A TikTok rival promised millions to Black creators. Now some are deep in debt.

Triller made its name recruiting talent with lavish perks. Now, dozens of influencers are struggling to get paid. 'We were made to look like fools,' one creator said.

By Taylor Lorenz
August 3, 2022 at 12:01 p.m. EDT

Last fall, David Warren seemed to be on the verge of a breakthrough.

With more than half a million followers on TikTok, Warren, 22, had left Hot Springs, Ark., for a one-bedroom apartment in Los Angeles, near a dance studio, where he could attend classes five days a week.

Warren had the promise of stability in the form of a lucrative, year-long deal with Triller, a short-form video app that looks and functions similarly to TikTok. He was part of a group of what Triller touted as 300 Black content creators offered contracts totaling $14 million — "the largest ever one-time commitment of capital to Black creators," the company bragged in a November news release.

But nearly a year after Triller began recruiting Black talent, its payments to many creators have been erratic — and, in some cases, nonexistent, according to interviews with more than two dozen creators, talent managers and former company staff, many of whom spoke to The Washington Post on the condition of anonymity to avoid retaliation from the company.

For influencers, it's a disastrous turn from a platform with a reputation for paying big money, dubbed "Triller money," to get talent to post on the app.

Throughout 2020 and 2021, Triller launched luxurious content houses in the Hollywood Hills and inked a partnership with the Sway Boys, a popular collab group. A-list TikTok stars were promised up to $10,000 per stream on TrillerTV. Triller leased a black Rolls-Royce with a "TRILLER" vanity plate for Charli D'Amelio, TikTok's most-followed creator in the United States. Josh Richards, another TikTok star, got a Mercedes-Benz. The platform splurged on lavish dinners at restaurants like Nobu, where executives would brainstorm with top Hollywood creators on how to take down TikTok.

Far from "Triller money," the Black influencers were promised $4,000 per month, with half paid in equity, according to documents reviewed by The Post. Warren, used to making content for platforms controlled by according to documents reviewed by The Post. Warren, used to making content for platforms controlled by other people, found the chance to own a piece of something thrilling.

But now, as they cope with uncertain payments, many creators allege they are compelled to keep up with a demanding posting schedule and vague requirements that make it easy for the company to eliminate people from the program.

In late June, after The Post had begun reporting the story, some creators received one month's payment. In July, some creators began receiving back payments for previous months of work. Dozens of creators were asked to sign an agreement committing to confidentiality to receive their pay or risk "forfeiture of all equity consideration," according to correspondence viewed by The Post.

As this story was being prepared for publication Tuesday, some creators told The Post they received notifications from Triller that payments for May and June work were being deposited into their accounts; several received mailed checks. One creator, who had been seeking payment for a deal with TrillerTV for nearly a year, said they received payment Tuesday.

Triller disputes that there have been any problems with creators' pay. Triller chief executive Mahi de Silva said in a statement that the company "has met its financial commitments to the creators in this program and will continue to do so."

"We specifically take pride in our role in creating a platform that celebrates Black creator content," he said. "No other medium has done as much as Triller has for this often overlooked and underrepresented part of the creator economy."

Many of the creators who signed deals with Triller say they have been left deep in debt, and are facing eviction and skipping meals to make ends meet.

For Warren, the experience has also conjured up questions about the ethics of the influencer industry and whether apps sold as empowering a generation of creators are instead exploiting vulnerable talent. "This program was meant to make us financially free and to empower Black people," he said. "They told us that so much was going to happen for us."

"We were made to look like fools," Warren said.

Brand deals and big promises

Triller gained prominence in 2020, when a number of right-wing influencers, including President Donald Trump, renounced the Chinese-owned TikTok in favor of the homegrown app.

But its rise has been plagued with controversy amid a relentless, one-sided battle against TikTok.

After Triller announced it had grown to 13 million active monthly users in 2019, employees disputed the claim, telling Business Insider that internal metrics showed fewer than 2.5 million active monthly users. The company's then-CEO, Mike Lu, said the employees were "disseminating inaccurate information." This summer, several fighters involved in Triller Fight Club, a live-streamed boxing series, alleged they hadn't been paid for their work. And in February 2021, Universal Music Group pulled all of its music from Triller after it "shamefully withheld payments owed" to Universal artists, according to the music company. (Triller denied the claim, and the two companies later reached an expanded licensing agreement.)

Last August, it was TikTok that was under scrutiny. Black creators, fed up that the app hadn't done enough to resolve complaints about White creators taking credit for viral trends created by Black users, launched the Black TikTok Strike, an awareness campaign.

That's when Triller began an attack on its biggest rival. It announced a series of investments in the Black community: It signed sponsorship deals with members of the Collab Crib, an all-Black influencer house in Atlanta. It teased a new content house in Los Angeles: the Flave House, which would exclusively feature diverse talent.

Company representatives reached out to hundreds of prominent Black creators, inviting them to an "Assembly for Black Creators," a virtual conference for talent to network with one another, brands and industry leaders. Triller also promised to hold a massive "Black Creator Conference" in Atlanta in the first half of 2022.

"Triller was promising us all of these things, a content house, collaborations, brand deals," said Roman Parks, 18, a social media creator in San Jose.

The courtship was rocky from the start. When more than 100 Black content creators logged on to the Zoom meeting for the first virtual conference, they were greeted with a series of pre-written talks by executives and were auto-muted by the organizers so they couldn't speak directly to the hosts or the brand reps in attendance, according to several creators and a recording of the call reviewed by The Post.

When Triller Executive Chairman Bobby Sarnevesht told the creators on the Zoom that they could be the next Charli D'Amelio, a White high school girl and one of TikTok's most popular stars, many grew frustrated. "It was like, we don't want to be the next Charli," Warren said. "We want to be the next us, and you're sitting up there comparing us to a little White girl that's nothing like our demographic."

Sarnevesht continued, undeterred. With the Black creators' help, he said, Triller could finally crush its competition, TikTok. "If we all work together we can build some cool s--- together," he said, according to a recording of the call reviewed by The Post. "And you know what? We don't need the Chinese."

The tenor of the event changed when Sarnevesht announced Triller would be doling out a big offer. "$2,000 a month, plus $2,000 stock," he said, to every creator on the call. "I don't give a f--- about the size of your audience. Let's all start, let's all be a team. ... it's time to get collaborative."

On top of the monthly payment, Triller would feed the creators brand deals — including ones from Hallmark and Popeyes ready to go — and help them broker connections, things many creators said they wanted from TikTok.

Warren immediately began thinking of how his life would change.

"LET'S GOOOOOOOOOOO!" one creator wrote in the comments of the Zoom chat.

"About to send my cute 653k to triller," wrote another.

The stock was a major milestone. While Black creators are often responsible for the success of social platforms, generating engagement and driving memes, they're rarely, if ever, given a stake in a company. "The driving force for the [Collab Crib members'] decision wasn't just the money," said Keith Dorsey, co-founder of the all-Black content house in Atlanta. "To say, I have stock in this company, I'm invested in this company from a corporate level, that's a game changer."

When Triller sent out a news release touting the program in late November, it was met with a flurry of positive press. Bonin Bough, Triller's chief growth officer, told the Hollywood Reporter at the time that the program would require a light load, “meant to give creators the freedom to post on other channels without being ‘too big of a lift.’ ”

There were warning signs early. Some creators who opted for the Popeyes promotional deal said they were sent materials for Hallmark instead. When they raised this issue, Triller management said they’d have to promote Hallmark or skip the opportunity, according to messages reviewed by The Post. Other creators’ packages came too late to complete the campaigns, or they never received a package. It felt disorganized, creators said.

Creators and their managers were told the program would begin in January, but the new year came and went, and they still didn’t have a deal. By Feb. 1, the agreements weren’t signed, but the creators were still asked to post, pressured by Triller’s partnerships team.

“Some creators got contracts in January and some in March. As this new program rolled out, some agreements took longer than expected,” said de Silva, Triller’s CEO.

Almost immediately, Triller began disqualifying creators who didn’t produce the required posts. Some creators said they were kicked out for what they viewed as minor infractions, such as not adhering perfectly to the posting schedule, or not completing the Hallmark and Popeyes promotions months earlier, a promotional deal many creators thought was voluntary.

Finally, on March 3, many creators in the program were given a finalized contract.

The program required more extensive work than what Bough implied to the Hollywood Reporter. Influencers had to post eight Triller videos per month and aggressively promote the app on competing platforms, according to documents viewed by The Post. Triller videos had to be cross-posted on their Instagram feed, and on Snapchat, Instagram Stories or Twitter no less than once per week. To ensure Instagram feed posts performed well, the creators weren’t allowed to post anything else to the app eight hours before or eight hours after their Triller post. They had to issue at least two public statements per month reiterating their ties to the app. The contract granted Triller royalty-free, worldwide, transferrable rights to license and use of an influencer’s name, image, likeness, voice and audiovisual on all Triller channels.

The limits on “competing platforms” were particularly restricting, creators said. They were not allowed to post more content on TikTok, YouTube Shorts, Instagram Reels or myriad other social platforms than they posted on Triller, making it difficult to make outside income. Triller’s de Silva said language restricting posts to other platforms “does not exist in our contracts.” Multiple contracts reviewed by The Post included language restricting such posts.

The creators found the work unusually stressful and exhausting. On top of producing a stream of promotional Triller content, the creators had to keep meticulous track of their work, sending screen recordings of all their posts to Triller to ensure they received credit for the deliverables. If the influencers missed a post or forgot to document an Instagram story, they risked getting kicked out of the program, according to emails reviewed by The Post.

“The talent signed up for a specific schedule that requires specific deliverables. If they don’t do the basic job, they will not get paid,” de Silva said.

Niccolo Cagnolatti, a 20-year-old influencer in Los Angeles, learned this the hard way. After his cousin died in March, he asked if he could have a brief extension on an Instagram post required by the end of the month. He had shared a GoFundMe to cover funeral costs for his cousin, and it felt crass, just days after losing a family member, to post a Triller promotion.

Triller wouldn't budge. In an email to his manager viewed by The Post, a representative explained that he had to fulfill the promotional requirement or risk being removed from the program.

When his manager communicated the news, Cagnolatti's heart sank. "I was speechless," he said. "I felt disrespected as a person, I felt like I wasn't working for human beings."

He posted the promo, including a video of himself with his cousin to try to make it less obvious.

Other creators struggled to balance Triller content with TikTok content. The TikTok algorithm rewards frequency, and many creators earned money through TikTok's creator fund, a program that pays creators for views accumulated on the app. As their posting frequency on TikTok plummeted, so did the money they received from the app. Because Triller wasn't issuing regular payments, their incomes took a hit.

"Triller put a restriction on TikTok content, which is their main livelihood," said Prasuna Cheruku, a talent manager for several creators in the program. "For some, their rate for one TikTok post alone is $2,000 to $5,000."

Warren was fine dipping into his savings to get through the first few months, but when payment hadn't come by late May, he began to worry.

Later that month, an email arrived from Triller: "We want to inform you that there may be a delay in completing our ongoing contractual obligations with your firm," the company said. The company was preparing to go public through a reverse merger. As part of Triller's "fiduciary responsibility to complete the deal," the company explained, "we are obligated to maintain a certain amount of dedicated resources on our books to complete the transaction."

The creators were livid. Months later, many still haven't been paid for past work.

"It's been very stressful," said William Horne, 20, a content creator from Detroit. "I decided to go get an apartment because I thought I'd be covered by Triller for the next year. … They were super pushy about us and our deliverables, but when it came time for payment, they passed the deadline and breached their own contract. The hypocrisy."

Old Hollywood all over again

Black creators aren't the only ones who have struggled to obtain payment from Triller. In February 2021, after Triller announced TrillerTV, a live-streaming series featuring custom content from top creators and celebrities, the company signed a slew of theoretically lucrative deals with talent, promising to pay them up to $10,000 to host short live-streamed shows on the app.

Just months after the program began, creators said Triller started missing payments. Influencers began contacting the company last fall and failed to get a response, according to documents reviewed by The Post. Now, a year and a half later, after sending dozens of emails and multiple invoices, some creators say they are still owed tens of thousands of dollars.

The company disputes the allegations. "Anyone owed has been paid or still has deliverables or brand approvals," de Silva said. The creators said they met all deliverables, and no outside brands were involved in their streams.

On Tuesday, one creator said they received payment owed from a TrillerTV deal. Others, like Maverick Baker

On Tuesday, one creator said they received payment owed from a Triller TV deal. Others, like Maverick Baker, said they are still waiting.

“They owe me money, and it’s been almost a year,” said Baker, 21, a social media content creator in Dallas. “I’ve sent multiple invoices, I don’t hear from them for months at a time. It’s always another reason why they can’t pay me.”

Groups of creators traded horror stories about Triller in June at VidCon, the annual convention for online video stars in Anaheim, Calif. At VidCon, every major social platform and every hopeful start-up in the social media space vies for content creators’ attention. Instagram, Snapchat, Amazon, YouTube and others set up marketing booths where representatives court talent, extolling the benefits of creating content on their platforms. TikTok headlined the event. Triller was noticeably absent.

“They don’t want to show their faces because they owe us all money,” said one top TikTok creator who spoke on the condition of anonymity to speak candidly. “It will stir up these people and will cause problems. We all earned this money contractually.”

In late July, Sarnevesht, de Silva and other leaders at the company held a Zoom meeting for the creators who were owed money from the company.

“I’m sure you guys have better things to do than hear some a------ talk about why he didn’t pay you,” Sarnevesht said, blaming the delay on an internal miscommunication about accounting and promising to get them paid by the end of the month, according to a recording of the call reviewed by The Post.

Sarnevesht also teased opportunities for the Black creators in the Middle East. He said that the company was discussing a plan to fill an airplane, decorated with Triller’s logo, with influencers and send them to Dubai to create content, and that they may be able to work with Saudi Arabia, too. Sarnevesht bemoaned lawsuits filed against the company and promised big things on the horizon. “Which I can’t discuss because everyone keeps suing me. I’m so tired of being sued, by the way,” Sarnevesht said.

The company said Sarnevesht’s quote “was false.” The Post reviewed a recording of the meeting and confirmed its accuracy.

The lack of payment has thrown dozens of creators into difficult financial situations. Creators reported missing car payments, rent and loan payments. Some have been forced to cancel trips, while others say they are cutting back on food.

Jahsy Johnson, 21, a content creator in Los Angeles, said he was homeless when Triller approached him for the program. After signing the contract with Triller, “I started looking for apartments and settled down on one,” he said. “But when I didn’t get the payments, I had to let it go.” He’s now temporarily staying with family.

By the end of July, Warren was still owed payment for months of work with Triller. He has since moved out of his North Hollywood apartment to avoid an eviction threat. He has a roommate now and is trying to get back on his feet financially, but his phone bill and car payments are past due.

Late last month, Warren started a new job as a private security guard working eight hours a day. “It means I can’t dance as much,” he said. “But it’s a necessary need right now. I’m still trying to take as many classes as possible.”

Triller has announced that it still plans to pursue an initial public offering (IPO) this fall, with a public listing under the ticker symbol “ILLR” by September. Black creators in the program say they’ve yet to be allocated the shares in the company.

“Us as Black creators work twice as hard or three times as hard just to be seen,” Warren said. “All these platforms preach about diversity, but just like old Hollywood, there’s a lot of people being used as token characters while the owners of the platforms profit.”