

#travelforall: Influencer culture, digital activism and marginalized identities*

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This paper explores the nexus of influencer culture, marginalized identities, and social change advocacy through a case study of disabled Instagram influencers. Influencers are increasingly engaging with social and political issues and, at the same time, advocacy organizations and institutions – from startup PR agencies to governments – are courting them to reach new audiences. While marketing scholars have extensively researched the economic relevance of influencers, their potential role as advocates is relatively underexplored. To address this gap, this study analyzed six months of content from eight disabled Instagram influencers focused on travel. Travel, a commercially relevant topic, intersects with several disability rights issues. The apparent contrast between disability as a historically stigmatized identity and the expectations of social media culture provides an opportunity to investigate these phenomena alongside marginalization. Building on the situational theory of publics, we examined self-representations of disability, their relationship with hegemonic narratives, the relationship between market-oriented and issue-oriented content, how these influencers address brands, organizations, and online publics, and whether they nudge them toward action. Results show a marked prominence of disability-related content and a frequent engagement with disability advocacy themes. However, advocacy content tends to be kept separate from commercial content and is presented from a personal perspective without appeals to participate in action, with a tone that contrasts with the grievance framework typically used in disability rights activism. As such, innovative forms of advocacy are emerging that prioritize lived experiences as positive and ‘authentic’ – in contrast with dominant disability narratives – but are also limited to the individual level without explicit or implied links to collective mobilization. This highlights the potential and limitations of social media influencers as advocates, suggesting that this phenomenon ought to connect to other activation processes and organized activism to move beyond mere awareness-raising.

Keywords: influencers, advocacy, activism, disability, social change

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Introduction

So far, social media influencers have been understood mainly as a marketing phenomenon. Yet, in recent years they also increasingly engaged with important social issues (Wellman et al., 2020). Recognizing the potential relevance of these figures, especially among young people, advocacy organizations and political institutions are now courting influencers to harness their visibility and loyal following to reach new audiences. Illustrative examples include, at one end of the spectrum, events and briefings for TikTok influencers held at the White House (Sprunt, 2022) and, at the other end, the work of innovative PR agencies and startups that connect influencers with advocacy organizations. For influencers, this blurring of the lines between their commercial work and social and political advocacy has vast potential but is also fraught with risk and limitations. This increases the urgency of better understanding these trends beyond the false dichotomy between “public relations” and “activism” that has long hindered a more rounded cross-disciplinary examination of these phenomena (Jelen et al., 2024).

Online influencing is simultaneously tied to both the underlying logics of social media platforms and cultural values and expectations, both of which affect the practices and strategies of online content creators. As Cotter (2019) noted, influencers need to play the “visibility game” and seek to exploit social media algorithms by constantly coming up with ways to increase user engagement with their content. To do this, influencers generally seek to project a positive, attractive, and distinctive image, while also appearing trustworthy, knowledgeable, and “authentic” (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017). This not only clashes with the emotional labor that characterizes influencing work and personal storytelling more broadly, but it also creates specific tensions for influencers who may be interested in advancing social and political causes, given that such content may alienate and drive away some followers. A useful analogy here is with celebrities “who are willing to risk or compromise their image” but “may find that their audiences are not” (Meyer & Gamson, 1995, p. 201). This tension is even more relevant for influencers from marginalized groups who, through social media platforms, are afforded opportunities to project more authentic representations but at the same time need to contrast pervasive stereotypical narratives and assert identities that have historically been stigmatized (e.g. Farinosi, 2023).

Among these, an especially relevant group are people with disabilities - roughly 20% of the global population (WHO, 2011) - who have long been associated with disempowering stereotypes in both news and popular media (Haller, 2010). As alternative representations of disability based on lived experience have emerged and become popularized in recent years through the work of disabled artists, journalists, and other media-makers (Trevisan, 2020), social media influencing represents an important new vehicle for this type of change. In contrast with traditional celebrities with disabilities who often preferred to hide their impairments to avoid being stereotyped (Howe & Parker, 2012), the expectation of authenticity that characterizes social media influencing could incentivize disabled content creators to be more open about this aspect of their lives. The popular press has dedicated a growing amount of space to the emergence of disabled influencers in recent years; yet,

this phenomenon remains comparatively underexplored in scholarly literature. The limited work published in this area so far has focused on fashion and beauty influencers, noting how their self-representations seek to eschew reductive tropes and project an idea of complex personhood (Bonilla-del-Rio et al., 2022; Södergren & Vallström, 2022; Trevisan & Farinosi, 2024). This, however, barely scratches the surface of the relationship between social media influencing and disability advocacy.

In light of this, this study investigates the nexus of influencer culture, digital activism, and marginalized identities through the phenomenon of disabled travel influencers, whose work constitutes an especially relevant case study. This is because accessible travel is a growing market that intersects with a range of issues such as accessible transportation, built environment design, inclusive hospitality, and so on that have long been central to the disability rights movement. Given the impact of accessible environments and services on disabled people's inclusion in all aspects of society, these issues continue to be at the top of the agenda for disability rights activists in virtually all countries, with significant recent successes such as new rules from the U.S. Biden administration to hold airlines responsible for damage to wheelchairs and other mobility aids. Thus, travel influencing and disability rights advocacy have the potential to intersect in significant ways that make this a very relevant case study. Furthermore, the complex relationship between disability on one side, and social media visibility on the other adds another layer of complexity that provides an opportunity to examine the intersection of influencer culture, activism, and historically marginalized identities.

A useful framework for capturing, examining, and interpreting the relationship between social media influencing and disability rights advocacy beyond the initial studies outlined above is the situational theory of publics. First outlined by Grunig (1997), this theory has played an important role in studies of issue-centered advocacy and posits that people can be divided into different types of "publics" depending on four key criteria including: their awareness of a given issue; their level of involvement with said issue; their perception of potential self-efficacy; and their understanding of the constraints that limit self-efficacy. Thus, organizations and individual advocates seeking to reach and activate people around specific issues can benefit from recognizing latent (low awareness, high constraints), aware (high awareness, high constraints), and active (high awareness, high involvement) publics (Aldoory & Grunig, 2012). Consequently, the communication strategies of advocates can be classified according to whether they seek to inform and raise awareness, counter the perception of constraints, or increase self-efficacy and active participation to advocacy efforts among online publics. Applying this framework to the case of disabled travel influencers helps understand how they navigate the blurred line between influencing on one side and advocacy and activism on the other.

Research questions and methods

To address the gaps outlined above, this study addresses four main questions, including:

1. How do disabled travel influencers represent themselves on Instagram and how, if at all, does this content seek to counter hegemonic and stereotypical disability representations?
2. What are the main themes and messages they communicate and to what extent, if at all, do they intersect with disability rights themes?
3. What is the balance between commercial (market-oriented) information and activist (issue-oriented) information? More generally, what kind of relationship do they have with commercial companies on one side, and disability rights networks and organizations on the other?
4. How, if at all, do they seek to build community and activate online publics?

Instagram was selected because of its centrality to influencer work, which allows them to share both promotional content and snippets of their daily lives, seeking to establish a personal connection with followers. Furthermore, Instagram also enables the extraction and analysis of both visual and text-based content that complement each other, providing a more rounded view of influencers' work. To identify influencers who posted about traveling with disabilities we searched Instagram for content that included #disabledtravel, a popular hashtag (N=35.2k at the time of our study) that summarizes effectively the central theme of our analysis. Through this search, we identified approximately one hundred public accounts of content creators focused primarily on traveling with disabilities, which we then reviewed for several selection criteria were applied.

First, given the importance of visual elements, we focused on influencers with mobility impairments who have visible disabilities. Second, we considered those with a profile explicitly centered on travel, excluding those who touched on travel occasionally and posted primarily on other themes (e.g. fashion). Given the lack of previous work on this topic, we cast a wide net by focusing on influencers that post in English and address global audiences. This also enabled us to capture issues related to international travel, rather than focusing on any one specific country in this initial analysis. In follow up work, it would be interesting to explore influencers that operate in different languages and specific countries with a view to examine the relationship between these emerging phenomenon and local cultures. For consistency, we also prioritized individual influencers over couples, families, associations, and companies, focusing on "endogenous" influencers (Bennato, 2022), meaning those who became known through social media first. From the resulting shortlist of 23 travel content creators with disabilities, we then selected all those with at least 2,000 followers for in-depth analysis. This included eight influencers in total, six women and two men, all located in Western countries (Table 1). According to Ruiz-Gomez's (2019) classification by number of followers, one of them is a macro-influencer and the other seven are micro-influencers. For five these, their engagement rate (ER)¹ was equal to or higher than average, with three

influencers for whom it was significantly higher than average (>40%), suggesting an intense relationship with their followers (Ouvrein et al., 2021).

Type of influencer	Name	Instagram Account	Location	Followers	Engagement Rate
Macro	Chelsea Bear	@realchelseabear	USA	354.331	1,70% (average)
Micro	Jennie Berry	@wheelie_good_life	UK	74.564	189,73% (>average)
Micro	Cory Lee	@curbfreecorylee	USA	39.354	41,61% (>average)
Micro	Kristin Victoria	@sweet.satellite	Canada	37.022	51,73% (>average)
Micro	Aspen Baxter	@accessibility_with_a_spen_sage	USA	13.923	5,11% (>average)
Micro	Emma Muldoon	@simplyemmablog	UK	7.684	2,95% (<average)
Micro	Kamil Goungor	@thetrawheeler	Greece	3.465	4,67% (<average)
Micro	Carrie-Ann Lightley	@carrieannlightleyblog	UK	2.066	2,85% (<average)

Table 1 - The 8 disabled influencers analyzed (September, 30, 2023)

While all of these influencers have mobility impairments, most also have other conditions (e.g. C-PTSD, cerebral palsy, spinal cord injury, and functional neurological disorders). This reflects broader demographics in the disability community, where approximately 40% have multiple disabilities (Taylor, 2018).

Both the profile information and all the Instagram posts published by these influencers over a six-month period spanning from April 1 to September 30, 2023 were analyzed. This period was chosen because, given the location of these influencers, late spring and summer are busy travel periods likely to spur a higher level of activity and engagement. In total, 467 posts were collected, including: 98 single photos; 93 carousel photos; and 276 videos (Figure 1). The number of posts varied considerably between accounts, ranging from 10 on @carrieannlightleyblog to 156 on @curbfreecorylee. It should be noted that we focused on Instagram posts rather than “stories” because the latter pose specific methodological and ethical challenges (Bainotti et al., 2021), and research has shown that both posts and “stories” offer comparable spaces for authentic self-representation (Kreling et al., 2022).

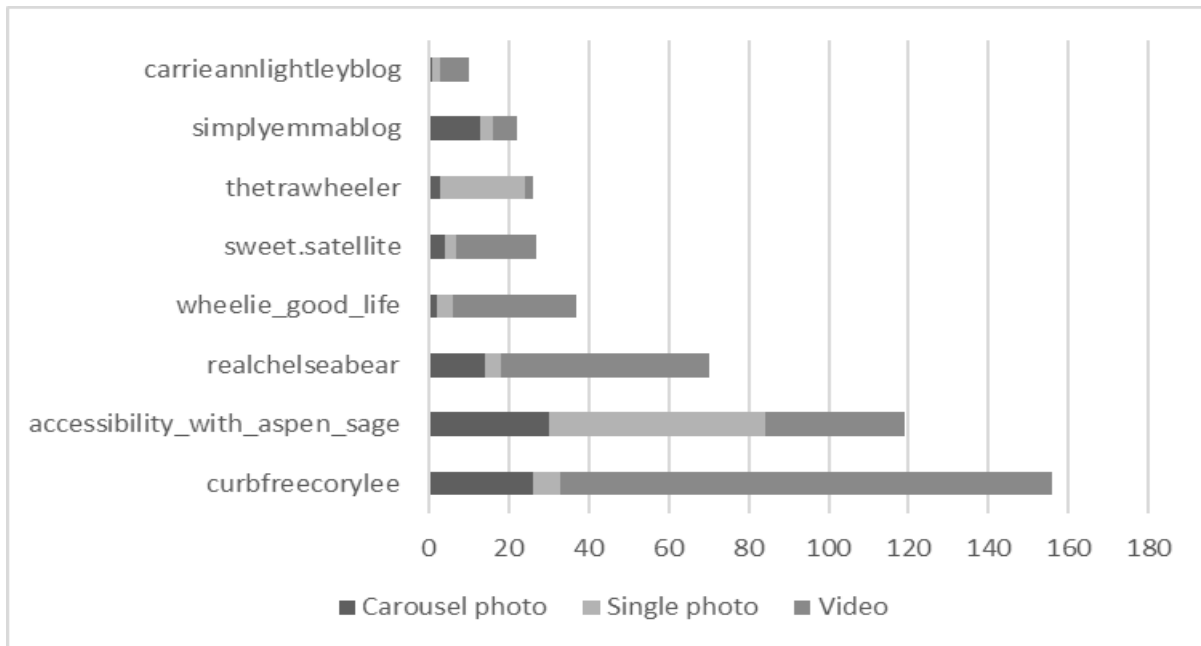


Figure 1 - Number and type of posts (April-September 2023)

Posts were analyzed on two levels, both deductively and inductively. First, we examined each Instagram bio, which helps influencers to convey their identity. Second, we carried out a content analysis of both the visual and textual elements in each post. For visuals, the main variables included how disability was depicted, the extent to which it was visible, daily activities, the presence of others, settings and other contextual elements. For text, key themes were first mapped through a word frequency analysis carried out with NVivo. Thereafter, we developed a coding frame that included both deductive indicators of commercial (e.g. brand names and tags, sponsored content, etc.) and advocacy-oriented (e.g. specific calls to action) nature, and inductive thematic categories (e.g. about travel experiences, everyday life, and so on). Coding was conducted independently by two coders to enhance reliability and disagreements were resolved through discussion and variable refinement during piloting.

Findings

Online personas, disability, and awareness-raising

A first set of findings pertains to RQs 1-2, which focus on self-representations and their intersections with themes of disability rights and alternative representations of disability.

The analysis of profile information showed that disability occupies a central position in the self-representations and digital identities of these influencers. This mirrors results from work on disabled fashion influencers (Trevisan & Farinosi, 2024), but was articulated here in ways

that are specific to the travel sector. For example, all the bios included at least one direct reference to disability. Out of the eight influencers considered, half included the word “disabled” in their Instagram bio; three mentioned their medical conditions (i.e. cerebral palsy, C-PTSD); and three used the word “wheelchair.” “Disabled” is an especially meaningful word choice, given its common negative connotation and the fact that the disability rights movement has pushed for its use as a form of political statement. Also significant is the use of “accessible travel,” present in half of the bios. The theme of disability is also evident in the emojis included in bios: six out of eight influencers included a disability-related emoji that depicts a wheelchair user. One influencer, Carrie-Ann Lightley, accompanied the wheelchair emoji with a brain emoji, representing her condition of C-PTSD, a consequence of a childhood marked by extensive medical interventions, pain, and surgery (Table 2).

<i>Instagram Account</i>	<i>Disability -related elements</i>	<i>Disability emojis</i>	<i>Other keywords</i>
accessibility_with_aspen_sage	Yes	Wheelchair	No
carrieannlightleyblog	Yes	Wheelchair , Brain	Blogger, writer, public speaker, marketer, ambassador
curbfreecorylee	Yes	Wheelchair	Travel writer, travel expert
realchelseabear	Yes	No	No
simplyemmablog	Yes	No	Travel blogger
sweet.satellite	Yes	Wheelchair	Travel and lifestyle content creator, adventure seeker, advocate, educator, traveller, speech-language pathologist
thetrawheeler	Yes	Wheelchair	Travel blogger
wheelie_good_life	Yes	Wheelchair	Blogger, traveller, content creator

Table 2 – Instagram profile information

These initial impressions were corroborated by the in-depth analysis of Instagram posts. With regard to textual content, the 15 most frequently used words provide a detailed snapshot of the predominant themes in their discourse. The most common word was “accessible” (n=599), highlighting a central focus on physical access (or lack thereof) and inclusivity. Following this, “wheelchair” appeared 554 times, indicating a significant emphasis on mobility aids. In third place, “wheelchairlife” (313) reflected the influencers’ engagement with daily experiences. Similarly, “accessibility” (309) underscored the importance of accessible environments and services, while “wheelchairtravel” (304) and “accessibletravel” (303) both signify a focus on travel experiences tailored to wheelchair users. The word “travel” (279) further reinforced the thematic emphasis on mobility and exploration, with “wheelchairuser” (270) highlighted the identity of the individuals engaging in these activities. The term “disability” (220) broadened the scope to include various aspects of living with a disability, while “can” (210) suggests a positive, action-oriented narrative within these posts. Other frequently used terms – besides “disabledtravel” (156), which was

used for sampling purposes – included “disabilityadvocate” (183), “disabilityawareness” (168), and “disabled” (156), indicating active roles in promoting disability rights and raising awareness (see the next section for more on this point). Overall, these frequently used words provide a useful overview of the main concerns of the influencers, showing that they tend to highlight and increase awareness of issues related to accessibility and inclusion, alongside frequent references to their lived experiences, use of mobility aids, as well as their efforts to promote travel and awareness to other people with disabilities.

Results for visual content provided further insights into these themes, with disability clearly visible in 83% of the photos and videos examined. In most of these the influencers are depicted using a wheelchair. The prevalence of these images underscores these influencers’ commitment to visually representing their lived experiences and challenges, thereby promoting visibility and awareness of disability issues. The prevalence of disability-related imagery in their posts aligns with the textual emphasis on accessibility, mobility, and awareness-raising aspects of advocacy, further highlighting these as central themes in their social media content and reinforcing their role as advocates. Relatedly, it is also worth noting that these influencers spotlighted several disability-related events throughout the period we examined such as Disability Pride Month (July), International PTSD Awareness Day (June 27), and World Spinal Cord Injury Day (September 5). These posts sought to celebrate disability culture with a view to progressively influence public perception of disabilities and fight stigma. They demonstrated an interest in participating in broader online conversations focused on disability through positive content that sought to align individual experiences with larger social themes and topics of public interest.

A second prominent thematic category was “travel.” This theme was present in nearly 80% (n=370) of the posts examined. The frequent depiction of travel underscores these influencers’ dedication to promoting accessible travel experiences and highlighting the importance of inclusivity in tourism and leisure activities. This emphasis on accessible travel is realized through a range of visual and textual elements including but not limited to images of accessible destinations, reviews of disability-friendly accommodations, and tips for navigating public transportation with mobility aids. More specifically, influencers narrate their adventures and showcase their experiences with cruises, museums, beaches, mountains, parks, and historical sites. In general, this kind of posts not only help advocate for accessibility by highlighting virtuous examples but they also provide other people with disabilities with useful knowledge to help them explore and enjoy travel. In other words, through content that shows “what’s possible,” these influencers effectively illustrate both the opportunities and challenges of traveling with a disability, thereby raising awareness and pushing for more inclusive practices within the travel industry. Sharing positive examples with others in a similar situation – especially people in groups that have historically faced marginalization and stigma, including internalized stigma – is an important but often underrated aspect of advocacy that serves to inform and empower latent publics. This consistent representation of travel within their posts aligns with their broader advocacy efforts, emphasizing the need for accessibility in all areas of social life.

Besides frequent disability- and/or travel-specific posts, there was also a significant proportion of content that showed influencers as socially engaged individuals involved in everyday life activities, including work. This, again, contributed to relaying an almost ordinary but, crucially, socially and economically active image of disabled influencers. Specifically, the theme of “friends and family” dominated over a fifth of posts. All the influencers examined posted images related to friends or family, highlighting the importance of personal relationships and social support in their lives. Friends and family are often people who accompany the influencers on their adventures around the world and assist them with their needs. For example, @sweet.satellite and @accessibility_with_aspen_sage were shown frequently in the company of their partners, while @curbfreecorylee presented images of his family, particularly his mother who is also a close collaborator and founded with him The Curb Free Foundation, a non-profit organization that provides travel grants for wheelchair users to reach their “dream” destinations. Additionally, 11% of the posts analyzed included themes drawn from everyday life. These posts enabled influencers to illustrate how they navigate the complexities of daily tasks, manage their responsibilities, and spend time at home, including candid representations of life with a disability that ring authentic without encroaching on so-called “inspiration porn” (Young, 2014). For example, @realchelseabear demonstrated the challenges of carrying a coffee cup when one has an atypical gait and the complexity of putting on a pair of shoes. Another example was @curbfreecorylee illustrating the transfer from bed to wheelchair in the morning, a complex process that requires assistance from a family member or caregiver.

Finally, three influencers published 19 posts (approximately 4% of the total) focused on “work activities.” This label describes posts that concern activities extending beyond their work as online content creators, even though they may originate from it. This is because they depict a variety of professional engagements such as public speaking or working on creative projects, illustrating how these influencers leverage their platforms to advocate for important causes, share their expertise, and connect with broad audiences. For instance, @curbfreecorylee shared images on his profile highlighting the successes of his accessible travel foundation, as well as his speeches at conferences. Similarly, @realchelseabear showcased her involvement in outreach events, achievements, and activities related to her work as a YouTuber.

Balancing commercial content with activist goals

So far, we traced the emergence of positive, alternative, and empowering self-representations of disability that contribute to awareness-raising among relevant internal (i.e. the disability community), as well as external publics. Beyond this first level of advocacy that constitutes an essential foundation for activation, there are aspects that are more directly focused on fueling social or political change in the short and medium term. Here, three main threads emerged from the analysis that relate to RQs 3-4, including: 1) the use

of hashtags to try to insert oneself in broader, socially relevant discourses; 2) the relationship with commercial partners and, more generally, brands and organizations (including advocacy organizations); and 3) efforts to build community among followers and nudge them toward certain topics or actions.

Hashtags

As was shown above, all the influencers we examined represented disability in both visual and textual forms. A further step to elucidate their role as potential advocates was to analyze the hashtags they used, which helped to identify tensions of knowledge and power in their content, both within and beyond Instagram. The use of the “#” symbol is not merely a way to label trackable elements. Instead, it possesses a connective force, manifesting through the relationships it fosters, which allows collective actions mediated by social media platforms to be understood. This phenomenon is known in the literature as “hashtag engagement” (Omena, Rabello, & Mintz, 2020) or “hashtag activism” (Stache, 2014).

In general, hashtags were very frequently employed in the posts under examination, providing a snapshot of how these accounts manage their content and engagement strategies. Our analysis identified 1,079 distinct hashtags, used a total of 6,924 times with an average of approximately ~15 hashtags per post (Figure 2). Unsurprisingly, there was considerable variation among influencers with regard to hashtag use and related communicative strategies. Some accounts employed a range of hashtags as a way to augmenting their reach, while others adopt a more selective approach, typically incorporating more targeted hashtags. Nevertheless, the number of hashtags used by each influencer did not appear correlate with their number of followers. For example, @accessibility_with_aspen_sage stood out with as many as 118 unique hashtags used 3,153 times in 119 posts, demonstrating a strong emphasis on connecting and engaging with broader audiences through this strategy. In contrast, influencers such as @realchelseabear (76 hashtags, 181 times) and @carrieannlightleyblog (23 hashtags, 76 times) employed hashtags to a lesser extent.

significant but not exclusive. Contrastingly, influencers such as @thetrawheeler, with only one out of 26 posts, showed minimal engagement with content related to activism.

Commercial content vs. grievances

A crucial way to understand where disabled influencer commercial content overlaps with or diverges from activist topics is to shine a light on how they refer to brands and commercial partners, as well as other organizations, including advocacy organizations. To what extent did they partner with organizations? Praise or criticize them and their practices? Publicize them, or seek to hold them accountable?

The relationship between influencers and brands takes place on multiple levels but mainly concerns those influencers who work with a talent agency (Table 3).

<i>Instagram Account</i>	<i>Verified Badge</i>	<i>Business Account</i>	<i>Talent Agency</i>	<i>Branded Content</i>	<i>Uses Hashtags for Sponsorship</i>	<i>Number of Accounts Tagged</i>	<i>Discount Codes</i>
accessibility_with_aspen_sage	No	No	Yes	No	No	154	No
carrieannlightleyblog	No	Yes	No	No	No	9	No
curbfreecorylee	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	107	Yes
realchelseabear	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	73	No
simplyemmablog	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	23	Yes
sweet.satellite	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	8	Yes
thetrawheeler	No	Yes	No	No	No	23	No
wheelie_good_life	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	40	Yes

Table 3 – Characteristics of Instagram Accounts in Relation to Brand Partnerships

The first level is the creation of sponsored posts on Instagram, which are created at the request of advertisers and companies to promote their products or services. To enhance transparency, Instagram introduced “Branded Content” that enables influencers to label their posts as “Paid partnership with [brand name],” and sharing information about the impact of their commercial partnerships with brands. In the six-month period under consideration, just over 10% of posts (n=52) were sponsored. It is also noteworthy that approximately 90% of these posts were created by @curbfreecorylee, one of the few influencers under

examination who had a verified profile and was supported by a talent agency. Most of the brands on his profile belong to companies related to the travel sector, but there were also clothing, technology, and healthcare companies. Skyscanner was a particularly frequent and notable brand, as at the time of writing @curbfreecorylee was an “ambassador” for that company.

A second level of the relationship between influencers and brands concerns the use of market-related hashtags in post captions, which indicates a sponsorship that is part of a commercial agreement for which the creator is paid. About 11% of the posts examined contained at least one hashtag related to a sponsored product or service such as #ad, #sponsored, #gifted, and #partner. In some cases, sponsorships and partnerships were not explicitly indicated through hashtags, but this information was less overtly included in the post text and the relevant company was tagged. Overall, the inclusion of market-related hashtags varied significantly among the influencers we analyzed. Some included them regularly, while others did not use them at all.

A third level of the relationship between influencers and commercial partners is illustrated by the use of brand-specific tags. In the six-month period under consideration, @accessibility_with_aspen_sage, @curbfreecorylee, and @realchelseabear engaged in this practice quite frequently, with between 154 and 55 brand-specific tags each. For @curbfreecorylee and @realchelseabear, this aligned with the fact that they had a considerable number of followers, verified profiles, and official partnerships. In contrast, for @accessibility_with_aspen_sage this practice was likely to be part of a strategy to put themselves on companies’ radar with a view to gaining recognition and establishing future collaborations.

The top three most frequently tagged companies were: @skyscanner, a travel fare aggregator metasearch engine (n=30); @wheeltheworld, a booking platform for accessible travel (n=28); and @disneyarks, the Disney Corporation’s amusement parks (n=12). These brands were tagged overwhelmingly in positive posts that often, though not exclusively, promoted these companies or services (n=32). A common strategy used in these posts was to discuss a personal experience with said company or service (n=22). In addition, some of these posts also offered useful advice to disabled travelers (n=8) or asked them to share their opinions and experiences (n=4) about a particular destination (but not about the brands themselves). Accessibility was a concern discussed in virtually all of these posts. Despite the overwhelmingly positive tone of this content, only 10 of these posts were explicitly labeled as #sponsored or #ad posts, while the others did not clarify whether the brands had paid influencers for this content.

In contrast, only a handful of posts in the entire dataset tagged commercial brands while also referencing negative experiences. For example, @simplyemmablog, who had previously lauded a Crowne Plaza hotel for its accessibility in one of her posts, in a subsequent post expressed dismay at the fact that the same hotel removed the ceiling track hoist, a device that helps mobility impaired guests move around the room (Figure 3).



Figure 3 - An example of a post where an influencer highlights the removal of accessibility features in a hotel (Source: @simplyemmablog, May 4, 2023)

Another notable example was a video by @wheelie_good_life that showed her falling out of a wheelchair while being assisted to deplane, in which she tagged both the airline Jet2 and Birmingham airport. This type of content exercises advocacy by demanding accountability from brands and companies. In doing so, it mirrors a frequent tactic by disability activists who in recent years have increasingly used social media – especially Twitter – to pressure businesses, public services, elected officials and political organizations (Trevisan, 2022) by publicly “shaming” them. Although significant, this type of content represented an exception in the work of the disabled travel influencers examined for this study.

To examine the relationship between activism and sponsorship, we also checked for the co-occurrence of market-related hashtags and activism-related hashtags within the same post. This indicated that only some accounts exhibit overlap between these two categories in their posts, while others maintain a clear boundary between market-oriented and issue- and advocacy-oriented content. Specifically, only 18 posts (3.85%) contained both market and activism-related hashtags, suggesting that the integration is not widespread across the analyzed profiles. Nevertheless, it was interesting to note that most of the profiles analyzed demonstrated a greater engagement with content related to activism compared to market-related content, at least in terms of hashtags. In addition, three influencers – @carriannlightleyblog, @sweet.satellite and @curbfreecorylee – showed a higher percentage of overlap between commercial and advocacy content in their posts (20%, 11.11% and 5.77% respectively), indicating a desire and ability to integrate these two kinds of messages. In doing so, they appear to be attempting to amplify both commercial reach and advocacy impact simultaneously.

Community building and calls to action

Beyond content and relationships with brands, a final aspect of our investigation focused on the ability of disabled travel influencers to relate to their followers, build community, and encourage them to transition from “aware” to “active” publics. As a first step, it was useful to examine how these influencers addressed other Instagram users. For this reason, it was noteworthy that all the influencers under examination addressed their followers directly. Out of 314 posts in which these influencers addressed followers directly, 299 (95%) used the pronoun “you,” 10 (~3%) used the pronoun “we” (in the sense of disability community, not referring simply to other people in the photo post), and “community” was used in 5 (1.6%) posts. Furthermore, nearly a third of posts asked followers to respond to specific questions or otherwise invited them to add a comment.

The size of an influencer’s following alone did not seem to be related to their propensity to ask questions in Instagram posts. Among micro-influencers, @sweet.satellite and @accessibility_with_aspen_sage frequently engaged in dialogue with their followers, while @curbfreecorylee, despite having more followers, never invited or even mentioned comments. The same was true also of @wheelie_good_life, the micro-influencer with the largest following in our sample, compared to macro-influencer @realchelseabear. Engagement rate metrics also revealed a similar pattern with @wheelie_good_life scoring a substantially higher engagement rate than all other influencers, and again @sweet.satellite outperforming @curbfreecorylee. One possible explanation for these differences is that @wheelie_good_life’s rate is so high because she is advised by a talent agency, which enables her to receive greater assistance in formulating strategies to expand their follower base and achieve greater success.

Taken together, these findings denote a strong and diffused desire among these influencers to become resources to their audiences and kickstart conversations, suggesting that they are dedicated to establishing an authentic connection with followers through direct communication. Nevertheless, the quantity and quality of interaction do not appear to be directly proportional to the size of their audiences, suggesting that other factors influence this aspect of their presence on Instagram.

These regular attempts to get followers to engage in conversation could be interpreted as an effort to build a sense of community, which is a foundational but also hard to achieve aspect of the advocacy process, especially online (Eaton, 2010). Given these challenges, a useful next step to boost the collective aspect of these efforts could be to collaborate with, or even just informally direct followers toward, more established advocacy organizations. Yet, our analysis showed that only a handful of posts mentioned advocacy organizations, while other individual opinion leaders (disabled or non-disabled) were not mentioned at all. Organizations that were occasionally mentioned included: AccessNow (n=2), a non-profit organization on digital rights; CureSMAorg (n=2), an organization that supports people with spinal muscular atrophy and their families; Spinal Injuries Ireland (n=2);

womenwhoexplore_ohio (n=2), a community that promotes women's empowerment through outdoor activities; and the Curb Free Foundation (n=1), @curbfreecorylee's own non-profit. Thus, while these influencers assiduously sought to connect with their online audiences, their engagement with advocacy organizations was comparatively much sparser. Similarly, the absence of explicit references to other opinion leaders also suggested an intentional focus on personal storytelling and direct follower engagement. This may be the result of a strategy to keep the spotlight on one's own personalized brand, avoid diverting attention toward other places, and more easily control messaging.

References to advocacy-related actions were similarly concentrated on the individual level and primarily oriented toward raising awareness of problems related to traveling with a disability, as well as building community around shared experiences. The only action traditionally associated with organized activism that was mentioned by the influencers we analyzed was donating money. However, this appeared in only four posts all by @curbfreecorylee and sponsoring their own Curb Free Foundation. Other low-threshold actions such as signing a petition, contacting elected officials, or even just signing up to receive information and updates from an organization were never mentioned. In contrast, these influencers asked their followers to share their own personal experiences and thoughts about key issues with accessible travel and disability more generally quite regularly, with this type of questions in more than 10% of posts (n=48). Also of note, though less frequent (n=10), were posts that encouraged others to amplify an influencer's message in disability-related online conversations around, for example, accessible travel, so-called inspiration porn (Young, 2014), and disability pride, by sharing their content with other users in their networks.

Discussion and conclusion

Overall, our analysis showed that disabled travel influencers are engaging in important advocacy functions. Their work takes advantage of platform logics to create and amplify alternative narratives around a traditionally marginalized identity such as disability but bending them to the neoliberal logic of the attention economy that regulates these digital spaces. The impact of this content can also extend beyond narrative change as it can act as a resource that encourages other people with disabilities to travel more, making disability more visible in the "real" world and emphasizing the urgency of access-related issues. However, some important challenges emerged too, especially with regard to the relationship between the individualized and collective aspects of advocacy, which suggest some significant limitations to the ability of these influencers to affect specific change.

Applying the situational theory of publics framework to positive and alternative self-representations by disabled travel influencers, it is apparent that they serve an advocacy function toward two different types of publics. In the broadest sense, they can inform and bring awareness to latent publics – which have low awareness and perceive high constraints

to change, such as in this case the general public that tends to know disability indirectly through media stereotypes – because they counter dominant disempowering narratives. At the same time, they can also reach aware publics, which are attuned to the issues but have an acute perception of the constraints that impede change. Most notably, this is the case of other disabled people, their family and friends, who are often affected by internalized stigma stemming from dominant stereotypes and negative personal experiences, and whose concerns may be mitigated through narratives that show different, more active and engaged disabled lives (Trevisan et al., 2025) such as those that the influencers examined in this study are able to project.

With that being said, our results also delineated a crucial tension between a majority of the commercially relevant content that touches upon advocacy issues and extends the positive “possibilities” narratives on one side, and much rarer representations of negative experiences that are more aligned with the typical disability activist communication strategies based on grievances (Pettinicchio, 2024). While positive stories serve an informative function and can highlight valuable solutions to exclusionary barriers, there is also a risk that – depending on engagement dynamics and algorithms – they may obfuscate digital narratives about widespread inaccessible or insensitive travel accounts that seek to hold service providers accountable for, for example, damages to mobility aids during air travel or ride-sharing services refusing to pick up passengers with disabilities or service animals, which have emerged periodically online in recent years (McKercher & Darcy, 2018).

Promoting content centered on alternative representations while not quashing content that highlights persisting exclusionary barriers requires a delicate balance. This is a gray area in which influencer content, while supporting a certain type of awareness, could simultaneously take space away from other representative voices, as it has happened before in social media discourses about racial justice (Wellman, 2022), inadvertently projecting the false notion that systemic inequalities have been solved. Clearly, this issue is not circumscribed to influencers but, rather, platforms and their algorithms play a crucial role in these dynamics. Future work should explore this tension in more detail from a platform perspective, comparing the reach of these two types of disability-related content and their relationship with the affordances of different platforms.

Furthermore, our analysis of influencers’ efforts to go beyond narrative change and foster online community and participation also highlighted important sources of innovation, as well as key limitations related to individualized advocacy without organized action. On the one hand, influencers frequently made space for and actively encouraged other users to share their personal experiences content, which signals an opening toward basic actions that support generalized awareness-raising and are aligned with the growing individualization of grassroots advocacy and popularity of “personalized action frames” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013) that enable broader sets of people to participate. Furthermore, this is also aligned with a platform logic that encourages content sharing and citizen “marketing” as essential strategies in digital grassroots advocacy (Penney, 2017). At the same time, however, disabled travel influencers were also reluctant, at least so far, to engage with the collective and goal-oriented aspects of advocacy that target public and private decision-makers and

can lead to specific outcomes. This not only distinguishes them from other disability rights activists who have used platforms to put pressure on politicians, businesses, and other agencies, as was mentioned above, but it more generally curbs their potential to become effective activators and mobilizers.

In conclusion, our results suggest that there are beneficial innovations but also unresolved challenges in effectively blending the potential of personal social media brands and personal storytelling on digital platforms with some of the dynamics of power and influence that continue to require organized advocacy and large numbers alongside visibility. In other words, disabled travel influencers do a great job at reaching, informing, and potentially empowering “latent” and “aware” publics, but do not offer them opportunities to become “active” ones. There could be a range of explanations for this, from platform logics that may somehow discourage disabled travel influencers from sponsoring change-oriented actions to influencers’ perceptions of activism itself. Future work should shed light on the motivations behind this complex canvas, illuminating the rationale for this emerging relationship between digital platforms, promotional cultures, and activism, as well as its potential and limitations for policy and social change. From a theory standpoint, these results also point to a need to reconsider existing conceptualizations of activism and go beyond normative models that are likely insufficient to interpret and value the emerging interplay of social media influencing and social change advocacy.

Biographical notes

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Notes

¹ The ER is calculated by dividing the number of user interactions with an influencer's content by the number of their followers. To determine the ERs (Table 1), we employed the NotJustAnalytics software, which provides ranges to identify profiles that are above or below average based on total follower count. The average rates used were: 5.7% for 1,000-5,000 followers; 4% for 5,000-10,000 followers; 2.4% for 10,000-100,000 followers; and 1.7% for over 100,000 followers.