"Unlock a better life: Here's how!": A critical inquiry into how life coaches gain capital and shape legitimacy using Instagram's affordances
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Abstract
Instagram has become a primary platform via which life coaches establish a relationship with potential clients and advertise their professional services. In this study, we draw from Bourdieu’s work on taste and capital to unravel how life coaches capitalize on the affordances of Instagram to generate legitimacy and credibility for their profession. Drawing from a one-month observation of 1,650 posts collected from 20 Instagram profiles of life coaches, our analysis provides insight into how these professionals strategically display and integrate cultural practices, tastes, and preferences that align with neoliberal ideals of self-improvement and self-responsibility to set themselves apart as experts within their field. They then use this distinctiveness as a marketing technique, thereby feeding off their cultural and social capital, among others by rationalizing their expertise by appealing to their own experiences, embedding client testimonials, and driving the narrative by combining hashtags or images that refer to self-entrepreneurism, self-responsibility, and the good life. We reflect on the potentially harmful implications of these legitimization techniques on individuals and society.

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Introduction
In contemporary Western societies, life coaching has become a popular self-help profession. Life coaches aim at improving individual well-being through a variety of solution-focused and results-oriented approaches (Green, et al., 2006). At the heart of these approaches lies a neoliberal ideology of self-improvement (Nehring, et al., 2020).

Within the industry, there are concerns surrounding the credibility and ethics of individuals using the title ‘life coach’; the lack of protection for this title, meaning that everyone can profess to be one, contributes to
the ongoing controversy over life coaches’ legitimacy (Moin, et al., 2023; Pagis, 2016; Spence, 2007). In this contested and competitive field, life coaches are found to embrace social media platforms such as Instagram to demonstrate their expertise, market their services, and connect with prospective clients (e.g., Baker and Rojek, 2020b). In the process of attracting clients, life coaches, much like influencers, must actively strive to construct a trustworthy relationship with their followers to achieve their goals (Baker and Rojek, 2020a).

Previous research on digital media and influencer marketing, has already examined the methods through which traditional social media influencers strive to accomplish this aim (e.g., Fiers, 2020; Kováčová, 2022). Influencers effectively use the affordances of Instagram, allowing influencers to cultivate authority, credibility, authenticity, and craft appealing content (Jin, et al., 2019; Sokolova and Kefi, 2020). In contrast to influencers, however, life coaches do not primarily act as brand ambassadors for themselves and/or external companies; their focus is foremost on attracting clients to enroll in their self-made self-improvement programs (Wenig and Janetzke, 2022). In doing so, life coaches must market themselves as credible experts in their field.

This study aims to understand how life coaches legitimize themselves and their profession, drawing on Bourdieu’s work on distinction (Bourdieu, 1987) and capital (Bourdieu, 1986). In the following, we first further explain how the evolving field of life coaching, as understood through Bourdieu’s (1990) lens of social fields, aligns with a neoliberal ideology that emphasizes self-improvement and individual responsibility. Next, we expand on Bourdieu’s (1990, 1987, 1986, 1977) concepts of capital, distinction, taste, and habitus to consider how the specific affordances of Instagram might serve the strategic goals of life coaches. Then, we present our thematic analysis in which we analyze the Instagram profile of 20 life coaches and 1,650 posts.

The field of life coaching

Life coaches make a living by coaching individuals in their pursuit of a good life (Nehring, et al., 2020). Their professional identity is predicated on the neoliberal belief that ‘the good life’ can be attained through individual agency, as individuals are assumed capable of actively pursuing their own well-being (Davies, 2015; McCormack and Salmenniemi, 2016). In this context, self-improvement, through continuous personal growth and development, becomes a key avenue for individuals to take proactive steps in the pursuit of their well-being (Rimke, 2000). However, the underlying belief that happiness, success, sadness, and failure are predominantly attributed to personal actions, places a significant burden of responsibility on individuals for shaping the outcomes of their lives (Brown and Baker, 2012).

Life coaches step into the picture here, offering support to individuals who struggle with this ‘self-entrepreneurial process’ (Nehring, et al., 2016). By doing so, they align themselves with the entrepreneurial spirit fostered by neoliberalism (Harvey, 2005), reinforcing the notion that individuals possess the power to shape their destinies in the relentless pursuit of a ‘good life’ (Bachkirova and Borrington, 2020; Deery, 2006; McGee, 2005; Raisborough, 2016). Their very existence thus upholds the status quo of an ever-need-to-improve individual (Lynch, 2004; Tiusanen, 2021), which guarantees the continue demand for their services (Nehring, et al., 2020).

The life coaching industry, however, operates in a precarious landscape, as it remains unregulated and unsupervised (Aboujaoude, 2020; Cavanagh and Palmer, 2006; Grant, 2005). Indeed, with no protective title, anyone can market themselves as a life coach, sparking concerns over the rise of charlatanism within the profession (Duyck, 2021; Palmer and Cavanagh, 2009; Paterson, 2008). Consequently, life coaches operate in a challenging and competitive field (George, 2013), and must persuade their (potential) audience of their credibility and legitimacy.

In this study, we explore the socio-cultural dynamics of life coaching within a neoliberal framework, with a specific focus on self-improvement as it materializes on Instagram. This exploration is rooted in Bourdieu’s (1990, 1987) concept of ‘the field.’ According to Bourdieu (1987), fields possess distinct rules and
regulations that shape participant behavior. The rules and regulations pertaining to the field of life coaching may be visible in how professional life coaches shape their professional identity similarly on Instagram. Yet, fields do not negate the significance of individual agency. The concept of ‘habitus,’ integral to Bourdieu’s (1977) framework, emphasizes the role of individual actions, decisions, and practices within the field, emphasizing the dynamic interplay between structural elements and individual agencies in the complex realm of life coaching on Instagram. Recognizing that isolating the field or habitus would oversimplify the complex interplay between them, it is imperative to avoid falling into the trap of a misleading dichotomy.

In our analysis of how life coaches shape their professional identity on Instagram, it is imperative to cultivate a comprehensive understanding that encompasses the platform’s architectural affordances. These features define how Instagram enables users to establish credibility and legitimacy. In the next section we describe Instagram’s affordances that are related to self-presentation and the pursuit of social status, aiming to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how these elements are harnessed to establish legitimacy.

**Instagram’s self-presentation and status-seeking affordances**

Affordances emphasize the interplay between human agency and the platform’s structures (Barnwell, et al., 2023), acknowledging that the materiality of technology both enables as well as constrains the possibilities for humans (Evans, et al., 2017). Instagram has been designed as a communication platform with a primary focus on visual content (Bossio, 2023). More precisely, Instagram users are required to engage with their audience, commonly referred to as ‘followers,’ through the sharing of photos and videos (Bug and Heene, 2020). This mode of communication affords the opportunity to project and pursue status, a crucial element for attracting followers and as well as potential clients (Marwick, 2013). Prior research shows, however, that crafting an influential presence on Instagram demands more than a surface-level comprehension of the platform (Cotter, 2019): It requires a committed engagement and an elaborate understanding of how the platform functions (DeVito, et al., 2017; Leaver, et al., 2020).

Research, on, among others, the adjacent phenomenon of ‘lifestyle gurus’ (Baker and Rojek, 2020b), points towards influencer studies as a valuable framework to understand how life coaches leverage Instagram’s affordances for self-presentation and status-seeking. While life coaches and influencers both aim to establish credibility in their respective fields, life coaches primarily focus on attracting clients for their self-improvement programs (Baker and Rojek, 2020b), as opposed to serving as brand ambassadors for external companies (Abidin, 2016; Banet-Weiser, 2012). Life coaches, however, can leverage Instagram’s self-presentation affordances in a manner akin to that of influencers (Yenilmez Kacar, 2023), to engage and communicate with their followers (Fiers, 2020; Georgakopoulou, 2021).

Influencers use Instagram Stories, for instance, as temporary snapshots, capturing daily activities and providing live updates (Amancio, 2017; Keerakiatwong, et al., 2023), and archiving some of these as ‘highlights’ on their main feed (Georgakopoulou, 2021). This organizes stories chronologically, and allows them to be personalized with unique cover images and titles, making it easier to categorize and locate them (Alfonzo, 2019). Content posted on the main feed, on the other hand, is intended for long-term visibility (Leaver, et al., 2020). Influencers invest a significant amount of time in ensuring that these posts maintain a consistent aesthetic. This is often achieved by meticulously coordinating colors with previous photos, creating an appealing and harmonious color palette (Abidin, 2016). This deliberate approach to content presentation highlights the level of engagement and expertise, which, within Bourdieu’s (1986) framework, can be conceptualized as cultural capital. This cultural capital is indispensable for establishing credibility and professionalism on Instagram, aligning with the social expectations associated with the platform. Furthermore, during the content creation process, influencers endeavor to uphold an authentic image, as it is instrumental in cultivating a relationship of trust with their followers (Hurley, 2019). For instance, in photographs, this authenticity is reflected in natural-looking images, and honest confessions (de Perthuis and Findlay, 2019).

Influencer research indicates that engagement with one’s followers and the cultivation of an authentic
Unlock a better life: Here's how!: A critical inquiry into how life coaches gain capital and shape legitimacy using Instagram's affordances (Barnwell, et al., 2023; Kováčová, 2022). When sharing visual content, captions serve to provide context, improve clarity, and offer additional information to aid the audience in understanding the visual elements (Amirudin and Triyono, 2018). Instagram’s tagging affordances can be classified into three distinct types: hashtags, which are used to categorize content and increase its discoverability, account tags, which facilitate mentions and collaborations with other users, and location tags, connecting shared content to specific geographical places and moments, thereby allowing users to explore content related to locations or events (Fiers, 2020).

In the realm of Instagram, an individual’s self-presentation is continually subject to evaluation, a process facilitated by what Marwick (2013) describes as “status affordances,” exemplified by ‘likes,’ symbolized by a heart icon (Bucher and Helmond, 2018). In addition, Instagram users can also convey their thoughts and feedback on each other’s content by engaging in the comment section (Sheldon and Bryant, 2016). Consequently, the status and identity of Instagram users are perpetually subjected to assessments that may culminate in recognition or dismissal.

In sum, it is essential for life coaches to establish themselves as experts in their field, a goal that can be realized by using Instagram’s affordances. As already suggested in studies examining influencers, this process of seeking status and legitimacy often involves acquiring and displaying cultural and social capital. The following section expands further on this, drawing a connection between life coaches’ activities on Instagram and Bourdieu’s concept of capital.

**Capital-building within the field of life coaching**

Bourdieu’s (1987, 1986) theory of ‘capital’ serves as a foundational framework for understanding how various forms of resources and assets contribute to social stratification and the construction of power and status, and can thus be used to gain a better understanding of how life coaches strategically construct their professional identity within their field. Bourdieu (1986) differentiates among economic capital, which can be directly converted into monetary resources, cultural capital, comprising knowledge, skills, and educational qualifications, social capital, constituted by an individual’s social connections and obligations (Lebaron, 2014; Thomson, 2013). One form of capital can act as a catalyst for another, each holding its own significance and implications, yet intricately interconnected. For example, having an extensive network, regarded as a manifestation of social capital, can open doors to securing a respectable job, translating into economic capital (Medvetz and Sallaz, 2018). As influencer studies indicate, it is likely that life coaches active on Instagram will capitalize on its affordances to display and acquire cultural and social capital, with the underlying goal of converting it into economic capital by attracting clients who will pay for the use of their coaching services.

Bourdieu’s (1987, 1986) posits that individuals, in their quest for status within a particular field, engage in a process involving the conversion of economic, cultural, and social capital into symbolic capital, a unique form of capital rooted in the symbolic value attributed to a person, group, or institution. The process of turning capital into symbolic capital often involves strategies and behaviors that align with the norms, values, and expectations of a particular social field (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2013; Lebaron, 2014). Central to this process of accumulating symbolic capital is the acknowledgment received from peers, competitors, or the broader social milieu (Noordegraaf and Schinkel, 2011) of one’s ‘taste’.

Taste, then, refers to an individual’s preferences, choices, and cultural inclinations, and how these align with the prevailing norms and values of a field. Through their taste, individuals demonstrate their cultural competence and adherence to the accepted standards, which, in turn, contributes to their recognition, acceptance, and status within the field. In the context of life coaching, life coaches may thus attempt to distinguish themselves from others by showcasing their cultural knowledge and preferences. Where someone stands in the field is determined by their ability to express their cultural capital and preferences effectively, influencing their status, acknowledgment, and acceptance within that field.
In this study, we aim to delve into how life coaches actively and strategically pursue credibility and status within their profession by acquiring and leveraging diverse forms of capital through their activities on Instagram. We will investigate how life coaches position themselves within the distinct field of life coaching, examining their deliberate accumulation and utilization of various forms of capital while using Instagram’s affordances. Additionally, we will evaluate the messages they convey and examine how they align with the neoliberal concept of self-improvement.

Method

Sample

The study took place in March 2022. In total, 20 participants [1] agreed to us analyzing their Instagram profile, out of a total of 50 individuals who were contacted via Instagram. Among those who declined to participate in our study, 24 did not respond to our inquiry. For those who did respond, we received brief replies indicating their decision not to participate without providing further elaboration. The informed consent provided a comprehensive description of the study, outlining how the participant’s data would be collected, stored, and used, so to ensure an individual’s privacy.

Flemish-Belgian and Dutch participants were searched through the hashtag #lifecoach (in Dutch). The decision to involve Flemish-Belgian and Dutch life coaches can be understood from a sociocultural perspective, as cross-cultural characteristics such as language and online presence allow them to operate within the same client system. Apart from using Instagram, the eligibility criteria for participation were that participants had to identify themselves as a life coach in their Instagram biographies and were required to have an active account, which we defined a priori as having posted in the past week. Moreover, these life coaches had to offer their services for a fee, which we determined in advance.

Since this study targets Flemish-Belgian and Dutch life coaches, an equal ratio of Flemish-Belgian and Dutch life coaches was sought. This was however not accomplished as it proved much more difficult to find Belgian life coaches on Instagram, and those who were found were less likely to agree to participate. This study, therefore, moved forward with a total of five Flemish-Belgian life coaches and 15 life coaches from the Netherlands, of which five identified as male, and 15 as female on their Instagram profile.

Prior studies have linked credibility to the number of followers on Instagram, arguing that the higher the number of followers, the more credibility is granted (e.g., De Veirman, et al., 2017). Although the research method used in this study does not allow us to investigate directly whether the number of followers affects the legitimacy of life coaches, we included accounts with differing numbers of followers: Our sample consisted of six ‘small’ (< 200 followers), seven ‘medium’ (between 200 and 500 followers), and seven ‘large’ accounts (> 500 followers).

Across this diverse set of 20 profiles, we conducted an analysis of 1,650 Instagram posts, which encompassed screenshots of various content types such as pictures, videos (including reels), and stories shared on the life coaches’ main profiles. These screenshots were securely stored for further analysis in accordance with the local legal and ethical regulations.

Procedure

Our analysis adopted a thematic approach, delving into both textual components, such as captions, descriptions, comments, and hashtags, and visual elements, encompassing images and videos. This comprehensive method allowed for a nuanced exploration, seeking patterns and themes within the content on Instagram. By meticulously examining the interplay between textual and visual aspects, we aimed to uncover underlying themes and meanings. The textual content, including captions and comments, served as
a rich source of information, offering valuable insights into the intentional messaging and communication strategies employed by life coaches on Instagram. Through this thematic lens, we sought to illuminate the discursive dimensions of their self-presentation and the intricate construction of their professional identity. This approach provides a holistic understanding of the overarching themes embedded in the Instagram content, facilitating a deeper interpretation of the communicative strategies employed by life coaches.

We organized and analyzed the data in NVIVO, i.e., a computer software package for qualitative data analysis. The screenshots (or parts of them) were analyzed using a thematic coding process. Contents were first classified into categories such as ‘description of what life coaching entails’, ‘used methods’, ‘neoliberal ideas’, ‘notions of the good life’, and ‘knowledge source.’ After assigning these higher-order codes to the content, the screenshots were further linked to more specific codes, e.g., the category entitled ‘knowledge source’ contained codes such as ‘personal experience’, and ‘obtained certificates.’

The analysis was completed by making use of a qualitative analysis of the contents embedded in the code tree, focusing on the techniques that life coaches use, to understand how life coaches carry out and legitimize their professional identity, with particular attention to how they incorporate a neoliberal discourse of self-improvement through their use of Instagram.

In the demonstration of our results, we adhered to privacy regulations, minimizing the inclusion of pictures. When including images, we used advanced AI programs like Runway and DALL-E. By inputting original images into these programs, we regenerated them, ensuring both anonymity and preserving the core interpretative elements of the data. Moreover, we incorporated methods such as selectively blurring specific areas or reconstructing textual images. This ethical consideration aligns with our commitment to conducting a responsible and respectful analysis of the Instagram content.

Results

Overall, our findings reveal that life coaches adeptly use Instagram’s affordances to assert their professional status, thereby shedding light on what the implicit rules and regulations are of their field. Our findings align with Bourdieu’s (1990, 1987, 1986) work, and indicate that legitimacy is forged though the accumulation of strategic uses of economic, cultural, and social capital, which are transformed into symbolic capital. More specifically, life coaches were found to strategically establish their presence in the field, celebrate self-improvement as a way of living, and emphasize it as an individual responsibility.

Establishing a presence in the life coaching field

In our study, life coaches employed Instagram’s affordances to articulate and emphasize their professional standing, leveraging the platform’s features for a direct and explicit presentation of their online professional identity. Notably, every life coach in our sample distinctly identified themselves as a ‘life coach’ in their Instagram biographies. This self-ascribed function description can be likened to a business card, effectively summarizing the services and expertise offered by the life coaches.

Moreover, many life coaches maximized the potential of Instagram’s afforded space by providing a detailed and comprehensive classification of their profession and expertise, along with information about the individuals they aspire to coach. For instance, life coaches used phrases such as “I expand your insights and strengthen your mental strength” to highlight their distinct expertise and “for anyone who wants to live according to their true potential” to provide a clear picture of their intended audience. This deliberate articulation of their professional identity, coupled with their unique expertise, exemplified how life coaches aimed to establish themselves as distinctive and desirable.

In their content, life coaches leveraged the hashtag #lifecoaching, serving a dual purpose: enabling coaches
to establish their positions within the life coaching realm while simultaneously reinforcing and solidifying the broader recognition and foundation of the entire field. Notably, many of the examined life coaches complimented their identity by incorporating additional coaching specialties, such as ‘business coaching’ or ‘walking coaching.’ This ‘functional differentiation’ was also evident in a range of hashtags related to different coaching disciplines, including #businesscoach, #walkingcoach, #holisticcoach, and so on.

By using these tagging affordances, life coaches not only enhance discoverability but strategically navigate a larger field of ‘coaching,’ located in the broader field of self-improvement, thereby cultivating a sense of community within the online realm that unites diverse coaching specialties. This practice goes beyond surface-level engagement; it builds social capital, fostering a robust community and shared identity (Fiers, 2020).

Simultaneously, life coaches, through tags, comments, and reactions on their posts, visibly establish connections not only with other (life) coaches but also with individuals in related entrepreneurial self-help professions within the broader domain of self-improvement, such as ‘transformational speakers,’ ‘energy tarot readers,’ or ‘positive seed-planters.’ These interactions often take the form of ‘networked gift-giving’ (see De Leyn, et al., 2022) where life coaches share screenshots from others, add tags and commentaries, which are then ‘thanked for’, and reciprocated. Similar to the practices of regular social media influencers (e.g., Henderickx and Wolf, 2019), these associations can be viewed as a strategic manifestation and aggregation of social capital, which is subsequently transformed into symbolic capital.

Several examined profiles also shared positive feedback received from clients in this way. These reviews were prominently featured in both the life coaches’ main feed and their stories, the latter often archived in their highlights. These archived stories, then, effectively function as cultural capital, with which the coaches not only ensure their accessibility but also amplify their impact, as other followers can readily see the approval and credits given to the life coaches for their expertise.

Apart from relying on external indicators of credibility and legitimacy, the life coaches in our sample adeptly drew upon their individual experiences — a technique commonly observed among social media influencers (e.g., Lewis, 2008; Baker and Rojek, 2020b). They created captions to accompany their shared content, for example, with statements like “I work from an individual approach that derives from my own life experiences and people skills.” This distinctive approach allowed life coaches to simultaneously position themselves within the field while also setting themselves apart from others in the profession through their ‘lived experience.’

These mechanisms of self-identification often integrated persuasive language, such as “believe me” or “you can do it too,” as well as affirmations that aimed to build rapport with their followers, like “I can relate to your struggles.” This duality allows life coaches to not only position themselves as authoritative experts but also to connect on a personal level with their followers, acknowledging the common journey of personal growth and self-improvement.

Moreover, as they sought to solidify their status and expertise in the field, the life coaches in our study intensely leveraged Instagram’s communicative affordances to highlight their educational backgrounds and professional knowledge. They frequently shared images that highlighted certificates, qualifications, and (self-help) books they had read. These visuals serve as tangible representations of life coaches’ cultural capital, symbolizing their extensive qualifications and embodying their expertise in the field of life coaching. Universally recognized as symbols of professional legitimacy and expertise, these certifications thereby reinforcing life coaches’ authority and credibility, and simultaneously setting themselves apart from those without formal recognition.

Some of the life coaches leveraged Instagram's affordances to offer a further glimpse into their professional realm (see Figure 1). They often did so by presenting a workspace designed as a therapy-like setting, but described with esoteric terms, for instance as a place of “harmony” or “tranquility,” thus manifesting a tangible coaching environment in the physical world.
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Figure 1: An AI (Runway) generated example picturing the workplace of a life coach, presented as an image on their Instagram main feed.

The depictions of physical spaces provide an additional layer of authenticity and legitimacy, or symbolic capital, that not all coaches can offer, thereby bestowing upon them a unique advantage in the competitive field of life coaching.

In sum, our results demonstrate that life coaches actively use Instagram’s affordances to identify themselves and communicate their status as professionals. In their quest for distinction and legitimacy, life coaches employ a range of strategies, including displaying their credentials, offering tangible proof of their physical coaching spaces alongside their online presence, sharing client feedback and testimonials, and referring to their expertise-by-experience. These efforts collectively enhance their status within the field, granting them additional social, cultural, and symbolic capital. Simultaneously, in doing so, life coaches use Instagram to reproduce the field of life coaching, setting clear rules (e.g., being certified, having experience, being part of a network with other coaches) for what characterizes a (good) life coach. This multifaceted approach highlights the complexity of establishing oneself as a recognized and respected professional in the field of life coaching.

In the next result section, we describe further how life coaches develop their status-seeking process by legitimizing their mission, which centers on enhancing individuals’ well-being.

Self-improvement as a way of living

The profiles of the life coaches in our sample centered around messages of self-improvement and self-responsibility, which can be comprehended through the professional objective or raison d’être of life coaching, which is to enhance individuals’ overall well-being (Green, et al., 2006). Therefore, the strategic use of ‘the self-improvement construct’ can be considered crucial in not only safeguarding and reinforcing life coaches’ position within the field, but also ensuring the continued existence and relevance of the field itself (Rimke, 2000).
Life coaches embrace a range of techniques to attain these objectives. They foremost skillfully harness Instagram’s affordances to craft visually captivating content, frequently displaying a harmonious color scheme and the inclusion of motivational quotes, as exemplified in Figure 2. Notably, the creation of the ‘inspirational quote tile’ emerged as a potent technique, known for conveying both inspiring and aesthetically pleasing messages. Through these deliberate choices, life coaches embraced the design elements and cultural capital inherent to the Instagram community, as already observed within influencer studies, thereby signifying a powerful sense of professionalism (e.g., Abidin, 2016; Karpasitis, 2020).

![Figure 2](image.png)

**Figure 2:** A recreated example of an inspirational quote tile, thoughtfully crafted with a harmonizing color palette, shared by a life coach to enhance the overall aesthetic appeal of their Instagram profile.

A considerable portion of the profiles analyzed also featured carefully curated images and videos that portrayed the life coaches actively embracing the concept of an ‘improved life,’ as exemplified in Figure 3.
These portrayals were frequently associated with the personal methods that life coaches had adopted and advertised, and often displayed positivity (e.g., a portrait of the life coach with a bright smile), projected a calm and serene presence (e.g., a life coach meditating), or demonstrated the active use of their self-improvement techniques (e.g., a life coach writing in a journal or walking in nature). These visuals were enriched with detailed captions in which they elaborated on their distinct 'self-improvement journeys' through the strategic use of Instagram’s tagging affordances by adding hashtags like #self-improvement and #livingmybestlife onto images that portrayed their improved lifestyles, supposedly marking the journey toward a happier life.

![Figure 3: An AI (Runway) generated example of a life coach’s Instagram post representing the coach practicing yoga in a calm natural setting.](image)

Here again, the expertise through experience re-surfaced in life coaches’ personal journeys of self-improvement. They shared these carefully constructed anecdotes, through captions like, “I left the rat race, quit my 9-5 job, and took a sabbatical; thanks to that step, I decided to realize my life goal [...]. As a result, I am happier than ever,” “Thanks to these steps and by freeing myself from my old life, I reconnected with myself,” and “I ventured to [...], away from everything, no cell phone, no talking, and a focus entirely on meditation. This step changed my life.”

When documenting and sharing these narratives on their Instagram profiles, life coaches attempt to build a trust relationship with their followers by seeking interaction with them, encouraging them to share similar experiences in the comment section, for example, “What helps you when you feel overwhelmed? Leave your tips in the comments [...].” This dynamic not only strengthens cultural and social capital but also facilitates transformation into symbolic capital, which becomes evident through individuals’ reactions, such as comments like “this is so recognizable.” These reactions signify the recognition and acceptance of the life coach’s message and their credibility, enhancing the coach’s professional position within the field of life coaching.
coaching. In addition to comments, support for the life coaches’ messages was evident through what Marwick (2013) defines as “status affordances,” such as likes.

An interesting tension appeared here, with life coaches often alluding to the importance of finding one’s ‘True Self,’ all while infusing them with their own unique personal perspectives, which end up not being so unique after all: While their ‘habits’ or implemented ‘self-improvement techniques’ encompassed various elements, they often alluded to activities such as self-reflection, journaling, connecting with nature, meditation, yoga, maintaining a healthy diet, and adhering to other ‘template activities’ to attain the good life (tagged with hashtags such #yoga, #journaling, and #selfimprovement, thereby playing a pivotal role in facilitating posts’ reach, but also linking these ‘template activities’ to the good life (Black, 2016; Giannoulakis and Tsapatsoulis, 2022).

In sum, our results demonstrate how life coaches skillfully use Instagram’s affordances to shape their ‘self-improvement narratives.’ They carefully curate visual content and complement it with well-crafted captions, leveraging Instagram’s affordances to accumulate and use capital effectively. Life coaches position themselves as ‘experts by experience’ in the field of self-improvement by sharing their personal journeys toward a better life. These visual depictions and compelling captions solidify their role as life coaches and enhance the legitimacy of life coaching. Their self-improvement stories resonate with followers who engage with these experiences, forming a trust-based relationship that transcends the typical coach-follower dynamic. By sharing personal narratives, life coaches transform their cultural capital into symbolic capital, reinforcing their authority and credibility within the field. In essence, life coaches shared narratives and visual content highlighting the effectiveness of specific techniques, contributing to the importance and validity of their profession.

**Self-improvement as an individual responsibility**

Through the strategic use of Instagram affordances and persuasive speech, the life coaches in our sample actively promoted their self-improvement techniques and encouraged their followers to assume responsibility for their personal development. In doing so, these life coaches tapped into the prevailing neoliberal notion of the ‘good life’ that places a strong emphasis on self-improvement and self-responsibility. This aligns with the broader cultural narrative that individuals should take control of their own lives, make self-driven changes, and be accountable for their own success and well-being (Brown and Baker, 2012; Harvey, 2005).
Posts for example often contained statements such as “So, choose whether you’re heading for the doomsday scenario or your own success,” “Self-respect, self-worth, and self-love all start with yourself,” “The only one who can help you is you,” and “Stop hiding your true self and be free.” Additionally, the use of hashtags like #youareincontrol, #takecontrol, #standupforyourself, and #freeyourself reinforces the overarching theme of self-responsibility promoted by these life coaches. By endorsing this idealized, neoliberal-driven reality, life coaches harness a pervasive discourse, that aligns with the aspirations of numerous followers who are actively pursuing a more fulfilling and self-directed life (Ward, 2021). Furthermore, the longevity of this discourse is sustained through its widespread propagation on Instagram, often facilitated using relevant hashtags, as evident in the examined profiles.

The prevalent self-improvement narrative paired with the portrayal of progress towards a more improved life (see Figure 4), a phenomenon that was clearly present in all the profiles that we analyzed, serves a dual function. Firstly, it enables life coaches to position themselves as authoritative figures within their field. Secondly, it accentuates a noticeable distinction between these coaches and their followers. Throughout their portrayed self-improvement journey, life coaches emphasize their past struggles and vividly illustrate that they were once in the same position as their audience. This relatable comparison effectively underscores the transformation these life coaches have undergone and the personal responsibility they have embraced. As a result, it solidifies their roles as mentors who have triumphed over comparable challenges, offering valuable guidance to those striving to enhance their lives.
Within our sample, life coaches also displayed a common belief in the necessity of personal transformation into the ‘true self’ or the ‘authentic self’ (see Figure 5). Some coaches took this a step further and alluded to the existence of a ‘higher self’ [2]. Intriguingly, despite the absence of universally accepted definitions or clear empirical foundations for these concepts, it becomes clear that within the realm of life coaching, these interpretations of ‘the self’ hold significant meaning and relevance, further strengthening the notion of self-improvement that commences from within ‘the self.’ These ideas are consistently reinforced by their prominent presence across the accounts of life coaches and other professionals in the self-help industry (see also Rindfleish, 2005), all interconnected through Instagram’s tagging affordances, such as #trueself, #authenticself, and #higherself.

Moreover, among the life coaches in our sample, there was a shared use of Instagram’s affordances to endorse the idea that embarking on the journey to uncover one’s ‘higher self’ (#higherself) or ‘true self’ (#trueself) necessitates a purposeful commitment to transcend the ego and silence the inner critic. The ego

**Figure 5:** A recreated example of a life coach’s Instagram feed embracing the concepts of self-responsibility and the ‘true self.’
[3], as illustrated in the shared content, is often portrayed as the force that prevents the higher self from pursuing the essential steps toward living one’s dream life. This perspective was consistently reinforced through the captions accompanying the shared content, such as, “Do not listen to the inner voice that tries to stop you from living your best life,” or “When we talk about the three cancers of the mind, Ego is always the reason.”

Several posts asserted that the concept of the higher or true self involves being independent of others’ opinions. The notion of self-improvement is thus linked to the responsibility of detaching oneself from external influences, as illustrated by quotes such as, “Or do you let the outside world that is always asking for your attention guide you,” “You are not responsible for any other person; everyone must take responsibility for their own life,” and “Avoid people who take away your energy.” Life coaches describe the attainment of this ‘self’ by emphasizing introspection and the presence of all the answers within oneself, often using phrases like, “You will have to embark on a journey within yourself because the answer can only be found there.”

Expanding on these viewpoints, certain life coaches within our study embraced more unconventional perspectives on self-improvement that align with a linear hierarchical framework. In this paradigm, individuals are encouraged to “level up” or progress to the “next level in life.” This perception is symbolized by hashtags like #nextlevel, #levelup, and #thenextlevelyou, drawing parallels to the terminology employed in video games. Much like the gaming experience, where players must strive to unlock the next level to continue or survive, these life coaches assert that the pursuit of a fulfilling life is analogous to cracking and strategically navigating the ‘system of life.’

The narrative surrounding self-improvement in the examined profiles thus places a robust emphasis on the notion of individuals embarking on a personal journey to define their paths and progress toward more fulfilling lives. Nonetheless, it is essential to recognize that life coaches, while encouraging individuals to embark on a personal quest, also provide their guidance throughout the process — as indicated by statements like, “Do you need someone to guide you in the right direction? Then a life coach is idea” in their captions.

This approach creates a paradox that underscores the coaches’ role in guiding, while emphasizing the individual’s self-directed pursuit of self-improvement. In doing so, life coaches not only construct a narrative but also create a clear distinction between those who may initially seek guidance in their journey towards self-improvement and those who possess the knowledge and expertise to provide it — namely, the life coach. This strategic narrative construction is instrumental in not only guiding individuals but also solidifying the life coaches’ professional standing within the field, positioning themselves as authoritative figures in the realm of self-improvement.

In sum, our results show how life coaches use Instagram affordances to strategically harness a shared discourse and terminology revolving around the core concepts of self-improvement and self-responsibility. This shared language, propagated through tagging, and enriched with concepts such as the true self, the authentic self, the higher self, and the next level you, serves as a convincing means of enriching and strengthening their field. It is through this shared language that life coaches bolster the credibility of their guidance and assert their cultural capital within the field. By weaving these terms into their narratives, they effectively stake their claim as authoritative experts, knowledgeable in the nuances of self-improvement. Furthermore, these concepts play a pivotal role in distinguishing life coaches from their clients. In positioning themselves as the overseers of the ‘higher self’ or the ‘authentic self,’ they offer individuals the promise of achieving a superior state of being, a transformed and improved life. In essence, this shared vocabulary empowers life coaches to position themselves as knowledgeable professionals within the field.

Conclusion
This study closely monitored the Instagram profiles of 20 Western life coaches over the course of a month. Drawing from Bourdieu’s (1987, 1986) work on distinction and capital, we approached the evolving profession of life coaching as a distinct field, of which the boundaries are shaped through the use of Instagram’s affordances.

Our study has revealed several strategies employed by life coaches to establish themselves within the field of life coaching and to secure the profession of life coaching itself. Life coaches effectively used Instagram’s affordances to confer significance to the title of ‘life coach’ and to position it within the broader realm of professions aimed at supporting individuals in their quest towards self-improvement, and the good life. This was achieved by explicitly identifying themselves as life coaches, elucidating their personal interpretations of life coaching, and delineating the nature and raison d’être of their services, but also through the more implicit use of Instagram’s affordances to bolster their position and reinforce a shared narrative centered on self-improvement and self-responsibility. From a Bourdieusian perspective, this perpetuation and reinforcement of the life coaches’ professional status on Instagram can be seen as a process of cultural reproduction where the cultural, social, and symbolic capital of the life coaching field is maintained and transmitted across time, ensuring its continued existence and relevance (Bourdieu, 1973).

Bourdieu and Passeron’s (1990) principle of cultural reproduction was aimed at uncovering the mechanisms that generate and perpetuate social inequalities in society. From this perspective it is noticeable that, in today’s world, neoliberal values that prioritize individual responsibility for shaping a successful life often dominate the social discourse. By engaging in this social discourse, life coaches further fortify and disseminate the idea of a malleable future. This is not without risk, as life coaches who gain legitimacy in these ways may contribute to harmful consequences for both the individual and society, among others by ignoring existing differences, inequalities, and privileges that may provide an unequal playing field, while still placing the full burden of responsibility for living ‘the good life’ on the individual.

In the absence of adequate regulation, life coaches, whether consciously or unconsciously, may strive to establish themselves as professionals in a constantly evolving field. They may rely on popular ideas that appeal to the wider public, as well as strategies facilitated by Instagram’s affordances. However, this positioning may not always be rooted in genuine expertise but in strategic presentation. This phenomenon is particularly evident on social media platforms like Instagram, raising potential risks and uncertainties. Hence, notwithstanding the valuable role that life coaching may play in supporting individuals who are eager to make positive life changes, our study also warns for potential harms resulting from an unstructured and unregulated professional life coaching industry.

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Notes

1. Although some might argue that publicly available Instagram profiles of life coaches represent social media content for which no reasonable privacy expectation can be assumed, given the detailed nature of our empirical inquiry, and that users can also perceive third-party use of their public data as a privacy breach (see also boyd, 2008), combined with the presence of third-party comments of life coaches’ clients and contacts, and the feasibility of contacting Instagram account owners, we opted to obtain an informed consent from life coaches prior to including their Instagram page in our sample. This approach was agreed upon by the institutional review board (IRB) of Ghent University, who ethically approved our study.

2. The concept of the ‘higher self’ resonates within the New Age movement, which emphasizes spiritual evolution, and the transcendence of egoic limitations. Aligned with New Age principles, the higher self represents a more enlightened, evolved aspect of consciousness, encouraging individuals to realize their spiritual potential, foster interconnectedness, and undergo transformative journeys toward self-realization and self-actualization (Ankerberg and Weldon, 1988; Redden, 2002; Shimazono, 1999).

3. Life coaches visualize the ego as a negative state that must be overcome to live a good life, which goes against Freud’s (1989) generally accepted theory of personality structures where the Ego equals consciousness and operates based on the reality principle. However, this pseudo-pop-positive-psychological theory linking the true self with happiness may contribute to the legitimacy of life coaching (Berg, 2008), as several life coaches propagate it as generally accepted knowledge.

References


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