategy effectiveness was measured using scales adapted from Chen et al. (2024), modified to include platform-specific strategies and local market considerations. Items assessed perceived effectiveness of different monetisation approaches using 5-point Likert scales (1 = completely ineffective; 5 = highly effective).

Cultural adaptation indicators drew on frameworks from Hornikx et al. (2023), measuring the extent to which participants modified global strategies to incorporate local cultural elements, languages, and market practices. Platform usage patterns employed questions developed specifically for this study based on social media research frameworks (Snelson, 2016), capturing posting frequencies, audience engagement patterns, and feature utilisation across TikTok and Instagram.

Adaptation frequency measures asked participants to rate how often they modified standard influencer marketing practices, while success indicators included self-reported revenue generation, partnership acquisition rates, and audience growth metrics. All multi-item constructs demonstrated acceptable internal consistency in pilot testing, ensuring measurement reliability for subsequent analysis.

3.4. Data Analysis Techniques

3.4.1. Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative data analysis employed descriptive statistics to characterise sample demographics, platform usage patterns, and monetisation strategy prevalence. Given the exploratory nature of this research and the relatively small sample size, analysis focused on descriptive patterns rather than inferential statistics ([Harris, 2022](#)).

Comparative analysis examined differences between content categories, follower ranges, and platform preferences to identify patterns in adaptation strategies. Cross-tabulation analysis explored relationships between demographic characteristics and strategy choices, whilst correlation analysis investigated associations between variables such as follower count and monetisation success.

3.4.2. Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative data analysis followed established procedures for thematic analysis adapted for social media research contexts ([Snelson, 2016](#)). The analysis process comprised six stages: familiarisation with data, initial coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition and naming, and report writing.

Familiarisation involved a comprehensive review of survey open-ended responses and content analysis notes to develop an overall understanding of adaptation patterns. Initial coding employed both theoretical codes derived from the literature review and emergent codes identified through data examination.

Theme generation focused on identifying patterns that addressed research questions about adaptation mechanisms and effectiveness factors. Themes were developed through iterative analysis that moved between individual cases and cross-case patterns to ensure both depth and breadth of understanding.

Theme review involved assessing internal coherence and external distinctiveness to ensure that identified themes accurately represented data patterns while providing meaningful insights into adaptation processes. This stage included consideration of negative cases and alternative interpretations to enhance analytical rigour.

3.4.3. Integration and Interpretation

Data integration occurred through convergent analysis that examined areas of agreement and divergence between quantitative and qualitative findings. This approach acknowledges that mixed-methods research gains value through synthesis rather than parallel reporting of different data types ([Harris, 2022](#)).

Integration analysis specifically addressed how quantitative patterns of strategy prevalence related to qualitative insights into adaptation mechanisms. Areas of convergence were interpreted as robust findings, whilst areas of divergence were explored to understand potential explanations for different perspectives.

Final interpretation considered findings within the broader theoretical framework established in the literature review, assessing how empirical results contribute to understanding of platform economy dynamics and regional adaptation processes. Particular attention was paid to identifying implications for both theoretical development and practical application in similar emerging market contexts.

4. Findings

This section presents the findings from an investigation of how South African student influencers adapt global monetisation strategies to local market conditions. The results are organised thematically to address our research questions about adaptation mechanisms

and effectiveness factors, integrating quantitative survey data with qualitative content analysis insights.

Our analysis addresses RQ1 (How do South African student influencers adapt global monetisation strategies?) through examination of three primary adaptation mechanisms: strategic localisation (Section 3.2), platform arbitrage (Section 3.3), and resource-constrained innovation (Section 3.4). These mechanisms were identified through quantitative measurement of strategy prevalence and perceived effectiveness, combined with qualitative content analysis of monetisation-related social media posts.

RQ2 (What factors influence the effectiveness of these adapted strategies?) is addressed through analysis of category-specific adaptation patterns (Section 4.5), effectiveness factors and success determinants (Section 4.6), and implementation challenges (Section 4.7). This analysis draws on correlational analysis of creator characteristics and success indicators, supplemented by thematic analysis of survey responses regarding barriers and enablers.

The integration of quantitative prevalence data with qualitative insights into adaptation processes provides comprehensive understanding of both what adaptations occur and why they succeed or fail in the South African context.

4.1. Participant Characteristics and Platform Usage Patterns

The final sample comprised 20 South African student influencers with demographics detailed in Table 1. Participants ranged in age from 18–28 years ($M = 22.4$, $SD = 2.8$), with the majority (60%, $n = 12$) falling within the 18–22 age bracket. Content categories showed clear concentration in lifestyle (35%, $n = 7$) and beauty (25%, $n = 5$) sectors, with gaming (15%, $n = 3$), education (10%, $n = 2$), and other categories including activism, comedy, and fashion representing smaller segments (15%, $n = 3$ combined).

Table 1. Participant Demographics and Platform Characteristics.

Characteristic	Users (n)	%
Age Range		
18–22 years	12	60%
23–28 years	8	40%
Content Category		
Lifestyle	7	35%
Beauty	5	25%
Gaming	3	15%
Education	2	10%
Other (activism, comedy, fashion)	3	15%
Follower Count Range		
1000–10,000	12	60%
10,001–25,000	5	25%
25,001–50,000	3	15%
Primary Platform		
Instagram-focused	12	60%
TikTok-focused	5	25%
Dual-platform	3	15%
Geographic Distribution		
Gauteng	9	45%
Western Cape	6	30%
Other provinces	5	25%

Follower distributions revealed a predominantly micro-influencer sample, with 60% ($n = 12$) maintaining 1000–10,000 followers, 25% ($n = 5$) ranging from 10,001–25,000 followers,

and only 15% ($n = 3$) exceeding 25,000 followers across platforms. Platform preferences demonstrated Instagram dominance, with 60% ($n = 12$) operating primarily on Instagram, 25% ($n = 5$) focusing on TikTok, and 15% ($n = 3$) maintaining active presence on both platforms.

Geographic distribution reflected urban concentration patterns, with 45% ($n = 9$) based in Gauteng and 30% ($n = 6$) in Western Cape, while 25% ($n = 5$) represented other provinces. Despite this urban bias in digital infrastructure access, rural participants demonstrated particularly innovative adaptation strategies, often leveraging limited connectivity periods for strategic content scheduling and audience engagement.

Platform usage patterns revealed significant adaptation to local connectivity constraints. Participants reported posting frequencies that differed substantially from global best practice recommendations, with 55% ($n = 11$) posting once weekly compared to the recommended daily posting for optimal algorithm performance. Content analysis revealed that this reduced frequency was strategically compensated through higher production quality and increased local relevance, representing a clear adaptation to resource constraints identified in platform economy literature (Rani & Furrer, 2021).

4.2. Strategic Localisation: Adapting Brand Partnership Approaches

Brand sponsorships emerged as the dominant monetisation strategy, utilised by 70% ($n = 14$) of participants (Table 2). However, qualitative analysis revealed significant departures from global best practices in partnership negotiations and execution. Unlike standardised global approaches that emphasise follower metrics and engagement rates, South African student influencers developed localised negotiation strategies that emphasised community impact and cultural authenticity.

Table 2. Monetisation Strategy Prevalence and Effectiveness.

Strategy	Users (n)	Success Rate ¹
Traditional Strategies		
Brand partnerships	14	80% (beauty), 50% (other)
Affiliate marketing	9	60%
Sponsored content	12	65%
Adapted Strategies		
Digital product sales	13	75%
Community monetisation	9	70%
Service provision	8	85%
Collaborative ventures	6	65%
Platform-Specific		
Cross-platform funneling	12	80%
Live streaming	7	45%
Bio-link optimisation	15	70%

¹ Percentage reporting sustainable income generation.

Participants consistently reported modifying partnership approaches to accommodate local business practices, particularly regarding payment structures and contract terms. Beauty influencers ($n = 5$) demonstrated the most sophisticated adaptation strategies, developing micro-partnerships with local suppliers who lacked formal influencer marketing capabilities. As one beauty content creator explained through survey responses: “I work with small local brands who can’t afford big influencer rates, so I created a system where I get products plus a small fee, but I also help them understand social media marketing.”

Content analysis revealed that successful brand partnerships consistently incorporated local cultural elements, language mixing (English, Afrikaans, and indigenous languages), and references to shared South African experiences. This cultural embedding represents a

significant adaptation from global influencer marketing practices that typically emphasise universal appeal (Hornikx et al., 2023). The effectiveness of this localisation approach was evidenced by engagement rates that averaged 8.2% for culturally adapted content compared to 4.1% for more generic sponsored posts.

Payment adaptation strategies showed particular innovation, with 85% ($n = 12$) of participants reporting alternative compensation structures developed to accommodate local market realities. These included extended payment terms, product-heavy compensation packages, and collaborative promotion arrangements that shared marketing risks between creators and brands. Such adaptations reflect the institutional voids identified by (Soluk et al., 2021) whilst demonstrating entrepreneurial innovation in response to structural constraints.

4.3. Platform Arbitrage: Leveraging Access Limitations Strategically

Cross-platform funneling emerged as the most effective platform arbitrage strategy, used by 60% ($n = 12$) of participants, with the highest effectiveness rating of 4.2 out of 5.0 and an 80% success rate (Table 2). Bio-link optimisation showed the highest adoption rate at 75% ($n = 15$), with moderate effectiveness (3.6 rating) and a 70% success rate. Live streaming demonstrated the lowest performance metrics, with only 35% ($n = 7$) adoption, a 2.8 effectiveness rating, and a 45% success rate, indicating significant challenges in this monetisation approach.

These quantitative patterns reflect what participants termed “platform arbitrage”—the strategic leveraging of differential access to platform features to create competitive advantages. This finding addresses a gap in existing literature that typically assumes universal platform feature availability (Koay et al., 2021).

TikTok Creator Fund inaccessibility, experienced by all South African participants, led to the development of sophisticated cross-platform strategies. Rather than viewing this as a constraint, participants who employed cross-platform funneling ($n = 12$) achieved the highest success rates by using TikTok for audience building and Instagram for monetisation. Content analysis revealed strategic funnel approaches where TikTok content included subtle calls-to-action directing audiences to Instagram profiles optimised for commercial engagement.

Instagram Shopping feature limitations prompted adaptive responses, particularly among gaming content creators ($n = 3$) who developed alternative product placement strategies. These approaches often achieved higher conversion rates than standard shopping features due to increased authenticity and audience trust, despite bypassing formal shopping integrations through creative storytelling and bio-link optimisation strategies.

Live streaming monetisation presented the most challenging adaptation area, with the lowest effectiveness ratings (2.8) across all strategies measured. Participants reported leveraging Instagram Live and TikTok Live features differently than global best practices suggest, focusing on intimate audience building rather than large-scale revenue generation. This approach reflects both the smaller scale of South African creator audiences and the importance of relationship-building in African business cultures (Mafimisebi & Ogunsade, 2022).

The platform arbitrage strategy demonstrates how local creators can transform structural constraints into competitive advantages through innovative adaptation. The high effectiveness rating (4.2) for cross-platform funneling suggests that participants successfully converted platform limitations into strategic advantages, extending existing platform economy theory by showing how peripheral market positions can generate novel value creation approaches (Vallas & Schor, 2020).

4.4. Resource-Constrained Innovation: Alternative Monetisation Development

Digital product development emerged as the most prominent alternative strategy, used by 65% ($n = 13$) of participants, with the highest effectiveness rating of 4.1 out of 5.0 and a 75% success rate for sustainable income generation (Table 2). Service provision, although adopted by fewer participants (40%, $n = 8$), demonstrated the highest success rate at 85%, with an effectiveness rating of 4.0. Community monetisation approaches showed moderate adoption (45%, $n = 9$) but performed strongly with a 3.9 effectiveness rating and a 70% success rate. Collaborative entrepreneurship was reported by 30% ($n = 6$) of participants, indicating emerging yet less widespread adoption of joint venture approaches.

These quantitative patterns demonstrate genuine innovation within the South African context, with participants developing monetisation strategies that had no direct equivalent in global influencer marketing literature. Educational content creators ($n = 2$) and lifestyle influencers ($n = 7$) spearheaded the majority of these alternative approaches, with both categories achieving above-average success rates in digital product sales and service provision.

Digital products consistently addressed local challenges, such as university-specific study materials or budgeting guides adapted for South African economic realities. Content analysis revealed that successful digital products leveraged the student identity of creators while creating scalable revenue streams independent of brand partnerships. This strategy directly capitalises on shared educational experiences while generating income streams that strengthen rather than exploit audience relationships.

Community monetisation approaches showed notable innovation, with participants creating group-based offerings that capitalised on strong social bonds within their audiences. These included private study groups, mentorship circles, and skill-sharing communities that generated revenue through membership fees or tiered access structures. Such approaches reflect African communal values while establishing sustainable income streams, marking a significant shift from individualistic global influencer models.

Service-based monetisation included tutoring, social media management for local businesses, and event coordination. The integration of online influence with offline services represents a significant departure from global influencer models that typically maintain separation between digital and physical activities. This integration demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of how to leverage dual student-creator identity for comprehensive value propositions.

Collaborative entrepreneurship models involve shared content creation, cross-promotion arrangements, and collective brand negotiations to enhance bargaining power. These strategies demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of network effects and collective action principles that address individual resource limitations through community organisation, contributing to the strategy's moderate but increasing adoption rate.

4.5. Category-Specific Adaptation Patterns

Analysis revealed distinct adaptation patterns across different content categories, suggesting that strategy effectiveness depends significantly on niche characteristics and audience expectations. Beauty influencers demonstrated the highest adaptation success rates, with 80% ($n = 4$ of 5) reporting sustainable monetisation through localised strategies. This success appears related to the tangible nature of beauty products and the strong cultural specificity of beauty standards and practices.

Lifestyle content creators showed the most diverse adaptation approaches, with strategies ranging from digital product sales to service provision and community building. The broad nature of lifestyle content allows for multiple monetisation approaches whilst the relatability factor enhances audience trust and conversion rates. However, this diversity also led to more fragmented income streams and challenges in scaling successful strategies.

Gaming content creators faced unique challenges due to the global nature of gaming culture combined with local connectivity and device constraints. Their adaptations focused heavily on platform arbitrage and community monetisation, with less success in traditional brand partnerships due to limited local gaming industry presence. However, they demonstrated particular innovation in live streaming monetisation and audience engagement strategies.

Educational content creators, despite being the smallest category, showed remarkably high monetisation success rates through digital product development and service provision. Their strategies consistently leveraged student status most effectively, creating authentic value propositions that resonated with similar-aged audiences facing shared educational challenges.

4.6. Effectiveness Factors and Success Determinants

Integration of quantitative and qualitative findings revealed several key factors that influence adaptation strategy effectiveness. Audience engagement quality emerged as more important than follower quantity, with successful monetisation correlating strongly with comment engagement rates ($r = 0.67$) rather than follower counts ($r = 0.23$). This finding supports micro-influencer research reported in (Chen et al., 2024) whilst highlighting the particular importance of relationship quality in resource-constrained markets.

Cultural authenticity consistently predicted monetisation success across all categories. Participants who successfully incorporated South African cultural elements, languages, and contextual references achieved higher conversion rates and more sustainable partnerships. This pattern supports cultural adaptation research (Hornikx et al., 2023) whilst extending it to creator economy contexts.

Platform expertise, particularly understanding of algorithmic systems and audience behaviour patterns, strongly influenced adaptation success. Participants who demonstrated sophisticated understanding of how content performs differently across platforms were more successful in developing effective monetisation strategies. This finding emphasises the importance of platform-specific knowledge in creator economy success (Mears, 2023).

Entrepreneurial orientation, evidenced through innovation, risk-taking, and opportunity recognition, distinguished successful adapters from those who struggled with monetisation. This characteristic enabled creators to view constraints as innovation opportunities rather than insurmountable barriers, supporting entrepreneurship research in emerging markets (de Klerk et al., 2025).

Network effects within the South African creator community facilitated adaptation success through knowledge sharing, collaboration opportunities, and collective problem-solving. Participants who actively engaged with other creators reported more diverse monetisation strategies and higher overall success rates, suggesting that community embeddedness enhances individual adaptation capabilities.

4.7. Challenges and Constraints in Strategy Adaptation

Despite innovative adaptation strategies, participants faced significant constraints that limited monetisation potential. Low local purchasing power emerged as the primary challenge, with 85% ($n = 17$) of participants reporting that audience financial constraints limited both direct sales and brand partnership opportunities. This constraint necessitates volume-based approaches or premium positioning strategies that may be difficult to achieve with smaller follower counts.

Platform algorithm unpredictability created particular challenges for resource-constrained creators who cannot afford to experiment extensively with content strategies. Participants reported feeling disadvantaged compared to creators in markets with estab-

lished influencer marketing infrastructures who have access to better platform support and industry knowledge.

Payment processing difficulties, particularly for international brand partnerships and platform monetisation features, created significant barriers to revenue realisation. These infrastructure limitations reflect broader challenges in South African digital payment systems whilst highlighting the need for platform-specific solutions in emerging markets.

Brand education requirements placed additional burdens on creators who must simultaneously develop their own strategies and educate potential partners about influencer marketing value. This dual role requires substantial time investment that may reduce content creation capacity, creating efficiency challenges for resource-constrained creators.

Limited access to professional development resources, including courses, conferences, and mentorship opportunities available to creators in developed markets, constrains skill development and strategy sophistication. Participants consistently expressed desire for local training and support systems that acknowledge South African market realities whilst building global best practice knowledge.

These findings demonstrate that whilst South African student influencers have developed innovative adaptation strategies, structural constraints continue to limit the full realisation of monetisation potential. The creative responses to these constraints, however, suggest significant untapped potential for supporting emerging market creator economies through targeted interventions and policy developments.

5. Discussion

This study examined how South African student influencers adapt global monetisation strategies to local market conditions on TikTok and Instagram. Our findings reveal three primary adaptation mechanisms: strategic localisation, platform arbitrage, and resource-constrained innovation. These mechanisms operate within a complex ecosystem where cultural authenticity, entrepreneurial orientation, and community embeddedness emerge as critical success factors. This discussion examines the theoretical implications of these findings, their practical significance, and their contribution to understanding creator economy dynamics in emerging markets.

5.1. Theoretical Contributions to Platform Economy Research

Our findings extend platform economy theory by showing how creators in peripheral markets transform constraints into innovative value creation opportunities, moving beyond the deficit models that characterise much existing research. Our findings reveal that platform economy theory, cultural adaptation theory, and entrepreneurship theory operate synergistically in emerging market contexts. Platform constraints create the structural conditions that necessitate cultural adaptation, while the limitations of standard localisation approaches drive entrepreneurial innovation. The three adaptation mechanisms we identified—strategic localisation, platform arbitrage, and resource-constrained innovation—represent interconnected responses that draw simultaneously on cultural authenticity, platform manipulation, and entrepreneurial creativity rather than operating as discrete strategies. The strategic localisation patterns observed challenge assumptions of universal platform practices while demonstrating how cultural adaptation theory extends beyond simple content translation to encompass fundamental business model modifications. Whereas research on platform-specific monetisation typically assumes feature availability and standardised user behaviours (Belanche et al., 2021; Koay et al., 2021), our findings demonstrate that adaptation occurs at multiple levels: technical (working around feature limitations), cultural (embedding local values and languages), and economic (developing alternative payment structures). This multi-dimensional adaptation process

suggests that platform economy theory requires greater attention to regional variation and local agency.

The resource-constrained innovation mechanism offers a particularly significant theoretical contribution. Rather than confirming deficit models that position emerging markets as lacking necessary infrastructure for digital entrepreneurship, our research demonstrates how constraints can stimulate innovation that may be superior to established practices. The community monetisation strategies developed by participants, for example, create stronger creator-audience relationships than transactional approaches dominant in Western markets. This finding supports emerging literature on innovation in emerging markets whilst extending it to digital labour contexts (Soluk et al., 2021).

Our findings also contribute to digital labour theory by revealing the entrepreneurial agency that operates within platform constraints. (Gandini, 2021) critique of digital labour as potentially obscuring actual working conditions finds nuanced expression in our data, where creators simultaneously experience platform dependency and demonstrate remarkable innovative capacity. The dual identity of student-influencers creates particular tensions and opportunities that existing digital labour theory has not adequately addressed.

5.2. Cultural Adaptation and Authenticity in Creator Economy Practice

The prominence of cultural authenticity as a success factor provides empirical support for cultural adaptation theory whilst extending its application to creator economy contexts. Hornikx et al. (2023) demonstrate that cultural value adaptation in advertising is effective but not dependable across contexts. Our research suggests that for creator economy practices, cultural authenticity is not merely effective but essential for sustainable monetisation in emerging markets.

The language mixing practices observed among successful creators reflect sophisticated understanding of audience expectations and cultural positioning. Unlike standardised global influencer practices that often emphasise English-language content for broader reach, South African student influencers achieved higher engagement through multilingual approaches that acknowledged local linguistic diversity. This finding has significant implications for platform design and creator support systems, suggesting that global platforms may need to develop more culturally sensitive monetisation tools.

The integration of African communal values into monetisation strategies represents a particularly important finding for understanding how global digital practices adapt to local cultural contexts. The community monetisation approaches developed by participants draw explicitly on Ubuntu philosophy and collective support systems, creating monetisation models that strengthen rather than exploit social relationships. This represents a significant departure from individualistic creator economy models prevalent in Western contexts and suggests that cultural values can fundamentally reshape digital entrepreneurship practices.

The success of locally relevant digital products demonstrates how cultural specificity can create competitive advantages in global platform environments. Study guides adapted for South African university contexts, budgeting templates reflecting local economic realities, and skill-building courses addressing regional challenges achieved higher conversion rates than generic alternatives. This finding suggests that niche authenticity may be more valuable than broad appeal in creator economy contexts, particularly for creators in emerging markets who cannot compete on production scale.

5.3. Entrepreneurial Innovation Under Constraint

Our findings provide compelling evidence for entrepreneurship theory that positions constraints as innovation catalysts rather than simply barriers to be overcome. The resource-constrained innovation mechanism observed among participants aligns with research on

frugal innovation, whilst extending it to digital contexts (de Klerk et al., 2025). However, our research reveals that constraint-driven innovation in creator economy contexts operates differently than in traditional entrepreneurship due to the dual constraints of platform dependency and local market conditions.

Successful participants demonstrated entrepreneurial orientation that enabled them to reframe structural constraints as innovation opportunities, suggesting that individual agency plays a crucial role in adaptation outcomes. Participants who viewed platform limitations as innovation opportunities rather than insurmountable barriers developed more diverse and sustainable monetisation strategies. This finding supports entrepreneurship research that emphasises opportunity recognition whilst highlighting the particular importance of creative problem-solving in platform economy contexts.

The collaborative entrepreneurship patterns observed challenge individualistic assumptions embedded in much creator economy research. Participants consistently leveraged network effects and collective action to overcome individual resource constraints, developing joint ventures, shared promotion strategies, and collective brand negotiations. These approaches demonstrate sophisticated understanding of economic cooperation principles whilst creating more sustainable business models than purely individual approaches.

The service integration strategies employed by participants represent genuine innovation in creator economy practice. By combining online influence with offline service provision, student influencers created value propositions that transcend traditional creator-audience relationships. This integration suggests that future creator economy development may require broader conceptualisation of value creation that encompasses both digital and physical economic activities.

5.4. Platform Design and Policy Implications

Our findings have significant implications for platform design and policy development in emerging markets. The prevalence of alternative monetisation strategies suggests that current platform monetisation tools may be inadequately designed for emerging market contexts. The absence of TikTok Creator Fund access and limited Instagram Shopping functionality prompted innovations that often achieved superior results to standard platform tools, indicating that platforms may benefit from studying and incorporating locally developed approaches.

The importance of cultural authenticity for monetisation success suggests that platforms should develop more sophisticated localisation strategies beyond simple language translation. Creator support systems, monetisation tools, and algorithm optimisation should acknowledge cultural variation and support locally relevant content creation. This requirement extends beyond technical features to include creator education, community building, and market development support.

The payment processing challenges identified by participants highlight infrastructure constraints that limit creator economy development in emerging markets. Platform companies and policymakers should collaborate to develop more inclusive payment systems that accommodate local banking systems, mobile money platforms, and alternative value transfer mechanisms. The innovative payment structures developed by creators provide models for more inclusive monetisation systems.

The brand education burden experienced by creators suggests need for intermediary institutions that can bridge knowledge gaps between global platform capabilities and local market realities. Creator support programs, industry associations, and educational institutions should develop resources that acknowledge emerging market contexts whilst building global best practice knowledge.

5.5. Implications for Emerging Market Creator Economy Development

Our research demonstrates that emerging market creator economies may develop along different trajectories than established markets, potentially achieving superior outcomes through locally appropriate approaches. The community-focused monetisation strategies, cultural authenticity emphasis, and collaborative entrepreneurship patterns observed suggest alternative models for creator economy development that prioritise relationship quality over scale.

These findings have important implications for policy development in emerging markets. Rather than simply importing creator economy support models from developed markets, policymakers should recognise and support locally developed innovations whilst addressing structural constraints that limit their full potential. Digital skills development programs should emphasise cultural authenticity and community building alongside technical competencies.

The success of educational content monetisation among student influencers suggests particular opportunities for integrating creator economy approaches with formal education systems. Universities and educational institutions could develop programs that support student creators whilst leveraging their influence for educational and developmental purposes. Such integration could address youth unemployment whilst building digital economy capabilities.

The entrepreneurial innovation demonstrated by participants suggests that emerging market creator economies may generate approaches with broader applicability beyond their local contexts. The community monetisation models, cultural adaptation strategies, and constraint-driven innovations developed by South African student influencers could inform creator economy development in other emerging markets facing similar challenges.

5.6. Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study's limitations suggest several directions for future research. The relatively small sample size and focus on South African contexts limit generalisability to other emerging markets, though the adaptation mechanisms identified may have broader applicability. Future research should examine strategy adaptation across multiple African countries to identify continent-wide patterns and country-specific variations.

The cross-sectional design captures adaptation strategies at a single point in time but cannot examine how these strategies evolve as creators gain experience or market conditions change. Longitudinal research would provide valuable insights into adaptation trajectory and strategy sustainability over time.

The focus on student influencers, whilst providing important insights into this underexplored demographic, limits understanding of how adaptation strategies vary across different creator types. Future research should examine adaptation among professional creators, older demographics, and different educational backgrounds to develop a more comprehensive understanding of emerging market creator economy dynamics.

The methodology's emphasis on creator perspectives provides limited insight into audience experiences and brand partnership effectiveness from organisational viewpoints. Future research incorporating multiple stakeholder perspectives would enhance understanding of adaptation ecosystem dynamics and outcomes.

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