Mediascapes journal 24/2024

Influ-activism: Outlining a New Area of Investigation Between Media Studies and Activism Research[*]

Maria Francesca Murru[**]
University of Bergamo

Marco Pedroni[***]
University of Ferrara

Simone Tosoni[****]
Università Cattolica of Milan

In recent years, the convergence of activist and influencer practices has given rise to what we term "influ-activism". This contribution seeks to define influ-activism as a dynamic hybrid space where digital activism and influence culture intersect, creating novel dynamics and challenges for both arenas. Influ-activism encompasses the marketing strategies and aesthetics typical of influencers, now employed by activists, as well as the political stances increasingly adopted by mainstream influencers. This convergence significantly impacts the visibility, authenticity, and mobilisation potential of social causes in the digital public sphere. The article unfolds in four main sections. The first section anchors influ-activism within the distinct literatures of influence culture and digital activism, providing a genealogy of the phenomenon and developing theoretical concepts for its understanding. The second section delves into the current literature on influ-activism, exploring the blending of influencer and activist practices. The third section offers a comprehensive methodological approach for the empirical study of influ-activism, examining its communicative agents, practices, audiences, and ecosystems. Finally, the conclusion considers the broader implications of influ-activism for the digital public sphere and suggests avenues for future research. By critically examining the neoliberal and platform logics that underpin influ-activism, this essay seeks to enhance the understanding of the intricate dynamics shaping contemporary digital activism and the broader influence culture.

Keywords: influ-activism, digital activism, influence culture, neoliberal logics, platform logics

[*] Article submitted on 01/07/2024. Article accepted on 20/12/2024. This essay is the result of collaborative work in which the authors participated with equal responsibilities. Therefore, they are listed here in alphabetical order. The authors also wish to highlight that the forced recognition of a differential in responsibility and merit in collective intellectual work – such as the imposition of a first author for a joint essay, or the selection of a principal investigator in a competitive grant – responds to neoliberal logics that ultimately define the intrinsic limits of the academic discourse. In a different discursive arena, this is precisely the matter of concern around which the essay revolves.
[**] mariafrancesca.murru@unibg.it
[***] pdrmcl@unife.it
[****] simone.tosoni@unicatt.it

Introduction

As pointed out on different occasions by Thomas Poell and José van Dijck (2015; 2018), the platformisation of activist communication introduces a "constant tension between (...) techno-commercial platform strategies and activist tactics and values" (2018, p.7). Social media platforms enhance the speed and reach of alternative reporting while steering user activity through algorithmic visibility, often prioritising personalisation and the ephemerality of trending topics over sustained collective engagement. For the authors, this raises critical questions about the long-term efficacy of social media-driven activism: as a result, they challenge researchers "to develop a comprehensive approach" (p.10) in order "to trace how changing activist practices and evolving techno-commercial platform strategies mutually articulate each other" (p.11).

This articulation has recently taken on new forms with the emergence of what we term "influ-activism", a hybrid space where the practices and aesthetics of influence culture intersect with those of digital activism (see Section 3). This convergence introduces novel dynamics, reshaping the visibility and mobilisation potential of social causes in the digital public sphere. On one side, activists increasingly adopt strategies typical of influencer marketing, engaging their audiences emotionally and establishing forms of non-reciprocal intimacy (Dean, 2023). They often commit to self-promotion centred on authenticity and, not infrequently, monetise their efforts indirectly through advertising or by promoting personal projects such as books. On the other side, mainstream commercial influencers now regularly take explicit stances on controversial public issues, such as intersectional feminism, sustainability, or disability rights. We argue that influ-activism plays a key role in shaping agendas and discourses in a growing number of discursive *arenas* – spaces in the digital public sphere where diverse social worlds converge around shared concerns (Clarke & Star's 2007). Examples include those taking shape around issues of intersectional feminism, sex-positivity, neurodivergence, defence or contestation of science, ableism and disability, and gender-related diseases are just a few possible examples. While digital activism and influence culture have been extensively studied as separate domains, *influ-activism* remains underexplored, raising questions about its implications for the articulation of non-hegemonic discourses and its alignment with neoliberal and platform logics.

On one hand, its potential to promote non-hegemonic narratives and facilitate their mainstreaming is acknowledged. On the other, there is significant concern about how these practices of discursive production and mobilisation may be co-opted by neoliberal and platform logics, reshaping them. Exploring the forms, extent, and implications of this entanglement is therefore crucial to understanding the current dynamics of the digitalised public sphere.

To address Poell and van Dijck's (2018, p.10) call for a "comprehensive approach" to influ-activism as an articulation of activist practices and techno-commercial platform strategies, we proceed in four steps. First, we ground influ-activism in the distinct literatures on influence culture (Section 1) and digital activism (Section 2), aiming both to outline a

genealogy of the phenomenon and to extract a constellation of concepts that may serve as a theoretical framework for the understanding of the phenomenon. In the third section, we examine the existing literature on influ-activism in order to complete this framework. Finally, we propose a comprehensive methodological approach—a full research programme—for its empirical study.

In line with Jonathan Dean (2023), the aim here is not to evaluate influ-activism against normative ideals of activism, assessing its efficacy, ideological soundness, or coherence between ideology and political praxis (or indeed activists' behaviour). Instead, it is to critically examine how neoliberal and platform logics, already embedded in contemporary influence culture, shape both the possibilities and limits of the discursive and mobilisation practices of influ-activism. This effort forms part of a broader attempt to map "the intersections of the cultural, the economic and the political to capture the specificity of [the present] (…) historical conjuncture (...)" (Dean, 2023, p.5).

1. From Influencers to Influence Culture

The term "influence" derives from the Latin *influentia*, meaning "the act of flowing." Influencer marketing draws on the metaphor of contagion, also embedded in the medical term *influenza*, to describe strategies that spread marketing messages, driving exponential growth in exposure (Wilson, 2000). Dawkins' *The Selfish Gene* (2017 [1976]) refined the concept of viral transmission, which later informed Rushkoff's (1996) notion of 'thought contagion'. Viral logic has since become a core strategy in commercial and technological contexts, facilitating the circulation of information and goods in capitalist economies (Parikka, 2007).

The related term "influencer" gained prominence in the 2010s, especially after Facebook (now Meta) acquired Instagram, which evolved into a key platform for image sharing and digital marketing. As noted by Leaver, Highfield, and Abidin (2020), Instagram's popularity among advertisers grew significantly, with a substantial proportion of posts being paid advertisements, leading to a flourishing and at that time informal economy of content sponsored by influencers. Reflecting on this phase, Abidin (2015) characterised influencers as ordinary internet users who amass significant followings on blogs and social media by sharing textual and visual narratives of their personal lives and lifestyles. They engage with their audience both digitally and physically, monetising their influence through advertorials, paid collaborations with brands, and event appearances. Freberg et al. (2011) characterised influencers as independent third-party endorsers who shape audience attitudes via social media platforms, while Van Dijck (2013) emphasised their extensive networks of followers and peers, which often attract offers to distribute promotional messages. These definitions converge on an understanding of influencers as key figures in digital culture and economy, leveraging their perceived authority, knowledge, and relationships to impact purchasing decisions.

While alternative perspectives, such as that of Kozinets et al. (2023), broaden the definition of influencers beyond monetisation—arguing that "an influencer is not necessarily a profit-oriented professional" (p. 11) and thereby allowing for the inclusion of social media-based activists—we contend that monetisation is a constitutive element of influencer practice. This fundamental characteristic sets influencers apart from other social media figures, such as activists, whose efforts have traditionally been driven by non-commercial goals rather than financial motives. It is for this reason that we introduce the concept of the "influ-activist", a hybrid figure that emerges at the intersection of the analytically separate domains of influencers and activists. This theoretical category highlights a grey area that disrupts the traditional dichotomy between commercial and non-commercial roles, capturing how these distinct logics intersect and blend in the digital public sphere. To gain a comprehensive understanding of this hybrid figure, we must first adopt an operational definition of influencers, as they constitute one of the foundational components of this convergence.

Aligned with the idea that financial gain is intrinsic to the nature of influencing, this essay adopts the definition proposed by Pedroni (2023) which characterises influencers by two main attributes: the ability to attract a significant audience and, crucially, the ability to monetise their activities on digital platforms. By doing so, we intend to dismiss the initial informality of the role of the influencer and at the same time stress their key role in the commodification of relationships typical of neoliberal logics. The relationship of an influencer with their audience, and everything it entails in terms of affective regimes, trust, and mediated intimacy (although often not reciprocal), is in fact used to advertise products and services, as a crucial strategy of contemporary digital and marketing landscapes.

From its informal origins, influencer marketing has quickly evolved into a highly structured field (Pedroni, 2015), bringing forth an organised economic chain, specific professional roles, and well-established practices. However, influencing as a phenomenon extends beyond the framework of influencer marketing, characterising a much broader cultural landscape that we term "influence culture", emerging from the intersection of digital culture and marketing practices. What we want to highlight here is the capacity of influencers, as previously defined, to shape the attitudes, behaviours, and practices of a vast audience through social media and digital platforms. Building on Ann Swidler's (1986) perspective on culture, we define influence culture as a toolkit—a repertoire of tools, skills, abilities, practices, and strategies that individuals use to navigate everyday challenges and construct lines of action. Here, the focus shifts from internalised norms to the resources and strategies social agents deploy: these tools do not mechanically determine behaviour but offer resources from which individuals devise strategies in varied social contexts. The utilisation of these cultural tools varies depending on the circumstances and needs of the individual, with no straightforward relationship between culture and behaviour. From this perspective, individuals are not passively moulded by culture; rather, they actively employ cultural tools in flexible and creative ways.

Influencers operate within their arenas employing cultural tools derived from influence culture. They create meaning through textual and audiovisual content, with objects, brands,

and lifestyles taking central roles. This process generates a vast discursive space characterised by reciprocal competition for audience attention and, often, confrontation, struggle, and contestation (Pedroni, 2016). Within this space, behavioural and value models are not only mirrored and moulded but also evolve, transcending the influencer community to reach a broader audience. This transition underscores how these practices, values, strategies, and styles shift from digital marketing to personal branding: influence culture becomes a repertoire of taken-for-granted practices, aesthetics, and criteria of judgement. These evolve into a specific form of *cosmesis*, a term referring to the ways users construct and present their identity online. What we are specifically referring to is what Boccia Artieri et al. (2017) define as "promotional cosmesis", consisting of a set of strategies adopted by users to enhance their online visibility and social approval. These strategies involve carefully selecting content that highlights positive qualities to create an attractive and respectable image for a wide audience. Much like influencers, users engage in self-promotion practices to gain consensus and improve their reputation within their social networks, bringing forth a broader influence culture, where practices, values, strategies, and styles transition from digital marketing to self-marketing.

2. Activism on Social Media: Counter-Publics and Political Entrepreneurship

Levine and Nierras (2007) define an activist as someone who seeks to advance substantive political or social goals through actions such as raising awareness, mobilising supporters, and organising protests. Building on this, terms such as "digital activism" (Gerbaudo, 2017) and "digital activist practices" (von Bülow et al., 2019) have emerged to describe the political use of digital media. Early research on digital activism was significantly influenced by the idea that mobilisation depends on the presence of strong publics and that it is relevant to study how digital media can enhance the willingness of potentially interested people, the framing of controversial issues, and the acquisition of visibility in the public sphere. A key concept in the field is the one developed by Charles Tilly (1978): "catnet"—a network within a category, referring to a network of people recognising themselves as part of a collective self. Tilly suggests that networks of ties alone are insufficient; they must be accompanied by self-awareness as a connected public, defined by common conditions and a distinct sense of collective solidarity.

More recent scholarship has shifted its focus to individualised forms of activism enabled by social media. Karppi (2015) highlights the dual nature of user agency within platforms, where individuals simultaneously act as agents of digital labour and objects of data extraction. This tension aligns with Finlayson's (2022) characterisation of social media activists as "ideological entrepreneurs", who bypass traditional political structures to cultivate audiences and promote worldviews. Analysing right-wing digital activist Paul Joseph Watson, Finlayson demonstrates how "stylised individuality" is rhetorically employed

to build affective communities through charismatic self-presentation rather than formal political programmes.

Political influencers, a distinct category within this spectrum, have been conceptualised as "networked political brokers" (Soriano & Gaw, 2021) who exploit platform affordances to advance political and monetary agendas. Rothut et al. (2023) expand on this by introducing the concept of "parasocial opinion leadership", whereby influencers mobilise followers through sustained parasocial interactions and personal branding. This phenomenon exemplifies what Barbala (2023) terms "techno-affective agency," where affective and relational labour facilitate the emergence of new behaviours and networks. However, Barbala's study of feminist Instagram influencers during the #MeToo campaign identifies limitations to this agency, noting that it often privileges individual symbolic power over collective feminist goals.

These critiques resonate with concerns that influencer-driven activism embodies an "individualistic and reductive formulation of identity politics" (Dean, 2023, p.14), undermining organised struggle by framing the political as a personal endeavour. Gerbaudo (2018) links this trend to the "elective affinity" between populism and digital media, which prioritises personalised narratives and performances of intimacy. This shift mirrors changes in social protest, where Bennet and Segerberg (2013) contrast traditional, identity-based movements with decentralised, individualised contention shaped by self-expression and platform affordances.

Acknowledging the pervasive individualism of contemporary influencer activism, we draw on Kavada and Poell's (2021) concept of "contentious publicness", which shifts focus from stable publics to dynamic processes of public contestation. This framework examines how digital media shapes the material, spatial, and temporal configurations of public claim-making. Following Gerbaudo (2022), we further explore how influencers' political engagement can foster "identity work", enabling dispersed individuals to unite under collective banners that address shared grievances. By integrating these perspectives, we aim to construct a more coherent theoretical foundation for understanding the hybrid practices of influ-activism.

3. The Hybrid Logics of Influ-Activism

The distinction between influencers and activists is rooted in their historical and functional contexts. Influencers are primarily associated with the digital economy, monetisation, commercial pursuits, the commodification of audiences, and self-branding, while activists have existed long before the internet and are driven by intrinsic motivations to enact structural change. For this reason, many activists resist being labelled as influencers. For example, Scharff's (2023) empirical research on feminist activists reveals that participants distinguish influencers as financially motivated, contrasting this with activists' exclusive focus on political change. This dichotomy, which underlies a normative ideal of activism, is

based on a moral hierarchy, where activism is deemed more valuable than wielding influence for commercial interests. However, as clarified by Dean (2023), all these efforts in boundary work attest to the formation of a grey area where, against the backdrop of a common influence culture, the practices of influencers and activists hybridise.

3.1 A Bidirectional Movement

Bidirectional movements between commercial influencers and online activism are exemplified by influencers increasingly engaging in public debates, despite marketing norms suggesting the avoidance of divisive topics (Minero, 2020). This trend is particularly visible when specific socio-political issues, such as climate change or racial equality, gain mainstream traction (Hoppner & Vadakkepatt, 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Engaging with these issues serves as an additional tactic to enhance perceptions of authenticity, yielding positive outcomes in terms of audience engagement and attitudes toward the influencer. Managerial literature highlights that influencers who align with social causes can attract collaborations with brands supporting similar values (Thomas & Fowler, 2023). As consumers increasingly expect brands to publicly endorse significant social issues, brands are progressively compelled to partner with influencers to boost the credibility of their commitment (Lou & Yuan, 2019) and to gain greater visibility (Himelboim & Golan, 2022). In this context, Thomas and Fowler (2023) identify two types of expectations that emerge when influencers engage in activism: *citizenship behaviours*, where influencers advocate for a cause driven by personal alignment with the issue, and *direct support behaviours*, involving tangible actions such as donations or public statements. Yet, often influencers comment on causes while they are in the headlines but revert to their usual content once public attention wanes. This creates a form of intermittent activism, not exempt from accusations of opportunism and superficiality.

Conversely, activists adopt practices, aesthetics, and logics typical of commercial influencing, even if direct monetisation—framed in terms of self-financing when it occurs—appears less relevant than the accumulation of other forms of symbolic and reputational capital (as discussed below). Journalist Symeon Brown (2022) notes that modern political activists often operate similarly to private enterprises, cultivating extensive follower bases that subscribe to their personal brands. According to recent scholarship, several arenas of activism exhibit a notable convergence with influencing practices. An incomplete list includes feminism, veganism and promotion of sustainability, queer rights advocacy and social justice, and the open endorsement of specific ideologies. Novoselova and Jenson (2019), Mendes (2022), and Navarro and Villegas-Simón (2022) have for example shown how feminist influencers harness the power of social media to promote feminist causes while also engaging in monetisation strategies. These “fempreneurs” normalise and capitalise on their activism, transforming it into a viable economic pursuit. Himelboima and Golanb (2022) and Huber et al. (2022) have instead focused on veganism advocates and eco-influencers,

showing how they blend activism with personal branding, promoting ethical consumption and environmental awareness while leveraging their platforms for financial gain. Finally, while Dean (2023) has addressed the adoption by left-wing activists of influencer strategies of self-branding, Rothut et al. (2023) have explored how conservative and right-wing influencers market not only products but also ideological beliefs, mobilising support through techniques typical of commercial influencers, such as fostering intimacy with their followers.

3.2 Convergence of Logics

To address a gap in existing sociological literature and map the grey area at the intersection of influence culture and digital activism, we propose the concept of "influ-activism". Sporadically used in the public debate, from which we borrowed it [1], this concept allows us to stress how the phenomenon must be read in terms of the convergence of distinct logics. By *logics*, we refer to the (largely implicit) principles and organising rules that govern the functioning of social domains. These logics determine what is considered valid, important, and legitimate within a particular context. Although they are not fully visible, their effects on all agents participating in the life of the domain are evident. For instance, the economic and artistic sectors operate under distinct principles: the economic sector is driven by the logic of profit and capital accumulation, whereas the artistic sector values symbolic recognition (Bourdieu, 1996).

In influ-activism, we observe a convergence of traditionally distinct logics. Influencers typically operate under a commercial logic, focusing on profit maximisation through follower accumulation and legitimising advertising as a core part of their social media narrative. Conversely, activists often adhere to a logic of autonomy and independence from commercial pressures, akin to the 'art for art's sake' ethos, where art stands, of course, for the purity of socio-political causes. Our theoretical proposition is that these logics are converging into the hybrid space of influ-activism, where influencers incorporate social causes to enhance their authenticity and engagement, while activists adopt *capitalisation practices* typical of influencers.

Here, capitalisation is understood in a broader sense than mere monetisation, encompassing the accumulation of other forms of capital alongside economic capital. Capital, in this context, must be conceived as a form of currency, representing resources and assets that individuals and groups possess and can exchange for social power and influence. These include economic capital (financial assets), cultural capital (education, skills, cultural knowledge), social capital (networks, relationships), and symbolic capital (prestige, recognition, reputation) (Bourdieu, 1986). Each form of capital plays a crucial role in determining an individual's position and trajectory within the social hierarchy of an arena within the digital media ecosystem. In this sense, engaging in sponsorship does not appear to be a reliable criterion (or at least not the only or the most significant one) for re-establishing boundaries between activists and influencers, particularly because the field of

influ-activism is rich in strategies for translating one type of capital into another. An example of this is the publication and promotion of books, which are often quite successful in terms of sales. Here, symbolic and reputational capital is transformed into economic capital.

3.3 Neoliberal and Platform Logics

While each situated arena may have its specific ways to articulate activist and influencer logics, and therefore specific forms of capitalisation, they are all conditioned by broader logics that operate across arenas. These logics depend on the development of influ-activism within a neoliberal context and on the characteristics of digital platforms that enable both influencing and online activism.

Neoliberal logics encompass a set of principles and practices that emphasise the primacy of the free market, promote privatisation, deregulation, and a reduction in state intervention in economic affairs. According to Foucault, neoliberalism is a form of governmental rationality that permeates social institutions, with the neoliberal subject viewed as an entrepreneur of the self, continually engaged in self-monitoring and optimisation (Foucault, 2008). While a comprehensive discussion of neoliberalism is beyond the scope of this essay, we highlight two neoliberal logics as crucial to the development of influ-activism.

Firstly, *commodification*, which encompasses both monetisation and capitalisation. Neoliberalism encourages the commodification of various aspects of social life, turning public goods and essential services into market commodities. In the domain of social media, influencers engage in self-commodification, transforming their personal lives and relationships into marketable content or into mechanisms of capitalisation (Duffy, 2017; Hearn, 2008). They also commodify their followers, whose numbers determine the value of sponsored posts and stories. This aligns with Foucault's (2008) notion of biopolitics, where individuals are treated as resources to be optimised.

Secondly, *individualism*. Neoliberal ethics champion the idea that individuals are solely responsible for their success or failure, often overlooking existing social structures and inequalities as well as the value of collectives in generating communal capital. This logic underpins influencers' self-definition as digital entrepreneurs, emphasising self-branding and personal responsibility. The digital economy urges all digital workers, including activists, to engage in self-branding, producing neoliberal subjectivities (Scharff, 2023). The "girl boss" image, embodying self-reliance and empowerment through self-branding, is particularly resonant with neoliberal individualism (Banet-Weiser, 2021). Similarly, socio-political causes are increasingly promoted online by individuals rather than collectives, including a new generation of content creators who base their editorial plans on a controversial cause. For example, in the Italian context, the Instagram profile of the movement *Non una di meno* counts around one half the followers (170,000 as of July 2024) compared to the most prominent feminist influ-activists. Moreover, while influ-activists often form clusters coordinating their activities and endorsing and promoting each other, they

rarely renounce personal visibility to engage in common social media communication projects.

Regarding platform logics, in this context we will mention just four of them:

(1) *Competition* for attention and maximisation of visibility, whose related strategies include leveraging social media algorithms, collaborating with other influencers, participating in public events, and creating viral content. Metrics serve as key success measures, with influencers constantly innovating to build larger, more engaged audiences (Marwick, 2013);

(2) *Engagement*, which is crucial for building mediated relationships and strengthening social influence. Related strategies include responding to comments, posing questions, launching contests, and using stories and live sessions to interact in real time, thereby fostering an active community;

(3) *Self-branding*, where a strong personal brand reflecting influencers' unique values, style, and identity is of key relevance for accumulating symbolic capital. Related strategies include maintaining consistent imagery across all channels used, curating social media aesthetics, and establishing a distinctive tone of voice;

(4) Finally, *authenticity*, epitomising the complex interplay between perceived genuineness and strategic commodification (Peterson, 1979; McQuarrie et al., 2013). The commodification of authenticity, a process dating back to critiques of consumerism in the 1960s (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999), is evident in the immaterial and promotional labour of social media practitioners (Rocamora, 2018). Scholars have highlighted the paradoxical nature of authenticity within these promotional contexts through terms like 'staged authenticity' (Pooley, 2010) and 'contrived authenticity' (Abidin, 2016). In contrast to uncritically enthusiastic depictions found in business and influencer marketing manuals (e.g. Backaler, 2018), a critical sociological understanding frames authenticity as a potent marketing narrative (Guignon, 2004; Gilmore and Pine, 2007) based on socially constructed ideals more than on subjects' inner qualities. This perspective emphasises that authenticity relies on a repertoire of characters, images, practices, and metaphors that collectively articulate genuineness, spontaneity, originality, and often an anti-establishment ethos. Such a constructivist view shifts our focus from authenticity as an attribute to authenticity as work: authenticity is not simply claimed but actively constructed and maintained by various social actors—including companies, influencers, and audiences—as a criterion for acquiring or conferring legitimacy and trust within the digital media ecosystem.

Neoliberal logics, with their emphasis on commodification and individualism, align seamlessly with the operational logics of digital platforms, which prioritise visibility, engagement, self-branding, and authenticity. Self-commodification and the entrepreneurial self find fertile ground in the digital ecosystem, where metrics of visibility and engagement are paramount. Platform logics reinforce the neoliberal subjectivity of constant self-optimisation, creating a feedback loop that perpetuates these principles. Authenticity is continuously performed and recalibrated in this context, often balancing between genuine engagement and commercial interests. While each discursive arena may have its own ways of articulating neoliberal and platform logics, this interaction invariably defines the conditions

of possibility and the limits of influ-activism's discursive production and mobilisation practices.

4. Influ-activism: Proposing a Research Map

The constellation of concepts introduced in the previous three sections – such as influence culture, discursive arenas, "contentious publicness" (Kavada & Poell 2021), and influ-activism logics (including both the general logics characteristic of the phenomenon and local adaptations to specific arenas)—along with notions like authenticity as work, monetisation and capitalisation, and the various forms of capital and strategies for their mutual translation, constitutes a foundational theoretical framework for understanding the phenomenon of influ-activism.

The concrete exploration of the phenomenon, however, remains an empirical issue, and a rather urgent one. Currently, empirical studies on influ-activism are not only quite sporadic, but they also present some limitations for those seeking a sociological understanding of the phenomenon: a significant part of them is predominantly managerial in nature, and thus quite strictly oriented towards identifying technicalities for the optimisation of performances (as Thomas & Fowler 2023). Sociological inquiries, on the other hand, by and large focus on the specificities of single arenas, and not infrequently on single aspects of the phenomenon (as the studies on feminist influ-activists like Scharff (2024) and Caldeira & Machado (2023), concerned with issues of self-labelling and of neoliberal bending of feminist practices, respectively). This excessive fragmentation of the emerging field of study could hinder a more general understanding of the phenomenon.

Drawing on literature on influ-activism, influencing, and social media activism, it is possible to sketch a map that could guide, or at least connect, empirical efforts to understand the phenomenon. In our view, it should facilitate and encourage the comparison of studies that focus on different arenas. This map (Fig. 1) emerges as organised around four main areas of research, often overlapping: (1) influ-activists as communicative agents; (2) practices and discourses of influ-activists; (3) audiences and publics of influ-activism; and (4) ecosystems of influ-activism.

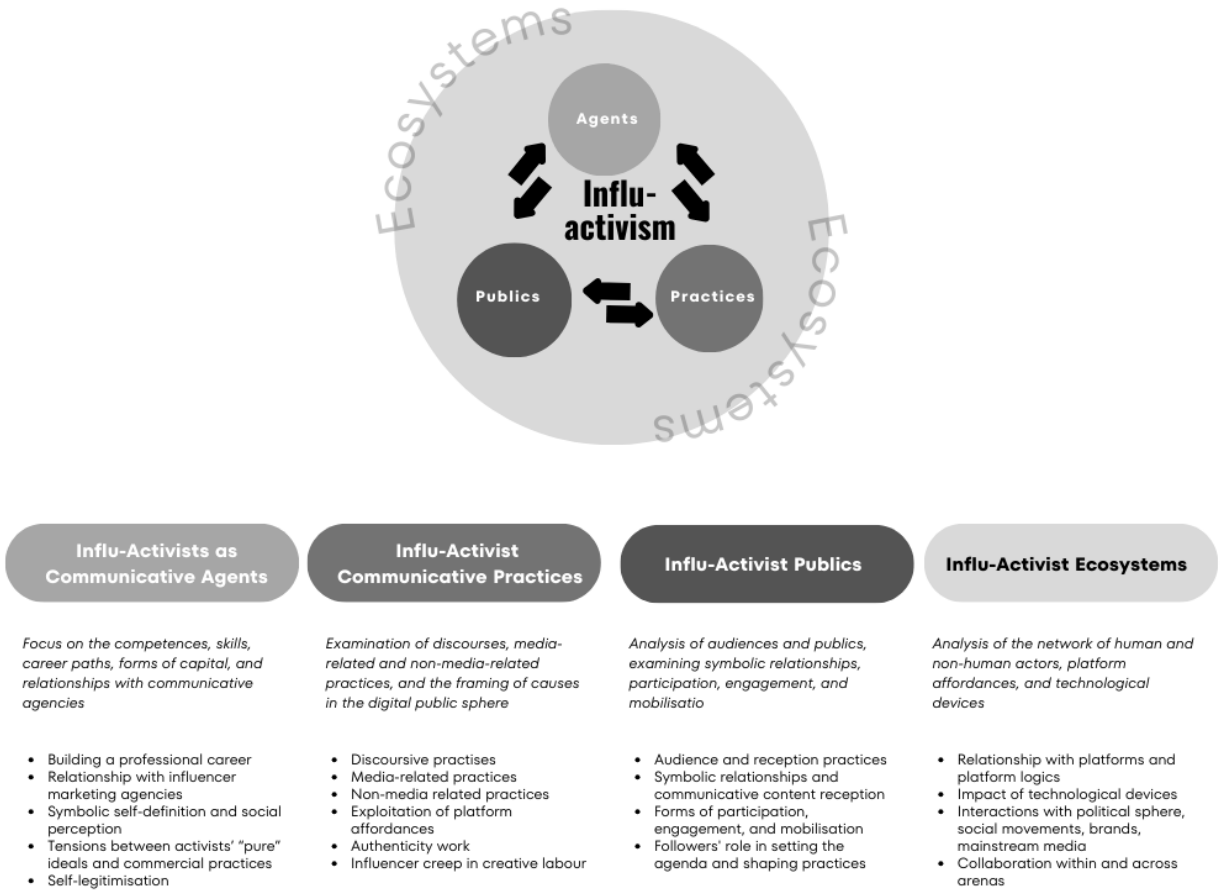

Fig. 1: A Map of Influ-Activism Research Areas

1) The first point focuses on influ-activists as social agents investing on self-branding. In dialogue with the sociology of professions, this includes examining their professional careers and exploring their competencies, skills, career paths, and forms of compensation in terms of various types of capital, as well as their relationship with major influencer marketing agencies, thus further integrating these figures into institutionalised market dynamics. A key theme is the progressive professionalisation of influencers, which also impacts influ-activists, as evidenced by the increasingly frequent appearance on the market of educational programs, even at the university level, that aim to introduce students to the profession, despite its lack of formal regulation. Finally, the interplay between influ-activists' symbolic self-definition and the way they are socially perceived falls under this first point and the next point of our map. This dynamic is evident in the resistance of influ-activists in defining themselves as such. This refusal often stems from the associations of the term "influencer" with commercialisation or superficiality, which many traditional activists perceive as incompatible with their advocacy work. The tension between how influ-activists perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others drives influ-activists to deploy various strategies aimed at establishing credibility and legitimacy. These

include cosmesis, authenticity work, and rhetorical strategies of self-legitimisation and accreditation, as explored in Scharff (2024) and Dean (2024).

2) *Influ-activist communication and practices.* This second point focuses on influ-activist discursive practices, and other media-related as well as non-media-related practices. Most of the studies that fall under this second point of the map adopt critical discourse and visual analysis to scrutinise how influ-activists frame the causes they promote in the digital public sphere. These studies largely warn against oversimplifying these causes through platform affordances and logics, which would ultimately undermine the social change promoted by influ-activists. For example, Caldeira and Machado's study of Portuguese feminist influ-activists (2023) highlights the "inevitable tensions between feminist ideals that seek to address intersectional and systemic gender inequalities, and feminist practices that are constrained by logics of popularity, visibility, and commercial success" (p.165), and how these tensions favour "individualised feminist expressions centred on self-improvement and commercial consumption" (p. 165). Regarding practices, an illuminating example is provided by Bishop's (2023) inquiry into the convergence between the logics of influencing and those of the art world, in a process closely resembling that of influ-activism. The author has coined the term "influencer creep" to refer to "key social and cultural practices" (p.2) originating from influencers within creative labour, which have "three key tenets – self-branding, optimisation and a performance of authenticity" (ibid.).
3) *Influ-activist publics.* The third point shifts the focus to the audiences and publics of influ-activists, analysing them from a twofold perspective. The first perspective draws on the long tradition of audience and reception studies to address the meanings that followers attribute to their symbolic relationship with influ-activists. This includes how the communicative content produced by influ-activists is received, interpreted, appropriated, and incorporated into followers' daily lives, and within the structured worlds they participate in (for example, movements or collectives). It also examines the forms of participation, engagement and mobilisation elicited by these symbolic relationships and communicative output. The second perspective, conversely, concentrates on followers' engagement with influ-activists. As clarified by Arnesson (2023), "the distinction between audience and public is becoming increasingly blurred (…). An influencer's accumulation of followers is both an audience commodity to be sold to advertisers and a public involved in participatory practices that can both praise and criticise their work" (p. 541). In this sense, it is crucial to take into consideration the role of followers in setting the agenda and shaping influ-activists' practices and discourses.
4) *Influ-activist ecosystems.* The concluding point centres attention on the ecosystemic dimension, specifically on the network of human and non-human actors that enables influ-activists to emerge, consolidate their presence, deploy their narratives, and perform their practices. This involves, on one hand, their relationship with the affordances of platforms and the articulation of platform logics they enact with their narratives and practices. It also includes technological devices, such as

smartphones, which affect the speed of content production and consumption. On the other hand, it includes the interactions of influ-activists with a heterogeneous variety of actors, including the political sphere, social movements, brands, and mainstream media, as well as broader clusters of influ-activists who collaborate either within one arena or across multiple arenas. Examples of collaboration include mutual endorsement, amplifying each other's contents, or campaigning for specific objectives. An example of the attention to ecosystems is Sykes and Hopner's (2024) study of Tradwives, online female influ-activists who promote traditional lifestyles and right-wing political values. This insightful study describes, among other things, how the communicative projects of these influencers often unfold across multiple platforms, including fringe ones, and how the interconnection of the most radical of these projects to alt-right online spaces—for instance, via reposts—can funnel followers into extreme-right echo chambers, as extensively described by literature on radicalisation.

The distinctions between these four points are not clear-cut, nor should they be conceived as mutually exclusive in informing empirical research. The same illustrative examples used to clarify our four *foci* often intersect multiple points in various combinations.

Conclusions

This article has sought to propose a comprehensive framework for understanding the emerging phenomenon of influ-activism. To this end, we outlined a preliminary genealogy of the phenomenon, introduced a constellation of theoretical concepts for its interpretation, and provided a guiding map for empirical research. These tools appear sufficiently adaptable to address a wide range of interests and research questions pertaining to influ-activism. Our specific interest in this topic stems from the growing visibility and pervasiveness of influ-activism within the digital public sphere. In particular, we are intrigued by the reach of anti-hegemonic and openly critical discourses on neoliberal capitalism, which use social media—one of the key infrastructures of the neoliberal order—as their platform for dissemination. As Boltanski and Chiapello (1999) have long argued, the new spirit of capitalism entails the commodification of the very content of protests against it. What concerns us is that these anti-hegemonic discourses, often radical in scope, are produced, distributed, valorised, and consumed in ways deeply infused with neoliberal logics. Conversely, we are less troubled by the simplification of anti-hegemonic discourses, a phenomenon denounced by several authors who have studied social media activism and influ-activism. After all, it is not uncommon for intellectual and political formation to follow oblique paths, frequently deviating far from their starting points.

It remains to be seen whether influ-activism is just one of the latest chapters in this ongoing process, or if it represents a qualitative leap, with neoliberalism infusing the very practices of producing discourses of opposition to its hegemonic order with its own logics. Precisely

because we recognise the absence of an ‘outside’ from which to critique this order, we find it necessary to abandon any normative ideals in addressing the phenomenon. Instead, we aim to focus on its underlying conditions of possibility for generating practices and discourses, in search of what cannot be said, shown, or ultimately incorporated and lived. In this light, the questions raised here are but a starting point, inviting ongoing dialogue and critical inquiry into the future of digital activism in its controversial marriage with influence culture.

Biographical Note

Maria Francesca Murru is Associate Professor in Sociology of Culture and Communication at the University of Bergamo. Her research interests are focused on online public spheres, digital activism and mediated civic participation. She is currently engaged in research projects dealing with conspiracy ideation, epistemic pluralism and adoption of Artificial Intelligence in newsmaking processes. Among her latest publications: (with Simone Carlo) IA e newsmaking: un’indagine esplorativa nelle redazioni nazionali e locali italiane, *Mediascapes Journal*; Qanon and conspiracy theories – the Italian case, in Eslen-Ziya, H, Giorgi, A., *Populism and Science in Europe*, Palgrave McMillan.

Marco Pedroni is an Associate Professor of Sociology of Culture and Communication at the University of Ferrara. He is the founder and director of D/Cult, a critical observatory on digital cultures. He serves as Co-Editor in Chief of the *International Journal of Fashion Studies*, published by Intellect Books. His research and publications have concentrated on cultural industries, including fashion and gambling, as well as social media influencers. Currently, he is engaged in research projects on artificial intelligence and influence culture.

Simone Tosoni is an Associate Professor of Sociology of Cultural Processes at the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences at Università Cattolica di Milano. His research focuses on digital media, science communication and misinformation, and subcultures. Among his recent publications, he has edited and contributed to the volume *Manufacturing Refused Knowledge in the Age of Epistemic Pluralism. Discourses, Imaginaries, and Practices on the Border of Science*, Palgrave 2024 (with Federico Neresini, Maria Carmela Agodi, Stefano Crabu).

References

Abidin, C. (2015). Communicative ❤ intimacies: Influencers and perceived interconnectedness. *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology,* (8). doi:10.5399/uo/ada

Abidin, C. (2016). 'Aren't these just young, rich women doing vain things online?': influencer selfies as subversive frivolity. *Social Media + Society, 2*(2), 1–17. doi:10.1177/2056305116641342

Arnesson, J. (2023). Influencers as ideological intermediaries: Promotional politics and authenticity labour in influencer collaborations. *Media, Culture & Society, 45*(3), 528–544. doi:10.1177/01634437221117505

Backaler, J. (2018). *Digital Influence: Unleash the Power of Influencer Marketing to Accelerate Your Global Business.* Palgrave Macmillan.

Banet-Weiser, S. (2012). *Authentic™: The politics of ambivalence in a brand culture.* In: *Authentic™.* New York University Press.

Barbala, A. M. (2024). Reassembling #MeToo: Tracing the techno-affective agency of the feminist Instagram influencer. *Convergence, 30*(3), 992–1007. doi:10.1177/13548565231191261

Banet-Weiser, S. (2021). Gender, social media, and the labor of authenticity. *American Quarterly, 73*(1), 141–144. doi:10.1353/aq.2021.0008

Bennett, W. L., & Segerberg, A. (2013). *The Logic of Connective Action: Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics.* Cambridge University Press.

Bishop, S. (2023). Influencer creep: How artists strategically navigate the platformisation of art worlds. *New Media & Society.* doi:10.1177/14614448231206090

Boltanski, L., & Chiapello, E. (1999). *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme.* Paris: Gallimard.

Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (pp. 241–258). Greenwood Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1996). *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field.* Stanford University Press.

boyd, d. (2011). Social network sites as networked publics: Affordances, dynamics, and implications. In Z. Papacharissi (Ed.), *Networked self: Identity, community, and culture on social network sites* (pp. 39–58). Routledge.

Brown, S. (2022). *Get Rich or Lie Trying: Ambition and Deceit in the New Influencer Economy.* London: Atlantic Books.

Bruns, A. & Highfield, T. (2016). Is Habermas on Twitter? Social media and the public sphere. In G. Enli, A. Bruns, A. O. Larsson, E. Skogerbo, & C. Christensen (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to social media and politics* (pp. 56–73). Routledge.

Caldeira S. P. & Machadoc, A. F. (2023). "Hello My Lovelies!" Conficted Feminisms and the Neoliberalisation of Portuguese Activist Infuencer Practices. In T. Krijnen, P. Nixon, M. Ravenscroft & C. M. Scarcelli (Eds.), *Identities and Intimacies on Social Media Transnational Perspectives* (pp. 153–168). Routledge.

Clarke, A., & Star, S. L. (2007). The Social Worlds Framework: A Theory/Methods Package. In E. J. Hackett, O. Amsteramska, M. E. Lynch, & J. Wajcman (Eds.), *The handbook of science and technology studies* (pp. 113–138). MIT Press.

Dawkins, R. (2017 [1976]). *The Selfish Gene.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dean, J. (2023). From solidarity to self-promotion? Neoliberalism and left politics in the age of the social media influencer. *Capital & Class.* doi:10.1177/03098168231199907

Duffy, B. E. (2017). *(Not) getting paid to do what you love: Gender, social media, and aspirational work.* Yale University Press.

Finlayson, A. (2022). YouTube and political ideologies: Technology, populism and rhetorical form. *Political Studies, 70*(1), 62–80. doi:10.1177/0032321720934630

Foucault, M. (2008). *The birth of biopolitics: lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979.* Springer.

Fraser, N. (1990). Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy. *Social Text,* (25/26), 56–80. doi:10.2307/466240

Freberg, K., Graham, K., McGaughey, K., & Freberg, L. (2011). Who are the social media influencers? A study of public perceptions of personality. *Public Relations Review, 37*(1), 90–92. doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2010.11.001

Gerbaudo, P. (2017). *The mask and the flag: Populism, citizenism and global protest.* New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Gerbaudo, P. (2018). Social media and populism: An elective affinity?. *Media, Culture & Society, 40*(5), 745–753. doi:10.1177/0163443718772192

Gerbaudo, P. (2024). From individual affectedness to collective identity: personal testimony campaigns on social media and the logic of collection. *New Media & Society, 26*(8), 4904–4921. doi:10.1177/14614448221128523

Gilmore, J. H., & Pine, B. J. (2007). *Authenticity: What Consumers Really Want.* Harvard Business Press.

Guignon, C. (2004). *On Being Authentic.* Routledge.

Hearn, A. (2008). Meat, Mask, Burden: Probing the contours of the branded self. *Journal of Consumer Culture, 8*(2), 197–217. doi:10.1177/1469540508090086

Himelboim, I., & Golan, G. J. (2022). A Social Network Approach to Social Media Influencers on Instagram: The Strength of Being a Nano-Influencer in Cause Communities. *Journal of Interactive Advertising.* doi:10.1080/15252019.2022.2139653

Hoppner, J. J., & Vadakkepatt, G. G. (2019). Examining moral authority in the marketplace: A conceptualization and framework. *Journal of Business Research, 95,* 417–427. doi:10.1016/j.jbusres.2018.07.050

Huber, B., Lepenies, R., Quesada Baena, L., & Allgaier, J. (2022). Beyond Individualized Responsibility Attributions? How Eco Influencers Communicate Sustainability on TikTok. *Environmental Communication.* doi:10.1080/17524032.2022.2131868

Jackson, S. J., & Foucault Welles, B. F. (2016). #Ferguson is everywhere: Initiators in emerging counterpublic networks. *Information, Communication & Society, 19*(3), 397–418. doi:10.1080/1369118x.2015.1106571

Karppi, T. (2015). Happy accidents: Facebook and the value of affect. In K. Hillis, S. Paasonen, & M. Petit (Eds.), *Networked Affect* (pp. 221–234). London: Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Kavada, A., & Poell, T. (2021). From Counterpublics to contentious publicness. *Communication Theory, 31*(2), 190–208. doi:10.1093/ct/qtaa025

Kozinets, R., Gambetti, R., & Gretzel, U. (2023). *Influencers and Creators: Business, Culture and Practice.* London: Sage.

Leaver, T., Highfield, T., & Abidin, C. (2020). *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures.* Cambridge: Polity.

Lou, C., & Yuan, S. (2019). Influencer marketing: How message value and credibility affect consumer trust of branded content on social media. *Journal of Interactive Advertising, 19*(1), 58–73. doi:10.1080/15252019.2018.1533501

Marwick, A. E. (2013). *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, and Branding in the Social Media Age.* Yale University Press.

McQuarrie, E. F., Miller, J., & Phillips, B. J. (2013). The megaphone effect: taste and audience in fashion blogging. *Journal of Consumer Research, 40*(1), 136–158. doi:10.1086/669042

Mendes, K. (2021). Fempreneurs and Digital Feminist Publishing. *Women: A Cultural Review, 32*(3–4), 410–433. doi:10.1080/09574042.2021.1973734

Minero, S. (2020). The influencer evolution. *Adweek, 61*(23), 10.

Navarro, C., & Villegas-Simón, I. (2022). Feminist Discourses of Spanish Digital Influencers: An Analysis of Their Activity on Social Media. *Dígitos. Revista de Comunicación Digital, 8,* 201–214. doi:10.7203/drdcd.v1i8.223

Novoselova, V., & Jenson, J. (2019). Authorship and Professional Digital Presence in Feminist Blogs. *Feminist Media Studies, 19*(2), 257–272. doi:10.1080/14680777.2018.1436083

Papacharissi, Z. (2015). *Affective publics: Sentiment, technology and politics.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Parikka, J. (2007). *Digital Contagions: A Media Archaeology of Computer Viruses.* Bern: Peter Lang.

Pedroni, M. (2015). Stumbling on the Heels of My Blog: Career, Forms of Capital, and Strategies in the (Sub)Field of Fashion Blogging. *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture, 19*(2), 179–199. doi:10.2752/175174115x14168357992355

Pedroni, M. (2016). Meso-celebrities, fashion and the media: How digital influencers struggle for visibility. *Film, Fashion & Consumption, 5*(1), 103–121. doi:10.1386/ffc.5.1.103_1

Pedroni, M. (2023). Two decades of fashion blogging and influencing: A critical overview. *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture, 27*(2), 237–268. doi:10.1080/1362704x.2021.2017213

Peterson, R. A. (1979). *Creating country music: Fabricating authenticity.* University of Chicago Press.

Poell, T., & van Dijck, J. (2015). Social Media and Activist Communication. In C. Atton (Ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Alternative and Community Media* (pp. 527–537). Routledge.

Poell, T., & van Dijck, J. (2018). Social media and new protest movements. In J. Burgess, A. Marwick, & T. Poell (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Social Media* (pp. 546–561). Sage, London.

Pooley, J. (2010). The consuming self from flappers to facebook. In M. Aronczyk & D. Powers (Eds.), *Blowing up the brand: Critical perspectives on promotional culture* (pp. 71–89). Peter Lang, Bern.

Rambukkana, N. (2015). *Hashtag publics: The power and politics of discursive networks.* New York: Peter Lang.

Rocamora, A. (2018). The Labour of Fashion Blogging. In L. Armstrong & F. McDowell (Eds.), *Fashioning Professionals: Identity and Representation at Work in the Creative Industries* (pp. 65–82). Bloomsbury, London.

Rothut, S., Schulze, H., Hohner, J., & Rieger, D. (2023). Ambassadors of ideology: A conceptualization and computational investigation of far-right influencers, their networking structures and communication practices. *New Media & Society,* 1–28. doi:10.1177/14614448231164409

Rushkoff, D. (1996). *Media Virus: Hidden Agendas in Popular Culture.* New York, NY: Ballantine Books.

Scharff, C. (2024). Are we all influencers now? Feminist activists discuss the distinction between being an activist and an influencer. *Feminist Theory, 25*(3), 454–470. doi:10.1177/14647001231201062

Soriano, C. R. R., & Gaw, F. (2022). Platforms, alternative influence, and networked political brokerage on YouTube. *Convergence, 28*(3), 781–803. doi:10.1177/13548565211029769

Swidler, A. (1986). Culture in action: Symbols and strategies. *American Sociological Review, 51*(2), 273–286. doi:10.2307/2095521

Sykes, S., & Hopner, V. (2024). Tradwives: Right-Wing Social Media Influencers. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography.* doi:10.1177/08912416241246273

Thomas, V. L., & Fowler, K. (2023). Examining the outcomes of influencer activism. *Journal of Business Research, 154,* 113336. doi:10.1016/j.jbusres.2022.113336

Tilly, C. (1978). *From Mobilization to Revolution.* Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Van Dijck, J. (2013). *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

von Bülow, M., Vilaça, L., & Abelin, P. H. (2018). Varieties of digital activist practices: students and mobilization in Chile. *Information, Communication & Society, 22*(12), 1770–1788. doi:10.1080/1369118x.2018.1451550

Vredenburg, J., Kapitan, S., Spry, A., & Kemper, J. A. (2020). Brands Taking a Stand: Authentic Brand Activism or Woke Washing? *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing, 39*(4), 444–460. doi:10.1177/0743915620947359

Wilson, R. (2000). The Six Simple Principles of Viral Marketing. *Web Marketing Today, 79*(1). https://www.practicalecommerce.com/viral-principles

Notes

[1] For the Italian context it is the case of social media analyst and content creator Serena Doe (Serena Mazzini) who has devoted critical attention to the phenomenon through her Instagram profile. See instagram.com/serenadoe ___/