ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Influencers as socio-technical actors: mapping the paths of influence and the traces of the digital influencers' system in Italy

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In recent years, digital influencers or digital opinion leaders have emerged as a global phenomenon, one providing a rich field of investigation for several disciplines from sociology to marketing. The goal of the paper is to study this phenomenon by adopting an ecological approach, not focusing only on a single dimension but observing the influencer system as an environment with its own rules and subjects, examining the other components of the system and tracing the relationships between them. The original contribution of this paper is to conceptualize influencers as socio-technical actors, i.e. as social subjects that operate within technological platforms, and to adopt an interdisciplinary approach, starting from sociological and marketing studies on the influencer phenomenon and then moving on to STS studies that have focused on the social shaping of technology to shed light on how the influencers are transforming the (social) media system in which they are inserted and then the chain of communication industry. The argument will therefore start by reviewing the theories that address this phenomenon and by sketching a genealogy, tracing its roots in the cultural and social context of the participatory web and web 2.0. It will move, then, to investigate the dynamics of shaping social media platforms, reviewing the studies that have investigated them, from the Social Shaping of Technology approach to platform studies. The paper will apply the analysis to the Italian context, unfolding the dynamics of influence with the support of the case study of ClioMakeUp (the leading beauty creator in Italy), examples, and grey literature from the Italian context. In the final part, the paper will map the traces of the influencer system in Italy and the communication chain, focusing on the processes of mutual shaping between brands, communication agencies, influencer enterprises, regulatory bodies, media, and of course platforms. The STS approach proved to be useful in disentangling the several actors of the system, but as platforms evolved the opportunities for mutual shaping have gradually diminished as the balance of power seems to be tending in favor of the platforms. More research is needed to further understand the concepts of closure, script, and relevant social groups within social media platforms.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, digital influencers or digital opinion leaders have emerged as a global phenomenon, one providing a rich field of investigation for several disciplines from sociology to marketing[1].

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The aim of this theoretical paper is to investigate this multifaceted phenomenon by adopting an ecological approach, observing the influencer system as an environment with its own rules and subjects that interact with the mass media system (Boccia Artieri & Gemini, 2019; Arriagada & Ibáñez, 2020). The starting point of the paper is that influencers are not alone in their communication and branding practices, but are inserted in a specific cultural, social, and market context, and interact with other subjects, contributing to configure the current (social) media system. In this light, influencers will be considered as socio-technical actors within a system of which the components will be unpacked and the processes of mutual shaping highlighted. Besides the literature review, the analysis will be supported by a case study, examples, and grey literature from the Italian context. It will focus mainly on Instagram recognized as the leading platform nowadays in the influencer marketing industry (O'Meara, 2019, p. 2).

The original contribution of this paper is thus in mapping this phenomenon, identifying its components and outlining the relationships between them. The paper will adopt an interdisciplinary approach, starting from sociological and marketing studies about the influencer phenomenon and then moving on to STS studies that have focused on the social shaping of technology to shed light on how the influencers are transforming the (social) media system in which they are inserted and then the chain of communication industry.

The argument will therefore start by reviewing the theories that address this phenomenon and by sketching a genealogy, tracing its roots in the cultural and social context of the participatory web and web 2.0. It will move, then, to investigate the dynamics of shaping social media platforms, reviewing the studies that have investigated them, from the Social Shaping of Technology approach to platform studies.

The paper will conclude by mapping the traces of the influencer system in Italy and the communication chain, focusing on the processes of mutual shaping.

2. An interdisciplinary phenomenon and a reflection on words

The digital influencer phenomenon is well established by now and at an advanced stage of global diffusion.

Given the extent of the phenomenon and the far-ranging nature of the studies, the aim of the literature review is to isolate the main theoretical paradigms that have framed it and also to reflect on the terms used to identify it. Words actually belong to a theoretical framework and also identify practices and social groups. A tentative genealogy of the phenomenon will also be traced.

Within the realm of mediated communication, it can be argued that some of the first traces of this phenomenon can be found in online forums and communities. They exhibit several layers of social interactions, revealing the presence of expert users or users that catalyze other users' trust. Among the communities which have received most attention, there are online forums and groups devoted to health promotion or to the support of patients suffering from specific diseases. At first, researches showed the usefulness of the community support and of mediated communication for health education (White & Dorman, 2001) and also highlighted that role differentiation and the development of different levels of expertise among the users has emerged during time. Users with a major role in the communities were identified and described as "key opinion leader" (Guo et al., 2016). A similar terminology was used in studies about offline communities (Kelly et al., 1991). Both recall the crucial work on opinion leaders (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Shi & Salmon specify that "opinion leadership on social media, may rest not only on the ability to access or disseminate information but also on the ability to bridge groups [14], build critical links in information dissemination [14], and trigger others in the network to share information [16]" (p. 2). Although

other models of information diffusion were identified online beside the two-step flow model (Shi & Salmon, 2018) the characteristics of opinion leaders identified by Katz and Lazarsfeld (about opinion leaders) are still valid, among which: personal attributes (activeness, verification, information and communication technology development in one's location); competence; social positions (Shi & Salmon, 2018).

Other terms used in the medical research field are "peer experts" "who have high health literacy skills and are interested in sharing this information" (Vydiswaran & Reddy, 2019, p. 42), and community champions or health influencers (McCosker, 2018). McCosker, in his analysis of the beyondblue community, pointed out that among the community users who become champions, or health influencers, there are those who have had experience of the disease and successfully recovered. However, he also highlighted that the experience of the disease is not enough: it is necessary to transform that experience so as to connect with other users or lead them to connect with each other (McCosker, 2018). The second element is framing, "which refers to both the act of expertly articulating mental health experiences and recovery strategies, and the durable frames, points of reference, key posts, ideas, practices and behaviors that hold sway or take shape as norms or conventions – particularly through the interpersonal flow of affects and the generation and management of empathy" (p. 4757). The third element is feedback cycles, which is to say that influencers have styles and rituals of interaction that allow them to consolidate their position (McCosker, 2018).

Another fundamental step in the development of mediated communication and of web 2.0 are blogs. Within the blogosphere, studies have evinced that there were "A-list bloggers" whose existence was already detected by Blood in 2002 (Herring et al., 2005) and of whom there are already traces in studies conducted in the early 2000s. Herring et al. (2015) define A-list bloggers as "those that are most widely read, cited in the mass media, and receive the most inbound links from other blogs" (p. 19) and make effective these traits, identifying them as "as the blogs with the highest number of other blogs that link to them" (p. 4). External links pointing to the blog are the main parameter of evaluation, because the link had a deeper significance, not only connected with popularity but also with trust (Locatelli, 2014). Ko has shown that a-list bloggers maintain their status by writing every day and giving feedback to their audience (for example incorporating quotes in their articles), have a high number of in-degree links, and attract new audiences by building a "personal brand" (Ko, 2012). Consideration of this phenomenon therefore starts with the social role and personal characteristics that these individuals have.

Passing on to social media, it would be impossible here to attempt a complete review of literature about influencers, and this would also exceed the scope of this genealogy. The present objective is to map the different terms used, theoretical frameworks, and their characteristics.

A wider term used is "digital influencers" (Cotter, 2019; Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014) which is connected both with the theoretical framework of opinion leaders and that of influence. Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip (2014) recalled the Two Step Flow of Communication theory of Katz and Lazarsfeld and also Katz's reflection about the characteristics of an opinion leader being personality (values and opinions), competence and expertise, social location and size network (Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014). In this frame, influencers are comparable to opinion leaders because they share some characteristics, "such as openness to messages, and taking the role of discussant, and [proving] influential and valued among social contacts" (p. 593).

Other studies adopted a more specific term, "social media influencers" (Audrezet, de Kerviler, & Guidry Moulard, 2018; Hurley, 2019; Stoldt, Wellman, Ekdale, & Tully, 2019), explicitly referring to the field of social media. Marketing and public relation studies recognized social media influencers

as a new kind of endorser or individual for promoting brands and products (Audrezet et al., 2018). Audrezet et al. (to which we refer for the single references) acknowledged also that prior research had investigated marketing with "various influencers" (p. 2) such as endorsers, bloggers, vloggers, YouTubers, Instagrammers, and micro-celebrities (p. 2). These terms indicate that in some circumstances influencers are not present and effective on all digital communication but are platform-specific. Arriagada and Ibañez (2020) found that fashion creators felt the term influencer as a commercial label externally imposed. These paradigms still focus on the social role and personal characteristics of these individuals but also recognize the role of the digital platforms.

Tending in the same direction, it is interesting to see that another term used in connection with fashion bloggers is "content creator" (Duffy, 2015), which identifies content as an intermediary in constructing the online presence of these individuals.

This phenomenon has also been studied within the theoretical framework of micro-celebrity and internet celebrities (Abidin, 2016, 2018; Senft, 2008). Although not every form of micro-celebrity to emerge from digital media and social media is identifiable as a digital opinion leader or an influencer, they share some common traits. Abidin (2018) identifies six measures to assess internet celebrities and especially micro-celebrities: the scale; the platform; the audience; the nature; the practice; and the impact (p. 14-15). Influencers are in this context a "critical form of internet celebrity given their ability to attract and maintain a sizable following on their social media platforms, through highly engaging and personalized content production, which can be used as conduits of information to amplify messages" (Abidin, 2018, p. 71). She therefore identifies influencers both as "mediators" in business research and as displaying "as a vocation and practices focused on social media-based, multimedia, fame on the internet" (Abidin, 2018, p. 71).

The review of terms and theoretical frameworks has shown several different approaches to the phenomenon and the variety of terms suggests the richness of disciplinary perspectives and the overlapping of several layers of social phenomena. Common characteristics of these subjects appear to pertain to the three areas of personality, social relations, and expressive ability. Put succinctly, the personality attributes include competence, expertise, personal branding, capacity to dominate the social media platform in which they operate; social relations depend on social location, ability to manage and nurture social relations, ability to be connectors, capacity to be trusted, openness to messages, and ability to have a role in discussions; expressive ability hinges on the capacity to constantly create interesting digital contents and to distribute them.

Moving on to the specific topics investigated by research, they can be divided into five main areas.

A first area is interested in analyzing influences'/opinion leaders'/celebrities' identity development on social media and impression management. Among the topics investigated are authenticity management (Audrezet et al., 2018; Hurley, 2019) and self-branding (Senft, 2013).

A second area has concentrated on how the influencers/opinion leaders/celebrities created their expertise, focusing on trends creation (Zhang, Zhao, & Xu, 2016), reasons to follow them (Winter & Neubaum, 2016), and digital labor (Abidin, 2017).

A third area has examined the relationship between the influencer/opinion leader/celebrity and his/her social network, analyzing the relationship between influencers and brands (Abidin, 2016, 2017; Jin & Muqaddam, 2019; Kapitan & Silvera, 2016); the construction of a community of practices around blogger and YouTube channels (Gannon & Prothero, 2018) or the criteria for selecting the right influencers for a campaign (Bokunewicz & Shulman, 2017; Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014).

There are two more topics, strictly connected with the previous ones and interrelated: the nature of labor and the relationships with the platforms in which these subjects are acting.

Academics have reflected on the nature of this new form of labor, conceptualizing it as "aspirational labor" (Duffy, 2015), in which influencers are often underpaid and their actions (content production, community relations) commodified (Duffy, 2015). Cotter (2019) points out that in their work digital influencers constantly negotiate with platforms, struggling to gain visibility without which they would immediately forfeit the attention of brands and hence their livelihood. To keep up with algorithm rules and to manage their visibility, digital influencers may choose either to nurture a "relational influence", based on authentic relations on the platform, or a "simulated influence" in which actions on the platforms (like, comments, sharing) are motivated only by interest, taking part for example in engagement pods (Cotter, 2019). O'Meara points out that engagement pods may be a way to resist the imbalance potential of algorithms and to keep their values high (O'Meara 2019).

The increasingly important role of platforms and their affordances is a stimulus to find paradigms to investigate their role, as this paper will attempt to do by matching studies of digital influencers with STS studies.

3. Social shaping and digital platforms

The Social Shaping of Technology paradigm and especially the Social Construction of Technology paradigm (SCOT) (Bijker, Pinch, & Hughes, 1989) has aimed to study the shaping processes which occur when technology is conceived and designed. In analyzing these processes, scholars introduced the concepts of "interpretive flexibility" and "closure" (Bijker et al., 1989) which both refer to the meaning that a technology may have. It can actually be different and can be closed at a certain point when a consensus emerges, and it can be shaped by the "relevant social groups" involved in the process (Bijker et al., 1989). The theoretical framework of the Social Shaping of Technology and the attention to the process of shaping was applied also to ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) in which the user has a role in defining, configuring and personalizing the technologies (Oudshoorn & Pinch, 2003). Williams also highlighted the role of ICT users in finding new meanings and uses (Williams, 1997). Working in a similar area, the PICT (Programme on Information and Communication Technologies) studied the relationship between technology and society in terms of design, work, and institutional policies (Dutton 1996, 1999). The edited books by MacKenzie and Wajcman also analyzed the social shaping of software (Mackenzie & Wajcman, 1985, 1999) and, following this path, other researches also demonstrated the cultural shaping of technologies such as the personal computer and mobile phone (Pasquali & Scifo, 2004; Scifo, 2005). Other scholars pushed forward the analysis of the social shaping of cultural artefacts and computer-mediated communication tools (Fulk, 1993). These researches showed that users' beliefs, imaginations, discourses contribute to shaping the use, the adoption practices of a specific tool.

Siles (2012) has applied the SCOT paradigm, including the concepts of "relevant social groups", "articulation" and "interpretive communities", to the study of the early evolution of blogging. Investigations into platforms clearly showed that they are non-neutral because they drive users' behavior, for example through social and technological affordances that guide their actions while serving the commercial interest of the platforms themselves (Hurley, 2019; Postigo, 2016). As Aroldi and Vittadini evidenced (2015), reconducting social network uses both to "the design of interfaces and affordances" and to "users' social position" is a form of "reductionism" (Aroldi & Vittadini, 2015, p. 195) that they overcome by using the concept of "style" "as a form of personal agency that mediates between the constraints of technological affordances and the structure of opportunity in which the actor is rooted and which directs and restricts his/her action" (p. 195). In their thorough exploration of affordances in the context of social media platforms, Bucher and Helmond tackled the broad

meaning of affordance, that comprehends interfaces, features, imagined affordances, and also vernacular affordances, but also highlighted the need for an approach that considers the platform and the affordances specific to it. They also point out that platforms may involve the various types of users differently and enable different forms of action for each of them (Bucher & Helmond, 2018).

The role of users in platforms is such that one the one hand, their activities are exploited for marketing purposes, on the other hand, they can appropriate the platforms' dynamics to influence and shape them (Dijck and Poell 2013; Van Dijck, Poell, De Waal 2018). Social media are platforms constantly open to change, in a permanent "always beta" state (Vittadini, 2018); this implies that also their meaning and adoption practices may vary according to the period, the culture or the country of adoption. Bloggers, for example, contributed to define the meaning and the functions of the blogging itself in various countries (Locatelli, 2014; Siles, 2017). This process was also recognized in the study of Mídia NINJA, a Brazilian alternative media (Vila Seoane, Hornidge, 2018).

Specifically, working on influencers and social media, Carter (2016) conducted one of the first studies to analyze the concept of influence by adopting a socio-technical approach. He demonstrated that influence is determined by social, technical, and business dimensions and influencers act strategically inside the platforms to maintain or improve their status, interacting with their followers or with non-human entities like brands or hashtags (Carter 2016, p. 11). Hurley recognized that the construction of authenticity practices by female Gulf-Arab social media influencers passes through the affordances of the Instagram platform, both at a practical and imaginary level, arguing "that the multimodal affordances of social media, at material, conceptual, and imaginary levels, offer bricolage identities for individuals and communities navigating contradictions of a neoliberal imaginary" (Hurley, 2019, p. 15). Another important consideration is that influencers are users with specific traits, such as the transition from an amateur activity to the professionalization of their work (Abidin, 2016, 2017). The professionalization process is a key passage in defining traits and characteristics that belong to an influencer and in creating and consolidating a status that will win recognition from other users and enable him/her to negotiate their relationship with brands.

The mutual interaction between users and platforms, and between users, contents, and infrastructures that emerges from the above-mentioned studies is strongly reminiscent of the reflections to have emerged from SST studies.

If, on the one hand, platforms regulate and control users in line with specific intentions enabled by their affordances, on the other hand users, including influencers, are able to direct the uses of the platform, to exploit some features to build their personality and social network. In this process, marked by a savvy use of platforms and their affordances, by constant relationship with their communities and an ability to assess their status, it can be argued that influencers are in a position to function as major socio-technical actors or as "relevant social groups" in defining and shaping paths of use at both a practical and imaginary level of social media platforms. Moreover, it can also be argued that influencers are not the only actors in this shaping process, but they operate together with other subjects, interconnected and constituting a system.

The remainder of the paper will try to back this hypothesis with a case study, examples, and grey literature from the Italian context.

4. Influencers as socio-technical actors: traces of a system

Having studied the meaning and characteristics of digital influencers in depth and illustrated the dynamics of social media platforms which both drive users' behaviors and are shaped by them, the hypothesis of digital influencers as socio-technical actors will be tested within the Italian scenario. This will be done by means of a case study of ClioMakeUp developed from the ethnography of her

profiles and personal interviews with Elena Dominique Midolo (CEO of ClioMakeUp), Clio Zammatteo (Co-Founder & Talent of ClioMakeUp) and Claudio Midolo (Co-Founder & CTO of ClioMakeup and Clio's husband). The case was chosen because it is exemplary and therefore invites reflection on the whole phenomenon. The analysis will be based also on previous research into digital communication agencies and the evolution of professions (Locatelli, 2109), grey literature, newspaper articles, examples from the Italian context. The discussion will draw on the literature and the case study to shed light on the digital ecosystems and also on the power relations that exist within them.

4.1. Paths of influence

Before starting, the case study will be described briefly. ClioMakeUp, whose real name is Clio Zammatteo, is the most famous digital beauty creator in Italy. Her digital presence began with a YouTube channel, but she now has her own company and product line and is described on her blog/website as "make-up artist, beauty blogger, Youtuber and Tv personality" (ClioMakeUp, n.d.).

ClioMakeUp started her YouTube channel from New York in 2008, bringing to Italian YouTube users a brand-new genre of videos (makeup tutorials), popular in the USA but not yet in Italy (interview with Clio Zammatteo and Elena Dominique Midolo; Milano, 2019), and thus becoming one of the early adopters of the platform. She was also the first Italian YouTuber to be part of the YouTube partnership program that gave the content creator part of the revenues from YouTube advertising, being paid by YouTube for the extensive publicity that her contents achieved on the platform. This changed her approach to video production because she had money to spend on new products to test and review, and this can be interpreted as a first step on the road to professionalization (Milano, 2019). This moment was also important in defining and consolidating her status as a YouTuber in the beauty field. She then moved to other platforms, like Snapchat and Instagram. She opened a blog in 2013, now managed together with a team (Milano, 2019), and also a forum connected to the blog to host the discussions of her community of followers. This progression relies on the use of professional tools to create contents (Milano, 2019), the formation of a team to manage the influencer's social media presence and also the use of new platform features, like the customized GIFs, such as the ones created to celebrate ClioMakeUp's most common phrases, products, and recent collaboration with a global beauty brand. Speaking of the current media ecosystem, Clio is also periodically a tv host on programs devoted to beauty and make up (interview with Clio Zammatteo). She recognizes two main assets of her career: the centrality of audiovisual storytelling in developing the contents, and of honesty and transparency toward her community (interview with Clio Zammatteo).

Becoming an entrepreneur seems to have been a turning point in her career, because it marks the transition to managing her image and her relations with brands and other institutions without intermediaries. As specified on the website, all the relationships are managed internally, without requiring any intermediary (ClioMakeUp, n.d.). Clio says that having a team was a major change for her because she became more responsible for the entire project (interview with Clio Zammatteo). Although her studies ensured that she was already a make-up professional and a skilled video maker (Milano, 2019), the creation of a team and then of a family enterprise demonstrates her professionalization and status. The model adopted was also original because it is a direct-to-consumer, not very common on the Italian market, and all centered on the philosophy of Clio Zammatteo herself (Milano, 2019).

The terms that Clio Zammatteo uses to describe herself are "content creator", especially as regards the starting of the YouTube channel. She acknowledges that she once fitted the definition of

"influencer" but says it no longer applies to her, claiming that she now sees herself as an "engager" (interview with Clio Zammatteo).

The first area that will be examined is the role of influencers in shaping the platforms and their uses.

Previous studies evidenced that influencers are often early adopters of platforms (Archer, 2019a; Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014), directing attention to new platforms created and attracting new users to them. In Italy, for example, bloggers moved from platform to platform or created accounts on multiple platforms in order to expand their social networks and always be seen as innovative (Locatelli, 2014). As explained in the case study, Clio is an example of drawing attention to a new social media channel and form of content, like YouTube beauty tutorials, in Italy.

As a category, digital influencers also have the to push platforms to change or introduce new features, as happened recently with the introduction of Instagram Reels, a feature very close to those of the emerging social media platform Tik Tok. Not as individuals but as a category, or as leaders of an opinion movement, influencers seem to have the power to shape platform policies together with other users. A telling example is the attention brought to bear on the former Instagram policies banning breastfeeding images on the platform which were changed in the wake of protests from influencers and users (Locatelli, 2017).

Again, as regards policies, the grey zone of unpaid and paid relations between brands and influencers and the pressures of regulation entities, spurred platforms to develop tools and policies to make such collaboration more transparent (Instagram, n.d.). Clio Zammatteo was one of the first creators and influencers to disclose paid partnerships before the bodies entrusted with drew up common guidelines requiring the disclosure of paid and unpaid collaboration between brands and influencers (Milani, n.d.). On this theme, Clio has always had a very firm philosophy of transparency towards her community, each time publicly disclosing all the subjects involved in the partnership (interview with Elena Midolo; interview with Clio Zammatteo).

An initiative that made history from this point of view was the inclusion of influencers among the categories that could belong to the IAP (Istituto di Autodisciplina Pubblicitaria), the authority that regulates advertising standards with a view to promoting correct, honest, transparent, and true information. One of the first influencers to join the IAP was Chiara Ferragni (Porro, 2018). The collaboration between brands and influencers shown by #advertising (or similar, like #sponsored, #suppliedby), also conditions the practices of other users, and mainly of wannabe influencers, who adopt them even when there is no real partnership: the goal is to pretend it exists in order to increase their status among followers and brands (Morvillo, 2019). This is a sign that having paid partnerships that are exhibited as such is a trait that distinguishes a consolidated influencer from one that whose status is not yet established.

These regulations show, on the one hand, the progressive integration of influencer marketing practices in the marketing and advertising disciplines, but recognize, on the other, the potential power of influencers in promoting products, services and brands.

The process through which influencers gain visibility and relevance in the eyes of brands and other users entails exploiting (Abidin, 2016) the social and technical dynamics of social media, working to build an "authentic" self-image (Archer, 2019b; Gannon & Prothero, 2016; Hurley, 2019; Lutton, 2019) so as to nurture their social network by creating a sense of intimacy (Abidin, 2015; Abidin & Thompson, 2012), presenting themselves as authoritative in their field and thereby expanding their social networks (Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014). They are also able to exploit the technical features of the platforms, such as popularity (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013), by showing the

metrics of engagement of their posts showing the audience data; or using hashtags strategically to obtain and maintain visibility (Carter, 2016). ClioMakeUp does this by disclosing the metrics of the different channels on her website (ClioMakeUp, n.d.).

Influencers have also created (and somehow institutionalized) a style of self-presentation and a set of strategies for being on social media that are used by the so-called wannabe influencers to achieve their status, or simply by other users who want to publish contents in the same area, as Archer showed with mummy bloggers (Archer, 2019a). Among the examples can be cited the way in which the Instagram profile is built by using specific hashtags in the bio (like #beautyinlfluencer), by inserting the email address for business contacts regardless of the number of followers. This is a part of the process of consolidating content creators and influencers as a "relevant social group", in the language of SST, that have a role in shaping the platforms.

The paths of influence not only go from influencers to users and platforms, but also the other way around, showing unbalanced networks of power. Platform changes condition the way in which influencers act and strategically shape their online presence.

One major change was when Instagram feed turned to being algorithmically ordered and no longer in reverse chronological order (Instagram, 2019). This led to a potential reduction in the number of posts seen in the feed. Cotter (2019) and O'Meara (2019) show the strategies enacted by digital influencers for "gaming the system" through engagement pods and tactics like follow/unfollow. Another strategy that influencers and brands use is to share the posts in their Instagram stories to signal their publication to users. Instagram Stories, at present, are shown at the top of the app in reverse-chronological order and are instantly updated with new contents. Recently, Instagram introduced another change, choosing not to show publicly the overall number of hearts (likes) that each post obtains (Sclaunich, 2019) on the app, although they are still visible on desktop view. The number is shown only to the creator of the post and is available through platform analytics. Beside the commitment to preventing people from becoming addicted to likes and reactions to their posts (Fitzgerald, 2019), this choice will probably have consequences for the way in which instagrammers, creators, and influencers create and disseminate their content and relate with brands. This is because metrics are an index of visibility (Cotter, 2019) and a parameter for work evaluation and future engagement (O'Meara, 2019). Another outcome will be, then, that brands for sponsored contents will have to use platform analytics or to rely on the data supplied by the influencer to realize the engagement that the content posted produced. This can also be interpreted as a decision to move from these kinds of metrics to different metrics that assess the quality and the capacity of influencers to really influence people such as increase in purchases or change in purchase habit or in the beliefs about the products. It can also prevent practices designed to surreptitiously raise the number of followers or the engagement rate buying them (Sclaunich, 2019). Clio Zammatteo thinks that this decision will not affect the big players, but it is likely to impact profiles with a smaller audience, and she also says that it is important to have a proprietary website to contain these changes (interview with Clio Zammatteo).

As previously mentioned, this paper also aims to extend the range of the analysis by identifying other components that make up the system and interact with the former ones (influencers, users, platforms, and brands. See also Abidin, 2018). The paper will try, then, attempt to draw up an outline of the system around influencers as regards the Italian market.

The first area, recently developed, is represented by the agencies and brands created by the influencers themselves to manage their image, their social media profiles, their partnerships with brands, and their product lines. Influencers thus become entrepreneurs, emerging as stakeholders and part of the market (Abidin & Gwynne, 2017; Archer, 2019a, 2019b) as Clio Zammatteo did,

distinguishing herself by engaging directly with brands and other partners. More frequently, intermediaries seem to be necessary for wannabe or less organized influencers that need help in building their profile, managing their relationships with brands and with their community. From this point of view, Archer highlights the tensions in the mumpreneur phenomenon and the risks of job insecurity and exploitation (Archer, 2019a).

The second area is represented by the entities that contribute to managing and influencers. Talent management agencies are in fact not only managed by influencers themselves but can be external agencies that help the influencer to manage their image, their social media profiles, and their relationships with brands (Locatelli, 2109). The presence of such agencies testifies both to the consolidation of modes and codes of building a social media presence for influencers and to the profitable nature of the market.

The third subject of this system is professional communication, well conceptualized by the notion of "intermediaries" (Stoldt et al., 2019). They "seek to formalize and professionalize the social media influencer industry by facilitating working relationships between influencers and brands while solidifying their role as a necessary broker of these relationships" (Stoldt et al., 2019, p. 9). Among these subjects there are agencies belonging to professional communication such as creative advertising agencies that produce advertising, PR agencies that are focused on media relations and event communication, media centres - a peculiarity of the Italian communication market - that are intermediaries between brands, creative agencies and advertising dealers (Locatelli, 2109). Among these entities, there are also agencies that do reporting and help brands to select influencers. Some of them adopt a data driven approach, offering tools for performance monitoring and influencer selection. They develop forms of influencer classification based on metrics like engagement and number of followers but also on topics and fields of expertise (Locatelli, 2109). For example, Buzzoole that set up an "Observatory of Influencer Marketing" drew up a ranking of the best Instagram influencers in Italy (Buzzoole, 2019). The work of these agencies is to understand and encode the traits that define an influencer and to propagate them across the market.

From the point of view of the system and the market, activities with influencers can be considered as endorsement and thus belonging to the field of public relations (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, & Freberg, 2011), product placement (Jin & Muqaddam, 2019), or paid media (author, 2109; Evans, Phua, Lim, & Jun, 2017). As endorsers, influencers can be involved for free, by being given product samples or invitations to events and then required to write or post about the brand in their social media profiles. For product placement or paid posts, influencers are considered as media channels. In this case influencers produce paid contents through negotiation with brands that, in turn, have to adopt a flexible approach to their products promotion if compared with the traditional forms of paid advertising (Stoldt et al., 2019).

A fourth element are regulatory bodies that oversee communication and advertising, like the above mentioned IAP or the Italian Authority for Guarantees in Communications (Autorità per le Garanzie nelle Comunicazioni - AGCOM). These entities are responsible for defining what is and what is not advertising, and the conditions for transparent communication.

Last but not least in this survey of the field come broadcasting and online media that contribute to boosting the importance and popularity of influencers and also create articles and news about them, as for other celebrities (Abidin, 2018). They help to confirm their status and to blur the line between influencer and celebrities, but they can also be exploited by influencers to promote and consolidate their status.

Gathering together the subjects discussed above and trying in conclusion to map out a system, it can be said that platforms are enabling agents that through their algorithms and affordances offer a means to build a personal presence that can be transformed into a status, namely the influencer. This is achieved through practices of self-branding, authenticity, expertise assertion, social network creation and nurture, advertising for promoting posts and profiles, to mention just some of the processes that create and consolidate their status. Influencers offer social media platforms contents, traffic, users, and engagement, providing contents that constantly feed the algorithm. The power balance does not seem fair and equal. As the literature showed, at present platforms seem to have more power, determining the rules of the frame. Influencers risk being underpaid workers, with the exception of well-established personalities, like Clio Zammatteo, who have the power to negotiate and create an ecosystem to support them.

Contents are intermediaries, because they are produced by influencers, posted on platforms, seen and engaged by users. They also mediate between influencers and brands through the intermediation (except in some cases like ClioMakeUp) of specific agencies. Contents also produce new languages and styles which may set the trends of the platforms and - when the outcome of partnership with a brand - create new forms of product placement in which the advertised product or brand is presented in within the style of the influencer, a process that Abidin (2016, 2018) calls "advertorials". Influencers and this system thus contribute to shaping the use and imaginary of social media platforms by influencing one another reciprocally.

5. Conclusions and further research

This paper shows that the so-called influencer phenomenon is multifaceted, and many disciplines are coming to terms with it. From sociology to marketing, a range of disciplines have studied the phenomenon with a view to understanding how influencers build an online presence, how they create a field of expertise and a strong social network, and how best to identify the right subjects for brand communication and to then assess their performance.

Due to the growth of this phenomenon and also to the increased stability of social media platforms as socio-technical systems, the paper has attempted to focus on the influencer phenomenon by adopting an ecological approach, trying to delineate the paths of influence and the system that underlies beside and beneath them.

Moving from a genealogy of the phenomenon and focusing on the different terms used to describe them, the paper shows the almost "native" presence of influencers and opinion leaders within the online social networks and how it became progressively entangled with marketing dynamics that had identified digital influencers as relevant stakeholders for public relations or product placement. If, at the outset, social and personal characteristics were identified as markers of digital opinion leaders and influencers, over time the relationship both with platforms and their affordances and with brands emerged as common themes of the academic literature, together with the nature of the new profession and of digital labor. Researchers drew attention to the constant adaptation and shaping between digital influencers and platforms. If, on the one hand, platforms offer predefined patterns of actions through algorithms and affordances that direct users actions according to predefined patterns, on the other, their status as "always beta" platforms facilitates the agency of users who are able to modify their trajectories of development (not a definitive closure but a temporary one using SST language). Digital influencers can be defined, then, as socio-technical actors, which is to say social subjects able to combine social agency and a skilled use of the digital platforms. In SST terms they also act as "relevant social groups" that contribute to assessing the meaning and uses of the platforms, driving other users' behavior, but also managing the flexibility margins of the platforms in order to regulate their online presence. In this process they are not alone

but are part of a system of intermediaries that is becoming more and more complex as time goes by. Among the most interesting entities there are influencer enterprises that can be seen as the product of a neo-liberal economy (Archer, 2019b) but also as a consequence of the professionalization process that influencers have undergone. Among the other actors several are from the professional communication agencies involved, from creative to talent management, from intermediaries to enterprises directly founded by the influencers to manage their partnerships and projects. Media and brands have, of course, a huge role in driving and shaping the sector, providing celebrity on the one hand, and money on the other. All the parts of this system depend on one another and cooperate to shape it.

The STS approach proved to be useful in disentangling the several actors of the system, but as platforms evolved and took on their present form the opportunities for mutual shaping have gradually diminished as the balance of power seems to be tending in favor of the platforms. More research is needed to better understand the concepts of closure, script, and relevant social groups within social media platforms and the role of other relevant social groups as communication agencies and brands.

Further research is needed in this field to understand if self-branding and entrepreneurial skills are new forms of labor and exploitation, as former studies suggested, or whether they provide a new form of work and work-life balance for mothers, for example. More investigation is also needed to comprehend the differences between the several types of influencers from this viewpoint and to arrive at a clearer understanding of their role within the system. Other productive areas of research might well focus on the effectiveness of the partnership with influencers, analyzing their role in a systemic way, not merely considering online metrics but also the impact on people's beliefs, opinions, and purchasing habits.

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