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## **Striving for Conspicuousness.**

How Micro-Influencers Construct and Display Social Status on  
Instagram.

Doctoral dissertation by

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# Introduction

By looking at the ubiquitous presence of social media in our everyday life, we are thrust into an ongoing flow of content aimed at stimulating our emotional reactions and gaining our attention even just for the time necessary to click the like button. Digital content, affect, attention, and metrics: these are the building blocks of a contemporary economy which values attention and the neoliberal imperative of creativity and self-realisation, all elements that change the current understanding of status and prestige accorded to different individuals. In this context, this dissertation focuses on the issue of social status in the current Western society, in particular by looking at how status is constructed and displayed across the online and offline domains by a category of highly visible and branded personae, the so-called *social media influencers*.

The attention economy just mentioned is thriving in a neoliberal economy where the imperatives of self-branding, creativity, and passionate labour play a pivotal role in orienting people's behaviours (Arvidsson et al., 2010; Hearn, 2008; McRobbie, 2016). In this context, not only the ways in which we live our everyday life, approach our work, and live our leisure time have undergone a pervasive change. Also, what has been mutating is the general approach towards fame, celebrity, and status. Internet and social media seem to have opened the doors to easily achievable celebrity status, fuelled by a perception of democratisation of celebrity (Turner, 2010) based on the importance of ordinariness and authenticity (Banet-Weiser, 2012), and facilitated by the performance of self-branding as micro-celebrity practices on social media (Senft, 2008). These changing perceptions go hand in hand with rhetoric about the Internet and social media as venues without limits for self-expression and success. In a context characterised by uncertainty and precarity as a reverberation of the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis – a context which will be further exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic – the lure of fame and status through social media deemed to be conduits to new occupations and success is increasingly considered a valuable path by many youths and young adults.

Moreover, processes of self-branding aimed at constructing an online persona are now ubiquitous and involve not only celebrities but also ordinary people in different aspects of their life (Hearn, 2010). In particular, self-branding practices are pivotal for freelancers, as they represent a way to construct a reputational capital useful to gain access to various projects, job opportunities and social contacts (Gandini, 2016a). Reputation can be measured and rendered



visible through social media metrics (e.g. likes, followers, retweets etc.) (Hearn, 2010), which are progressively considered as important requisites to be employed in the context of the creative industries (see, e.g. Duffy & Schwartz, 2018). Thus, the acquisition of a reputational capital that can then be monetised and leveraged to produce value, and which in turn provides monetary rewards, wealth, and prestige, is increasingly sought after.

In this context, status has been considered to be progressively tightened to the management of a broad audience on social media and the ability to gain attention, which become modern-day status symbols (Marwick, 2013). The importance of attention as a status marker and a determinant of social status is embraced in the field of consumer research (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2019). From a consumer culture perspective, indeed, the reconfiguration of the ways in which people try to accrue and display social status has been described to be more and more detached from traditional status markers rooted in material and conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1899/2007), and rather more concentrated on practices related to the accumulation of attention, flexibility, and the performance of inconspicuous consumption (Currid-Halkett, 2017; Eckhardt et al., 2015).

The context just outlined constitutes, on the one hand, a fertile ground for the emergence and affirmation of highly self-branded personae, the so-called social media influencers, who are social actors able to gain a consistent following on social media and to monetise it mainly through sponsored content and advertising (Abidin, 2018). On the other hand, it opens up for a reflection on the changing nature of status and the practices of status gaining and signalling across the online and offline domains. In this vein, the present research responds to the quest for empirical and theoretical analysis of the innovative dynamics of social status and distinction in contemporary society raised by scholars Eckhardt and Bardhi (2019), looking at the social media economy as a key battleground for the acquisition of social status.

Therefore, to understand the key elements that contribute to the construction of social status by social media influencers is the main goal of this dissertation. A quick look at the public perception of influencers, especially in the Italian context, where the research is situated, makes clear the extent to which the issue of status is important in itself, as well as for its implications. The perception of social media influencers is mostly characterised by ambiguity. On the one hand, influencers are being accused of ‘showing off’ their possessions, living idle lifestyles, wasting their time taking selfies and scrolling Instagram, and, more generally, deemed to be in need of finding ‘a real job’ – whatever that means. On the other hand, influencers are undoubtedly becoming relevant and acknowledged subjects. They are appreciated for their

creativity and considered, not without ambiguity, useful resources in the field of marketing and advertising. Moreover, influencers are getting popular as they embody an aspirational personality and are considered by their following as intimate and relatable friends whom to ask for advice. Influencers are becoming more and more influential subjects also in the public sphere, so much so that the influencer turned into celebrity and entrepreneur Chiara Ferragni – one of the most influential figures in the Italian as well as international scene, was called to incite her young following to wear face masks in an attempt to face the second-wave of Covid-19 outbreak in Italy in October 2020.<sup>1</sup> However, there are many insights suggesting that for one successful story such as that of Chiara Ferragni, there are thousands of other digital content creators who remain in the shadow of an increasingly saturated influencer economy, receiving free perks in the attempt of, in the near future, ‘getting paid for doing what they love’ (Duffy, 2017). Given the complexities and ambiguities surrounding the influencer persona, it becomes crucial to unravel the notion of status in relation to the influencer economy and the potential inequalities related to the persistence and mutation of status hierarchies.

Status is a manifold concept, and it is here intended in terms of the amount of prestige and esteem accorded to each individual. Status is considered, on the one hand, as a position in a social hierarchy and, on the other, as a performative practice of display. In particular, the performative dimension of status entails drawing attention to the practices of status construction through consumption and status signalling by means of contemporary status symbols. The perspective on status here adopted stresses that status is gained and signalled through self-branding practices in the context of a social media economy characterised by the importance of displays, the understanding of attention as value, and the blurring between consumption and production.

The issue of status is particularly important for a specific category of content creators, the so-called micro-influencers. The size of their publics typically set under 100k followers in the Italian context (Pogliani, 2016), together with their perceived relatability, bring them closer to regular users and consumers than Internet celebrities (Abidin, 2018). As an emergent group of social media content producers in a growing and saturated market, micro-influencers represent a privileged category for brands and companies to work with. Not only are they considered more relatable towards their audience, but they are also willing to advertise products on social media

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/iredominioni/2020/10/22/chiara-ferragni-calls-on-italian-youth-to-wear-face-masks-against-coronavirus/?sh=79382a6f28b4> (Last accessed 13/11/2020).

in exchange for free products or a small commission, and they are easily replaceable by choosing among a large amount of other wannabe content creators (Maheshwari, 2018). This is one of the reasons why an in-depth analysis of micro-influencers is needed to assess the different levels of persisting inequalities among those who try to achieve status through personal branding on social media. The attention put on micro-influencers, therefore, entails a switch from celebrity culture to the understanding of influencers as ‘agents of promotion’, as their activities blend the branding of their own persona and the sponsoring of different consumer products. Therefore, the present work aims to understand status in a context where production and consumption are increasingly intertwined (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010) and where promotional culture (Wernick, 1991) and self-branding are ubiquitous (Hearn, 2008).

In this context, the research aims at considering micro-influencers’ self-branding practices as ways to accrue and signal social status. Although existing literature has paid much attention to influencers’ self-branding strategies in terms of micro-celebrity (Marwick, 2013; Senft, 2008) and fame (Abidin, 2018), an analysis that focuses on such practices as ways to increase and/or maintain social status across the online and offline domain is still missing. Moreover, despite increasing attention towards new ways of accruing and signalling social status in consumer research (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2019), how influencers construct social status and a reflection on the determinants underpinning such practices is so far an overlooked research area. The present research aims to fill these gaps in the literature firstly by assessing the key elements at the basis of the construction of social status on Instagram. The second main research’s purpose is to analyse the determinants of status (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2019) in the context of the influencer economy and, therefore, what are the resources underpinning the acquisition and display of social status. Lastly, the dissertation asks broader questions about the issue of status consumption and the creation of status hierarchies in contemporary society.

Drawing on the Theory of the Leisure Class by Thorstein Veblen (1899/2007), the analytical lenses of conspicuous consumption are here adopted as a heuristic to analyse how micro-influencers construct their personae to be noticeable and easy to see by potential followers and advertisers. Such a heuristic is particularly apt to grasp the social significance of consumption and the relationship between consumer goods and status. In an attempt to reconcile Veblen’s theory with the changes in conceiving, gaining and expressing social status (Currid-Halkett, 2017; Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2019), I contend that conspicuous displays are repurposed to be productive in themselves, as they can be converted in attention, visibility and eventually profit.

The overarching argument of the thesis is that *conspicuousness* represents the main cultural logic underpinning micro-influencers' practices. More specifically, the logic of conspicuousness embraces all those practices aimed at being noticeable before a certain audience and oriented towards the construction of social status. Conspicuousness, therefore, integrates the notion of visibility (see, e.g. Abidin, 2016c) by accounting for the importance of displays and their social and symbolic valence in gaining and signalling status. What is constitutive of the notion of conspicuousness is the importance of display and the seamless coexistence of consumption and production practices. The logic of conspicuousness points to an iterative process in which status is at the same time displayed and reproduced, and consumption practices, properly displayed, become productive in themselves. The domain of consumption is here broadly intended: the attention will be focused on consumer goods and leisure activities, stressing how they can be conspicuously showed off or more subtly put on display (as fully addressed in Chapter 1). The perspective adopted in this work, therefore, entails a conceptual shift from conspicuous consumption as the ultimate status symbol, as described by Veblen (1899/2007), to the strive for conspicuousness in itself as a process aimed to accrue social status.

In order to analyse social status in the context of the influencer economy, an innovative methodological approach comprising digital methods (Rogers, 2013) and qualitative interviews (Patton, 2002) in an overarching qualitative design is implemented. The research consists of the collection, analysis and triangulation of Instagram data and interview data in a complementary and circular process. In particular, the research is based on the visual analysis of Instagram posts and a systematic analysis of Instagram Stories, which are enriched with data from in-depth interviews. The methodological approach here proposed, therefore, aims at studying social status by using digital methods in a qualitative environment. As such, the research represents an attempt to use digital methods for consumer research, which, apart from a limited number of studies (Airoldi, 2019; Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016), is still an overlooked field of research. This study focuses on the social media platform Instagram by looking at how platform-specific self-branding practices unfold with the aims of accruing and signalling social status. Instagram is considered a preferred platform for the study of influencers, for its economies, affordances, and visual cultures (Leaver et al., 2020). Moreover, the research is circumscribed to the Italian context and therefore adds empirical and theoretical analysis to the influencer literature on a still overlooked national dimension.

The dissertation is structured as follows.

The first section illustrates the theoretical background of the present work in order to contextualise the analysis of micro-influencers and social status. Firstly, I will offer an overview of the existing research about social media influencers across celebrity study, media study, and consumer culture research. Then, I will reflect on the notions of status and conspicuous consumption, by addressing their meaning, their progression in time, and their specificities in a neoliberal and late-capitalist time. Lastly, I will draw attention to the existing literature about social status and class. Throughout the chapter, I call for the need to shed light on the so far understudied theme of micro-influencers and status. Moreover, I propose to reconcile the Veblenian notion of conspicuous consumption to the contemporary late-capitalist time.

The second chapter describes the methodological approach adopted in this work. I argue that an approach which blends digital methods (Rogers, 2013) and qualitative research (Flick, 2009) is the most suitable to analyse issues of status across the online and offline domains. The chapter illustrates the different phases of the research and reconstructs the processes of data collection and analysis. Moreover, I critically discuss the main methodological issues and ethical challenges of the research and provide a reflexive account of the fieldwork.

In chapter 3, the attention draws on how micro-influencers construct social status by looking at their representations on Instagram. In this chapter, I argue that conspicuousness relies on an economy of display (Yuran, 2016) and deploys through a '*circle of prosumption*', whereby consumption and production activities are seamlessly blended. The notion of conspicuousness is discussed in relation to the progressive importance of inconspicuous consumption (Eckhardt et al., 2015), and the concept of '*conspicuous authenticity*' is introduced to reconcile the apparently contradictory coexistence of conspicuous and subtle displays. The empirical results show that micro-influencers construct social status by performing different '*aesthetics of display*' and practices of wasteful and circular consumption. Hence, this chapter illustrates some of the key elements which constitute social status on Instagram, across the online and offline domains.

Chapter 4 further expands the analysis by looking at how status is accrued and signalled through the mediation of access. The notion of access (Rifkin, 2000) and access-based consumption (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012) are functional to the theorisation of what I define '*access-based conspicuousness*' – a cultural logic based on the reconfiguration of the purchase, use, and possession of goods and services to accrue social status. The main claim of the chapter is that access intersects with self-branding, reputation and existing resources (i.e. economic capital) to work as a mediating mechanism. I will firstly show how micro-influencers construct social

status by following the logic of access-based conspicuousness in three different ways: through the search for exclusivity, the claims for belongingness, and the performance of productive leisure. Moreover, I illustrate how access works either as an amplificatory or a compensatory mechanism of existing resources, rather than an equaliser. This chapter adds to the analysis of status construction a reflection on the determinants of social status in the context of the influencer economy.

The fifth chapter describes the relationship between status, work, and labour. More specifically, I will address how conspicuousness unfolds as a form of labour, defined *labour of intermediation*, characterised by the coexistence of creativity and professionalism (McRobbie, 2016). The chapter then moves on to argue that, despite a tendency towards professionalism as an individualised ethos, the labour of intermediation converges only very rarely into a formal occupation. Thus, I will contend that in an increasingly post-employment society (Kendzior, 2018), the labour of intermediation can be considered as a work without occupation. Moreover, the results show that, in order to face this situation, micro-influencers are involved in a *constellation of occupations* beyond the creation of content, which allows them to acquire status both in terms of self-fulfilment and financial compensation. This chapter adds to existing literature some important insights about the relationship between status and occupation, with a specific focus on micro-influencers' practices in an increasingly saturated market.

Lastly, the conclusion provides a set of final remarks about the understanding of micro-influencers as the contemporary 'Leisure Class'. Furthermore, I address the limitations of the present work and suggest some directions for future research.

# Chapter 1.

## Literature Review

### 1. Introduction

The present work focuses on how micro-influencers construct and display social status on Instagram. In the recent past, an increasing body of literature has started to address the issue of social media content producers, influencer industries and influencer cultures (see, e.g. Banet-Weiser, 2012; Duffy, 2017). Through the years, these themes have been addressed from different perspectives including sociology, anthropology, media studies and celebrity studies. Particular attention has been paid to define the figure of the influencer (Abidin, 2018), analyse the practices of self-presentation and content production (Abidin, 2016a), and the implications in terms of labour (Duffy, 2017). Moreover, existing research has started to stress the persistence of inequalities in terms of economic capital, financial remuneration and gender, among others, which characterises influencer economies (see, e.g. Duffy, 2017). However, less attention has so far been paid to the concept of status, and how status is gained and signalled by influencers on Instagram. In this section, I will highlight this gap in the literature, and I will stress the relevance of integrating existing research about social media influencers with a perspective on social status.

In particular, with the present literature review, I will stress the relevance of reading influencers' practices in the context of an increasingly pervasive promotional culture, of which the imperative of self-branding becomes a key component (Hearn, 2008; Wernick, 1991). In this context, influencers' self-branding tactics and promotional techniques will be understood as ways for constructing and displaying social status. Specifically, the attention will be focused on the category of micro-influencers, their peculiar features and their controversial importance in the influencer economy.

In this section, I will provide a theoretical background around the themes of influencers, status, conspicuous consumption and class, which represent the analytical concepts at the bases of this dissertation. More specifically, I will introduce the need for a perspective on micro-influencers and status based on the notion of display, and which accounts for the articulations of

consumption and production in the processes of status gaining and signalling. This is in line with the need for theoretical and empirical insights about the new dynamics of social status in the context of current social media attention economy (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2019).

The chapter is organized as follows. In the first part, I will provide an overlook of the existing literature about influencers, paying particular attention to the notion of self-branding, visibility, authenticity and aspirational labour, and how they unfold across the online (i.e. Instagram) and offline domains. Secondly, I will review the existing literature on social status, which is functional to provide the definition of status embraced in the present research. From here, I will move to the analysis of status and conspicuous consumption in order to address the strengths and weaknesses of the Veblenian perspective. This section aims to provide the theoretical background for the development of the notion of conspicuousness as a heuristic for the analysis of status in the contemporary influencer economy (as will be fully addressed throughout the dissertation). I will conclude the chapter by accounting for the theme of social status and class.

## **2. The literature about social media influencers**

### **2.1. Influencer: towards a definition**

The term ‘influencer’ refers to social actors who gain a prominent position and a large number of followers on blogs and social media through the textual and visual narration and promotion of an online persona (Abidin, 2016a). They are involved in the production of digital content to be distributed across a well-defined demographic segment – from here, the label of ‘content creator’ which is often used to refer to influencers. Through their activity, they attract the attention of brands, companies and advertisers, and become able to monetize their following mostly by integrating adverts and promotional content into their social media posts (Abidin, 2016a). It is common for influencers to cross-promote their content and to diversify their self-brand across multiple platforms, such as Instagram, YouTube and, increasingly, TikTok, alongside personal blogs and websites. In particular, at the time of writing, Instagram has become a preferred platform for influencer marketing and thus the main focus of the present work (as deeply addressed in Section 2.3). Influencers are becoming prominent figures all over the world, and in the Italian context as well. This is testified by the increasing attention that the



topic has gained in the public opinion, which nevertheless hasn't been converted into systematic academic studies yet, especially in the field of social sciences. The relevance of influencers and influencer marketing in Italy is as well attested by the blossoming of influencer marketing agencies, analytic services, research centres<sup>2</sup>, and ad-hoc created courses and schools<sup>3</sup> dedicated to influencers as well as brands and marketers.

Influencers do not represent a new phenomenon per se, as they are the expression of a broader context characterised by the affirmation of user-generated content typical of the Web 2.0, blogging cultures, and the bedroom culture typically unfolding on YouTube (Banet-Weiser, 2012). In this sense, influencers can be considered as the evolution of the figures of bloggers and vloggers thriving on the Internet and social media from the 2010s onwards. In the early days of their activities, indeed, many influencers started their own blogs and blogshops, for then moving to more captivating and promising social media platforms such as Instagram (Abidin, 2018).

Existing literature has so far conceived influencers' activities as ways to accrue micro-celebrity (Senft, 2008), Instafame (Marwick, 2015) and Internet celebrity status (Abidin, 2018). In particular, the notion of micro-celebrity was coined by scholar Theresa Senft (2008) to describe an innovative style of online performance through which a generation of young women, the 'camgirls', gained popularity on the Internet by cultivating a public image of the self as a brand and interacting with viewers through emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983). The micro-celebrity framework is developed further by Alice Marwick (2013). In her ethnographic research in the San Francisco tech industry, Marwick (2013) shows that participants are involved in the curation of their online persona to obtain visibility, gain a large public and, in turn, increase their status. This entails a series of practices performed as if all friends and followers on the Internet were potential audience and fans (ibid.). Abidin (2018) extends this perspective even further by considering influencers as "the epitome of internet celebrities, given that they make a living from being celebrities native to and on the internet" (p. 6). In this case, influencers have been

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<sup>2</sup> It is worth mentioning here the creation of the national observatory for influencer marketing in 2019 (Osservatorio Nazionale Influencer Marketing, see: <https://www.onim.it/> (Last accessed 21/03/2021).

<sup>3</sup> Among the other initiatives, the "Scuola Italiana Influencer" (which can be translated as Italian school for influencers), is one of the first online courses specifically dedicated to influencers and content creators, see: <https://scuolaitalianainfluencer.com/> (Last accessed 21/03/2021).

analysed in the broader context of internet celebrity, a concept which refers to all media formats (e.g. people, products, figures etc.) that attain popularity native to the Internet (Abidin, 2018).

Understanding influencers in terms of micro-celebrity and Internet celebrity raises some important points to stress. First, the notion of micro-celebrity is two-folded, as it refers both to a set of self-branding practices aimed at the acquisition of visibility (as will be fully described in Section 2.2), and a new type of celebrity as compared to traditional media celebrities. Secondly, the concept of micro-celebrity points to the smaller audience-size, the amount of emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) and the deeper celebrity-audience relationship (Senft, 2008) which distinguish micro-celebrities related to the Internet and social media from traditional celebrities (Abidin, 2018). Lastly, while potentially everyone has the possibility of becoming an Internet celebrity, only a specific category of users become able to turn their digital fame into a business (ibid.). Considering influencers in terms of micro-celebrity and fame thus risks overlooking that micro-celebrity practices are as well performed by regular users and consumers, who try to build their self-brands online. Moreover, as highlighted in existing literature and confirmed throughout this dissertation, just a few influencers are actually able to become micro-celebrities and to earn a living out of the creation of content, while the vast majority can be considered as aspirational content creators (Duffy, 2016) (as described in Section 2.4.). In addition, as the influencer industry grows and becomes more and more saturated, new analytical perspectives are needed to make sense of this group of content producers and their activities. In particular, the notion of influencers as Internet celebrities is complicated by the blossoming of new categories of content creators who have started to populate the scene in recent years. In one of her most recent works, Abidin (2021) recognises the need for acknowledging and classifying different types of influencers, according to criteria such as country, culture, platform, and genre, which is also functional to understand influencers' role in the information ecology.

In this context, the present research considers influencers as social actors performing micro-celebrity practices in the attempt to construct their branded self and, in turn, to construct social status. In particular, I will focus on a specific category of content creators, the so-called 'micro-influencers'. Micro-influencers are prominent social media users with a middle-sized audience, which allows them to be particularly relatable and close to their following and to express honest and authentic opinions about brands and products. The word 'micro' refers to the size of their audience which, according to the marketing literature, in the Italian context is conventionally set under 100.000 followers (see, e.g. Pogliani, 2016). In the present research, this convention is considered as a starting point for the understanding of what a

micro-influencer is, and it is blended with an understanding of micro-influencers as it emerges from the empirical data (in a typical ‘follow the medium’ style, as suggested by the digital methods tradition, see Chapter 2). Micro-influencers’ peculiar features bring them closer to regular users rather than Internet celebrities (Abidin, 2018) and make their activities particularly interesting to analyse in order to grasp the complexity of contemporary promotional techniques. Indeed, micro-influencers represent a paramount category of content producers in order to grasp the practices of status construction and display in a context where consumption meets production. The relevance of micro-influencers emerges in the Italian context as well. According to a recent study, the 59,7% of a sample of Italian marketers and companies chose micro-influencers under 30.000 followers to promote their brands (ONIM, 2019). This aspect can be related to the specificities of the Italian economic structure composed by small to medium business, which can benefit from micro-influencers and their ability to easily reach particular niche publics (ibid.). Moreover, specific marketing agencies specialized in connecting small business to micro-influencers are raising in Italy, such as the start-up Roundabout.<sup>4</sup>

In this context, with this work I propose to look at the influencer economy by focusing on the role of micro-influencers as actors involved in production and consumption practices aimed at the construction of status, rather than from a celebrity study perspective. The necessity of implementing this point of view is further reinforced by the lack of empirical research about this specific category of content creators, in a context where their increasing presence in the influencer economy and availability to work for small commissions lead to important issues in terms of inequalities.

Moreover, the importance of micro-influencers has been recently acknowledged also for their potential for marketing and advertising. Recent data show that in the years 2016-2019 there has been a clear move from celebrity and macro-influencers to micro-influencers for marketing campaigns (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2020). This points to another important element in the definition of influencers, concerning the relationships between social media content producers, brands and advertisers, and the creation of content. Influencers are in the business of cultivating a brand image based on their appearance and lifestyles, whereby they can promote consumer goods and spread sponsored messages. In particular, they are involved in the creation of a shoppable life (Hund & McGuigan, 2019) by grooming and curating idealised versions of their best life in order to invite followers to consume their content aspirationally (Leaver et al., 2019). It is precisely the perception that content creators communicate authentically to their audiences

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<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.roundabout.pro/> (Last accessed 21/03/2021).

and not in the highly glossed way typical of traditional advertising that is perceived to make influence marketing resonate with consumers (see, e.g. Brown & Hayes, 2008). In this regard, existing literature in marketing and advertising research has been considering influencers' endorsements as a highly credible form of electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) (De Veirman et al., 2017; Evans et al., 2017), which takes advantage of consumer-to-consumer communication through "networked narratives" (Kozinets et al., 2010). Indeed, through their posts, influencers can impact on consumers' buying behaviour, brand awareness and brand knowledge, among other things, and therefore represent a pivotal opportunity for marketers and advertiser to maximise the diffusion of information about brands, products and services on social media (Evans et al., 2017).

From what said so far, it is important to consider influencers and micro-influencers at the intersection of celebrity cultures, self-branding practices, and the articulations of production and consumption. In line with this view, in this research I will focus on micro-influencers, in order to extend the knowledge about the influencer economy by looking at how this particular category of content creators construct and signal status. For this purpose, the following paragraphs account for some of the main practices which characterise micro-influencers' activities and some of the theoretical perspectives so far adopted to frame them.

## **2.2. Self-branding, visibility, and authenticity**

As seen from the definition of influencers, existing research has paid specific attention to the micro-celebrity and self-presentation practices these actors engage in. The overarching concept underlying these studies is that of self-branding, intended as the "self-conscious construction of a meta-narrative and meta-image of self through the use of cultural meanings and images drawn from the narrative and visual codes of the mainstream culture industries" (Hearn, 2008:198) aimed to produce cultural value as well as to gain attention, reputation, and potentially profit (Hearn, 2010). From this perspective, the branded self is a commodity sign which must generate its own persuasive packaging and its own promotional skin in order to attract attention and produce value (Hearn, 2008).

In the last decades, neoliberal ideologies of individuality and self-governance have emphasised the importance of a self-conscious effort to brand the self. Many scholars have analysed the self-branding strategies adopted by different actors (Duffy & Hund, 2015; Gandini, 2016a;

Marwick, 2013; Wissinger, 2015) and across different social media platforms (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Marwick & boyd, 2011). In line with these works, existing literature stresses that influencers build on self-branding practices to create their online persona, nurturing an online following, and in turn build fame, popularity and status (Abidin, 2016a, Duffy & Hund, 2015; Marwick, 2013). In this sense, the micro-celebrity practices previously introduced (see Section 2.1.) can be considered as a specific form of self-branding, which consist of the curation of a persona that feels authentic, interactive and celebrity-like (Marwick, 2013; Senft, 2008).

More specifically, attention has been drawn on how bloggers and content creators perform an entrepreneurial, gendered self by the staging of a glam life and a carefully curated online persona (Abidin, 2016a; Duffy & Hund, 2015). These self-presentation activities, however, obscure the labour, discipline, and capitals necessary to perform a branded self (Duffy & Hund, 2015). Indeed, the amount of immaterial labour (Lazzarato, 1996) underneath self-branding is highlighted as a common issue among content creators. In a similar vein, Abidin (2016a) defines as tacit labour, the “collective practice of work that is understated and under-visibility from being so thoroughly rehearsed that it appears as effortless and subconscious” (p. 10).

Therefore, self-branding practices reflect a contemporary structure of feelings in which to be visible is to be rendered valuable (Duffy, 2017; Gandini, 2016b). In this sense, they are strongly intertwined with a media economy of visibility and recognition (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Accordingly, Abidin (2016c) develops the concept of visibility labour, which points to the analogue, affective labour undertaken by individuals when they curate their self-presentations so as to be noticeable among followers, prospective clients, advertisers and employers (ibid.). Adding to this work, Bishop (2018) contends that visibility labour cannot be decoupled from algorithmic visibility (Bucher, 2012), as being noticeable first requires being algorithmically recognizable (Gillespie, 2017). In this vein, existing literature has started to point out how content creators interact with social media platforms and their algorithms (O’Meara, 2019), as well as the type of algorithmic knowledge required to perform these practices (Bishop, 2019). In particular, Cotter (2019) points out that influencers are involved in a “visibility game”, aimed at consciously responding to the algorithmically derived threat of invisibility (Cotter, 2019). O’Meara (2019), instead, analyses how Instagram influencers pursue collaborative algorithmic hacking by means of engagement pods – groups of influencers who agree to mutually like, comment on, or otherwise engage with each other posts in the hope that this will outsmart the Instagram algorithm and provide the more engaging content with visibility.

The visibility mandate (Duffy & Hund, 2019) which orients content creators' practices is strongly influenced by the reciprocal interaction between data-driven metrics and algorithms (see also Section 3.2. for an explanation of metrics, ranking systems and status hierarchies). Notably, this kind of algorithmic-oriented visibility goes hand in hand with the economic imperatives of platforms, as well as cultural norms. As Bishop (2018) points out in relation to YouTube, the algorithm tends to create a discriminatory visibility hierarchy of vloggers, favouring those social actors who make highly stereotyped and gendered content aligned with advertisers' demands and needs. This is just one aspect of a highly gendered economy (see, e.g. Duffy, 2017). From these insights, it emerges that self-branding strategies are influenced at different levels by the platforms' technical affordances, cultural norms and economic imperatives. In this regard, on the one hand existing research has stressed the amount of discipline and surveillance underneath the regime of visibility propelled by self-branding and social media (Banet-Weiser, 2018). On the other hand, scholars highlight the extent to which content creators' visibility has become susceptible to the powerful infrastructures and economic forces which constitute today's social media economy (O'Meara, 2019). Focusing the attention on processes of platformization of cultural production (Nieborg & Poell, 2018), these works highlight the extent to which content creators' practices, visibility, and success are contingent upon social media platforms and the changes in their organizations (Duffy et al., 2019). This literature also hints at the strategic practices put in place by content creators to face the continuous platforms' changes and to protect their businesses (Arriagada & Ibáñez, 2020; O'Meara, 2019). These practices are not only considered as ways to game algorithms but also as collective and organized efforts to mitigate the precarious employment conditions of a cohort of young (and largely female) social media producers (ibid.).

In this context, one of the main logic underpinning self-branding practices and the construction of visibility is that of authenticity. Authenticity is used as a strategy to reconcile the production of a self-brand and a commercialized self with issues of realness and ordinariness (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Duffy, 2016). By detailing one's everyday life, performing practices of self-disclosure and presenting themselves as being 'just like us', content creators ostensibly give viewers a complete outlook on their 'authentic' self as a means to increase their perceived relatability and create an intimate relationship with their publics (Abidin, 2015; 2016b; Banet-Weiser, 2012; Duffy, 2016). Yet, the pervasive social media aesthetic and narrative relying on the logic of authenticity and realness requires actors to draw upon market logics to create a branded online persona, thus resulting in a tension between authenticity and self-promotion (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Existing research highlights the apparently contradictory

enactment of a staged authenticity in terms of calculated authenticity (Pooley, 2010), calibrated amateurism (Abidin, 2017), and aspirational ordinariness (McRae, 2017). All these expressions highlight the strategic deployment of authenticity as a productive narrative to embrace (Duffy, 2016). An authentic self-presentation, therefore, is the result of a strategic planning that includes taking accounts of how content performs, analysing what partnerships undertake to align the brand's value with one's self-brand, and reflecting on the personal and intimate information to share with the audience (Hund & McGuigan, 2019). In this vein, Duffy and Hund (2019) stress that performing authenticity entails the deployment of a real 'authenticity policy', through which content creators structure their activities in anticipation of critical feedback. This entails that content creators struggle between the imperative demand of being authentic and the risks of over-exposure and being 'too real'(ibid.).

Moreover, the deployment of authenticity entails the construction of an intimate relationship with the public, which is functional to build, keep and monetize an audience (Abidin, 2015). Notably, the success of influencers' self-branding practices, as well as their perceived relatability, largely depends on the collective evaluation of their qualities and displays from their following. Previous studies stress that content producers construct their online persona and self-brand through the careful and ongoing affective management of an online following (Abidin, 2015; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Shtern et al., 2019). Drawing on the notion of relational labour (Baym, 2015), Abidin (2015) describes the practices through which influencers prioritize the creation of intimate relationship and social bonds with their following in order to give the impression of exclusive, intimate exchange. It is exactly this sense of 'perceived interconnectedness', Abidin argues, that constitutes influencers' allure to their publics (ibid.). However, despite the presence of sincere and intimate relationships between content creators and their following, existing literature acknowledges the instrumentality of affective relationships (Duffy, 2016) and the commercial dimension of intimacy (Abidin, 2015), which are functional to provide visibility, reputation and the possibility for monetization. The progressive branding and commercial logics which characterise social media content production have entailed a shift from a promised networked intimacy to a networked public (boyd, 2010), where influencers are not primarily sharing content for small, intimate, groups of friends but instead publishing content in the persona of a public figure for an imagined, unseen audience (Abidin, 2021). This also means that the content creator's audience, which is often referred to as a 'community', is much more similar to what Arvidsson and Caliandro (2016) define as a public

– a social formation based on a continuous focus of interest and mediation, wherein participation is structured by collective affect (ibid.).

Within the picture just described, micro-influencers are defined as ‘agents of promotion’, as their activities blend the branding of their own persona and the sponsoring of different consumer products. As the review of the existing literature shows, much attention has been paid to influencers’ self-branding practices in terms of micro-celebrity (Marwick, 2013; Senft, 2008) and fame (Abidin, 2018). However, an analysis that focuses on such practices as ways to increase and/or maintain social status across the online and offline domain is still missing. The present research thus aims to fill this gap in the literature by reading micro-influencers’ promotional practices as conspicuous displays aimed to construct and signal social status. To do so, specific attention will be drawn on Instagram micro-influencers and their platform-specific self-brand.



### **2.3. Building the platform-specific self-brand: influencer and Instagram**

The labouring demands of self-branding just described is intensified by a large number of platforms for the production of branded content. As previously highlighted, influencers are usually involved in an ecology of social media platforms in order to maximise the diffusion of content and increase their visibility across different audiences. Existing research points out that, despite the idea of maintaining a consistent online persona, digital producers tend to constantly differentiate their self-branding strategies according to different platforms (Scolere et al., 2018). This entails the construction of a platform-specific self-brand, which is based upon the imagination of platform affordances, audiences, and the producer's own self-concept (ibid.). Although acknowledging influencers' cross-platform activities, the present work embraces the concept of platform-specific self-brand and focuses specifically on how micro-influencers' self-branding practices and status-seeking activities unfold throughout the Instagram platform.

Instagram is a predominantly visual social media platform, conceived and designed to share mundane moments of everyday life taken on the go (Manovich, 2016). The visual dimension of Instagram is rooted in, and at the same time reinforces, a society characterised by the prominence of visual culture (Highfield & Leaver, 2016), where more and more people use images to represent themselves and to communicate with others (Leaver et al., 2020). Instagram's content is characterised by a set of visual aesthetics and representational conventions shared by its users, which form a visual platform vernacular (Gibbs et al., 2015).

Instagram thus offers the possibility of creating visually appealing and engaging content, in a time span that is much more instant and immediate as compared to the textual orientation of blogs. This is as well due to the implementation of Instagram Stories in 2016 (Instagram, 2016). Instagram Stories allows for the creation of content that only lasts 24h hours, which is characterised by an ordinary, multi-modal and more spontaneous style of communication as compared to Instagram posts. Notably, the introduction of the Stories-feature marks a redefinition of the logics and usage of the Instagram platform, moving from an archival culture to an increasingly ephemeral culture (Bainotti et al., 2020). Stories now represent most of the content shared, have even surpassed Instagram feeds (Constine, 2018) and are an important tool to leverage by content creators and advertisers to increase visibility and promote sponsored content (Barnhart, 2020). The introduction of Instagram Stories has also anticipated the increasing importance attributed by the Instagram platform to video content. Starting from 2015, different features such as live videos and IGTV (a feature offering the possibility to share

previously recorded videos in a vertical format which very much recall YouTube videos) has been launched. Lastly, only very recently, in August 2020, Instagram released a new function called Reels, which consists in the creation of fun and entertaining video lasting 15 seconds and archived on the user's feed, that aim to compete with the emergent social media application TikTok (Chen & Lorenz, 2020)

Alongside all the different possibilities to share snippets of everyday life, Instagram allows users to connect with others and receive feedback for the content shared. This is further supported by the affordances provided by the platforms, especially like, comment and follower counts. Instagram metrics constitute effective ways to calculate and display attention (Marwick, 2013; Hearn, 2010) and, as such, represent one of the building blocks of the economies thriving on Instagram, and specifically of the influencer economy. Given these peculiar features, Instagram has become, not surprisingly, a leading platform in the influencer marketing industry. The popularity of influencer marketing on Instagram, indeed, is increasing at a fast pace. The global market is expected to grow from 1.3 billion U.S dollars in 2018 to nearly twice this amount by 2020 (Statista, 2020). Despite the backlash of the Covid-19 outbreak, which still has to be fully accounted for, Instagram keeps on being one leading platform for influencer marketing worldwide. The same is true for Italy, where the value of investments in influencer marketing has more than doubled between 2017 and 2019 and, according to the most recent data, has reached 241 million euros in 2019 (Statista, 2019).

The huge Instagram's popularity for influencer marketing is due to different reasons. First, with over one billion active users per month (Chen, 2020), it allows marketers and advertisers to reach a large potential audience through organic Instagram advertising or influencers. Moreover, Instagram offers advertisers the opportunity of targeting their niche audience and maximising the probability of purchases. Lastly, given the predominance of visual content and the presence of specific platform affordances above described, Instagram allows brands and influencers to showcase and promote their products in different and engaging ways. Notably, however, Instagram was not born as a commercial platform. Social media influencers were among the first social actors who started leveraging Instagram's peculiarities for commercial purposes (Leaver et al., 2020). It was only in 2013, a year after Facebook's acquisition, that the platform began to be monetised through the introduction of sponsored posts (Goel & Ember, 2015). From here, Instagram started to launch a set of tools and features with the aim of integrating commercial purposes within the platform affordances – both for marketers advertisers (such as

Instagram ads) and for content creators.<sup>5</sup> In particular, these features offer the possibility of inserting sponsored content and redirecting users to e-commerce and websites in order to facilitate the purchasing process. At the same time, a set of new actors started to populate the influencer economy, such as agencies, PRs, and third-party platforms<sup>6</sup>, which are mostly dedicated to matching the supply and demand of influencers. As Hund and McGuigan (2019) contend, these strategic decisions have turned Instagram into a form of shoppable media.

In the context just described, influencers are involved in a constant labouring dedicated to the creation of their platform-specific self-brand. Such labour is performed in concert with the platform's architecture and its political economy, and it is often considered a necessary and yet often uncompensated part of the job (Duffy, 2017; Gandini, 2016b). The following section addresses this issue by looking at content creators, their creative enterprises, and the aspirational labour they perform (Duffy, 2017).

#### **2.4. Entrepreneurialism and aspirational labour**

Part of the literature about social media content producers has shed light on influencers' self-branding activities as a form of entrepreneurial labour (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2015; Duffy, 2017). From this perspective, the emergence of social media influencers has been understood within the broader frame of a neoliberal economic system marked by its crisis, austerity regimes and employment precarity (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2015). As traditional jobs are disappearing and questions about how and in what ways economic value is constituted proliferate, achieving some kinds of celebrity status have come to seem a reasonable life goal (ibid.). Therefore, the rise of micro-influencers must be inscribed within broader transformations in the nature of work and value in contemporary society.

The general context in which micro-influencers' practices are situated is characterised by the coexistence of flexibility, precarity and risk with creativity, self-realization and coolness. On the

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<sup>5</sup> To have an overview on Instagram advertising see, e.g.

<https://business.instagram.com/advertising/#types>.

(Last accessed 19/11/2020).

<sup>6</sup> One of the most popular platforms in the Italian context is Octoly, <https://www.octoly.com/>.

(Last accessed 2/11/2020).

one hand, the transition to a post-Fordist economy in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has led to a flexibilization of work and a globalised labour market (see, e.g. Benner, 2002; Harvey, 2005). These processes were even further amplified by the spreading of digital technologies and resulted in the diffusion of nonstandard forms of employment, such as project-work (Gill, 2002) and freelance work (Gandini, 2016a), as well as the end of a career intended as a stable, life-long job (Gill, 2002). Contextually, the progressive importance of neoliberal policies and governmentality has resulted in the rhetoric of self-realisation and entrepreneurship, which are both downloaded onto singular individuals (McRobbie, 2002). The entanglements of these different elements provide access to increasingly autonomous working conditions, which offer the promises of freedom and self-fulfilment while at the same time propelling risk, insecurity and precarity (Ross, 2009; Neilson & Rossiter, 2005).

Indeed, the forms of non-standard jobs just mentioned are usually considered as cool, creative and autonomous, and characterised by relaxed and non-hierarchical working environments (Gill, 2002; McRobbie, 2002; Neff et al., 2005). These activities are valued for the aura of coolness they provide and are often framed in terms of passionate work (Arvidsson et al., 2010). Therefore, notions of freedom and flexibility, together with the practices of self-branding and self-monitoring they imply, are imbricated with the creativity *dispositif* (McRobbie, 2016), which increasingly drive individuals to involve in creative projects in the hope of achieving self-realization (ibid.). Flexibility, creativity and self-realization, therefore, become important rhetoric of the neoliberal and post-Fordist age, which nevertheless conceal the levels of risk and precarity attached to careers in the digital and cultural industries. Despite the glamorous aura of cool, indeed, these jobs are also precarious and insecure ones, characterised by long hours, low pay, uncertainty, and overwhelming workloads alternated with the lack of work opportunities (see, e.g. Gill, 2010, McRobbie, 2002). In a similar vein, Duffy and Wissinger (2017) show how the mythologies of creative work as fun, free, and authentic conceal the demands for emotional, self-branding, entrepreneurial labour required to maintain a position in the industry. Guided by the glossed narrations about the creative and digital industries, as well as by the promises of a cool and flexible job as a status symbol, workers have come to accept and normalise the high risks associated with these kinds of work (Neff et al., 2005).

In this context, influencers have been considered as cultural and creative producers with an entrepreneurial drive. Existing literature, indeed, has been stressing how they share precarious and risky working conditions with other youth youths working in the cultural and creative industries. In this sense, influencers' activities have also been described as highly individualized

and idiosyncratic career patterns (Duffy, 2017), build on individuals' attempts to become entrepreneurs of the self (Du Gay, 1996) by investing their capitals, time, energy and branded personae in their activities and aspirational projects, following the mantra of "doing what you love" (Tokumitsu, 2016).

Social media content producers have also been considered involved in what scholar Tiziana Terranova (2000) calls free labour, a kind of labour that "is simultaneously voluntarily given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited" (p. 33). According to this literature, indeed, the industry of social media production tends to configure consumer participation as a form of empowering production, when in reality the work of marketing and promotion is simply being downloaded onto consumers (Fuchs, 2010).

Drawing on the concept of free labour, and further expanding the notion of venture labour (Neff, 2012) and hope labour (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013), scholar Brooke Duffy coins the notion of aspirational labour (Duffy, 2016; 2017). With such concept, Duffy (2016) intends "a forward-looking, carefully orchestrated, and entrepreneurial form of creative cultural production often unpaid" (p. 6). Aspirational labourers are involved in productive activities that hold the promise of social and economic capital. This kind of labour shifts content creators' focus from the present to the future and ignites their hopes that their investments of time, energy and capital will lead to a fulfilling and lucrative career (Duffy, 2017). The unrelenting and unpaid work that takes place behind the scene in the hope for future reward is shared by different categories of freelance and creative workers (Gandini, 2016a; Neff et al., 2005) as well as by social media content creators.

The notion of aspirational labour is particularly important for the present research. First, it allows stressing some of the specificities of micro-influencers as compared to a-list content creators and influencers as internet celebrities. In fact, micro-influencers are a group of content creators who can be particularly subjected to the risks related to aspirational labour. In particular, micro-influencers represent a privileged category for brands and companies to work with. Not only are they considered more relatable towards the audience, but they are also willing to advertise products on social media in exchange for free perks or a small commission, and they are easily replaceable by choosing among a large number of other wannabe influencers (Maheshwari, 2018). This is one of the reasons why an in-depth analysis of micro-influencers is needed to assess the different levels of persisting inequalities among those who try to achieve status through personal branding on social media.

Secondly, the theoretical framework of aspirational labour allows us to reflect on the notions of aspirational production and consumption, which are to be found in the existing literature. The notion of aspirational labour, Duffy argues, entails a shift from conspicuous consumption (intended as the display of existing wealth and power, see also Section 4) to aspirational consumption and, in turn, to aspirational labour (Duffy, 2017). She contends that aspirational consumption represents a form of status-induced consumerism that is a projection of who the individual may become (Duffy, 2017) more than the conspicuous display of who the individual is (see also, e.g. O’Cass & McEwen, 2004). Not only Duffy (2017) acknowledges the differences between conspicuous and aspirational consumption, but she goes even further stating that content producers’ practices, which mostly rely on aspirational consumption, are to be considered as a form of aspirational labour. In this way, she stresses the productive dimension of content creators’ practices, the labouring they involved in, and their aspirational dimension. In a few words, the notion of aspirational labour refers to a set of practices aimed at constructing a self-brand as a micro-enterprise with the hope of being compensated in the future (ibid.).

Therefore, Duffy’s work (2017) points to the aspirational and status-seeking features of content creators’ activities. Building on her work, I will reinforce the idea that content creators build their activities by rerouting consumption as a mode of cultural production. Moreover, I will add micro-influencers practices need to be considered in the light of how production and consumption intertwine (see Chapter 3). Therefore, with the present work I would like to stress that even practices of aspirational labour and aspirational production (Marwick, 2015), and the aspirational dimension they point at, are part of micro-influencers’ strive for conspicuousness – namely, their attempt to be noticeable in front of potential publics through the display of consumption. In this sense, the logic of conspicuousness, as fully addressed in Chapter 3, is part and parcel of a contemporary society where individuals are compelled to incessantly curate, monitor, and ultimately invest in their online personae. The issue of investments and resources in the content creators’ micro-entrepreneurial activity will be discussed in the next section.

## **2.5. The Internet of possibilities and the persistence of inequalities: towards an analysis of micro-influencers and status.**

Despite the current perception of a widely accessible visibility and celebrity status, self-branding and micro-celebrity practices have so far failed to bring consistent material

improvement for a large part of social media content creators. Indeed, the high-profile activities of famous bloggers and Instagrammers tend to obscure the contribution of many other content producers for whom it is hard to be paid for their work and climb the ladder of social mobility (Duffy, 2017). This, in turns, concurs to exacerbating already existing inequalities in terms of class, status and gender, among others.

In this context, existing research has investigated the different elements that concur to the creation of a successful career in the social media content creator industries (McQuarrie et al. 2013; Duffy, 2017; Duffy & Hund, 2015; Marwick, 2015), most of them moving from Bourdieu's theory of capitals (Bourdieu, 1986). For example, in their research McQuarrie and colleagues (2013) analyse how a small number of fashion bloggers build a mass audience from an ordinary act of consumption, a phenomenon they refer to as the megaphone effect. More specifically, they offer a sociological explanation that centres on taste judgements and the accumulation of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). The study considers fashion bloggers as individuals who start with some capacity for taste, intended as judgement power (Gronow, 1997) and proceed with the accumulation of cultural capital through public displays of taste (McQuarrie et al., 2013). From the accumulation of cultural capital, a positive loop which leads to economic rewards and social capital develops (ibid.). Moving from a similar theoretical framework, Duffy (2016; 2017) shows that despite their appearance and self-presentation as ordinary consumers, fashion bloggers invest a large amount of capitals in their aspirational self-enterprises. In particular, she shows that many content producers in the blogosphere are not regular people but have specific skills and forms of capital that afford them unique access to the cultural circuit (Duffy, 2016). In this sense, the deployment of authenticity helps to obscure that social and economic capitals are often prerequisite to pursue content production, networking activities and professionalization opportunities. Abidin (2018) further stresses this point by connecting Internet celebrities' qualities such as exclusivity, exoticism and exceptionalism to various forms of economic, cultural and technical capital.

Despite the increasing interest toward the role of capitals in supporting the advancements of social media content producers, less attention has so far been given to how educational credentials can facilitate the process of achieving visibility and popularity. More generally, the role played by formal education in the paths to become social media content creators has been largely unexplored. Existing research agrees in acknowledging that the skills necessary to navigate in the industry are usually learnt on the job, via trial-and-error, or by imitating predecessors or friends/competitors' behaviours (Abidin & Gwynne, 2017; Duffy, 2016).

All in all, these insights have been functional to stress the inequalities that persist in the content production industries, and which affect influencers' careers and activities. Contrary to the hopes about the Internet as social media as a venue free from inequalities, content creators are playing in a field that remains profoundly uneven (Duffy, 2017). In this context, the present research aims to go one step further by analysing how status is constructed, and status hierarchies are formed within the influencer economy, as well as the potential implications in terms of inequalities deriving from these processes.

To do so, the present research focuses specifically on the dimension of display rather than adopting a Bourdieu-inspired perspective built on taste and capitals (see Chapter 4). In particular, by following the Veblenian perspective of conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1899/20007) as a useful heuristic, the attention is here focused on micro-influencers' practices intended as displays aimed at the acquisition and maintenance of social status (see Section 4). The relevance attributed to the practices of display goes beyond a focus centred only on self-presentation (Goffman, 1959; Hogan, 2010) to include the social significance of consumption. Before moving towards the analysis of the theoretical lenses of conspicuous consumption guiding this study, the next section provides an understanding of the concept of social status.



### 3. Status

#### 3.1. A definition of status

This paragraph aims to unpack the concept of social status by providing an overview of its various dimensions and the perspectives from which it has been analysed in the literature. The present research builds on the work of scholars Eckhardt and Bardhi (2019) and their call for a broader understanding of the new dynamics of status and distinction in contemporary societies. In this light, a reflection on the different dimensions of social status is particularly relevant to analyse status across the online and offline domains, an important challenge that remains overlooked in existing research.

So far, an extensive body of literature has addressed the theme of status (for an overview see, e.g. Dubois & Ordabayeva, 2015). In order to unravel the concept of status, the analysis of three important dimensions is here proposed: a) social status as connected to social stratification (Weber, 1922/1978; Chan & Goldthorpe, 2007); b) the relationship between status, consumption and taste (Bourdieu, 1984; Holt, 1998); and c) the link between status displays and status symbols (Mills, 1963; Goffman, 1951). The literature review is functional to provide the definition of status adopted in the present research. In particular, status is conceived as the amount of prestige and esteem accorded to each individual. More specifically, status can be conceived both as a position in a social hierarchy and a performative practice of display. The perspective on status here adopted stresses that status is gained and signalled through peculiar self-branding practices in the context of a social media economy characterised by the importance of displays, the understanding of attention as value, and the blurring between consumption and production.

One of the first sociological definitions of social status is provided by Max Weber (1922/1978). In his work *Economy and Society*, Weber distinguishes between class situation and status situation, designating with the latter “every typical component of the life of men that is determined by a specific, positive or negative, social estimation of *honour*” (Weber, 1922/1978:932, italics in the text). Accordingly, he defines as ‘status order’ the ways in which social honour is distributed in a community. In the Weberian perspective, status has to do with the distribution of honour, and it is connected to, although not completely overlapping with, the notion of class situation. While class situation is defined by property and lack of property and,

ultimately, is determined by individuals' market situation, the notions of status situation and status honour stand in opposition to the mere possession of property (the economic order).<sup>7</sup> Status is here defined in terms of honour and esteem, it is decoupled from property, and it is expressed through the sharing of a particular style of life by each status group.

By building on the understanding of class and status as two connected but distinct elements, and stressing the social implications related to the distribution of social honour, a structuralist perspective on status has been developed (Weber, 1922/1978; Chan & Goldthorpe, 2007). This perspective considers status as an important element in social stratification. In particular, status is seen as an expression of the processes through which power relations divide societies in a series of ranks which in turn result in manifested patterns of inequality (Chan & Goldthorpe, 2007). From this perspective, status is a classificatory element applied to larger social groups.

Similarly, but moving from a socio-psychological perspective, Ridgeway and Walker (1995) stress the importance of status structures, that is, ranking ordered relationships among individuals, formed from actors' implicit valuations of themselves and one another according to some shared standards of value (ibid.). Drawing on Berger (Berger et al. 1972; Berger & Webster, 2006), status is here referred to as "one's standing in a social hierarchy as determined by respect, deference and social influence" (Ridgeway & Walker 1995:281), and it creates hierarchies that implicitly bias the everyday processes through which people are evaluated, given access to rewards, and directed towards or away from positions of power and prestige in society (ibid.). What emerges from these perspectives is, above all, an understanding of status as an intrinsically valued social resource (Huberman et al., 2004). Indeed, status is considered as a means to gain future resources through a higher positioning in society (Lin, 1990). In this sense, these studies create a connection between status and power (Lovaglia, 1994; Thye, 2000).

In sum, this literature tends to stress the importance of status for social stratification, whereas it leaves aside the dimension of consumption. Actually, Weber's work already suggests the relevance of consumption and style of life for status processes. Indeed, he claims that "status honour is normally expressed by the fact that above all else a specific *style of life* can be expected from all those who wish to belong to the circle" (Weber, 1922/1978:932, italics in the text). From the Weberian definition of style of life to the practices of conspicuous consumption described by Veblen in the Theory of the Leisure Class (more on this later), the dimension of

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<sup>7</sup> Weber's theorization (1922/1978) is famous for the distinction between class, status and party as three different forms that characterize the distribution of power.

consumption has been considered as an important marker of status. In particular, the work of Pierre Bourdieu plays a pivotal role in the definition of an approach to distinction based on consumption. Moving directly from Weber, Bourdieu (1984) argues that class and status should not be considered as alternative types of stratification, but as two sides of the same coin (see also Weininger, 2005). In his masterpiece *Distinction* (1984/1996) he develops this argument by considering status as the symbolic aspect of class structure, which is not in itself reducible to economic relations alone.

In particular, Bourdieu (1984) argues that individuals rely on the combination of economic and cultural capital for the acquisition of status, which is considered as symbolic capital. Status as symbolic capital is constituted when specific forms of economic and cultural capital are recognized as legitimate bases for claiming prestige and respect in a given field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Hence, Bourdieu contends that distinction is not only determined by economic position (which he considers in terms of economic capital), but also by the pivotal role of cultural capital. Cultural capital, indeed, plays a pivotal role in the creation of taste hierarchies through the intervention of habitus. For Bourdieu, habitus is “both a system of schemes of production of practices and a system of perception and appreciation of practices. And, in both of these dimensions, its operation expresses the social position in which it was elaborated” (Bourdieu, 1989:16). Habitus, therefore, incorporates individual dispositions towards culture and contributes to creating a system of schemes of classification based on taste (Bourdieu, 1984). Notably, tastes are socially conditioned, and the objects of consumer choice reflect a symbolic hierarchy which is determined by the socially dominant in order to enforce their distinction from the other classes of society. Hence, it is taste that defines and marks off the legitimate from the illegitimate and, thus, determines status hierarchies (ibid.).

In sum, Bourdieu’s work conceives status in relation to taste hierarchies and as a form of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1984; 1989). From this perspective, cultural capital and cultural consumption represent a pivotal determinant of status. Moreover, Bourdieu’s work represents a milestone in the study of distinction, class and status, and has been orienting a fruitful stream of research based on the adaptation of his inheritance to the changing society (Bennet et al., 2009; Holt, 1998; Lizardo, 2008; Savage, 2015; Üstüner & Thompson, 2012). On the one hand, Bourdieu’s work has been criticized for his static and rigid view of class structure and reinterpreted accordingly. As Gronow (1997), among others, notes, the Bourdeusian theoretical approach does not account for the fluidity and mobility of postmodern consumer society. On the other hand, other scholars have stressed the changes in cultural capital at the basis of Bourdieu’s

theory, and have been pointing out the increasing omnivorousness of consumption, which highlights how consumers tend to appreciate a wide variety of cultural products beyond what is deemed appropriate to their class (see, e.g. Peterson & Kern, 1996; Prieur & Savage, 2011; Warde et al., 1999; see also Section 5.1.).

Bourdieu's work, as well as the fields of research in different ways inspired by his work, are particularly important for the emphasis they put on consumption practices and cultural capital. However, as fully addressed in Chapter 4, in this dissertation I suggest a different understanding of status, paying attention to the notion of display rather than of taste in the practices of accruing and signalling social status. From this perspective, the theoretical framework here proposed aims at stressing the strategic and performative practices of status gaining and signalling by looking at the display of consumption (and how such display is repurposed as a productive activity).

In particular, the understanding of status in terms of displays builds on the theory of conspicuous consumption proposed by Thorstein Veblen (1899/2007) (see also Sections 4.1 and 4.2). From this perspective, status is conveyed by the lavish expenditure on consumer goods and the display of conspicuous leisure (Veblen, 1899/2007). As will be described in depth in the following section, Veblen's work is particularly important to stress the importance of displays and status symbols and unpack the social significance of consumption.

In line with Veblen's work, other scholars have been pointing at the importance of status signalling. Previous studies have stressed that possessions and consumption habits can act as signals of identity as well as status (Holt, 1995; Levy, 1959). This implies that consumption is not only driven by function and utility but also by symbolic value (Levy, 1959). In this context, display is considered to play a pivotal role, as consumption alone does not ensure desired recognition, and the more visible consumption is, the easier it allows people to make inferences about themselves and others (*ibid.*). More specifically, previous research has been pointing to the role of costly signals as a means to express social status, stressing how the use and display of certain goods bring prestige apart from any functional utility (Bliege Bird & Smith, 2005; Saad, 2007). This perspective stresses that status signals are most effective when the owner incurs in consistent expenses for no other purpose than displaying rank (Dubois & Ordabayeva, 2015). More recently, the work by scholar Yuran (2016) proposes a definition of brands as costly symbols, which allows him to describe the functioning of an economy of display. This

element, as discussed in Chapter 3, will represent an important feature in the theorization of conspicuousness as the main logic underpinning status-seeking practices here proposed.

Therefore, as demonstrated from Veblen's work onwards, an understanding of status symbols is necessary to fully understand the nature of social status. The importance of status symbols is also at the core of an interactionist approach to status. Interactionism is traditionally concerned with the study of meanings and symbols (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969). Moreover, it draws attention to the contextual cues and settings in which status relations take place and on the situational nature of status relationship (Mills, 1963). According to Mills (1963), indeed, status has to be considered as a relation that is created and maintained through interactions embedded in social situations (*ibid.*). Such an interpretation marks a difference with the understanding of status as an individual property which concurs to the creation of social stratification. On the contrary, the interactionist approach emphasises the fluidity of status and its deployment through everyday interactions (Sauder, 2005). In particular, the ongoing symbolic work involved in the creation of status is acknowledged (see, e.g. Anderson, 1976). Accordingly, this perspective looks at the micro-mechanisms of status processes, and specifically how status is signalled and how symbols, used in interaction, create and maintain status differences (*ibid.*).

Therefore, the interactionist framework concentrates on the role of symbols in communicating social status, given that, as Stub (1972) argues, "the prestige, honour and deference that characterize many social relationships are manifested in symbolic form" (p. 217). In particular, attention is focused on the ways in which status symbols and their meanings are influenced by situational factors (Goffman, 1951; Mills, 1963). In this vein, Goffman (1951) conceives status symbols as observable markers of social position (e.g. mode of consumption, habits, language, manners and other styles of life) and stresses their importance as ways to favour social interaction. Notably, status symbols are relevant because they signal the boundaries between different groups. Status symbols indeed provide a general and internalized understanding of where everyone stands by grouping those within the same status category and reifying the difference between those of different statuses (*ibid.*).

In line with an interactionist approach, status symbols are accorded a pivotal role in this work. Differently from this perspective, however, the present study addresses status symbols as displays aimed simultaneously to signal and accrue social status, as described in Chapter 3. In this sense, this research focuses on the performative dimension of consumption displays by

stressing their intrinsic valence for the production of status, rather than the symbolic value and meanings of status symbols.

In the light of what said so far, this work considers status in terms of the amount of prestige and esteem accorded to each individual. Status is therefore conceived, on the one hand, as a position in a social hierarchy and, on the other, as a set of performative practices of display. In particular, the performative dimension of status entails drawing attention to the practices of status construction by looking at the intersection of production and consumption (see Chapter 3), as well as to the performances of status signalling by means of contemporary status symbols. Moreover, given the increasing complexities around the processes of status and distinction in contemporary society (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2019), status is considered in terms of attention, calculated and displayed through metrics as new status symbols (Marwick, 2013), reputational capital, monetary income, and prestige. This is why it is important to look how the determinants of status are changing in the context of the attention economy to account for how social status is constructed across the online and offline domains.

### **3.2. Status and the attention economy**

As just outlined, the present work conceives status in terms of prestige and esteem, as a position in a hierarchy and a set of performative practices, and, most importantly, in relation to the notion of display. Given the increasing complexity of contemporary Western society, it is becoming more and more important to address how the dynamics of social status and distinction are changing. Arguably, Eckhardt and Bardhi (2019) stress that there are new resources for accruing status, which they identify in flexibility and attention (*ibid.*). Moving from this work, the present section accounts for the changes in conceiving, accruing and signalling social status in the context of the attention economy, where social media and ranking systems have acquired increasing importance (Hearn, 2010; Marwick, 2013).

In this context, the notion of status has undergone a reconfiguration in the light of the now ubiquitous celebrity culture (Marshall & Redmond, 2015). Celebrity status is traditionally defined as the condition of being well-known, praised, or attributed importance (*ibid.*). Existing research points out that celebrity status can also be defined in terms of the normative and economic privileges that generate respect for celebrities and bring them large amounts of money (Kurzman et al., 2007). In a context where the proliferation of fame is becoming more and more

attached to the lived experience of the ordinary (Turner, 2010), achieving some kind of celebrity status, either on reality television or on social media sites, is becoming an accessible life goal and a status symbol for a vast amount of regular people. The ability to attract and directing attention that has constituted the very definition of celebrity from the earliest years of the cultural and media industries (Marshall & Redmond, 2015), is reaffirmed in a contemporary society which, as argued, increasingly values attention. In this context, Fairchild (2007), argues that reality tv idols status if they can emerge from anonymity, get visibility and, at the same time, create sustainable relationships with consumers by constructing and mobilizing their loyalty and trust.

Beyond the domain of celebrities, the already mentioned work of scholar Alice Marwick (2013) is pivotal for unravelling the practices of status acquisition in the attention economy. Indeed, Marwick (2013) offers a specific perspective on micro-celebrity and self-branding practices, which she considers as ways to boost social status and acquire a higher ranking. From this point of view, status is characterised by the capacity of attracting a large audience on social media, and it is measured by means of specific affordances, mostly platforms' metrics, which in turn assume the function of status symbols. Arguably, attention is considered as a form of capital that can be directly gained and quantified via shares, followers and likes in social media (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013). This, in turn, gives rise to status hierarchies based on attention and visibility (Marwick, 2013).

The role of attention in the creation of status hierarchies is reinforced by the fact that measures and ranking systems have made status explicit (Hearn, 2010), creating a publicly visible and constantly updated status hierarchy that determines individuals' social standing. The imbrication of celebrity culture, self-branding and social media affordances concur to play a key role in maintaining inequalities between high and low status people by reducing complex relationships to visual displays of quantity (Marwick, 2013). Accordingly, Hearn and Schoenhoff (2015) critically acknowledge the role of metrics, social-scoring services and ranking systems in working to "instantiate a new kind of social class predicated entirely on the forms of reputation that they construct" (p. 208). Ultimately, social-scoring measurement mechanisms discipline, direct and intervene in social identities, social relations and social life, becoming what Beer (2015) calls 'productive measures'. Metrics have indeed the power of measuring, circulating and influencing our social realities by concurring to create what they are supposed only to measure (Beer, 2016).

The relationship between status, metrics and rankings makes it important to stress the specificities of the concept of status in comparison to other relevant concepts, such as reputation (Hearn, 2010, Gandini, 2016a; 2016b). In the context of social media environments, reputation has become the aggregation of attention and affect, which can be mobilized to extract value (Hearn, 2010). According to Marwick (2013), online reputation refers to systemized ranking systems and relies on qualities based on “what people say about you online” (p. 75). Building on these works, Gandini (2016a) contends that reputation refers to a performance metric and is conceived as an eminently economic concept that grasps an actual or perceived quality that generates rewards. Moreover, reputation is considered as a strategic work aimed at the acquisition of economic return via the management of social relationships – that is, what social theory calls social capital (Gandini, 2016a). Therefore, personal connections created through self-branding practices can be considered as the social capital of the digital arena (ibid). On the contrary, according to Marwick (2013), social status is not only ‘what people think of you’, but also the extent to which one is conferred esteem. Status is thus synonymous with social rank. In the case of the micro-influencers in this study, reputation coincides with the creation of audience engagement, which fuels reputational capital and, in turn, the acquisition of status. Throughout the dissertation, I will highlight that reputational capital is a crucial asset to be leveraged by micro-influencers to accrue status (see Chapter 4). Reputation is therefore considered as one of the determinants for social status.

As so far outlined, the increasing role played by attention in defining social status has important implications for the contemporary structure of social hierarchies and social inequalities, as digital platforms can facilitate status displays and status games. Notably, even in online spaces where no status affordances are designed, ad hoc status markers and symbols can emerge, such as the ability to segment content appropriately by platform (Marwick, 2013), or avoiding content coded as lower class (Pitcan et al. 2018). For this reason, it is important to investigate further how new determinants of social status intersects with attention and reputation. In this vein, particular attention will be devoted to micro-influencers' visual representations and displays on Instagram and how they work as a means to accrue status (see Chapter 3). Moreover, this point is crucial as it calls into question the necessity of bridging the online and offline dimensions of social status. According to Marwick (2013), internet-related status symbols coexist with more traditional ones. Within the tech scene, for example, participating in the culture of techno-business, sharing personal information online and maintained a large audience have become modern day status symbols and go hand in hand with an ecosystem that



values wealth, exotic vacations, attendance of exclusive conferences and possession of knowledge and intelligence, among other things (ibid.). Building on the work of Marwick (2013) it is thus important to further expand a reflection of the construction of status in our society, as well to understand how status is gained and signalled by a category of individuals who build their everyday activities and even their professions (or their aspirational professions) on attention as a currency and status as a commodity.

So far, the importance of visibility and attention has been highlighted from different perspectives. In order to analyse how self-branding practices and status-seeking activities are performed by micro-influencers, I proposed a theoretical framework oriented by the theory of conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1899/2007). In particular, the present work recurs to the heuristic of conspicuous consumption to look at micro-influencers' practices of displays as pivotal to the construction of social status. In the following sections, I will define this concept as theorized by Veblen (1899/2007) and account for the strengths and weaknesses of his argumentation. Moreover, I will address how conspicuous consumption is changing in recent times, a reflection which will be functional to set the background for the definition of conspicuousness discussed in the rest of the dissertation.

## **4. Status and conspicuous consumption**

### **4.1. Defining conspicuous consumption**

As previously outlined, the analytical lenses adopted for the analysis of micro-influencers and status are rooted in the Veblenian theory of conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1899/2007). The concept of conspicuous consumption refers to the overt display of wealth for the purpose of acquiring or maintaining status and prestige. As various scholars point out, conspicuous consumption as a phenomenon has profound historical roots, with some examples of the use of material goods to display social status in traditional societies (Mason, 1981). Although previous works already hint at practices of conspicuous consumption (see, e.g. Edgell, 1999 for a review), it is with Veblen and his essay *The Theory of the Leisure Class* that this concept is fully theorised. As outlined before (see Section 3.1.), conspicuous consumption refers to ceremonial consumption practices aimed to attest status and honour through the display of leisure activities

and lavish expenditure on goods and services. In particular, with the description of conspicuous consumption Veblen (1899/2007) illustrates the spending patterns of the rich and the *nouveau riches* in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Veblen's work is to be read in the broader framework of a critique toward his contemporary mainstream economics, which he considered being mostly based on a static conception of human nature, focused on isolated individuals and rational calculation to the exclusion of other institutional factors (Edgell, 1999).

By delving into the theory of conspicuous consumption, Veblen (1899/2007) historically situates the rise of the Leisure Class with the emergence of ownership. In his view, once societies started to produce a surplus, the relationship between private property and status became increasingly important and, consequently, "it becomes indispensable to accumulate, to acquire property, in order to retain one's good name" (Veblen, 1899/2007:29). Private property, therefore, is conceptualized as having an inherent symbolic and social nature. However, the mere possession of goods and the accumulation of property is not enough to be considered as a sign of status. Indeed, Veblen (1899/2007) stresses that the ways in which such accumulation is gained are pivotal for wealth to be considered as legitimate. In this sense, he distinguishes between useful and productive activities (e.g. workmanship), and wasteful yet honorific activities. In his view, these two types of economic activity correspond to two types of commodities: useful commodities which are essential to human life and wasteful commodities which are functional to sustain social standing (see also Edgell, 1999 on this point). Therefore, status is conferred by activities that distance themselves from productive work and is displayed through wasteful commodities.

In this context, Veblen (1899/2007) identifies conspicuous leisure and conspicuous consumption as two main strategies whereby status is displayed. On the one hand, conspicuous leisure is defined as the display of idle activities, leisure time and the abstention from productive work, whereas conspicuous consumption mostly refers to the blatant ostentation of consumer goods (ibid). Veblen argues that, historically, conspicuous consumption has become the dominant medium of display, at the expense of conspicuous leisure. This was due to the changes entailed by an increasingly industrial and urbanized context and the consequent complexification of people's lives and personal relationship. In this context, the display of wealth through the consumption of goods became more suitable for showing off a certain pecuniary strength. The major way of indicating social status in modern societies became therefore pecuniary. Despite these differences, it is worth noticing that both conspicuous leisure and consumption share a common element of waste: "in the one case it is a waste of time and effort, in the other, it is a

waste of goods” (Veblen, 1899/2007:85). Therefore, wastefulness is considered as a primary status marker and a pivotal concept which characterises Veblen’s theory.

Arguably, a crucial element in the Veblenian theory of conspicuous consumption is the relevance attributed to conspicuousness and display. The mere possession of wealth and power, indeed, is not enough to determine one’s position in society. On the contrary, “the wealth or power must be put in evidence, for esteem is awarded only on evidence” (Veblen, 1899/2007:30). Thus, the notion of display is central to the Veblenian analysis and represents much of its analytical power (Schor, 2007). The dimension of display also shows that status has a relational component related to the judgments that other members make on an individual’s position in society (Veblen, 1899/2007). In this sense, consumption is performed for its social value, rather than for intrinsic product benefits, utility, or meanings (see also Section 3.1.). The emphasis on the relational context also emerges when considering that, according to Veblen (1899/2007), conspicuous consumption is extended to all strata of society. Indeed, Veblen argues that invidious distinction puts in motion a process of emulation according to which each social class tries to emulate the consumption behaviour of the class above (ibid). This is such a pervasive tendency that even the lower classes are subjected to pressures to engage in conspicuous consumption. Veblen talks about ‘pecuniary emulation’ to describe the desire to emulate the status held by others (ibid.).

In sum, the notion of conspicuous consumption is characterised by three main elements: the abstention from productive work and the display of conspicuous leisure; the presence of conspicuous expenses; and the extravagant consumption of resources or conspicuous waste (Edgell, 1999). All in all, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* has the merit of highlighting the significance of consumption as a ceremony practice to signal social positioning. In this way, it proposes a perspective on consumption that escapes the logic of utility maximization at minimal cost (Yuran, 2016). Moreover, Veblen’s theorization is a particularly apt description of his contemporary society in the so-called ‘Gilded age’ and the social and cultural dynamics between the *nouveaux riches* and the leisure class.

The notion of conspicuous consumption and the *Theory of the Leisure Class*, however, are not without critiques. In particular, as Trigg argues (2001), Veblen’s approach is too restrictive, as it relies on the trickle-down of consumption patterns from the top of the social hierarchy. Thus, the theory of conspicuous consumption is considered to lack generality, as it applies only to luxury goods (ibid.) and overlooks that status can be gained via other means such as bravery, wisdom, style (Campbell, 1995), or, in some specific historical moment, through austerity and sobriety

(Burke, 1993). Accordingly, from Veblen's days onwards, it has been argued that consumers no longer display their wealth conspicuously, and that status is conveyed in more subtle and sophisticated ways (Mason, 1981). These limits point to the need to consider how practices of signalling social status and distinction have been changing over time and to what extent conspicuous consumption can still be considered an effective and viable path for the display of status, as addressed in the following section. Moreover, from a postmodern perspective, the differentiation in the practices of conspicuous consumption coincides with the increasing importance of lifestyles (Featherstone, 1991). And indeed, another limit imputed to Veblen's theory is that consumer behaviour is no longer shaped by positions of social class but rather by lifestyles that cut across the social hierarchy (Trigg, 2001).

Despite these critiques, the Theory of the Leisure Class has also found an echo in the literature of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In particular, the idea of ostentatious displays is further extended by Mills (1951) in his account of the middle class, while Packard (1959) emphasises the symbolic significance of consumption in his description of the American consumer culture at the end of the 50s. Other works, such as that of Brooks (1981), stress that the competitive dimension of conspicuous consumption also involves an element of mockery in addition to the exhibition of wealth and power (*ibid*). More recently, the Veblenian perspective has seen a revival in the domain of consumer and marketing research, for example with the work by Yuran (2016) about costly symbols, or the discussion about the aspirational class articulated by the already mentioned Currid-Halkett (2017).

In this vein, with this work I suggest that the notion of display, one of the main components of the theory of conspicuous consumption, remains particularly apt to understand the practices of status gaining and signalling in the contemporary economy. This is particularly true in a time when self-presentation and self-branding on social media are important for driving individuals' behaviours and pivotal practices for the accumulation of reputation and, in turn, for the creation of status. The notion of display is particularly relevant for the category of micro-influencers, for who showcasing consumer goods and services in an attempt to signal and create status represents a crucial practice to maintain a position in the economy they inhabit. Therefore, it seems timely to reconcile Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption with the contemporary economy. To do so, it is relevant to account for how conspicuous consumption has been changing in times, from Veblen's theorization onwards, as described in the next paragraph.

## **4.2. Evolutions in status consumption: from conspicuous to inconspicuous consumption**

As seen so far, it is important to situate Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption in contemporary society, in order to understand whether and to what extent conspicuous consumption still represents a valid strategy to express social status.

Arguably, from Veblen's times onwards, a set of socio-economic changes, together with an evolution in individuals' preferences, have concurred to influence the ways in which status is expressed through consumption. As a result of the industrial revolution, the evolution in manufacturing techniques, and the consequent increase in mass consumption, the possibilities of displaying status through consumption have become accessible to most of the population, and conspicuous consumption has increasingly become a mainstream behaviour (Mason, 1981; Page, 1992). Starting from the 1940s and 1950s, as Galbraith (1958) argues, the purchasing power of a new stratus society, the middle class, has increased. The progressive social affirmation of this new group of social actors, together with the increasing possibilities for social mobility, propelled the idea of an "era of status revolution" (Hofstader, 1955/1962:138), which also entailed a set of changes in the social expression of status. Indeed, the lush expenditures typical of conspicuous consumption could be afforded by so many individuals that they ceased to represent a mark of distinction (Galbraith, 1958). The mainstreaming of conspicuous consumption practices fuelled by the mutated socio-economic situation goes hand in hand with a process of so-called democratization of luxury (Hudders & Pandelaire, 2013; Thomas, 2007), wherein the meaning of luxury goods has been diluted (Silverstein & Fiske, 2003).

### *4.2.1. Inconspicuous consumption*

Firstly, it is important to address how conspicuous consumption is changing and leaving space to forms of inconspicuous consumption. Existing research has shown that the top echelons of society, the 1% of the population, haven't stopped consuming conspicuously (Currid-Halkett, 2017; Stoneman, 2015). However, an increasingly important body of literature stresses that conspicuous consumption is a typical middle-class phenomenon (Berger & Ward, 2010; Currid-Halkett, 2017). By showing the progression of conspicuous consumption practices from

1996 until 2014 in the US, Currid-Halkett (2017) points out that middle-class members are spending more on status symbols and Veblen's goods (Leibenstein, 1950) relative to their income, whereas the wealthy and the very poor are spending less. These insights show that middle-class members are more involved in conspicuous consumption as a strive to improve their social standing through the purchase and display of consumer products that confer and symbolize social status. Thus, they recur to conspicuous consumption as a way to claim for belongingness to the elite social group. On the contrary, conspicuous consumption among the top echelons of the American society has been replaced by investments in non-visible, highly expensive goods, such as education, healthcare and childcare, which are less overtly luxurious but still signify social status and necessitate the mobilization of consistent monetary and cultural resources (ibid.).

In line with these results, members of the new contemporary elites across the world increasingly tend to distinguish themselves through goods that transcend the material dimension and are less overtly displayed. The trend towards the adoption of subtler ways of expressing social status has been recently referred to as inconspicuous consumption (Berger & Ward, 2010; Eckhardt et al., 2015). This concept points at status consumption practices that are not intended to be socially or culturally ostensible but nonetheless reveal status (Eckhardt et al., 2015). The concept of inconspicuous consumption comprises different elements, such as the reconfiguration of the visibility, size, and design of status symbols (Berger & Ward, 2010; Dubois, 2012), the relevance of the immaterial dimension of consumption (Keinan & Kivetz, 2011), and the redefinition of luxury (Hemetsberger et al., 2012).

In this context, existing research illustrates the practice of cost-prohibitive inconspicuous consumption typically performed by the higher strata of society (Currid-Halkett, 2017). Berger and Ward (2010) show that these practices consist in the adoption of inconspicuous status symbols which are misrecognised by most observers but facilitate the interaction with those who are enough in the know to decode subtle signals. The results show that wealthy consumers prefer subtler signs of status and are willing to pay a premium for inconspicuousness as a way to distinguish themselves (Berger & Ward, 2010; Han et al., 2010). Moreover, inconspicuous consumption consists in the investment in cost-prohibitive immaterial services (such as the above mentioned education, childcare etc.), which, although not material in a traditional sense have a high cost and will produce benefits in the long term and, therefore, contribute to reproducing already existing inequalities (Currid-Halkett, 2017). These practices imply expensive consumption practices aimed to improve the quality of life for those who can afford

it. Therefore, inconspicuous consumption presupposes both the possession of high economic capital and cultural capital, that lies in the possibilities of understanding and adopting the subtle ways of status display.

However, existing research stresses that inconspicuous consumption can be both highly expensive but also non-pecuniary (Brooks, 2001; Currid-Halkett, 2017; Heath & Potter, 2005). Indeed, it is possible to find a cost of information inconspicuous consumption (Currid-Halkett, 2017), based on inexpensive and nonpecuniary signifiers, and specifically on particular cultural knowledge (*ibid.*). In this way, the educated elite, those high in cultural capital but not as high in economic capital, differentiate themselves from both the moneyed elite as well as the working class. This behaviour is typical of a new elite, identified by Curried-Halkett (2017) as the aspirational class (see also Section 5.2.).

Therefore, behaviours that don't stand out for their pecuniary value can become status symbols as they display social and cultural knowledge. Consumers start to evaluate little luxuries in everyday life (Hemetsberger et al., 2012; Thomas, 2007) and experiences as status symbols (Keinan & Kivetz, 2011; Weinberger et al., 2017). On the one hand, the signalling ability of traditional luxury goods has indeed changed (Thomas, 2007), and luxury has become more about meaningful objects and activities that consumers might experience rather than conspicuous brand names (Hemetsberger et al., 2012). Therefore, it is possible to see a redefinition of the perception and display of luxury, which is becoming more and more decoupled from conspicuousness and wealth (Eckhardt et al., 2015). The experiential dimension of consumption, therefore, has become an important status symbol in itself (Weinberger et al., 2017). Although experiences can be conspicuous, they are so in a subtler way as compared to the practice of showing off ostensible, branded goods and flaunting wealth. Experiences, indeed, call to an immaterial dimension of consumption, which has become one important component in inconspicuous consumption (Eckhardt et al., 2015). This is also propelled by the rise of an economy increasingly based on access rather than ownership (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012; Belk, 2014) which leads to the increasing importance of dematerialized status symbols. As will be extensively addressed in Chapter 4, the processes of status acquisition and display are mutating in relation to the progressive importance conferred to access-based consumption of goods and services.

Moreover, inconspicuous consumption and a sense of luxury can be communicated by consumers through the most mundane and ordinary objects (Brooks, 2001; Kravets & Sandikci, 2014), with the aim of maintaining a position perceived as realistic and authentic (Cronin et al.,

2014). In the field of hipster culture, for example, inconspicuous consumption can be a deliberate strategy to restrict imitation by making tastes and preferences hard to copy (Arsel & Thompson, 2011; Cronin et al., 2014). In this sense, the use of subtly symbols is adopted in order to protect the within-group identity from mainstream co-optation, and mundane consumption is valued as an expression of authenticity (Cronin et al., 2014). Remarkably, all these consumption practices value knowledge and cultural capital rather than conspicuousness as currency, as highlighted by literature on cultural consumption (see Section 3.1.). Given the debate around authenticity and self-branding previously outlined (see Section 2.2), the desire of inimitability as a way of preserving authenticity is a very important aspect to consider in the domain of the present research (see also Chapter 3 and the definition of ‘conspicuous authenticity’).

Generally speaking, inconspicuous consumption is relevant to understand the broader changes in status consumption in contemporary society. These tendencies characterise the Anglo-American context, as well as other countries, especially emerging countries (Kravets & Sandikci, 2014; Wu et al., 2017). However, less attention has so far been paid to how inconspicuous consumption deploys in a mediated environment such as that of the Web 2.0 and social media. Moreover, what is missing is an account of the relationship between conspicuousness and inconspicuousness in a context characterised by self-branding and authenticity as important logics orienting people’s behaviours across the online and offline (as addressed in Chapter 3).

#### *4.2.2. Conspicuous leisure*

According to Veblen, one of the ways in which status is conveyed is through the display of conspicuous leisure (Veblen, 1899/2007). From this perspective, leisure is defined as the non-productive consumption of time and the conspicuous abstention from labour (ibid.). In line with the Veblenian perspective, wealth and leisure activities have so far traditionally been associated (Page, 1992). However, something has been changing in the ways of perceiving leisure as a status symbol, in a context increasingly characterised by the importance of work and productivity. Indeed, the value attributed to work as a means to achieve self-realization and self-fulfilment is one of the pillars of contemporary capitalist economies, and it is supported by



the contemporary neoliberal imperative of being productive both in work and in everyday life (see, e.g. McRobbie, 2016).

In this context, productivity and hard work have become highly valued, and this led to an increase in the ostentation of long hours of work and lack of leisure as status symbols (Bellezza et al., 2016; Currid-Halkett, 2017). Existing research highlights that long hours of work, busyness, and lack of leisure time are considered to some extent new status markers (Bellezza et al., 2016). In particular, social media offer a suitable venue to the display of busyness, as they allow users to share how much they work and complain about their lack of leisure time in an attempt to exhibit high status. The value attributed to busyness, moreover, is connected to the perceived relationship between hard work and social mobility (ibid.). Thus, the belief that hard work may bring success and social affirmation can propel the perception of busyness as a status symbol.

In line with these trends, existing research points at the productivity of leisure activities (Chia, 2020; Currid-Halkett, 2017; Keinan & Kivetz, 2011). In particular, Keinan and Kivetz (2011) contend that consumers collect experiences (e.g. travels, hobbies etc.) as a tendency to continuously use their time productively. A productivity orientation drives consumers to feel productive even when they are engaging in leisure activity and leads them to construct and constantly update their 'experiential CVs'. In a similar vein, Currid-Halkett (2017) argues that today's elite class is no longer leisurely, but, on the contrary, is involved in activities of productive leisure. From this perspective, even one's leisure time is infused with productivity and value, and this also means that key consumption leisure activities typical of Veblen's time (e.g. investing on so-called soft skills and experiences, learning to play an instrument etc.) are now important elements to maximize the possibilities for success and social mobility (Weinberger et al., 2017). Therefore, the notion of productive leisure is significant of a culture of overwork and a social context where the boundaries of work and leisure are increasingly blurred, which both reinforce the idea that leisure time has to be economically productive (Tarnoff, 2017).

Despite the fact that hard work and productive leisure have become status symbols, the possibility of affording conspicuous leisure is still suggestive of a luxury of time and the possession of economic resources. This clearly emerges by looking at the processes of commodification of leisure time, according to which free time is converted into a resource that can be monitored and bought (Currid-Halkett, 2017). Accordingly, the possibility of buying

services to increase one's leisure time, for example by externalising activities such as laundry, cooking, taking care of elderly people, is a new status symbol (ibid.).

The notion of productive leisure is particularly important insofar as it stresses the labour of production underpinning leisure activities, which will be addressed throughout the thesis. The practices of productive leisure are particularly important for a category of social media users such as micro-influencers, who display their everyday life and their leisure experiences in an attempt to transform them in remunerative activities (Chapter 4) by blending production and consumption (Chapter 3).

#### 4.2.3. *Conspicuous production*

The changes in conspicuous consumption and, specifically, the shift from conspicuous leisure to productive leisure just highlighted suggest that production and consumption are becoming more and more blended (see, e.g., Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). Therefore, it is pivotal to address if, and how, consumption and production intertwine when studying status in contemporary society. As sketched above in relation to the changes in conspicuous leisure, productivity orientation becomes an important element which orients status consumption. The role of production has also undergone a process of re-evaluation, with some scholars calling for the progressive importance of conspicuous production as a way to signal social status (Currid-Halkett, 2017; Spigel, 2005).

On the one hand, the concept of conspicuous production is not so much about how much people spend, but how much they work (Spigel, 2005; Tarnoff, 2017). In this sense, the public and conspicuous display of their productivity is a symbol of status and class power (Spigel, 2005) in a way similar to the display of long hours as a status symbol (Bellezza et al., 2016). On the other hand, scholars highlight that new elites accrue status through conspicuous production intended as a particular attention to the ways in which consumer goods are made, the transparency of production processes, the high-standard of primary goods, and the quality conferred to consumer goods as a result (Currid-Halkett, 2017). Therefore, from this perspective, being in the know about production processes and how they orient the quality of consumer goods is considered as a status symbol (ibid.). This entails a greater amount of cultural capital in the choice of the products consumed in the light of the production phase, which can result in the performance of marginal distinction (Gandini, 2020). With this term, Gandini (2020) means

exactly the capacity to grasp the minimal differences that characterise certain products and tastes and represent a way to maximise cultural capital in the absence of economic capital (see Sections 3.1. and 5.2.). Moreover, conspicuous production becomes a sign for distinction for those people who chose to transform their passions in entrepreneurial activity by relying on the perception of craft, handmade and artisanal products as original ways of performing creativity and developing cultural capital. This is typical of the proliferation of traditional working-class jobs which are now carried out by highly educated people (for example in the context of the hipster economy) and seen as status symbols rather than a way to make a living (Ocejo, 2017; Gerosa, 2020). The concept of conspicuous production, therefore, brings back the importance of production in the contemporary practices of status gaining and signalling. Despite such emphasis, however, existing research about status consumption tends to overlook the blending of production and consumption in the context of social media content (as will be highlighted in Chapter 3).

In conclusion, as Eckhardt and Bardhi (2019) point out, while consumers continue to engage in various forms of status signalling, the signs they use are now more inconspicuous and pertaining to the domain of production as well as of consumption. In particular, the trends above described highlight at least three implications for status consumption and conspicuous consumption. First, the shift towards forms of inconspicuous consumption, as well as productive leisure, implies that knowledge and the display of cultural capital acquire an important role in signifying distinction (Currid-Halkett, 2017; Savage, 2015). Secondly, the focus on knowledge and cultural capital implies that distinction can be decoupled from the mere display of wealth. Finally, although based on more subtle and less materialistic forms of conveying social status, the new practices of distinction above outlined have important implications in terms of inequalities. Indeed, the chances of investing economic, cultural and human resources in cost-of information, as well as cost-prohibitive inconspicuous consumption, can influence individuals' well-being in the present and assure them the same condition for the future (Currid-Halkett, 2017). These elements are relevant if we are to consider how status is changing in the specific context of the influencer economy, and specifically throughout the Instagram platform.

### **4.3. Conspicuous consumption and Instagram**

As discussed so far, status is increasingly related to the dimension of attention, and conspicuous consumption practices have undergone different evolutions in times. One more point to address

is to what extent status and conspicuous consumption have changed in an increasingly mediated context such as the one fostered by the Web 2.0, and specifically in relation to the social media platform Instagram. For its peculiar emphasis on visual content and self-presentation (see Section 2.3.), Instagram has recently been considered an important context where celebrity and micro-celebrity cultures and conspicuous consumption can thrive (see, e.g. Marwick, 2015). This is even more true given the progressively staged nature of Instagram content, and the ever more important role of influencers, which contribute to an increase in polished and Insta-worthy content (Leaver et al., 2020).

For these reasons, Instagram represents a suitable environment for the overt display of affluence and a preferred social media platform for studying conspicuous consumption. In this vein, previous studies show that the display of goods and wasteful activities has been amplified thanks to social media and has taken new forms in the web 2.0 environment (Abidin, 2014; Marwick, 2015; Stoneman, 2015). According to Stoneman (2015), social media helped normalised traditional conspicuous consumption practices, providing a frame of competitive individualism and entrepreneurship, wherein the experience of wealth must be documented and shared online. Accordingly, Instagram has been conceived as a repository of taste (Abidin, 2014), used by lifestyle bloggers and influencers to perform an upper-middle-class taste.

From this perspective, the conspicuous displays posted to Instagram are not far from the Veblenian definition of conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1899/2007). According to various studies, conspicuous goods and wealth are flaunted by a small minority of the population – the sons and daughters of the 1% of the population, as Abidin (2018) contends, who display their parents' fortunes to express status and gain an aura of exclusivity. These practices represent a celebration of the possessions unattainable for ordinary people without high economic capital (ibid.) and give birth to a common imaginary based on flaunting wealth and embodied in phenomena such as the Rich Kids of Instagram, or the #fallingstar challenge.<sup>8</sup> As Stoneman (2015) notes, while the medium transmitting the pictures is novel, the images and the social relations they represent recall earlier practices as well as depictions of wealth.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, he notes

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<sup>8</sup> See, e.g.

<https://www.vox.com/the-goods/2018/10/26/18030032/falling-stars-challenge-income-inequality> (Last accessed 18/11/2020).

<sup>9</sup> In particular, Stoneman (2015) makes a comparison between the Rich Kids of Instagram representations and oil painting popular among European elites during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

that contemporary Instagram posts point at the subject's prestige and status and embody the function of asserting and reinforcing social privilege typical of visual communication (Berger, 1972).

However, given the platform's nature and the context outlined in the previous pages (characterized by self-branding, neoliberal economy, and economies of visibility), the conspicuous displays just described can assume a double function. Not only such displays represent a way to show off already existing wealth; also, conspicuous consumption can be rerouted as a micro-celebrity practice aimed to increase attention (Senft, 2008). Therefore, conspicuous consumption practices result particularly appealing for bloggers and influencers, as they represent a means to attract attention by stimulating the aspirational consumption of the influencer's online persona (Abidin, 2014; Marwick, 2015). More specifically, conspicuous consumption can be enacted as a micro-celebrity practice through which users strategically create a profile and reach out followers to increase attention and improve their online status (Marwick, 2015; Senft, 2008). In this vein, Abidin (2014) describes how commercial lifestyle bloggers in Singapore curate their Instagram personae by displaying content congruent with the upper-middle-class taste. The display of luxury objects as signifiers of pecuniary taste (Veblen, 1899/2007), Abidin argues, are aimed to incite followers' interest and, in turn, advertisers' attention towards the influencer persona (ibid). Similarly, Marwick describes Instafame as the performance of microcelebrity practices peculiar to the Instagram platform. Given the photographic nature of the medium, the specificity of Instagram-related microcelebrity practices lies in the development of a particular type of visual self-presentation aimed to "emulate the tropes and symbols of traditional celebrity culture, such as glamorous self-portraits, designer goods, or luxury cars" (Marwick, 2015:139).

The practices just described are defined in terms of "aspirational production" (Marwick, 2015), as Instagram microcelebrities create content that portrays them in high-status light simulating the attention given to celebrities. This is in line with the shift from aspirational consumption to aspirational production and aspirational labour previously described (Duffy, 2017, see Section 2.4). Given the recurrence of an aspirational ethos (Duffy, 2017), the twist from aspirational consumption to aspirational production needs to be further addressed and confronted with the framework of conspicuous consumption and production. Moreover, moving from the works about aspiration and conspicuous consumption, I will argue that the common thread underlying these concepts is the role of conspicuousness as one of the most important logics underpinning content creators' practices and activities across the online and offline domains.

In line with the complexity of conspicuous consumption in our contemporary society (Currid-Halkett, 2017), the overt display of goods as a way to signal and/or achieve social status is not always linear and straightforward. Existing research highlights the negotiation of the display of social status in which bloggers and content creators are involved (Abidin, 2016b; Duffy, 2017). In this regard, Duffy (2017) points out that one way to pursue the authenticity ideal is exactly to downplay social status, disavowing traditional market of status and replacing costly symbols with lower-cost goods, in order to maintain the content creator's relatability towards the imagined middle-class readers. In a similar vein, McRae (2017) points out that authenticity labour involves curating a persona that is at the same time aspirational and ordinary, resulting in what she calls 'aspirational extra/ordinariness'.

In summary, existing empirical results point at the persistence of conspicuous consumption practices both as the expression of matter-of-fact wealth and of an aspiration to increase visibility and status. Thus, they show that conspicuous consumption can be rerouted as a micro-celebrity practice and, therefore, as a status-seeking activity. Given these insights, the different meanings and functions that conspicuous consumption can assume in the contemporary attention and capitalist economy are worth being further investigated.

#### **4.4. Rethinking Veblen and conspicuous consumption**

This section has outlined the changes in conspicuous consumption, with a specific focus on social media and the peculiarities of the digital attention economy. The Veblenian approach to conspicuous consumption has been discussed by accounting for its heritage and critical issues. Despite the critiques, the persistence of consumer good and leisure activity displays in contemporary social media and, specifically, on the visual social media platform Instagram, make the Veblenian notion of conspicuous consumption a valid heuristic to understand status in our contemporary society. Therefore, the analytical concept of conspicuous consumption still holds in a context where visibility, self-presentation, and self-branding play an important role in shaping individuals' behaviours. However, despite the increasing attention drawn on the changes in conspicuous consumption, and although the Veblenian perspective has recently been subject to a revival (see, e.g. Currid-Halkett, 2017; Faucher, 2014; Yuran, 2016), its potential to understand how status is currently constructed across the online and offline domains has not been completely developed yet.

In this context, I argue that Veblen's theorization, partly redefined, represents a fruitful framework for the analysis of contemporary status gaining and signalling practices. In particular, I propose to integrate the Veblenian perspective with the ubiquitous tendency of self-branding in a neoliberal context (Hearn, 2008). On the one hand, Veblen's theory allows to stress the importance of display and to address how self-branding practices and consumption acts are conspicuously displayed. On the other hand, the focus on self-branding permits considering conspicuous consumption as a performative strategy aimed at the construction of social status. This builds on the understanding of self-branding as evidence of the increasing cultural value, and potentially surplus-value, that is extracted from the production of affect, desire, attention and image (Hearn, 2008).

Therefore, conspicuous consumption is here repurposed as a means through which display and at the same time construct social status. This entails a conceptual shift from conspicuous consumption as the ultimate status symbol, as described by Veblen (1899/2007), to the strive for conspicuousness in itself as a process aimed to accrue social status (Chapter 3). More specifically, micro-influencers' displays can be considered as ways to show off and at the same time construct social status. Hence, within the framework of the present research the attention will switch from conspicuous consumption to conspicuousness, maintaining the importance of display as a key component. The adoption of such a theoretical framework also calls for a reflection on the practices of status consumption and conspicuous consumption, two apparently similar concepts which nevertheless point to slightly different processes. In this light, O'Cass and McEwen (2004) claim that 'status consumption' refers to the consumers' desire to gain prestige from the acquisition of status-laden products and brands, while the term 'conspicuous consumption' is mostly related to the dimension of display and to the overt usage of products in the presence of others. The concept of conspicuousness takes these two different dimensions into account and aims to highlight that, in the context of the influencer economy, status displays, and status-seeking behaviours are strongly intertwined and influence each other.

Notably, an analysis of conspicuous consumption in contemporary society also necessarily needs to address which social categories are involved in conspicuous consumption and what, and how, they are consuming in order to express and reveal social position. This entails considering the relationship between social status and class, which will be addressed in the following section.

## **5. Status and social class**

### **5.1. Perspectives on social status and class**

An analysis of status can't leave the notion of class out of consideration. Class will not be the key focus of the present work, but rather a contextual element useful to analyse the changes in status and status consumption from a cultural studies perspective (see, e.g. McRobbie, 2016). In particular, I will review the most relevant literature about social status and class to then move, in the following section, to provide some insights about contemporary elites and discuss whether micro-influencers can be considered as the Leisure Class (Veblen, 1899/2007) of the digital arena.

In existing literature, a lively debate has flourished about whether, and how, status is connected to class positioning (see, e.g., Eckhardt & Bardhi 2019). Class, has been argued, is not the most important determinant of status anymore, nor the main explanatory factor underpinning the formation of social hierarchies in contemporary society (ibid.). These debates go hand in hand with an ongoing reflection about the persistence of class as a relevant determinant for social hierarchies and a useful analytical concept for sociological analysis (see, e.g. Pakulski & Waters, 1996; Savage, 2015). In this context, the following paragraph offers a reflection on the different perspectives on social class and how they intersect with the issue of status. The debate around class and its implications for status and class status can be said to revolve around three main issues: occupation, consumption, and the role of culture and knowledge.

Firstly, social class has been traditionally understood in terms of occupational class, a perspective which posits employment and occupation at the basis of class analysis (see, e.g. Goldthorpe, 1980). From this perspective, stratification is based on the division of labour, within which classes exist as relations of exploitations and/or through processes of market competition (Breen, 2005). Pivotal in this sense is the schema developed by Goldthorpe and colleagues (Goldthorpe 1980; Goldthorpe & Marshall, 1992), which, moving from a Weberian perspective, has been extensively used in class analysis in the past twenty years (Breen, 2005). In a revised version of this work, Goldthorpe and Marshall (1992) argue that the aim of the class schema is to differentiate positions within labour markets or, more specifically, to differentiate such positions in terms of the employment relations that they entail.



However, since the 1980s theorists of class analysis have shifted their attention away from the macro emphasis on the division of labour towards a more micro interest in how the effects of class are produced through individual actions. As Savage (2015), among others, points out, such a shift is needed in the face of the proliferation of cultural markers of class which do not appear directly linked to occupational class. These changes are due to mutations in the labour market, the consequent perception of work, and the decline of specific identities and subcultures related to working experiences and occupational groups (Savage et al., 2005).

The critique towards a class analysis based on occupation can also be extended to occupational status. This point of view, indeed, presupposes a linear relationship between class, occupation and status, in line with the industrial economy of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (see, e.g. Harvey, 2005). On the contrary, existing literature stresses the complexification of these relationships (see, e.g. Gandini, 2020), and argue that the emphasis on occupational status is declining, in favour of other elements such as flexibility (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2019) and coolness (Frank, 1998; Neff et al., 2005).

The critique to occupational class analysis leaves space to perspectives more centred on consumption. As previously outlined (see Section 3.1.), consumption has been playing an important role in its relationship with status and, more generally, in determining class positioning. In this regard, over the past decades some scholars have begun to highlight that status behaviour is no longer shaped by class position and that, on the contrary, we are witnessing the “death of class” (Pakulski & Waters, 1996), which entails a sort of post-class or classless society (ibid.). From this perspective, a series of changes in the occupational market, globalization and the advent of liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000; Beck 1992) have challenged the notion of social class as the basis of status and social hierarchy. In particular, Pakulski and Waters (1996) stress that the concept of class is no longer apt to analyse the complexities and transitions of contemporary societies and that the whole mechanism of class should be dismissed. On the contrary, according to the authors we are witnessing the increasing importance of a status-oriented society which they call a “culturalist or status conventional phase” (Pakulski & Waters, 1996:153), where the principal social divisions emerge along lifestyle, consumption or value lines. Consumption and lifestyle rather than production become the key sources of identity and the orientation of new cleavages. Thus, economic production and property cannot be considered anymore as key determinants of social structures, but they have been replaced by a stratification system based on status, value, cultures and consumption. Moving from this theoretical perspective, and stressing the liquid nature of consumption

(Bauman, 2000), Eckhardt and Bardhi (2019) contend that status hierarchies and status consumption are far from following a class society, but are rather influenced by other determinants such as attention and flexibility, and displayed by means of inconspicuous and access-based consumption (ibid., see also Section 4.2.).

On the other hand, the importance of culture, lifestyle and consumption is at the centre of a very different perspective. In contrast with the idea of the death of class, other scholars have stressed the relevance of class as a pivotal tool in sociological analysis, and an important element upon which inequalities are built and structured (see, e.g. Savage, 2015; Skeggs, 2004). Many of these perspectives are inscribed within the cultural turn in the study of social class, which leads to considering cultural capital, culture and knowledge as important elements underpinning the processes of class formation. Notably, this perspective takes distance from the occupational understanding of class and, more generally, from the so-called ‘employment aggregate approach’ (Crompton, 1998) by stressing that social class is defined by cultural elements at the micro-level that are not directly attributed to the definition of classes as groupings of occupations. Moreover, the cultural turn takes distance from the perception of lifestyle and consumption as practices disconnected from the social structure, as proposed by the post-modern tradition, building instead on a re-adaptation of Bourdieu’s theorization (1984) about taste, cultural capital and distinction (see Section 3.1.). Drawing on Bourdieu, much work in the path of the cultural approach states that class should not be understood in terms of division of labour or exploitation; rather it should be focusing on the processes whereby resources are unevenly accumulated. Theoretically, this perspective has been called the ‘capitals, assets and resources (CARs)’ approach to class (Savage, 2015; Savage et al., 2005). Social classes, in turn, rise from the concentration of different types of capital, and social inequalities are the result of the accumulation and inheritance of different capitals (Savage et al., 2005). One important implication related to the CARs approach is that, despite the importance of economic resources, economic capital is not enough in itself to determine class position (Bourdieu, 1984). Instead, much importance is given to culture and cultural capital (Bennet et al., 2009; Savage, 2015).

From this perspective, class status is shifting towards a new kind of snobbery built on knowledge (Savage, 2015). Such a new snobbery is not the kind which overtly claims the superiority of certain lifestyles to others; instead, it is based on being in the know and displaying an awareness of the codes used to differentiate between classes and to signal status (in line with the tendency towards inconspicuous consumption outlined in Section 4.2.). Thus, as Savage

(2015) points out, this is a snobbery more related to the accumulation of cultural capital rather than directly deriving from class cultures as defined by occupation, and it proliferates in a market-based consumer society, where the display of taste becomes paramount. Moreover, as previously hinted at (see Section 3.1), this kind of snobbery is not only related to the display of high-brow cultural capital, but rather to the adoption of omnivorous tastes (see, e.g. Peterson & Kern, 1996; Savage & Gayo, 2011, and also Section 3.1.). It is not the scope of the present work to address the vast literature about omnivorous consumption. However, it is worth noticing that extensive literature points one more time to the increasing complexities of class, class status and status consumption in contemporary society.

In this context, the present work focuses more on the issues of class status rather than on class analysis per se. In particular, in line with the work of Eckhardt and Bardhi (2019), in this dissertation I embrace the idea that the determinants of status are far from aligning to a strict class society. Accordingly, the dissertation will point out what other resources for accruing status, beyond class, can be found in the context of the influencer economy. However, differently from the post-modern perspective of the ‘death of class’, it is here claimed that class keeps on playing an important role in relation to the construction of status. In particular, in the final section of the dissertation, I will suggest that the dynamics of distinction in the influencer economy are in line with the idea of a post-middle class status (Gandini, 2020). Such a perspective, it will be argued, is underpinned by the conditions of consumption as display (Chapter 3) and work without occupation (Chapter 5) peculiar to the influencer economy.

## **5.2. Perspectives on the contemporary Leisure Class**

So far, the perspectives on status and class have been addressed. One question that remains open is to what extent it is possible to consider micro-influencers as a ‘Leisure Class’ of the digital arena, and what are the characteristics that could possibly define such a social milieu.

According to Veblen (1899/2007), two main components define the Leisure Class: the property of (inherited) wealth and the display of it through the wasteful expenditure of leisure and consumption. However, after the processes of democratization of conspicuous consumption previously outlined (see Section 4.2.), some scholars have argued that the Leisure Class no longer exists, as many of the individuals in elite positions who spend large amounts of money in practices of both conspicuous and inconspicuous consumption have made their own money

through legitimate hard work (Currid-Halkett, 2017). The increasing erosion of a wealthy and idle aristocracy means that leisure is no longer synonymous with upper classes (ibid.). Thus, differently from Veblen's time, the perception of the elite as a form of aristocratic, idle and gentlemanly class is now increasingly vanishing (Savage, 2015).

However, new elites and signifiers of eliteness can be found. Savage (2015), for example, claims for the emergence of an 'ordinary elite' which comprises a sizable group within the population, larger than the 1%. Such an elite is variegated in its composition, to the point that it can be considered as a constellation of elites united by a series of shared practices, and the deployment of certain modes of consumption of highbrow and emerging cultural capital (Savage, 2015; Prieur & Savage, 2011). One more time, cultural capital is a pivotal resource used by elite members to produce their identities (Khan, 2012), but also to exclude others through boundary-drawing (Lamont, 1992). From this perspective, the establishment of a cultural hierarchy is central to the formation of an elite (Savage, 2015; see also Sections 3.1. and 5.1.).

Besides the role of culture, gaining entrance to the elite category is also a matter of achievements. It is likely that membership to the elite is based less upon dynastic wealth, and much more upon the achievement of an advantaged economic position through performing well in the educational system and subsequently succeeding in the world of high-level professional and managerial occupations (Savage, 2015). Accordingly, the ordinary elite stresses the role of hard work and meritocracy in processes of status acquisition (Khan, 2012). However, as Khan (2012) states, the myths of achievement and meritocracy often conceal the fact that those higher in the ladder of meritocracy and achievement are also those in a more privileged condition. Therefore, the possibilities of accessing the most elite position of society vary according to individuals' socio-economic background, which entails the reproduction of already established forms of privilege (Savage, 2015).

Reflecting on the role of contemporary elites, Currid-Halkett (2017) argues that the Leisure Class has been replaced by a new, cultural elite called the 'aspirational class'. Notably, the aspirational class is composed of individuals who are not necessarily at the top of the economic ladder, and thus it is less clearly defined by their economic position. On the contrary, unlike Veblen's Leisure Class, the aspirational class is characterised by a collective consciousness based on specific values and acquired knowledge, while the class position of its members is mostly expressed through cultural signifiers not directly connected to their economic value.

Therefore, the account of the aspirational class as a new elite takes to the extreme the ancillary role played by economic capital (Bourdieu; 1984; Savage et al., 2005) by decoupling economic position, eliteness and class status.

In line with this approach, existing literature has been attesting how people create class status from an apparently disadvantageous position. In the case of the hipster culture described by Gandini (2020), status is constructed by compensating a lack of economic capital with cultural capital. As hinted in the previous section, these practices can be considered as a post-middle class way of distinction, characterised by innovative relationships and imbalances between cultural and economic capital (ibid.). Such a perspective is particularly important in the context of the present research because it takes into consideration the innovative relationship between consumption and occupation in the creation of social status. Accordingly, in this work I would suggest the need of framing the issue of the contemporary Leisure Class in a context characterised by changes in consumption and conspicuous consumption, but also in the domain of work and labour.

Focusing on the post-middle class status also allows us going beyond the rather optimistic description of the ‘creative class’ as a young, creative and cosmopolitan elite provided by Florida (2002), to acknowledge the complexities and contradictions which characterise the contemporary processes of status acquisition. Indeed, the conjunction of easily accessible celebrity status and the possibility of working in the cool domain of social media production may lead to consider micro-influencers as a new elite in the attention economy. However, throughout the dissertation, I will show that that the status acquired by micro-influencers often fails to be transformed in monetary income, power or other resources. Consequently, the elite condition which micro-influencers may be assimilated to actually hides the kind of labour necessary to perform a branded persona and to boost social status. In this sense, micro-influencers can be considered more similar to the so-called precariat (de Peuter, 2014; Standing, 2011) and taking part in the process of middle-classification (McRobbie, 2016) which only very rarely entails actual social mobility.

In conclusion, the definition of elites as ordinary, their possible decoupling from economic position and power, and the existence of post-middle class dynamics of distinction open up a possible reflection for the understanding of micro-influencers as the Leisure Class in the digital arena. These insights are particularly important in order to better understand to what extent micro-influencers’ consumption displays produced in online social environments are grounded

in pre-existing resources and how such practices vary according to micro-influencers' background.

## 6. Conclusion

With this chapter, I offered a review of the existing literature about influencers, status, conspicuous consumption and class in order to provide a theoretical background for the present research. In particular, throughout the chapter I highlighted the need for addressing the still overlooked theme of micro-influencers and status. The importance of self-branding and visibility, together with their implication for accruing status in the attention economy, has been discussed. These insights have led to a definition of status which accounts for the pivotal role of consumption display. In particular, status is considered as both a position in a hierarchy and a set of performative practices, of which attention, reputation, and access are key determinants, among others. Moreover, by accounting for the changes in conspicuous consumption over time, the relevance of inconspicuousness in the practices of accruing and signalling social status has emerged. In light of these considerations, I introduced a theoretical framework aimed at reconciling the Veblenian notion of conspicuous consumption with the contemporary late-capitalist time. To do so, I contend that it is pivotal to blend a perspective on conspicuous display with one on self-branding.

After having described the theoretical background underpinning this work, in the following chapter, I will introduce the empirical research and illustrate the methodological approach followed for the data collection and analysis, to then move to the presentation of the empirical findings.

# **Chapter 2.**

## **Methodology**

### **1. Introduction**

After having described the theoretical background in which the research is framed (Chapter 1), the present chapter provides a discussion about the methodological strategy adopted to conduct the empirical research. As already said, the main purpose of this work is to analyse how status is constructed and displayed across the online and offline domains by looking at the group of micro-influencers on Instagram as a case study. The empirical research investigates micro-influencers' self-branding practices as ways to accrue and signal social status, with a specific attention to the notion of display. By focusing on the specific category of Instagram micro-influencers and their platform-specific self-branding practices (Scolere et al., 2018), the research aims to grasp the key elements at the basis of status construction processes, as well as the social determinants underpinning them. Considering the complexity of the contemporary social media economy discussed in the previous chapter, an empirical analysis of status also entails reconsidering the Veblenian theory of the Leisure Class by looking at the specificities of micro-influencer' displays. Addressing these points also means considering the dynamics of status gaining and signalling more broadly, in the context of the contemporary, late-capitalist society.

To achieve these objectives, the empirical research is based on the combination of different data and methods within an overall qualitative research design. In particular, the research comprises a combination of digital methods (Rogers, 2013) and the qualitative research tradition (Flick, 2009). The research design consists of three complementary phases, in a circular relationship, and in the triangulation of Instagram data (both related to Instagram posts and Instagram Stories) and qualitative interview data. The methodological approach here proposed represents a way to apply digital methods in qualitative environment to the study of status, a methodology which is still largely underused in the domain of consumer research.

In this chapter, I will illustrate the research questions and the methodological approach guiding the empirical research (Section 2). The chapter then proceeds by describing the various steps of



the research and specifically by highlighting the processes of data collection, sampling, and analysis undertaken in each phase (Sections 3, 4 and 5). Finally, the discussion includes some reflections about the methodological challenges, ethical issues and reflexive accounts that each step of the empirical research entails (Section 6).

## **2. The empirical study of status**

### **2.1. Main aims and research questions**

The main purpose of the present research is to understand how social status is constructed and displayed across the online and offline domains by looking at micro-influencers on Instagram as a case study. The research aims to analyse micro-influencers' self-branding practices as ways to construct and display social status. Specific attention is devoted to their displays and performative status-seeking practices. To achieve this objective, an inductive methodological approach is considered the most suitable to make sense of the multi-dimensionality of the concept of status and the complexity of the dynamics of status gaining and signalling in contemporary societies (see Chapter 1, Section 3 and 4). According to Mason (2002), an inductive approach entails that theoretical and analytical explanations are created out of the data, in a process that moves from the particular to the general. Following this perspective, the present research aims to inductively map micro-influencers' practices of display, and their status gaining and signalling behaviours, as they emerge from the empirical data.

The predominance of an inductive approach does not imply that the research builds in a theoretical vacuum. On the contrary, some theoretical insights are pivotal for an initial understanding of the main concepts on which the research design relies upon, as well as for the interpretation of the empirical results. As anticipated in Chapter 1, the research builds on the analytical lenses of conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1899/2007) as a heuristic to analyse micro-influencers' practices of status construction. As fully unpacked in Chapter 3, the analytical lenses of conspicuous consumption are particularly useful to grasp the dimension of display, status-construction practices, and processes of status consumption in the influencer economy and in our contemporary society at large.

In this context, the overarching research question of this study asks: what are the key elements that contribute to the construction of social status by Instagram micro-influencers? (RQ). This

research question is aimed at investigating how micro-influencers' self-branding practices are performed to accrue and signal social status. The research is then guided by three research sub-questions. Firstly, it is relevant to analyse micro-influencers' practices of display in relation to their socio-economic, educational, and occupational background (RSQ1). One of the research's purposes is thus to analyse the patterns in practices of status construction, as well as the aesthetics which characterise micro-influencers' display. To grasp the specificities of status, it is particularly important to see how these practices are articulated in relation to content creators' education, occupation, and socio-economic position. This allows considering the variety of status construction practices in the light of an increasingly complex and mediated context, such as the one fostered by the Web 2.0.

Secondly, and following Eckhardt and Bardhi (2019), this dissertation aims to analyse the determinants of status in the influencer economy. This is particularly important since, as already pointed out in Chapter 1, the resources underlying the construction of status are largely changing, moving from traditional status determinants such as social class and occupation, to innovative ones, such as flexibility and attention (ibid.). Therefore, it is timely to understand what the determinants underpinning the acquisition and display of status in the influencer economy are (RSQ2).

Furthermore, the present study aims to critically analyse the social phenomena of status consumption and conspicuous consumption in the context of the influencer economy. As addressed in Chapter 1, conspicuous consumption has undergone a set of changes from Veblen's time onwards. Therefore, it is important to analyse how conspicuous consumption has changed in a context characterised by the pervasively importance of self-branding, the blurring distinction between consumption and production, and the tendencies towards inconspicuous consumption (Eckhardt et al., 2015) (RSQ3).

The research question and sub-questions can be summarised as follows:

**RQ:** *What are the key elements that contribute to the construction of social status by micro-influencers on Instagram?*

**RSQ1:** How do micro-influencers' practices of display reflect different patterns and aesthetics according to their socio-economic, educational, and occupational background?

**RSQ2:** What are the determinants underpinning the acquisition and display of status in the context of the influencer economy?

**RSQ3:** How has conspicuous consumption changed in an increasingly mediated context such as the one fostered by the Web 2.0 and considering the blurring distinction between consumption and production?

To address these questions, the empirical research focuses on one specific digital platform (i.e. Instagram) and is circumscribed to the Italian context. Although acknowledging the vast ecology of platforms across which content creators' self-branding practices deploy, Instagram was chosen as it represents a preferred platform for the study of influencers (see Chapter 1, Section 2.3.). Specifically, the predominance of visual communication makes it a suitable venue for the analysis of status displays and the visual aesthetics which characterise them. Moreover, the study of how micro-influencers construct and display status is circumscribed to the Italian context. The importance of studying such a context is supported by the lack of empirical data about the influencer economy in Italy, which, despite its relevance (see Chapter 1, Section 3.2.) has been so far understudied in its specificities.

The empirical research is composed of a three-step research design which combines digital methods and qualitative research to grasp the phenomenon of status construction and display in its complexity and its different dimensions. The main phases of the research design are outlined in the following section.

## **2.2. Research design**

The methodological approach here proposed relies on the combination of different types of data and methods within an overall qualitative research design. The qualitative approach is considered as the most suitable for the analysis of social status as it allows for a deep and fine-grained understanding of the logics and practices of status construction and displays by privileging the depth of the analysis to the generalisation of the results (Patton, 2002). In particular, the research aims at studying social status from a consumer culture perspective by integrating digital methods (Rogers, 2013) and the qualitative research tradition (Flick, 2009). The interconnection of the two methods is pivotal for the understanding of social status in its different dimensions across the online and offline domains. The research design is articulated in three complementary steps, which correspond to three types of data at three different levels of analysis. Firstly, the research consists of the triangulation of three types of data: a) Instagram data (i.e. data extracted from persistent posts archived on users' Instagram feeds); b) Instagram

Stories (i.e. data extracted from the ephemeral content posted by users in the format of ‘small stories’ through the Instagram Stories feature); and c) interview data (i.e. data collected by conducting qualitative interviews with micro-influencers). In other words, the study thus deploys from a macro-level, consisting of the platform level of aggregated Instagram data, to a meso-level consisting of the Instagram Stories produced and shared by single users. Lastly, an analysis at the micro-level involves individual micro-influencers as the unit of analysis and aims at integrating digital data with interview data. The research was conducted in a flexible and iterative way, constantly moving back and forth between the different types of empirical material in order to understand the phenomena under study from different perspectives.

The first step consists of the study of status following a digital methods approach (Rogers, 2013; 2019) tailored for the qualitative analysis of digital environments (Caliandro & Gandini, 2017). The digital methods paradigm aims at exploiting the ways in which the Internet generates and organises data for studying socio-cultural phenomena on a large scale (Rogers, 2013). Empirically, this consists in observing and analysing how digital devices (e.g. search engines, hyperlinks, social media platforms etc....) or functions (e.g. Instagram hashtags, retweets etc....) structure the flows of communication and interaction among users. From here, the epistemological standpoint underpinning digital methods is expressed by the expression ‘follow the medium’ (ibid.). The digital methods approach thus entails considering the Internet not only as an object of analysis but also, and above all, as a source of methods.

In the present research, following Caliandro and Gandini (2017), digital methods are repurposed for qualitative research. For this aim, it is important to look at the circulation of an empirical object within a given online environment (in this case, micro-influencers on Instagram) to observe the social formations and the cultural imaginaries emerging from the practices of online communication and interaction between users and digital devices (ibid.). As also noted by Venturini and colleagues (2018), the fact that platform data are usually big does not prevent researchers from zooming in and applying qualitative methods, thus exploiting the granularity and traceability of digital data. The epistemological point of departure of the present research is therefore the possibility offered by small data to grasp the detailed imaginaries and representations related to the object of study. More specifically, the approach here adopted firstly permits the definition of the object of study as grounded in the medium. Secondly, it provides an understanding of the main features of the object of study by looking at the ways in which users and platform affordances, both socio-technical (such as hashtags) and cultural (specific platform vernaculars and conventions for representation) interact and create the

cultural formations under study. In sum, the first approach to the study of status by means of digital data provides a general picture of the practices of visual communication and visual representations as mediated by and through the Instagram platform. At this level of analysis, the attention draws on the collective forms of sociality and culture, and not so much on the behaviours of singular social actors.

In order to go more in-depth with the analysis, the second step of the research consists of a qualitative analysis of Instagram Stories. Instagram Stories are here considered as a different type of data collected from the Instagram platform. In fact, Instagram Stories are different from Instagram posts as they are small pieces of content which only last 24 hours. As such, they can be considered as micro-narrations aimed at documenting people's everyday life in an ephemeral and multi-modal way.

The methodological stance here proposed for the qualitative analysis of Instagram Stories aligns with the principle 'follow the native' (Latour, 2005), which consist in following the native practices through which social actors construct the social order by taking into account both human and nonhuman subjects in the processes of co-creation (ibid.). This entails taking advantage of the natively digital methods through which users capture Instagram Stories, thus making them co-researchers (see also, e.g., Caliandro, 2017). This principle is once again functional to reconcile the classical digital methods approach with the logics of the qualitative research (Caliandro & Gandini, 2017).

More specifically, the methodological strategy here adopted consists in bypassing the Instagram API (Bainotti et al. 2020), working around the restrictions to access Instagram data enforced in 2018 in the aftermath of the Cambridge Analytica scandal (Bruns, 2019). The research blends a scraping technique for data collection with an ethnographic coding approach for data analysis (Altheide, 1987). Broadly speaking, the research is inscribed within the existing literature about the repurposing of digital methods in a scenario of API curtailing (Venturini & Rogers, 2019).

The study of Instagram Stories constitutes a meso level in the analysis of status. At this stage, the focus moves from the aggregated analysis of Instagram data to the user-level analysis of Instagram Stories by means of digital methods. In this way, the study of Instagram Stories constitutes the *trait d'union* between digital Instagram data and individual micro-influencers' accounts collected through qualitative interviews.

Lastly, in the third phase of the research, digital data are integrated with insights from qualitative interviews. Here the unit of analysis is the individual content creator. The empirical

material collected goes beyond the level of representations and displays to grasp the meanings of content creators' practices. The analysis of social status through qualitative interviews is important in order to analyse content creators' understandings in relation to their status-seeking and status maintenance practices.

Therefore, interview data is complementary to digital data. Moving from a more general perspective to the individual level, the analysis of cultural imaginaries and users' doings (Caliandro & Gandini, 2017) is integrated with insights about individuals' trajectories and backgrounds. This aspect is particularly important since the data collected through digital methods are characterised by a post-demographic approach, where the traditional demographics of race, age, income, education, among others, give way to interests, tastes, favourites, and other information contained in an online profile (Rogers, 2009). Such an approach is useful to reconstruct the cultural and social formations as well as the space of lifestyle (Airoldi, 2019) surrounding a digital object, or to map out different aesthetics, as in the case of the present research (see Chapter 3). However, some complementary data about individuals' trajectories, background, and demographics are particularly useful for the understanding of social status in its different dimensions. This doesn't mean refusing the online groundedness of digital data (Rogers, 2013), but rather to acknowledge its epistemological status. In this sense, the integration of digital data and interviews can be read as a methodological attempt to stress further the continuum between the online and offline.

The three research steps just described are to be understood in a complementary and flexible way, wherein the different phases and data inform each other in a circular relationship. The following sections propose a detailed description of the three different stages of the research.

### **3. Studying status with digital data**

#### **3.1. Researching Instagram empirically: some reflections**

As described in the previous section, the first part of the research consists in a digital methods approach deemed to be suitable for the analysis of qualitative environments (Caliandro & Gandini, 2017; Rogers, 2019). The study starts with an exploration of digital Instagram data, with the purpose of understanding how micro-influencers' displays are expressed by means of Instagram visual representations. The semi-automated analysis of Instagram data (specifically

hashtag and caption analysis) is combined with a qualitative visual content analysis (Rose, 2016). Specifically, the first part of the research consists in mapping out the textual and visual patterns which characterise Italy-based micro-influencers' practices on Instagram across different categories and fields (e.g. fashion, beauty, travel, lifestyle etc....). Secondly, the data shed light on micro-influencers' representational practices in relation to the emergence of specific sub-vernaculars (Caliandro & Graham, 2020) used to signal and construct social status – that is, different Instagram aesthetics shared by specific categories of content creators (see Chapter 3).

As said, with its visual and textual components, and the increasing importance of ephemeral content (i.e. Instagram Stories) alongside persistent one, Instagram represents a preferred platform for the study of visual representations. Despite these advantages, however, doing social research using Instagram entails some methodological challenges as well as ethical issues (Caliandro & Graham, 2020). One of the most critical issues faced by social researchers is the availability and legitimacy of accessing Instagram data in an era of API curtailing. In the aftermath of the Cambridge Analytica scandal, social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter heavily limited access to their APIs for non-commercial partners, rendering it particularly difficult to access data for academic and research purposes (Puschmann, 2019). This situation poses serious limitations to the development of strategies for collecting and analysis Instagram data. Among the different solutions so far envisioned (Bruns, 2019), the present research relies on the use of scraping techniques as a way to bypass Instagram APIs and pursue social research.

Scraping consists of a technical operation that enables researchers to extract and collect structured information directly from the HTML code of the web page in which they are located (Weltevrede, 2016). Such a research procedure is acknowledged to be a controversial practice (van Schie, Westra & Schäfer, 2017). Although not illegal per se (Waterman, 2020), scraping is morally and ethically questioned, as it provides access to information that users are not necessarily willing to share by faking an account and simulating the browsing of the platform in order to scrape the content encountered. However, building on Venturini and Rogers (2019), scraping is here considered as a 'necessary evil' to pursue social research, if conscientiously performed. Scraping has become one important and viable path to conduct social research, as also testified by the increasing number of scraping tools now online available for researchers.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> For example, the scraping tools elaborated by the Digital Method Initiative, <https://4cat.oilab.nl>. (Last accessed 16/10/2020).

In the present study, attention has been paid to some of the ethical issues commonly ascribed to scraping techniques by not breaking Instagram's terms of services by using a scraping tool available online, not putting a burden on the site's services, and protecting users' privacy (on the implications of scraping for ethical issues see the discussion of Instagram Stories in Section 4.4.).



### 3.2. Data collection

The data collection is based on a grounded and iterative approach (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016). The research draws on two datasets collected in two different phases between 2018 and 2019. Data were collected by means of a publicly available Instagram scraper<sup>11</sup>, a command-line application written in Python that scrapes and downloads Instagram photos, videos and metadata.

The data collection was firstly aimed at defining the object of study and circumscribing it to the Italian context. To do so, a first data collection querying Instagram for posts tagged with the geolocation “Italy” in one-month time (November 2018) was performed. With the geotag function, Instagram allows users to check-in in a particular place and link their content to a specific location.<sup>12</sup> Although not providing information about the actual city or country of residence, geolocations nevertheless offer useful insights about the spatial context in which content is shared, and practices are set. Thus, it enables to start circumscribing the influencer economy to the Italian context. The resulting ‘geotag Italy’ dataset consists of 105.583 posts shared by 54.874 unique users (Table 1).

In order to complement the first dataset with information about the imaginaries surrounding influencers on Instagram, a second data collection was performed. The second data collection consists of querying Instagram for posts hashtagged ‘#influencer’ (between January 21st, 2019 and February 21st, 2019). Such a hashtag was chosen on the basis of a preliminary analysis of the first dataset ‘geotag Italy’. In fact, the hashtag ‘influencer’ resulted in being one of the most recurring ones in the dataset, with 53 occurrences (only after the hashtags: #italy, #fashion, #style, #love, #me, see Table 1). The use of the ‘influencer’ label emerges as a strategy enacted by users to circumscribe a specific discursive space and self-categorise their own content

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<sup>11</sup> The Instagram scraper used for this research was developed by Richard Arcega and is available at the link: <https://github.com/rarcega/instagram-scraper> (Last accessed 16/10/2020).

<sup>12</sup> Instagram users have the option to add a specific geotag to their posts: when uploading a new photo, each of them can select a specific location by choosing among the nearby locations based on his/her GPS presented by the platform, or by typing one specific location into the “Find a location” text box. [https://help.instagram.com/488619974671134/?helpref=hc\\_fnav&bc\[0\]=368390626577968&bc\[1\]=898918476885209&bc\[2\]=1771676186445020](https://help.instagram.com/488619974671134/?helpref=hc_fnav&bc[0]=368390626577968&bc[1]=898918476885209&bc[2]=1771676186445020) (Last accessed 16/10/2020).

(Caliandro & Gandini, 2017). It can be interpreted as a way to self-referentially ascribe to the category of the influencers, to relate one's content to the influencer imaginary, or an attempt to upscale the algorithm to gain visibility and to intercept potential brands and influencer marketing agencies. Thus, the second data collection leverages users' self-presentation as a tool for the reconstruction and understanding of a shared cultural system (Caliandro, 2017). The data collection also included location information, so that it was one more time possible to circumscribe influencer's activities to the Italian context.<sup>13</sup> The second dataset is composed of a total amount of 19.158 posts, all hashtagged #influencer and geotagged in different locations in Italy by 5.939 unique users (Table 2). No duplicates with the first dataset were found.

There are some pros and cons about the data collection. Firstly, the middle-size dimension of the data collected (105.583 in the first dataset, 19.158 in the second one, in a month-time) is mostly due to the collection being limited to the Italian context, which constitutes only a small part of the total amount of post shared to Instagram. However, the size of the datasets allows for an in-depth analysis of content creators' displays following a qualitative approach to digital methods. On the other hand, such a data collection procedure is particularly useful as it represents a way to study the influencer economy, starting from digital data and by following the medium (Rogers, 2013). The most important advantage from this point of view is that the data collection allows the researcher to shed light on the vast number of micro-influencers who are usually less prominent, visible, and famous as compared to A-list influencers, and therefore less easy to find.<sup>14</sup>

The choice of performing the two data collections just described is justified by the complementarity of information the two datasets provide. The first one ('geotag Italy') offers insights about the general digital environment in which Italian micro-influencers operate and permits to define a strategy to detect influencers' content starting from Instagram data. The second one ('hashtag #influencer'), instead, allows for the analysis of the different imaginaries and publics that revolve around the hashtag 'influencer'. Therefore, by considering the two

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<sup>13</sup> Differently from the first dataset which includes posts with the general geotag "Italy", the second dataset contains more specific details about locations in terms of regions, cities, and specific places within the Italian context.

<sup>14</sup> Despite the increasing popularity of micro-influencers, it is still difficult to find public available lists and rankings of micro-influencers.

datasets, it is possible to have a general outlook of micro-influencers' practices on Instagram and then to zoom in and shed light on the details of their displays.

### 3.3. Data cleaning and sampling

In order to proceed with the analysis, an initial data cleaning procedure was performed. This entailed the creation of a sampling strategy to detect micro-influencers' profiles and then clean the data accordingly. The final cleaned datasets include exclusively the content shared by micro-influencers and avoid other types of content (e.g. bots, brands, etc.).

The cleaning procedure was firstly based on metrics-oriented criteria by looking specifically at follower counts. Secondly, attention was paid to users' Instagram bios (which allow individuals to present themselves in their own words and hence provide relevant information about their location, activities, and self-presentations), and to the qualitative exploration of users' feed (in both their visual and textual elements) to grasp their general presence and main activities on Instagram. Although the definition of 'influencer' is blurred and multidimensional, as previously discussed (see Chapter 1), the following criteria for empirically detect micro-influencers' profiles has been set:

#### Metrics

- **Follower count:** according to the research focus on micro-influencers, only the profiles with a follower count ranging between 5.000 and 100.000 were considered. This is in line with the definition of micro-influencers in marketing and existing literature (see Chapter 1, section 2.1.).

#### Users' Bios

- **Location:** selection of Italy-based users
- **Self-presentation:** self-attributed definition as an influencer and/or brand ambassador; presence of a discount code; presence of the name of a sponsored product/brand.

#### Users' feeds

- **Language:** selection of Italian and English posts
- **Explicit sponsored content:** all the profiles with at least one sponsored content (shared from January 2019 to January 2018) were included in the sample. As Abidin (2016a) argues, influencers are social media users who become able to monetise their following, including 'advertorials' into their social media feeds or becoming brand ambassadors. Explicit sponsored content can emerge from the analysis of

captions by looking at specific expressions (e.g. thanking message to the company; product reviews; advice), hashtags (both labels mentioning a particular product/brand and labels that clearly mark the post as advertising, e.g. #ad, #adv, #collaboration) or mentions (mentions with the name of the company/brand/product sponsored). Further evidence of sponsored content also emerges from the posts' visual components and aesthetics.

- **Implicit sponsored content:** all the profiles with either visual or textual forms of brand and/or production display and ostentation were included in the sample. This is due to two main reasons: first, the line between advertising and spontaneous content is often blurred, and it is even more so as some influencers, and especially micro ones, do not always comply with the rule of signalling sponsored content through disclosure language, e.g. through the hashtags 'advertising', 'sponsored' etc. (Evans et al. 2017). Second, the display of brands and products (either by showing them off visually or mentioning the brand's name) points at the set of cultural scripts around which the performance of the self is staged (Banet-Weiser, 2012). At the same time, it can represent a way to attract the attention of the brand/company.

The combination of such criteria resulted in the creation of nine categories, which allow for the classification of both users and their posts.<sup>15</sup> All the profiles identified as brands, fan pages, companies and non-Italian users were excluded. On the contrary, all the profiles presenting both implicit and explicit sponsored content were selected, and their post included for the analysis. This procedure resulted in two final datasets, as summarised in Table 1 and Table 2.

The final datasets are composed of 920 posts in the first case, and 1.961 for the second dataset. Once again, the relatively small amount of data is due to the composition of the dataset. The type of content selected belongs to a specific category of users who represent a minority in the sample: highly visible, posting many times, with a relatively high number of followers and some specific qualitative characteristics. Such corpus, however, is useful for an inductive analysis of influencers and social status starting from digital data.

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<sup>15</sup> See Appendix 1 for a more detailed account of the data cleaning procedure in its different steps.

**Table 1. Dataset 1 - 'Geotag Italy'**

Dataset 1 - General statistics	
Statistics	Units
Total posts	105.583
Total users	54.874

Cleaned Dataset 1 - Statistics	
Statistics	Units
Total posts	920
Total users	343

Top 10 Hashtags (cleaned dataset)	
Hashtag	Occurrences Count
#italy	104
#fashion	87
#style	73
#love	63
#me	58
#influencer	53
#model	51
#girl	50
#picoftheday	49
#fashionblogger	48

**Table 2. Dataset 2 - 'Hashtag #influencer'**

Dataset 2 - General Statistics	
Statistics	Units
Total posts	19.158
Total users	5.939
Top 10 Hashtags (cleaned dataset)	
Hashtag	Occurrences Count
#influencer	1790
#fashion	723
#fashionblogger	530
#blogger	439
#style	431
#influenceritalia	427
#model	420
#love	337
#picoftheday	303
#photooftheday	302

Cleaned Dataset 2 - Statistics	
Statistics	Units
Total posts	1.961
Total users	583
Top 10 Locations (cleaned dataset)	
Location	Post count
Milan, Italy	351
Rome, Italy	165
Naples, Italy	139
Palermo, Italy	98
Florence, Italy	80
Turin, Italy	68
Catania, Italy	67
Trieste, Italy	39
Bologna, Italy	39
Verona, Italy	28

### 3.4. Data analysis

Given the medium's specificities, different techniques were used to account for textual and visual elements and the combinations of both. The data analysis proceeded in two steps: a first preliminary analysis based on the understanding of the general structure of the Instagram data, and a visual content analysis (Rose, 2016).

Firstly, attention was paid to the semantic structure of the Instagram data by performing a *co-hashtag analysis*. Such analysis is aimed at measuring not only the number of times a hashtag occurs but also the co-occurrences between different hashtags and their varying strength of association (see, e.g., Marres & Gerlitz, 2015). In this way, it was possible to reconstruct the textual discourses and imaginaries surrounding influencers in Italy and to have useful contextual information for the understanding of micro-influencers' displays on Instagram (the results of the analysis and the network visualisations are reported in Appendix 2). Specifically, the first dataset ('geotag Italy') provides an overview of the different themes and fields in which micro-influencers operate. The second dataset, instead, is more homogeneous, as attested by a dense and interconnected co-hashtag network where the topics related to fashion and beauty are largely predominant (Appendix 2). The data, however, show the presence of different publics surrounding the influencer economy as well as the existence of specific subcultures (Appendix 2).

In order to delve deeper in the analysis, the second dataset ('hashtag #influencer') was further analysed by performing a *qualitative caption analysis*. This dataset was chosen for its specificities, and in particular because it reflects the self-categorisation of user-generated content and at the same time provides information about the cultural imaginaries underpinning the influencer economy. The caption analysis represents a way to further explore the user-generated text in Instagram posts, beyond what is available through hashtag analysis. Given the limitless number of characters provided by Instagram captions, users may express more detailed and personalised content than what expressed via hashtag, helping the interpretation of posts and their visual components, as well as the analysis of visual displays.

The caption analysis builds on the dataset 'hashtag #influencer', and specifically on all the posts coded as 'influencer' (n=1.496, see Table C, Appendix 1). After reading each post in the corpus, all the captions were classified according to the following criteria: whether they refer to the influencer's personal life (personal content, 30,04%); whether they are aimed to engage the public by directly talking to them, asking them questions and/or soliciting their opinions

(engaging content 9,3%); or whether they mention and/or promote a product or service, in an explicit or implicit way (advertorial, 54,1%). The category labelled ‘other’ (6,1%) collects all the residual posts not matching with the previous categories. The captions are categorised according to the dominant type of content present in each of them (Table 3b). The classification criteria were built starting from existing literature about Instagram and influencers (see Chapter 1).

**Table 3a. Qualitative caption analysis – tagging categories.**

<b>Advertorial</b>	
<b>Definition</b>	Captions containing advertorials (Abidin, 2016a), aimed explicitly at sponsoring products/services, in a more explicit way (describing and promoting a product), or in a more implicit way (through hashtags and/or mentions).
<b>Example</b>	1)“Good morning world! And here it is, my new fabulous bag @evvemilano ♥ It is absolutely my favourite of the new spring/summer collection #evvemilano #bag #newcollection #look #totallook #me #love #influencer #fashioninfluencer #ad #advertising” <sup>16</sup>
<b>Engaging content</b>	
<b>Definition</b>	Captions aimed to engage the public by directly asking questions, feedback, and suggestions.
<b>Example</b>	“When I was blonde... do you like it? #blonde #memories #influencer #dubailife #dubaifashion # #italiangirl #italy #woman # #luxury #blondehair #young #sexy #cool #love #travel #travelling #celebrity”
<b>Personal content</b>	
<b>Definition</b>	Captions referred to the influencer’s personal and everyday life.
<b>Example</b>	“Today breakfast with my love ♥#ioete #together #influencer #love

**Table 3b. Qualitative caption analysis – statistics.**

Category	Unit	Percentage
Advertorial	810	54,1%
Personal content	455	30,4%
Engaging content	139	9,3%
Other	92	6,1%
Total	1.496	100,0%

The qualitative caption analysis was functional to move to the next step of the analysis, consisting of a visual content analysis of Instagram posts. Even though Instagram is becoming

<sup>16</sup> Translation by the author.



more and more oriented toward video content, as the rising of Instagram Stories and the introduction of Reels in August 2020 among other recently introduced features testify (Instagram, 2020), in this phase, the analysis was focused on still images. Instagram photos maintain a pivotal role, considering that the staging of the influencer persona, and thus the construction of status, remain strongly linked to the creation of persistent content to be displayed, in the typical fashion of the Internet archive culture.

The main aim of the visual content analysis is to understand how status is created by looking at the displays and aesthetics characterising Instagram posts. To do so, the research follows a critical visual analysis approach, as suggested by scholar Gillian Rose (2016). Such an approach includes a reflection on different elements within and outside images by looking at the site of the image as well as its production and circulation (ibid.). Accordingly, the visual analysis here performed takes into account textual elements (captions) and textual metadata (specifically hashtags and mentions) to understand the visual significance of images fully.

Within this broader approach, a *visual content analysis* was performed (Lutz & Collins, 1996; Rokka & Canniford, 2016). The visual content analysis enables the researcher to consider a large number of documents and to understand the different visual patterns in the corpus. It is not only about counting, but also, and mostly, about description (Lutz & Collins, 1996).

The visual content analysis was performed on a subsample of 405 posts extracted from the category ‘advertorial’ because the posts under this label convey the most text-rich material (both in textual and visual terms). Moreover, the focus on the advertorials permitted to understand micro-influencers’ displays by looking at the interplay between self-branding, promotional activities, and consumption practices. In order not to focus exclusively on the most engaging content, the posts under the category ‘advertorials’ were divided into three categories according to the posts’ like count (more than 10.000 likes, between 10.000 and 5.000, under 5.000) and then half of the posts in each like-category were randomly selected and analysed. In this way, the resulting subsample replicates the distribution of like count present in the main dataset.

The visual content analysis deploys at the descriptive, compositional, and interpretative levels. The three levels of the analysis, as well as the descriptive labels, are informed by the theoretical concerns of the research (Lutz & Collins, 1996). The process of analysis, however, allowed for other relevant category to emerge from the data. Table 4 summarises the levels of analysis and the coding categories.

At the descriptive level, the attention is concentrated on the site of the image (Rose, 2016). This phase is aimed at describing the content in the photo at the denotative level (Banks, 2007), starting by open coding the main visual element represented. The analysis also accounts for the type of picture, the type of product sponsored, and the level of expertise vis-à-vis that of amateurism of the photo. In particular, the ‘type of product’ category aims to distinguish between material goods and immaterial services, thus taking into account both consumption practices and leisure activities.

Secondly, the analysis focuses on the compositionality of the image itself (Rose, 2016), with an emphasis on the spatial organisation of the different visual elements and how they are arranged in the frame of the picture. At this level, attention was first given to the staging of the photograph. The ‘staging’ level refers to the degree to which the photos are preconceived by the photographer and the degree of compositional sophistication that takes place in the image (Presi et al., 2016). Staging is minimum when there is a simple composition of subjects and/or objects; it is maximum when there is a high level of conceptual engineering of the picture. Second, the compositional analysis is useful to address the dimension of display by investigating the display of brands and objects. Attention was here posed to the presence or absence of brands and the degree to which the brand logo (or other recognisable elements) are displayed. The category ‘brand display’ provides useful insights about brand prominence (Han et al., 2010) and forms of inconspicuous consumption (Berger & Ward, 2010). With the category ‘product display’, instead, the aim was to understand which kind of products and/or services are displayed and to what extent they are either overtly or subtly showcased. Attention is here focused both on gifted and sponsored products, and the creators’ individual possessions.

The last step of the visual content analysis is the interpretative level. In this phase, images are read in relation to their broader cultural meanings, practices, and context (Rose, 2016). The category ‘situation’ is aimed at highlighting the situational context that characterises the representation. Notably, in some cases, the primary situation conveyed by the picture is aimed at the exhibition of some products and at the display of the micro-influencer persona. Thus, in the interpretative categories ‘self-display’ and ‘object-display’ the compositionality of an image also becomes the key explanatory dimension in order to understand the broader meaning vehiculated by the picture. In these specific cases, the compositionality of the picture and the situation represented overlap. Lastly, with the expressive categories reported in Table 4, the analysis aims at grasping the symbolic dimension of consumption conveyed by the Instagram posts. Such a category lies on the idea that people use particular visual aesthetics and styles not

only to signal their identities but also to define their membership in consumption cultures and signal particular consumption choices (Manovich, 2016).

**Table 4. Visual analysis codebook**

Category	Modalities
<b>Level 1. Descriptive analysis</b>	
Content	Open descriptive codes
Type of picture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Portrait</li> <li>● Selfie</li> <li>● Composition (object + body)</li> <li>● Object(s)</li> </ul>
Type of product	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Material good</li> <li>● Immaterial service</li> </ul>
Level of expertise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Professional</li> <li>● Semi-professional</li> <li>● Amateur</li> </ul>
<b>Level 2. Compositional analysis</b>	
Staging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Maximum</li> <li>● Medium</li> <li>● Minimum</li> </ul>
Brand display: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Main brand</li> <li>● Other brand(s)</li> <li>● Type of display</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Present vs absent</li> <li>● Present vs absent</li> <li>● Overt vs subtle</li> </ul>
Object display: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Object (sponsored)</li> <li>● Other object(s)</li> <li>● Type of display</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Present vs absent</li> <li>● Present vs absent</li> <li>● Overt vs subtle</li> </ul>
<b>Level 3. Interpretative analysis</b>	
Situation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Public event</li> <li>● Leisure</li> <li>● Everyday life</li> <li>● Self-display</li> <li>● Object-display</li> </ul>
Expressive categories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Affordability</li> <li>● Affluence</li> </ul>

## 4. Qualitative analysis of Instagram Stories

### 4.1. Instagram Stories and its specificities

The second step of the research consists of a more fine-grained analysis of micro-influencers' practices through the study of Instagram Stories. Such a communication device allows for a deeper understanding of the aesthetics and practices which characterise micro-influencers' construction of status. In fact, it shows how content creators' displays and every day practices are intertwined by looking at the intersections between persistent and ephemeral content, archival and ephemeral cultures.

Released by Instagram in August 2016, Instagram Stories are characterised by a documentary, narrative and everyday style, that blends with the variety of modes of communication allowed by the platform itself (pictures, videos, texts, emoji, stickers, music, etc.). Their peculiar feature is ephemerality, as each Story lasts 24 hours. Moreover, Instagram Stories is a communication device for the creation of micro-narrations. From a methodological point of view, Instagram Stories can be considered as small digital stories (Page, 2015), which are usually fragmented, open-ended, and intertextual (Georgakopoulou, 2017). This peculiar feature is also important in the context of the present research since mundane micro-narrations provide insights about the experiential dimension of status consumption.

Therefore, the Instagram Stories feature provides different insights about micro-influencers' everyday practices and enables the researcher to get closer to their trajectories, which will be further analysed with qualitative interviews. As said, the analysis of Instagram Stories represents a meso level whereby digital methods are repurposed for the qualitative analysis of digital content generated by singular users.

The analysis of Instagram Stories is relevant because of the prominence of this peculiar communication device among regular users and content creators alike (Constine, 2018). In particular, as the influencer industry matures, content creators increasingly rely on Instagram Stories to create authentic and engaging content. Instagram Stories also represent an essential tool for brands and marketers to improve their advertising strategies (Warren, 2019). The distinguishing characteristics of Instagram Stories (ephemerality, ordinariness, multi-modality, and storytelling) make it an appealing feature for social research, but at the same time raise some methodological questions about data collection and analysis. The methodology strategy

here adopted consists in bypassing the Instagram API by using scraping techniques (Bainotti et al., 2020) and combining them with an ethnographic coding approach (Altheide, 1987). In this way, it also addresses issues of accessibility, epistemology and ethics related to the analysis of Instagram Stories.

## **4.2. Data collection**

The data collection strategy consists in the use of scraping as a way to circumscribe the Instagram API curtailment (Bainotti et al., 2020). Data were collected using a freely available tool to scrape Instagram Stories named StorySaver.<sup>17</sup> Such a tool was used both as an interface to visualise Stories and a scraper to collect and organise them in an anonymised corpus. StorySaver allows for the visualisation of Stories posted by users with public Instagram profiles and to download each of them manually in a .jpg or .mp4 format. The tool replicates the ephemerality of the object of study, as it collects the Stories within the 24-hours of their permanence of each user's feed.

The data collection started from the already extracted Instagram data and specifically from the cleaned dataset 'hashtag #influencer'. As said, this dataset was chosen for its peculiar characteristics, in particular its homogeneity, and was therefore considered more apt to the analysis of the similarities and differences among micro-influencers and their practices. From this corpus, 10 users were randomly chosen for the analysis of Instagram Stories. The random selection allowed the researcher to avoid collecting data in an overly subjective way. Consequently, each user in the sample was followed for 7 days (May 29th – June 6th, 2019), and their Stories collected every day of the week at the same time, in order to account for each user's daily Stories-sharing activity. The analysis of Instagram Stories is based on the idea of following the stream of content posted by a specific number of users in a given period of time according to the principles 'follow the medium' and 'follow the natives' (Latour, 2005; Rogers, 2013).

The Stories collected thanks to StorySaver were then organised in an anonymous corpus containing an arbitrary id label for each Story, the date of extraction, an anonymised user id, and the transcription of the texts and audio content of each Story when needed. The final corpus

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.storysaver.net>. (Last accessed 16/10/2020). At the time of writing, this is only one example of the different online tools dedicated to the visualization and download of Instagram Stories.

consists of 765 Stories shared by 10 singular micro-influencers in a week's time. The data collection procedure was also accompanied by ethnographic notes taken while first observing the Stories.

Notably, at the time of writing, the data collection through scraping techniques only allows for collecting Stories from single users. This peculiarity, together with the ethnographic and manual work required to gain the empirical material, results in the creation of a user-based dataset with a relatively limited number of empirical data.

### **4.3. Data analysis**

Given the specificity of the data collected – a corpus of user-generated and user-based data, Instagram Stories were analysed by means of an ethnographic coding approach (Altheide, 1987), which blends non-intrusive participant observation and note-taking with coding practices from the content and visual analysis traditions (*ibid.*). Drawing from Altheide (1987) some aspects peculiar to ethnographic research can be applied to the content analysis tradition in order to produce an ethnographic content analysis. In particular, the ethnographic content analysis consists not only in the categorisation and count of the different topics but also in the elaboration of descriptive categories which result in narrative data (*ibid.*). Thus, narrative data and descriptive information are the two outcomes provided by this kind of approach. The descriptive part of the ethnographic content analysis is particularly important in the present research, for it allows the researcher to interpret Instagram Stories in its different components. In this sense, the thematic and narrative analysis of Instagram Stories is more relevant than the count of the different categories, as a traditional content analysis would entail.

Accordingly, the analysis proceeded by open coding all the Stories in the sample by looking at the main themes emerging both from the visual and textual narrations, as reported in Table 5. All the Stories collected were visualised, analysed and open coded until the reach of empirical saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The analysis consisted of the creation of both descriptive categories of analysis, which emerged by the observation of the empirical material, and analytical categories oriented by the research questions.

**Table 5 – Instagram Stories: Content Categorisation**

Descriptive Categories	Interpretative Categories
Collaboration Consumption	<b>Material dimension</b>
Events & experiences Body care Sponsored travel Personal travel	<b>Immaterial dimension</b>
Q&A and personal information Interactions Followers' feedback Press Other social media	<b>Self-promotion and accountability</b>
Work	<b>Occupation</b>
Everyday life	<b>Everydayness</b>
Quotes Others	<b>Others</b>

Starting from the descriptive and analytical categories, the analysis then proceeded by highlighting the narrative descriptions of Instagram Stories. For each category, the main visual and textual elements recurring in the Stories were annotated in the forms of fieldnotes and short, descriptive narrations. One of the challenges posed by Instagram Stories as a digital and methodological object is the elaboration of a methodological strategy that accounts for the complexity of its multi-modality and its different components. To do so, the following levels of analysis were taken into account:

- **Visual elements:** attention to both still and moving images (Heat et al., 2010).
- **Digital elements:** attention to the digital visual elements inscribed within the platform affordances that can contribute to producing and beautifying Instagram stories (e.g. stickers, music, etc.)
- **Discursive elements:** attention to the narrations expressed through audio and/or written texts.

The combination of these elements allows for an understanding of how visual storytelling is articulated through Instagram Stories. In order to account for the different visual elements, categories related to the visual representation of content were led free to emerge during the qualitative observation of the Stories. As for the discursive elements, the Stories were observed,



and field notes were taken, addressing the main issues, descriptions and themes characterising micro-influencers' narrations. Moreover, the excerpts deemed more interesting have been transcribed. The narrative accounts of Instagram Stories emerging in the analysis were then compared and contrasted, following the principles of constant discovery and constant comparison, which characterise the ethnographic coding approach (Altheide, 1987). Among others, the main narrative descriptions emerging from the analysis are the following: over-consumption, experiences, recycling/reselling, accessing products (see Chapter 3).

#### **4.4. Ethical issues**

The analysis of Instagram Stories requires to address some ethical issues, especially, as previously anticipated, about the use of scraping techniques and users' privacy (see Bainotti et al., 2020). The scraping procedure by means of StorySaver is based on the use of a free online tool, which allows the researcher to collect data while complying with the Instagram platform's terms of service. Thus, also for the analysis of Instagram Stories, scraping is ethically and conscientiously implemented.

Moreover, the data were collected and used in ways that assure users' privacy and do not cause any harm. Firstly, the scraping technique here adopted collects content shared on users' public profiles, thus accounting for the contextual nature of the privacy settings provided by Instagram (Zimmer, 2010). For the nature of their practices, content creators' profiles are not only public but also seeking external validation and visibility. This, of course, does not in itself justify the collection of their content for research purposes, but points to the loose perception of privacy they have (more on this point in Section 5.4.), as well as their awareness that data posted to social media sites are, in effect, shared publicly (Landers et al., 2016). In this sense, it is important to consider micro-influencers' visibility in a critical way and to preserve their privacy by following the ethical principles of social research. In this regard, given the difficulties often related to the request of consent (Salmons, 2015), the data collected are considered similar to data gathered from observation methods (on this point see also Light et al. 2018 and their discussion on the 'walkthrough method' for the analysis of digital apps). Hence, names and personal users' details are anonymised, and the results presented in aggregated forms that do not allow for the identification of singular users.

Lastly, and in order to further safeguard users' privacy, the display of singular Stories as an exemplification of the research results, when present, recurs to the fabrication methods (Markham, 2012). Such a method consists in the ad hoc creation and re-elaboration of original data into composite accounts and fictional narratives, with specific attention to the maintenance of the original meanings conveyed by the data (ibid.). As Markham (2012) argues, fabrication has often been considered research misconduct and accused of falsifying the process of data analysis. However, the fabrication method is here regarded as useful to provide the readers with an idea of the visual formats and aesthetics used by micro-influencers to stage their displays while preserving their privacy. Therefore, despite the critiques, and given the personal nature of the content related to singular users, and difficulties associated with the full anonymisation of visual data, the fabrication method is here used to further assure users' privacy.

## **5. Delving into micro-influencers' trajectories: qualitative interviews**

The third step of the research consists in analysing how micro-influencers construct and display status by integrating digital data with qualitative semi-structured interviews conducted with individual content creators. This is the last level of the research, previously referred to as a micro-level, whereby individual micro-influencers are the unit of analysis. The use of qualitative interviews allows for the emergence of subjective and anecdotal narrations about micro-influencers' everyday life, practices and biographies, thus resulting in the more appropriate methodological tool for the understanding of their perspective. In this way, it was also possible to delve deeper into content creators' trajectories and to grasp the meanings they attribute to status and status-seeking activities. Thus, qualitative interviews represent a useful method to contextualise digital findings and blend the online and offline dimensions.

### **5.1. Case selection**

In total, 35 interviews with Italian content creators were conducted between April and October 2019. The case selection followed a purposive sampling procedure (Mason, 2002; Patton, 2002). Such a strategy allows for the selection and inclusion of information-rich cases following some predetermined criteria of importance. Participants were recruited starting from the Instagram

data, specifically from the dataset 'hashtag #influencer'. From this dataset, a list of Instagram profiles corresponding to potential recruits was created. Potential participants complied with the following criteria:

- **Gender**, to ensure balance and because micro-influencers' practices can follow specific gendered patterns;
- **Age**, to ensure a balanced demographic sample (minimum age: 18 years old);
- **Follower count**, in order to include the most prominent users as well as the less visible ones. Follower count is here considered as a proxy for status and for different degrees of participation in the influencer activity (in this sense, a high number of followers coincides with higher engagement in the activity, and vice versa);
- **Field of interest**: to ensure the presence of micro-influencers operating in different fields of the industry (e.g. fashion, beauty, lifestyle, travel);
- **Aesthetics**: in order to maximise the variety of aesthetics characterising micro-influencers' feeds according to the results emerging from the visual analysis (see Chapter 3).

The purposive sampling procedure was then integrated with a convenience sampling (Patton, 2002). This was due to the difficulties in sampling individuals according to their demographics, a limitation related to the post-demographic approach characterising digital data (Rogers, 2013). Especially for the information about location<sup>18</sup>, education, income, and familial background, the content creators who made themselves available for the interview were included in the sample. All in all, the blending of a purposive sampling with a convenience sampling allowed the researcher to match the Instagram datasets with actual users, taking one more time advantage of Instagram data as well as of the first findings of the visual representations of displays. Once again, the sample has the advantage of being grounded in the medium and enables the researcher to consider less prominent micro-influencers.

The sample aims at meeting the requirements of both symbolic representation and diversity (Mason, 2002). On the one hand, it aims at including the most important features of relevance to

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<sup>18</sup> Despite the geolocation information provided by Instagram data, it was very difficult to sample participants according to specific locations. The very general principle followed here was to ensure a proportional presence of micro-influencers across the Italian country following the distribution emerging from the geolocations included in the Instagram data (see Table 2).

the subject matter. On the other hand, the purpose is to be as diverse as possible within the boundaries of the identified population. In fact, the research aimed at recruiting a variegated sample of participants across follower count, fields of the influencer industry, geographic context, as well as personal and professional backgrounds. This is also a way to maximise diversity in the face of the limitations of the sampling procedure due to the post-demographic approach.

However, it is worth acknowledging that the sample has some specific characteristics as well as limitations. First, despite the attempt to include a balanced number of women and men, female micro-influencers are over-represented (23 female vs 12 male).<sup>19</sup> This insight reflects the predominantly feminised nature of the influencer industry, as women represent the vast majority of content creators (Heffer, 2020).<sup>20</sup> The sample is therefore skewed on female micro-influencers and, more generally, it is limited to what Duffy and Hund call a “narrow culture of influencers” (2019:4988), as the informants are mostly white, cisgender, and able women active in the fields of fashion and beauty. Nevertheless, the sample offers relevant insights about the cultural feminisation (Adkins, 2011) of micro-influencers’ activities of production and consumption and how male content creators’ practices, about which data are still mostly missing, are inscribed within this context.

Another element to be noticed is the age composition of the sample. The informants’ age varies between 18 and 25 years old (n=12); between 26 and 30 years old (n=10) and between 31 and 35 (n=9). Only a few of them are over 35 (n=4). Thus, the participants in the study are not teen micro-celebrities, but rather youth and young adults. Hence, they have already completed or are in the middle of completing their educational paths, while the majority of them already entered the labour market. These features, of course, orient the interpretation of the empirical results, especially about the relationship between status and occupation. As described in Chapter 5, the content creators in the sample are involved in different constellations of occupations. Moreover, the age composition of the sample influences the understanding of the role of the familial

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<sup>19</sup> For a detailed account of the sample demographics see Appendix 3.

<sup>20</sup> The higher number of women in the sample can also be read as the higher willingness of female content creators to be interviewed and to narrate their stories. This aspect could also be influenced by the same-gender relationship between the researcher and the potential interviewee. The reflexive positioning of the researcher, also in terms of gender, is an important element to take into account when critically discussing the sample composition and the nature of the data collected.

background and economic capital, as almost all the micro-influencers interviewed have already reached, or are struggling to achieve, independence from their mostly middle-class families. Moreover, it is important to notice that the final sample is composed of educated and highly educated informants. In fact, 4 of them have a postgraduate degree; 7 a master's degree; 7 a bachelor's degree; while 14 are currently enrolled in a university course.

## 5.2. Interviews conduction

After the definition of the sampling criteria, potential participants were contacted via the email addresses indicated in their Instagram profile. About 150 people were contacted, explaining the main aim of the research, disclosing the researcher's identity as a PhD student, and asking them to participate in an in-depth interview, either face-to-face or through a video call (suggesting Skype as the preferred application).

In total, 35 interviews with Italian content creators were conducted between April and October 2019, an amount which affords achieving empirical saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The large majority of informants were interviewed in person (n=20). The second-best option was to conduct the interview either by Skype or WhatsApp Call, using both audio and video interaction (n=12). Only two interviews were conducted by telephone, given the impossibility of having a stable Internet connection. In one exceptional case, the content creator (with the mediation of her staff) explicitly asked to release the interview only in a written format.

Participants were interviewed through a semi-structured interview. The open-questions in the interview outline allowed for the emergence of a fine-grained description of micro-influencers' activities and status-seeking practices. The interview focuses on different topics, which the most relevant are:

- **Everyday activities:** the relationship between the interviewee, Instagram, and other social media platforms; the first steps taken to become a content creator; the key events and important actors who have facilitated the content creator's trajectory; everyday activities and the processes of content creation; relationship with followers; use of Instagram Stories.
- **Sponsorships and collaborations:** products sponsored and aspired partnerships for the future; the criteria which are orienting the acceptance/refusal of sponsorships; what

kinds of collaborations can be considered a status symbol and in what terms; reflections on monetisation.

- **Status:** the importance of monetary income vs consumption goods; the importance of visibility vs earning a living; the importance of experiences and immaterial goods vs material goods; the values orienting their promotional activities, and what do they value about their work
- **Educational background:** investigation of the most relevant skills required for the content creator activity are and how they are acquired; the role played by formal education for the performance of the content creator activity.
- **Aspirations:** career interests and aspirations for the future.
- **Demographics:** city of residence, age, educational title, occupation, familial background (parents' occupation and education)

### 5.3. Interviews analysis

The interviews lasted from a minimum of 40 minutes to a maximum of two hours, for an average duration of about 50 minutes. All the interviews were audio-recorded previous informed consent and integrally transcribed verbatim.

The interviews analysis proceeded in the two phases. In the first phase, a descriptive analysis was performed in order to highlight the main themes emerging from the interviews. At this level, particular attention was given to the participants' own words in the creation of thematic categories. The second phase consists of the interpretative analysis of empirical data. At this level of the analysis, all the interviews were coded according to analytical categories emerging from the theoretical framework. The guiding principle in this analytical strategy is the interplay between theoretical considerations in reaction to the existing literature (see Chapter 1), the different theoretical traditions, and the empirical material emerging from the whole research field (Flick, 2009).

At a more practical level, the analysis proceeded to the identification of the recurring themes across the interviews, firstly by selecting sections of the discourses based on their content, qualifying them by means of a set of analytical codes, and then looking for the relations between the codes (Patton, 2002). The principal analytical codes used for the analysis are the following: authenticity, nurturing the public; circular consumption; wastefulness; access;

exclusivity; belongingness; productive leisure; type of income; experiential dimension; intermediation; creativity; work and labour; work on subjectivity; self-fulfilment; gender issues. The analytical concepts used for the analysis were then further refined inductively to develop the results presented in the following chapters.

The results shown in this work are presented in aggregated forms in order to assure the informants' privacy. The individual quotes are translated from Italian by the author and anonymised. Although the interviewees sometimes asked to be explicitly quoted in an attempt to get visibility, it was decided to preserve their anonymity and use fantasy names in the research. Moreover, in order to assure informants' privacy and not provoke them any harm, easily recognisable brands, workplace and agencies' names have been anonymised, while in some cases the fabrication method (Markham, 2012) has been adopted to make the informants not recognisable from potential readers. A broader reflection on the theme of anonymity and privacy in relation to the research ethics is provided in the following section.

#### **5.4. Fieldnotes and reflexivity**

Some reflexive considerations about the use of qualitative interviews with a group of individuals seeking for visibility and accustomed to self-presentation and self-branding are needed. Micro-influencers can be considered as an easily approachable and researchable group. However, some critical elements emerged during the field.

On the one hand, it was relatively easy to access the micro-influencer field, especially given the large number of potential interviewees that compensated for the low response rate. The interviews were conducted in a very informal way, when possible in informal settings (usually bars or cafes). This was as well facilitated by the age of the researcher (28 years old), which, in most of the cases, was close to that of the interviewees. Moreover, it was generally easy to stimulate participants' narrations, as they were eager to discuss their experiences and accustomed to it. Not only do they talk about themselves in front of their audience of followers almost every day; also, some of them already released other interviews for some newspapers, while others created ad hoc videos to talk about themselves and their paths towards being a content creator.

However, some issues about anonymity, visibility and self-branding emerged during the field. In particular, micro-influencers' ability in self-presentation and self-branding represents a critical

element to keep in mind for a reflection on the ways of conducting the interview and on the type of empirical material acquired. When contacting the participants, it was sometimes important to negotiate the terms of the interview, in order to assure a transparent data collection. In particular, in various cases, it was necessary to explain and stress the scope of the sociological research as compared to journalistic interviews aimed at self-branding and visibility.

Anonymity, as previously mentioned, was the first element to be negotiated. In most of the cases, the interviewees were not concerned about their anonymity at all. On the contrary, they reported being accustomed to expose themselves, thus considering the use of their real names not as an issue but rather an advantage to gain visibility. Accordingly, the assurance of anonymity was one of the main reasons given to refuse to take the interview, together with the absence of a press release of the interview itself. However, despite content creators' attempts to get visibility, the ethical standpoint here adopted is to preserve their anonymity by privileging their role as research informants rather than their everyday activities as influencers.

Secondly, one of the main difficulties of the research was trying to go beyond staged self-descriptions to grasp the informants' subjective accounts beyond the logic of self-branding. Similarly, it was important to go beyond expressions of social desirability linked to self-branding practices. To try to overcome these issues, different techniques were put in place. Firstly, the more relevant questions to the study were disseminated throughout the interview outline and asked different times with different formulations. This strategy was aimed at seeing the continuities and potential contradictions in content creators' accounts. Moreover, the questions were thought to be related to the interviewees' everyday practices, asking them detailed accounts of their activities and self-branding choices. This technique had the advantage of actually going beyond content creators' self-presentations by trying to explicit what are the logics and strategic choices underpinning them. This purpose was further achieved by framing the research itself and the interview as a way for the researcher to go beyond stereotypical and simplistic views of the content creator activity. Making clear this research purpose also contributed, in the vast majority of cases, to create a friendly environment which facilitated participants' disclosure. In a couple of cases, however, it was almost impossible to go beyond the staged self-presentation performed by the interviewee. Despite the self-referentiality of these accounts, the data collected are still important, as they attest the highly curated self-branding practices put in place by content creators.

Moreover, among the interviewees clearly emerged a specific way of understating and living the interview experience, which in some ways became considered as a status symbol. Being



contacted and interviewed by an academic was perceived as a symbol of prestige to be displayed as such in front of an audience. Another element of negotiation was how the experience of the interview was to be conducted, and the potential use of the interview itself as a self-branding tool. In a few cases, for example, content creators' request of video-recording the interview to then share some excerpts with their followers was dismissed for assuring a low level of social desirability and improving the quality of the empirical material more generally. On the other hand, however, acknowledging that visibility is the main currency to this category of social media content producers, it was accepted that the interview became part of the participants' narration through Instagram Stories. In the vast majority of cases, the informants created ad hoc Instagram Stories to share the experience of the interview with their following. In this sense, the experience of the interview truly became a status symbol, part of the conspicuous authenticity (see Chapter 3) displayed by micro-influencers, and, more generally, an experience to leverage for the production of content. In some other cases, the interview became a hint for developing some reflections about the influencer's experience and resulted in the production of specific content in the form of Stories, a blog post, or a podcast.

From these insights, it also emerges that the interview as an experience assumes a specific temporality and spatiality. It wasn't limited to the spatial and temporal meeting between the researcher and the interviewee, but it was also transposed to other places, and specifically to Instagram, and lasted longer than the actual encounter, if only for the following 24 hours as envisioned by Instagram Stories. Moreover, Instagram and the ecosystem of apps and websites surrounding the influencer's activity, together with the physicality of the smartphone, were elements consistently present in the conduction of the interview. The interview was intended by the content creators as a means to blend the online and the offline by explaining and showing how their activities work in practice and what are the meanings behind their choices and practices.

## 6. Conclusion

In this chapter I illustrated the methodological approach followed in this work. In particular, I argued that an approach based on digital methods (Rogers, 2013) and qualitative research (Flick, 2009) is the most suitable for the analysis of social status across the online and offline. The research design is composed by three complementary phases, each of them informed by different types of data: Instagram posts, Instagram Stories and qualitative interview data.

The chapter has shown the three phases of the empirical research and, for each of them, has described the processes of data collection, sampling, and analysis. Particular attention has been paid to the methodological challenges encountered while conducting the research, and specifically concerning the use of scraping techniques, the ethical data collection and analysis of digital data, and the issue of social desirability due to micro-influencers' tendency to adopt self-branding strategies.

The methodology here proposed represents an attempt to study issues of social status by using digital methods in a digital, qualitative environment. As such, the research represents an attempt to use digital methods for consumer research, which, apart from a limited number of studies (Airoldi, 2019; Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016), is still an overlooked field of research. In this case, digital methods are applied to a medium-sized dataset and integrated with qualitative interviews in order to analyse status from a qualitative perspective. Despite the limitations, mostly due to the digital data collection and the size of the sample (see also the Conclusion section), the research provides relevant empirical results for the analysis of social status in the context of the influencer economy. In what follows I will present the empirical results of the research, by addressing three main themes: the construction of status through Instagram representations and the notion of conspicuousness (Chapter 3); the analysis of access-based conspicuousness and access as a resource for the construction of status (Chapter 4); and an account on conspicuousness as labour by looking at status in its relationship with occupation.

# **Chapter 3.**

## **Understanding conspicuousness.**

### **The interconnections between display, consumption, and production**

#### **1. Introduction**

The previous chapters described the theoretical background and the methodological approach at the basis of this work. With this chapter, I will delve deeper in the understanding of the logic of conspicuousness by providing some theoretical coordinates to define this concept. Secondly, I will move to the in-depth description of the empirical results by illustrating how micro-influencers construct social status by looking at their visual representations on the Instagram platforms.

In what follows, I argue that conspicuousness represents the main logic underpinning content creators' self-branding practices. Moving from the analytical lenses of conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1899/2007), I contend that conspicuousness is a cultural logic based on the importance of displays and which seamlessly blends consumption and production activities in the construction of status. More specifically, I will illustrate how conspicuousness relies on an economy of display (Yuran, 2016) and deploys through what I call a 'circle of prosumption', whereby performative displays of consumption are repurposed as productive activities aimed at creating and signalling social status. The notion of conspicuousness, therefore, provides the lenses to look at the practices of status construction and maintenance in the context of the contemporary attention economy. The present chapter contributes to the existing literature in two senses: first, it provides an understanding of new consumption practices by looking at the intersection of consumption, production, and promotion. Second, it highlights the peculiar ways of accruing and signalling status in the contemporary late capitalist time.

Drawing on the analysis of Instagram posts and Instagram Stories (see Chapter 2), I will illustrate how the logic of conspicuousness deploys through micro-influencers' visual

representations and consumption practices. First, by looking at content creators' Instagram representations, I will show how they construct social status through the deployment of different 'aesthetics of display'. In this context, I will highlight how the logic of conspicuousness intersects with subtle displays, inconspicuous consumption, and authenticity (Section 3.1). Moreover, the results show how conspicuousness unfolds through a circle of presumption, characterised by the performance of circular and wasteful consumption practices (Section 3.2.). In the conclusion of the chapter, I will discuss the general implications entailed by the logic of conspicuousness for consumption more generally.

## **2. Theoretical framework. Disentangling the notion of conspicuousness**

### **2.1. Conspicuousness and the economy of display**

The theoretical framework proposed in this dissertation relies on the concept of conspicuousness intended as a pivotal cultural logic which orients micro-influencers' self-branding strategies. The logic of conspicuousness embraces all those practices aimed at being noticeable before a certain audience and oriented towards the construction of social status. In order to define what conspicuousness is, it is important to focus on two of its components: the importance of display and the increasingly blurred distinction between consumption and production practices.

As previously seen in Chapter 1, the Veblenian definition of conspicuous consumption is based on the notion of display. According to Veblen, status and wealth "must be put in evidence, for esteem is awarded only on evidence" (Veblen, 1899/2007:30). This is the core of conspicuous consumption, intended as the set of practices aimed at expressing one's status and power through the ostentatious display of consumer goods beyond material necessity, and the overt display of leisure time (i.e. conspicuous leisure) (ivi). Despite the critiques (see Chapter 1), the theory of conspicuous consumption provides useful insights to read the processes of gaining and signalling status in contemporary society, and particularly within the context of the influencer economy. As previously outlined (Chapter 1, Section 4.4.), the notion of display still holds in a context where visibility, self-branding and self-presentation are dominant logics which orient individuals' behaviours and constitutive elements of the influencer economy (Abidin, 2016).

The emphasis on displays, derived from the theory of conspicuous consumption, represents the first important element to define conspicuousness. The concept of display is here conceived in relation to what can be defined an “economy of display” (Yuran, 2016) and not only in terms of visibility labour (Abidin, 2016c). Existing literature (see Chapter 1) already highlights the pervasive economies of visibility (Banet-Weiser, 2012) which characterise the contemporary society and the strategies enacted by social media content producers to attract attention and visibility (Abidin, 2016c; Duffy & Hund, 2015). These perspectives, however, fail to fully analyse the issue of visibility in relation to status. The present work, on the contrary, is centred on the importance of displays as ways to be visible and attract attention as well as to gain and signal social status. In this vein, the notion of conspicuousness here proposed aims to integrate the analysis of visibility with the dimension of display and the social significance that such display assumes. Therefore, a perspective accounting for self-presentation and staged performances is combined with a specific focus on the strategic use of displays to express social status.

The importance of displays as ways to signal social status is widely acknowledged in existing literature (Bliege Bird & Smith, 2005; Levy, 1959; see Chapter 1, Section 3.1). More recently, the work of scholar Noam Yuran (2016) presents useful insights to highlight the contemporary peculiarities of the display. Building directly on *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Yuran claims that displays are at the centre of a peculiar economy. According to Yuran, the economy of display relies on the notion of ‘costly symbol’<sup>21</sup>, a commodity which appears worthy in itself and upsetting utilitarian calculation by embodying an aspect of waste. From this perspective, the costly symbol, and its display, maintains its intrinsic function as it points to social distinction, but, at the same time, can be conceived as an economic entity valued in itself (ibid.). In this way, Yuran (2016) accounts for the Veblenian distinction between useful commodities, which are essential to sustaining human life, vis-à-vis wasteful commodities, which are necessary to maintain social standing, and blends them in the notion of costly symbol.

Following Yuran, the logic of conspicuousness is based on the idea that displays are in themselves productive. More precisely, moving from the theorisation of Veblen proposed by Yuran, I suggest that conspicuousness embraces practices of display of consumption, enacted by

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<sup>21</sup> Yuran (2016) theorizes the economy of display, or economy of symbols, as a theoretical framework in support of the perception of brands as costly symbols, in opposition to the contemporary reading of brands as meaningful objects (Arvidsson, 2006; Lury, 2004). From his point of view, brands can be intended as symbols turned into commodities, and thus become in themselves economic objects.

micro-influencers as a means to produce their self-brand, boost their social status and eventually gain profit. Conspicuousness, I contend, is built upon a specific kind of consumption as display, which ends up in the form of 'consumption without consumption'. Hence, the notion of conspicuousness entails that consumption practices and leisure activities, together with their symbolic and wasteful dimensions, are repurposed as ways to boost social status and, in turn, as productive activities. Consequently, the conspicuousness of consumption becomes more important than consumption practices per se. In this sense, the definition of conspicuousness entails a conceptual shift from conspicuous consumption to the strive for conspicuousness as the ultimate way to accrue and signal social status. Such a shift is made possible by the strong interconnection between consumption, promotion, and production. Therefore, in a context characterised by the ubiquitous presence of self-branding and promotional strategies, not only conspicuous consumption, but also the very nature of consumption is witnessing a change.

It is relevant to stress that the concept of conspicuousness is detached from the analysis of the situational meaning of symbols, as an interactionist approach would suggest (Blumer, 1969, see also Chapter 1, Section 3.1.). Although acknowledging the importance of status symbols in signalling identity and appropriate behaviours, as well as their role in defining boundaries between different groups (Goffman, 1951), in this study the notion of conspicuousness is centred on the performative dimension of display rather than the symbolic value and meanings of status symbols.

Importantly, an understanding of micro-influencers practices in terms of conspicuousness requires considering which kinds of consumer behaviours and leisure activities are put on display. As seen in Chapter 1, conspicuous consumption has been largely changing from Veblen's time onwards, leaning towards subtler and more refined ways of expressing social status. Therefore, it becomes important to consider to what extent micro-influencers' displays can be considered as 'conspicuous' in a Veblenian sense. Content creators' practices are increasingly characterised by subtle ways of gaining and signalling social status, tending towards practices of inconspicuous consumption, as defined by Eckhardt et al. (2015) (see, Chapter 1, Section 4.2.).

Therefore, although it might seem counterintuitive, there is a strong relationship between subtle displays and the imperative logic of conspicuousness. Inconspicuous ways of gaining and signalling status are indeed subjected to the logic of display and constitute integral part of conspicuousness. This couples with another pivotal drive for micro-influencer practices, authenticity (see Chapter 1). Conspicuousness relies on the display of consumption but, at the

same time, it must be mitigated by attuning to the imperative of authenticity to fully work as a way to accrue status. Blending the literature about social media content production (see, e.g. Banet-Weiser, 2012) and status consumption (see, e.g., Eckhardt et al., 2015), I contend that authenticity is embedded in the logic of conspicuousness, giving birth to what can be called a ‘conspicuous authenticity’. Authenticity then becomes conspicuous in itself, as it is crafted to be displayed as a way to boost and maintain social status. Therefore, a connection between the logic of conspicuousness, inconspicuous consumption and authenticity can be established.

In sum, the logic of conspicuousness relies on the relevance of display – which is increasingly subtle but still showcased. Importantly, displays represent a way to signal social status and, at the same time, a productive activity aimed at the construction and maintenance of status. This leads to consider the intersection between consumption and production as another important characteristic of conspicuousness.

## **2.2. Conspicuousness and the ‘circle of prosumption’**

In line with what said so far, a reflection on the contemporary interplay between consumption and production, and its relationship with conspicuousness is needed. The theoretical perspective here proposed aims at showing how conspicuousness deploys through a ‘circle of prosumption’, whereby performative displays of consumption are repurposed as productive activities aimed at creating and signalling social status. Such a perspective derives from the necessity to reconcile the Theory of the Leisure Class and the concept of conspicuous consumption, together with the dimension of conspicuous wastefulness they imply (Veblen, 1988/2007), with the present late-capitalist context in which they are embedded – and of which social media are a key component.

Different studies in consumer research have already emphasised the productive aspects of consumption, suggesting that consumers actively engage in the social construction of the value of consumer goods, and transform symbolic meaning encoded in advertisement, brands, and other material goods to construct their identity and lifestyle (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Sassatelli, 2007). Some perspectives more than others have been stressing the increasingly blurring distinction between consumption and production and its implications. The neologism ‘prosumption’ has been used precisely to indicate an interrelationship of production and

consumption where it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to clearly distinguish one another (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010; Toffler, 1980).

While various forms of prosumption have always been present, contemporary societies are particularly imbued with these kinds of processes, so much that scholars Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010) define the contemporary economy as a form of ‘prosumer capitalism’ (see also Ritzer, 2015). An extensive body of research has been addressing the ways in which consumers are involved in production processes and have been ‘put to work’ in various context and social situations (Zwick et al., 2008), giving birth to ‘co-creation’ processes (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2000). The productive role played by consumers has been further enhanced in a context characterised by the pervasive rationalisation and McDonalised (Ritzer, 2008) of society, the progressive diffusion of the information economy and the Web 2.0, and the concomitant consideration of consumers as a source of cultural and social knowledge (see, e.g. Tapscott & Williams, 2006). As such, these processes are part of a larger configuration of labour and power peculiar of contemporary, knowledge-based capitalism (Terranova, 2004)<sup>22</sup>.

Similar processes of co-creation, which close the gap between production and consumption, can be found in the domain of branding. Arvidsson (2005; 2006), for example, drawing on the work of Lazzarato (1997), suggests that consumption can be considered a form of immaterial labour. From this perspective, consumers are involved in generating and producing an ethical surplus intended as “a social relation, a shared meaning, an emotional involvement that was not there before, which represents a brand’s economic value” (Arvidsson, 2005:237). In this sense, brands generate value by monetising the symbolic meaning-making activities of consumers (Hearn, 2008; Lury, 2004). The same principle of value creation remains when shifting from branding to self-branding. As Hearn contends, the branded self “either consciously positions itself, or it is positioned by its context and use, as a site for the extraction of value” (Hearn, 2008:199).

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<sup>22</sup> The debate around prosumption entails considering issues of power and exploitation. Existing literature argues that co-creation leads to the exploitation of consumers and the appropriation of their free labour (Terranova, 2000). Such a condition is further complicated by the dimensions of fun, enjoyment and freedom in participation which characterise production processes – as it is evident in the production of social media content and by self-conscious practices of self-exploitation undertaken by consumers-producers (Hearn, 2008). These processes are further fuelled by the emergence of a new form of governmentality, which consists in a modern corporate power that no longer aims at disciplining consumers and shaping actions, but instead works with and through the freedom of the consumer (Zwick et al., 2008).



Therefore, self-branding can be intended as evidence of the increasing cultural value, and potentially surplus value, that is extracted from the production of affect, desire, attention and image (ivi.). In this sense, self-branding represents another set of practices where consumption and production tend to be intertwined. Similar logics are to be found in the influencer industry. As Hearn and Schoenhoff (2015) point out, in the age of social media consumers move from being only fans to being producers of free promotional content for brands, and from occasional endorses to celebrity-seeking influencers.

Drawing on the theoretical background just outlined, I contend that conspicuousness unfolds through a circular process involving consumption and production, a ‘circle of prosumption’, whereby performative displays of consumption are repurposed as productive activities aimed at creating and signalling social status. Such a circle of prosumption is composed by the three following steps:

1. consumption practices and their display fuel the creation of a branded-self, and provide the raw material for the creation of the self-brand and promotional content;
2. the branded self and promotional content are used as a means to construct status and potentially gain profit;
3. the acquired status (and profit) are re-invested in the re-production of the branded self, and therefore represent a production process aimed at fuelling the consumption of the influencer’s persona.

Put it differently, consumption practices are not only displayed but repurposed to produce value in terms of status and profit, and oriented to fuel the consumption of the influencer’s persona, in a virtuous circle. Notably, to stress that conspicuousness deploys through a circle of prosumption is to say that the display of consumption is not exclusively an unproductive activity but is instead functional to feed and further enhance the process of status acquisition. The notion of conspicuousness thus entails a consistent difference from the Veblenian perspective of conspicuous consumption, according to which status displays are detached from production and utility (1988/2007). In line with Yuran (2016), consumption practices maintain their symbolic and wasteful dimensions as expressions of status, but at the same time are converted into productive activities aimed at enhancing that same status.

In sum, the notion of conspicuousness allows considering the display of consumption practices both as symbolic and productive activities, in a context characterised by the seamless coexistence of consumption and production. The circle of prosumption here described reinforces

even further Duffy's claim that content creators construct their activities "by re-routing *consumption* as a mode of cultural *production*" (Duffy, 2017:43, italics in the text). Differently from Duffy, however, the notion of conspicuousness stresses the role of consumption as a device functional to the production of status by means of consumption displays.

Notably, the definition of 'circle of prosumption' here proposed is in line with the reconfiguration of the practices of status gaining and signalling described in Chapter 1, and particularly with the idea of conspicuous production (Currid Halkett, 2017; Spigel, 2005; see Section 4.2.). This perspective has the merit of taking production into considerations in the dynamics of status gaining and signalling. However, it overlooks how production and consumption are intertwined to gain status, which is instead at the centre of this work.

Within this theoretical framework, the data illustrate how conspicuousness unfolds through different aesthetics of displays, used by micro-influencers to construct social status. These displays dovetail with the deployment of a circle of prosumption, which emerges in the performance of circular and wasteful consumption practices.

### **3. Constructing status through Instagram representations.**

#### **3.1. Instagram representations and aesthetics of display.**

Drawing on the visual analysis of Instagram posts, the results shed light on how micro-influencers construct status through visual representations on the Instagram platform. Specifically, the data show that the logic of conspicuousness orients the creation of different 'aesthetics of display', intended as different Instagram vernaculars functional to the creation and maintenance of status.

Following Presi et al. (2016), the results of the visual analysis are organised to provide a typology of four 'aesthetics of display', which highlights the various kinds of visual elements used to construct social status. The typology is based on two dimensions derived from the categories adopted to visually analyse Instagram posts (see Chapter 2, Table 4), represented by the two axes in Figure 1. The first dimension refers to the *quality of the picture* and includes the level of expertise vehiculated by the image (professional vs amateur photos), as well as the degree of the staging of the photograph itself (maximum vs minimum staging). The high-quality pole includes posts with a high degree of professionalism and complexity at a compositional

level; the low-quality pole, on the contrary, points to more elementary arrangements of the visual elements in the picture. The second dimension is that of *display*, which includes brand and object/service display, and varies from overt to subtle display. In addition, the four aesthetics are characterised by different types of pictures and the type of products/services showcased (see Chapter 2, Table 4). Each quadrant in Figure 1 represents a typical aesthetic of display performed by micro-influencers on Instagram. The typology accounts for the descriptive and compositional level of the visual analysis. Furthermore, each of the aesthetic here proposed is characterised by specific social situations and expressive categories, which represent the interpretative level of the visual analysis. It is useful to recall here that the expressive categories emerging from the analysis point out that Instagram posts may vehiculate a sense of: a) affordability, intended as an economic and financially accessible lifestyle; b) affluence, intended as a financially costly and out of reach lifestyle (see Chapter 2, Table 4).

Figure 2 shows one exemplar photo from each type of aesthetic, while Table 6 shows the occurrences of the main visual categories in the corpus.

**Figure 1. Types of aesthetics of display**

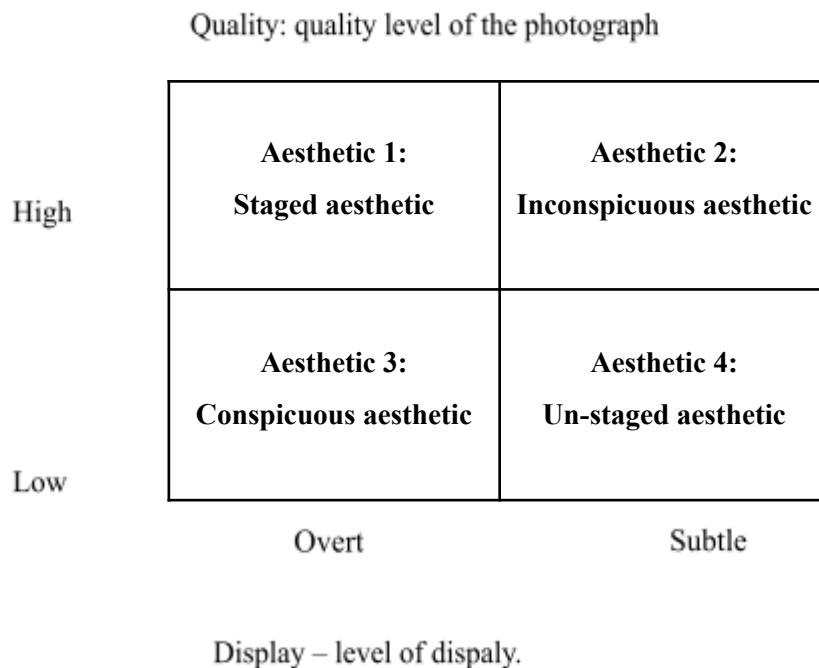


Figure 2. Representative examples of aesthetics of display

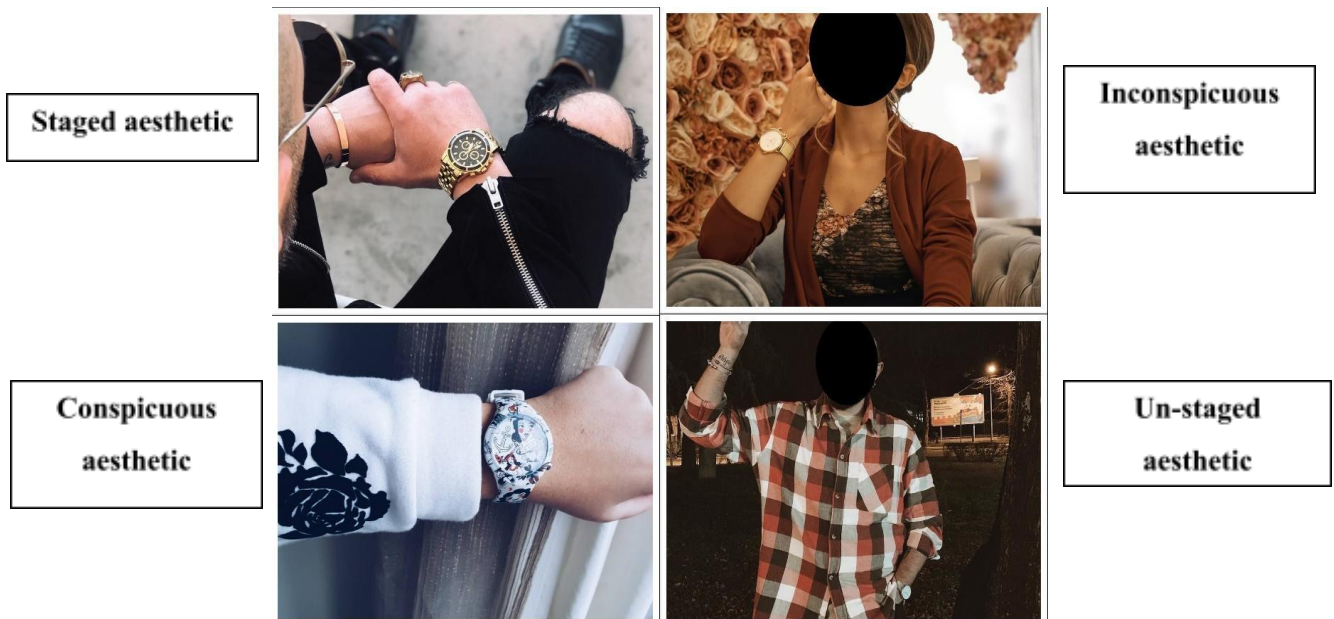


Table 6. Visual content analysis – Main categories and occurrences count (%)

	Conspicuous aesthetic	Inconspicuous aesthetic	Staged aesthetic	Un-staged aesthetic
<b>Type of image</b>				
Portrait	26,51%	100,00%	69,64%	76,47%
Selfie	10,84%	-	5,36%	23,53%
Composition (object + body)	24,10%	-	12,50%	-
Object(s)	38,55%	-	12,50%	-
<b>Type of product</b>				
Product	95,18%	72,41%	94,64%	100,00%
Service	4,82%	27,59%	5,36%	-
<b>Level of expertise</b>				
Professional	43,37%	48,28%	21,43%	-
Semi-professional	13,25%	17,24%	37,50%	29,41%
Amateur	43,37%	34,48%	7,14%	70,59%

Situation				
Public event	4,82%	10,34%	-	-
Leisure	4,82%	31,03%	3,57%	11,76%
Everyday life	2,41%	6,90%	5,36%	58,82%
Self-display	22,89%	48,28%	50,00%	29,41%
Object display	65,06%	3,45%	41,07%	-

By looking at each of the four aesthetics more in detail, the *inconspicuous aesthetic* is characterised by high quality and subtle display. In these cases, consumer goods, services and brands are subtly and implicitly displayed and integrated into highly staged representations. Consumer goods and promotional content are not explicitly flaunted, but it is often necessary to read the post's caption or other meta-texts (i.e. hashtag) in order to understand what products/services are advertised. The high quality of the photos is given by their maximum degree of staging (compositional analysis), as well as by the high degree of professionalism (48,28% of professional photos). The visual content in this category is, therefore, very much refined in its compositions and professional in the realization. As the picture in Figure 2 shows, the representations in this category are very much curated in each detail and convey the impression of a professional photograph. This couples with the predominance of inconspicuous displays: products, services, and brands, aren't overtly showed off, but rather integrated into content creators' visual narrations. Specifically, they are not at the centre of the scene, nor are they attracting the viewers' attention completely but are naturally integrated in the pictures as if they were details of a complex composition.

Furthermore, the inconspicuous aesthetic is characterised by the presence of different types of services and experiences, which point to an immaterial dimension of consumption (27,59% of services). At the interpretative level of analysis, the posts in this category mostly represent leisure moments (31,03%) and self-displays (48,28%). These elements attest to the inconspicuousness of this category even further, since experiences and immaterial consumption can be considered as expressions of inconspicuous consumption practices (Eckhardt et al., 2015, see Chapter 1).

On the contrary, the *conspicuous aesthetic* is characterised by overt displays and low quality and represents the most common aesthetic in the dataset. As for the compositional level of analysis, the staging of the picture is predominantly low and medium, and such is the level of

professionalism (none of the photographs has been coded as ‘professional’). Notably, the conspicuous aesthetic is also that in which brands are more present and often overtly displayed. The predominant type of picture in this category is related to the presence of objects (38,55%), arrangements of objects and bodies (24,10%), as well as portraits (26,51%). Moreover, these are the posts in which a material dimension of consumption predominates (95,18% of ‘products’). Given these elements, the conspicuous aesthetic is characterised by overt displays and the relevance attributed to material consumption. Interestingly, overt promotional intentions can be found both in the visual and textual representations of the posts in this category. In particular, the captions accompanying the pictures are very similar to product reviews, with few variations on the copy provided by the advertising agency. The quality of the images is less sophisticated as compared to the inconspicuous aesthetic, whereas there is a high degree of display. This aesthetic can be defined as conspicuous because brands and products are openly put on display, although in most of the cases they are approachable consumer goods. Differently from the Veblenian notion of conspicuous consumption, the consumer goods showed off are not attesting wealth, but rather an affordable lifestyle, as seen more in-depth in what follows.

In the middle between these two extremes, there is the *staged aesthetic*, the second most recurrent category in the corpus. In this case, displays are overt but arranged in more complex and refined compositions (maximum and medium staging). Given the overt and at the same time elaborated display, these photographs suggest a specific project guiding the staging of pictures. Accordingly, most of the pictures in this category are professional (21,43%) or semi-professional (37,50%), and more often portraits (69,64%) and compositions (12,50%). Moreover, in these cases, the ‘object display’ (50,00%) and the ‘self-display’ (41,07%) categories are the prevailing situations in the corpus. Furthermore, self-display and object display very often overlap, and it is sometimes difficult to draw a line between these two elements. This result suggests that micro-influencers’ self-branding practices are strongly connected to the promotion of the self also in terms of bodily presence and self-presentation (Duffy & Hund, 2019). The staged aesthetic is mainly characterised by a peculiar effort at calibrating the conspicuousness of display. In these cases, brands and products are overtly displayed, and yet such displays are created to seem as effortless as possible. The relevance attributed to the staging of the picture, together with this attempt of calibrating conspicuousness, justifies the name ‘staged aesthetic’.

Lastly, the *un-staged aesthetic* is characterised by low quality and subtle display. In these cases, the staging of the pictures is low and amateur photos prevail (70,59%). The display is subtle,

given that the products and services represented are part of users' everyday lives and possessions are inscribed within users' mundane moments. Accordingly, the situation 'everyday moments' is predominant in this aesthetic (58,82%). This last category represents a residual aesthetic, with the fewer number of posts included. As Figure 2 exemplifies, the photographs in this category are very simple and amateur in their composition. At the same time, the dimension of display doesn't seem to be relevant in these representations and the kind of lifestyle proposed is usually in line with a sense of affordability.

The aesthetics of display here presented are in line with existing Instagram-related visual vernaculars (Gibbs et al., 2015) and at the same time point to the presence of various sub-vernaculars (Caliandro & Graham, 2020) specific to an influencer economy based on displays. Therefore, the aesthetics of display can be considered as a means through which the logic of conspicuousness unfolds in the context of an economy of display (Yuran, 2016). As such, they are intended as ways to produce and signal social status and differentiate various categories of content creators within the influencer economy.

In this sense, the most important insight emerging from the visual analysis is the tension between conspicuous vis-à-vis inconspicuous displays in relation to peculiar compositions and staging of pictures. The data show that inconspicuousness, in the sense of subtle displays, represents an important component at the level of micro-influencers' visual representations (Eckhardt et al., 2015). What is more, the distinction between subtle and conspicuous displays reflects different degrees of status within the economy. In fact, overt displays, especially when present in low-quality photos, are less a sign of status as compared to the more staged and inconspicuous representations. Thus, there is an inverse relationship between the level of display and status: the more overt the display, the less the status conferred to the micro-influencer, and vice versa.

In order to address further the relationship between conspicuous and inconspicuous displays, it is relevant to go more in depth with the interpretative visual analysis of Instagram posts. As seen in Chapter 2, this level of analysis focuses on the situational context which characterises each post as well as on expressive categories, which are aimed to account for the atmosphere and the feeling conveyed by the image (Rose, 2016). This part of the analysis is particularly aimed at grasping the social significance of consumption conveyed by Instagram posts. And indeed, existing research shows that Instagram users recur to peculiar visual aesthetics not only to express their identity, but also their membership in consumption cultures (Carah & Shaul, 2016; Manovich, 2016). In this vein, the results shed light on the importance of inconspicuous

displays as relevant status symbols within the influencer economy. These insights clearly emerge by looking at the *inconspicuous aesthetic*. In this case, the subtle representation of consumer goods, together with the refined display of leisure and other immaterial experiences of consumption, convey the allure of an affluent atmosphere. From Instagram representations, it emerges that with the inconspicuous aesthetic micro-influencers tend to depict themselves according to an upper-middle class status. Hence, the most refined and subtle representations are also the ones which convey a sense of high-class status. The results further confirm a tendency towards inconspicuousness as a way to convey a refined aura to consumers and, in turn, to signal their higher status (Berger & Ward, 2010; Eckhardt et al., 2015).

On the contrary, in the case of the *conspicuous aesthetic*, a sense of affordability prevails. In these cases, the overt display of goods and services can be interpreted as an attempt to mimic specific Instagram vernaculars to stress one's belonging to the influencers' arena. Such a behaviour resembles typically aspirational practices, according to which individuals adopt the preferences of aspiration groups to construct a desired social identity to be considered a member of that group, and to be accorded the same status (O'Cass & McEwen, 2004). These practices are similar to the aspirational behaviours pointed out by Marwick (2015), whereby individuals imitate the poses and attire of other micro-celebrities to increase their status. Unlike Marwick's results, however, in the case of the conspicuous aesthetic, status is constructed through the display of everyday consumer goods and the use of relatable brands. In the majority of cases, content creators overtly put on display an affordable lifestyle to stress their belongingness to the influencer category. It is such sense of belongingness that in turn allows them to accrue status (as will be seen again in Chapter 4). The conspicuous aesthetic is functional to gain status, but at the same time conceals a lower condition in the hierarchy within and outside the influencer ecosystem.

Moreover, the analysis of Instagram aesthetics of display points to the important issue of resources and inequalities. Indeed, the inconspicuous and staged aesthetics, those signalling higher status, are as well the ones related to high quality pictures and often to a professional approach to photography and content creation. Thus, the practices of conspicuous authenticity are often sustained by existing economic resources (Duffy, 2016), which allow higher-status micro-influencers to access the work of those individuals who silently support the influencer economy (such as photographers, make-up artists etc...).<sup>23</sup> Notably, these aspects are strongly

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<sup>23</sup> The presence of these professional figures surrounding influencers is testified by the semantic analysis discussed in Appendix 2.



related to the determinants and resources underpinning social status, a theme that will be further addressed in Chapter 4.

Furthermore, the other relevant aesthetic emerging from the data, the *staged aesthetic*, is mainly characterised by a peculiar effort at calibrating the conspicuousness of display. As previously outlined, the displays in this category are conspicuous and yet organised to resemble as effortless as possible. Interestingly, the posts in this category point at two main types of consumption practices. First, high-quality pictures with an overt display of traditional forms of conspicuous consumption and Veblen goods can be found. These posts convey an upper-middle-class status representation and point to a sense of affluence. On the other hand, most of the photographs mix high quality and professionalism with the display of affordable goods, thus conveying the feeling of a more approachable lifestyle. In this sense, the staged aesthetic presents a combination of affluence and approachability, which is peculiar to the construction of the influencer persona (Abidin, 2014). The visual representation and consumption practices which characterise this aesthetic are consistent with content creators' strategies aimed at balancing the presence of promotional content in their feeds to avoid being accused of selling out (Duffy, 2017).

According to what said so far, the results show an inverse relationship between status and display: the more the quality of the picture, the less ostentatious the display and the more the status. This inverse relationship is further confirmed if we consider another dimension in the analysis: the number of followers. As seen in Chapter 1 (Section 3.2.), follower count can be a proxy for status based on attention and inscribed within the platform affordances (Marwick, 2013). By taking into consideration the mean of followers of the profiles in each aesthetic, a relationship between follower count and aesthetics of display emerges. In particular, the more refined aesthetics in terms of quality of the picture and subtle displays (inconspicuous and staged aesthetics) are performed by users with a higher average number of followers (191.618,24). Conversely, the conspicuous aesthetic and the un-staged aesthetic are performed by users with a more limited follower count (on average 35.226,88 followers). The connection of the four dimensions here considered – quality of the picture, display, expressive categories, and follower count, further confirms that subtler and staged displays corresponds to a higher position in the influencer ecosystem.

In line with existing literature in consumer research (see, e.g. Berger & Ward, 2010), less ostentatious forms of displaying goods and services play an increasingly important role in the economy of display on Instagram. Yet, subtle ways of signalling status need to be constantly

performed and overtly displayed following the logic of conspicuousness in order to effectively function as ways to accrue and express social status. The empirical findings show that visually sophisticated aesthetics and affluent lifestyles are compensated with subtle displays, which render status still present, but in a less flaunted way, as seen for the inconspicuous aesthetic. On the other hand, the overt display of goods and services is mitigated with staged compositions which mix the display of consumer goods with an affordable lifestyle, as in the case of the staged aesthetic. These results are in line with content creators' use of authenticity as a strategy aimed at downplaying their status to remain relatable towards their public (McRae, 2017, see Section 2.2. and 4.4.). In this case, authenticity is not only staged (Abidin, 2016a), but also constantly put on display. Therefore, the data show that authenticity becomes in itself conspicuous, as it is constantly and performatively displayed to construct social status. That's why it is possible to talk of a 'conspicuous authenticity' performed by micro-influencers to accrue status. The concept of conspicuous authenticity is here used to describe a set of subtle and inconspicuous ways of signalling social status which nonetheless need to be overtly displayed. The performance of authenticity is in line with the decline of conspicuous consumption as traditionally conceived, which becomes a stigmatized signifier of nouveaux riches, wannabes and conformists (Berger & Ward, 2010). Something similar happens in the context of the influencer economy, where the performance of a conspicuous authenticity represents a way to take distance from newcomers and wannabes and their ostentatious aesthetics. Therefore, authenticity and conspicuousness represent two important and complementary logics orienting micro-influencers' practices.

In sum, from the analysis of Instagram data, it emerges that micro-influencers construct social status by employing four main aesthetic of display, characterised by various descriptive, compositional and expressive elements and related to different positions in the status hierarchy. The results highlight an existing tension between overly visible, conspicuous displays on the one side, and inconspicuous and subtle ones on the other. Inconspicuous displays are much more related to immaterial, sophisticated, and affluent forms of consumption, and correspond to higher ranks in the influencer economy. Hence, inconspicuousness represents a pivotal status symbol and a way to create status within the influencer economy. Notably, inconspicuousness, at the level of Instagram's representations, still needs to be displayed in order to function as a symbol of status. In this context, authenticity falls under the logic of conspicuousness and, therefore, enters the circle of prosumption. Ultimately, the data highlight that status is displayed

and at the same time reproduced in an iterative process. In this sense, consumption practices, when properly displayed, become productive in themselves.

### **3.2 The circle of prosumption: practices of wasteful and circular consumption**

After having analysed the aesthetics which characterise Instagram posts, the study of Instagram Stories affords to go more in-depth with the understanding of conspicuousness by pointing at how it deploys through the circle of prosumption. By looking at Instagram Stories, this paragraph provides visual as well as discursive insights about the performative practices through which conspicuousness unfolds, paying specific attention to two emerging dimensions of consumption: wastefulness and circularity. Wasteful and circular consumption are here addressed as two practices which characterise the circle of prosumption. As previously stated, such a circle of prosumption is functional to the construction of social status.

Given that the influencer industry heavily relies on an economy of display (Yuran, 2016), the need for a large amount of consumer goods and services to be showcased is an important issue for micro-influencers to face. In this context, it is possible to see processes of product accumulation and display, together with practices aimed at draining the huge quantity of consumer goods possessed by content creators. Micro-influencers' practices are therefore characterised by an element of *wastefulness* intrinsic to conspicuousness. The notion of wastefulness here adopted refers to the possession of goods and the accumulation of services beyond utilitarian necessity and represents an important condition to take part in the economy of display.

The dimension of wastefulness emerges from the visual and discursive representations of material consumption found through the analysis of Instagram Stories. Practices of *wasteful consumption* clearly emerge when content creators showcase their collections of fashion or beauty items. This is for example the case of Anna, a fashion influencer who uses Instagram Stories to guide her followers in real 'tours' of her closet. In one of these occasions, she showcases her collection of blazers aesthetically sorted by colour. The camera slowly moves along the collection, while in the background the audience can hear Anna's voice saying: "*yes I know, I have a thing with blazers*". Her tone of voice mixes satisfaction, irony, and a bit of complain. A similar expression of wasteful consumption can be found in relation to beauty products, such as in the case of Silvia. Silvia is a lifestyle blogger based in the North of Italy,

who often chats with her followers while getting ready for work every morning. On one occasion, she displays a box full of shampoos, conditioners, and hair masks that are “*waiting to be tried on*”. She stresses that those are all products she received from different brands, which are waiting to be tried on before being described (and promoted) to the audience. One last example of wasteful consumption is that of Chiara, a fashion and beauty influencer. The dimension of wastefulness here emerges when she displays a pile of boxes and gifts waiting to be unboxed and then promoted to the public. As Figure 3 shows<sup>24</sup>, the visual image is accompanied by a text pointing to the quantity of gifts received and directly asking to her following “*Unboxing now?!*”. Significantly, this is also an example of the use of Instagram Stories’ stickers as a way to engage with followers by asking them for participation and sharing the content creator’s everyday life.

**Figure 3. Wasteful consumption, an example (fabricated results)**

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<sup>24</sup> The visual results from the analysis of Instagram Stories are here presented by following the fabrication method (Markham, 2012), which consists in the re-creation of the results starting from the empirical material and maintaining its meaning, but changing some details in order to preserve users’ privacy (see Chapter 2 for a full account of the methodological approach and the ethical issues related to the analysis of Instagram Stories). Therefore, the Stories here displayed were recreated by the author following the content, style and aesthetic of the original content.



All these examples point to the dimension of wastefulness by documenting the accumulation of material goods and experiences and the possession of products beyond mere necessity. These elements are expressed thanks to the visual display of such accumulation and through textual and audio content that stress it even further.

As previously seen, the wasteful dimension of consumption represents a crucial component of conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1988/2007) and the economy of display (Yuran, 2016). In line with the notion of economy of display proposed by Yuran (2016), the results point out that wastefulness is repurposed as a productive means to accrue status. Therefore, wasteful consumption represents one of the practices that constitute the circle of presumption. The productive dimension of wastefulness is consistent with the symbolic meaning undertaken by consumer goods and, in this specific case, by their accumulation (Yuran, 2016). In line with the definition of an economy of display, consumer goods and services are accumulated, used, and displayed beyond their utilitarian value to produce the self-brand and, in turn, accrue social status. This is not to express a value judgement on influencers and their activities; rather, it is to

stress the dimension of display and consumption beyond necessity which their practices entail. In this sense, the results show that the nature of consumption in itself is changing. The logic of conspicuousness entails that consumption is performed to be displayed and it is more similar to promotional practices and displays rather than consumption per se. This is an example of what was referred to as ‘consumption without consumption’, where the dimension of display of consumption prevails over that of consumption.

Besides the tendency to over-accumulation, the data highlight one more time a tension arising when the imperative of displaying and giving the impression of consumption clashes with that of authenticity (Duffy, 2016). Instagram Stories play a pivotal role in the negotiation of creators’ authenticity, insofar as they represent a means through which they can construct their persona as relatable (Duffy & Hund, 2019). In this sense, the performance of authenticity is characterised by practices aimed at mediating the intrinsic wastefulness of consumption in an economy of display. To do so, the first strategy adopted is that of stressing the micro-influencers accountability by exposing the choices behind their promotional practices on Instagram Stories. This point is evident in the case of Manuela, a 25-years-old fashion influencer, who dedicates an entire set of Stories to account for her promotional activities (for a total amount of 29 single Stories). Notably, she points out that:

“I want to make clear that I only choose those products, say a fashion item or a beauty cream, that I really like, those I think have a good quality, and that I would buy myself! I consider myself lucky ‘cause I have the opportunity to try different products... that’s why I think it’s important to be honest with you girls who always support me!”

Arianna, another fashion influencer, stresses this point even further when, putting on her mascara and looking directly in the camera, she states:

“You know you can always trust me... As you can see, I’m using the make-up I’ve been gifted, and I test the products I receive... I’m not like those bloggers who just want free products without even using them!”

In their narrations through Stories, content creators tend to underline the importance of testing, trying, and using the products they receive. The necessity of display is reaffirmed, but it is as well accompanied by a critique of the idea of ostentatious waste. Hence, not surprisingly, content creators profess themselves against the idea of an ostentatious display of consumption for its own sake. This element is in line with the ongoing activity of creating a self-brand, of which their self-narration through Instagram Stories represents a key component. Moreover,

these are other examples of how authenticity is subsumed by the logic of conspicuousness. Once again, this form of authenticity needs to be displayed, in this case by means of Instagram Stories.

Besides the performances of wasteful consumption, micro-influencers are also involved in the performance of a *circular consumption*, which consists in alternative ways of acquiring and draining consumer goods. Practices of circular consumption are aimed at fuelling the circle of prosumption and are therefore functional to micro-influencers' acquisition of status. Moreover, the performance of a circular consumption represents another way to compensate for the wastefulness of their consumption, and, therefore, as a way to construct conspicuous authenticity.

Practices of circular consumption respond to the need for acquiring the large amount of consumer goods necessary to work within an influencer economy of display. The empirical data show that micro-influencers collect and accumulate consumer goods by means of different strategies, such as borrowing and renting items (e.g. clothes, shoes, bags...). For example, by looking at Cecilia's account, it emerges a particular strategy used to assure the accumulation and display of goods:

“Today I'm so sad! Do you remember that yellow dress I love? I had to bring it back ☹

Yes because, let me explain, some PR agencies borrow you some clothes for a certain amount of time... and then you have to return them!

It's super useful because this way I can always have new clothes to show to you, without buying them... and without having my closet full of stuff! But on the other hand, it's sad when you have to say goodbye to a dress you started to love!”

Cecilia is a content creator working in the field of sport and promoting a healthy lifestyle. She speaks while walking down the street and expresses her sadness for the loss of one of her favourite dresses. Her tone is very open and aims to include her following not only in her everyday life but also in the backstage of her activities as a content creator. Similarly, other creators in the sample reported an array of practices aimed at borrowing products (mainly clothes and accessories) from friends, ad-hoc created PR agencies, or specific websites offering the possibility to rent some products for a certain amount of time. These practices point to alternative ways of fuelling the economy of display by collecting goods through access-based consumption rather than ownership (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012). Access-based consumption emerges as a response to the need for producing a branded-self rooted in consumption. Thus,

access turns out to be a relevant mechanism underpinning the acquisition of status, as discussed in Chapter 4.

Moreover, the micro-influencers in the sample try to drain their possessions beyond necessity. A set of practices aimed at recycling or selling the items acquired thanks to advertising agencies are frequently occurring in micro-influencers' narrations. Such a behaviour is exemplified, among others, by Silvia. While showcasing and promoting various body-products she recently received as gifts, she zooms on a body cream and states:

“Sometimes you have to choose between what to keep and what to give to your friends! If you try some products, and then you keep them, it means they are high quality and really worthy!”.

This aspect is further reinforced by the text accompanying the video, saying “*I’m keeping all this great stuff for myself*”, followed by the brand-name’s mention. The excerpt above testifies the presence of gifting practices as a way to drain the large numbers of products received.

Another way in which a circular consumption is performed is through the practice of re-selling personal goods and products. This aspect emerges from Instagram Stories in different ways. Some content creators, for example, gain in small groups and organise second-hand markets and other events to sell their clothes and consumer goods. This is the case of Alessia, a fashion content creator in her early 30s. Alessia, together with others fellow micro-influencers, periodically holds what they call “The Girls’ Closet”, an initiative whereby they sell their own clothes, both acquired thanks to sponsoring activities and bought by themselves. Figure 4 shows how such small markets are communicated and advertised through Instagram Stories.

The dimension of draining products which are beyond necessity clearly emerges from these empirical insights. This is further confirmed by Manuela’s words, when she invites her followers to take part to an ‘*incredible sale*’ organised by two fellow influencers:

I’m waiting for you guys! Clothes, body products, hair products, I’ve got EVERYTHING.

There’s an entire set of professional products for curly hair (don’t ask me why).

And clothes that don’t fit me! Lol 😊

In this case, Manuela is re-selling products that she doesn’t use, but also consumer goods that are not suitable for her, such as products for curly hair when she has short, straight hair, and wrong-sized clothes. A similar strategy is that of selling items on Depop – a dedicated platform



for selling second-hand clothes and products, which is also the most popular among the micro-influencers in the sample.

**Figure 4. Circular consumption, an example (fabricated results)**

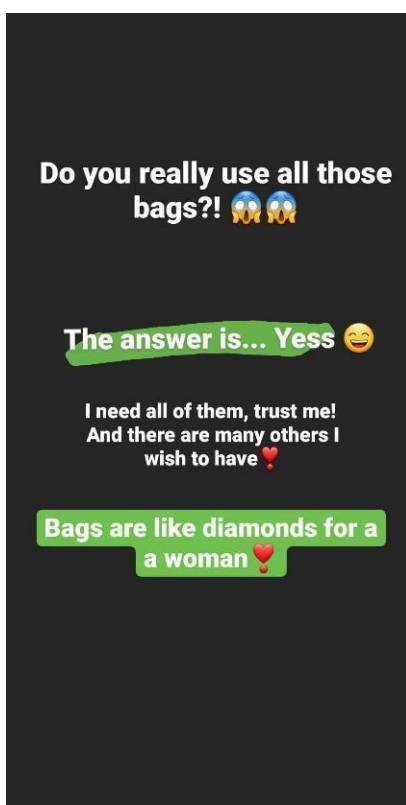


From the pervasiveness of circular consumption practices, it emerges that conspicuousness truly deploys through a circle of prosumption. The accumulation and draining of consumer goods propel the creation of a self-brand that is then ‘sold’ to followers, who are keen on appropriating sealable bits and pieces of the influencers’ persona, in an aspirational vein. Thus, the circularity of consumption represents a means for micro-influencers to create a positive connection with their following and generate an extra-income. In other words, the self-brand, created on consumption and at the same time consumed by followers, is rerouted to create status. In this sense, the relationship between consumption, self-branding and production, as highlighted by the definition of a circle of prosumption, emerges clearly. Through circular consumption practices, micro-influencers are able to increase their status both in terms of visibility and in terms of monetary income. Secondly, the data illustrate that the circularity of consumption is a

way to mitigate the logic of conspicuousness and the dimension of wastefulness it entails. Micro-influencers' status is maintained only if they can find a balance between their displays and overconsumption, and their authenticity and accountability. The risk micro-influencers are encountering relates to the accusation of “selling out” (Duffy, 2017), as well as of showing off.

If micro-influencers do not reach this balance, they risk losing their status. Throughout the qualitative analysis of Instagram Stories, it was possible to assist to an open critique of influencers' overt displays. It is the case of Simona, a 28-year-old fashion and beauty content creator. After having shared with her audience an overview of all the bags she owns, she received a veiled but overt critique from her followers. Figure 5 exemplifies the response she gave to the question “*Do you really use all those bags?*” she was recurrently asked by her following.

**Figure 5. Wasteful consumption, an example (fabricated results)**



This is an example of how content creators try to remain accountable to their following by sharing the comments and questions received, answering to them, and explaining their point of

view. In this particular case, Simona justifies herself saying that she actually uses all those bags, and prefers giving her extra ones to “*those who are less fortunate than me, those who might need them*” rather than selling them, as she herself explains. This example testifies that micro-influencers need to negotiate their displays with their following in a transparent manner. Status is indeed either conferred or negated by the content creators’ followers through direct messages and comments and the engagement rate they create. In this sense, it also emerges how influencers’ status is dependent of followers’ judgement and how content creators need to adjust their behaviours to respond to the followers’ requests and anticipating their critiques.

The results just presented show that conspicuousness is based on practices of wasteful and circular consumption, which constitute the circle of prosumption functional to the construction of status. Wastefulness, or at least the possession of consumer goods beyond mere utility, is here described as an essential component of the economy of display and, therefore, of the logic of conspicuousness. Nevertheless, status seeking behaviours, together with their wasteful component, need to be balanced by providing a sense of authenticity. As in the case of the aesthetics of display, conspicuousness relies on a calibrated balance of consumption, production, and displays. According to what said so far, the empirical data offer the possibility of reconsidering how consumption itself assumes a peculiar form, as it is imbued with practices of testing and promoting goods and services, and thus, becomes productive in itself.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In the present chapter, I proposed a definition of conspicuousness as a cultural logic based on the relevance of displays and which seamlessly blends consumption and production in the construction of social status. Conspicuousness, therefore, relies on an economy of display (Yuran, 2016) whereby the display of consumption plays a pivotal role. The importance of display is closely related to the deployment of conspicuousness through a circle of prosumption, whereby performative displays of consumption are repurposed as productive activities aimed at creating and signalling social status. In this sense, the display of consumption is part of an economy aimed not only to signal social status (as the traditional concept of conspicuous consumption entails) but also at accruing social status itself.

In this theoretical background, the data show how micro-influencers construct social status by means of different aesthetics of displays, oriented by the logic of conspicuousness. The

empirical results show that subtle displays represent increasingly important status markers in the influencer economy, attesting to the relevance of inconspicuousness. And yet, these subtle representations have to be constantly displayed to fully work as ways to accrue status. In other words, even subtle and experiential forms of signalling social status have to be performed and overtly displayed following the logic of conspicuousness in order to effectively function as status symbols. In this context, it is argued that micro-influencers try to keep together these contrasting elements by deploying practices of conspicuous authenticity. Furthermore, the results show how conspicuousness deploys through a circle of prosumption, characterised by practices of wastefulness and circular consumption. These practices are aimed at fuelling the economy of display underpinning influencers' practices and are repurposed as productive activities to gain social status.

Taken together, these elements allow us to stress some important shifts in the practices of status consumption in the context of the influencer economy. First, the importance of inconspicuousness as a status symbol is confirmed; second, status consumption is assuming innovative forms at the intersection of production and consumption in the contemporary economy. Consumption practices more broadly are as well changing, leaving space to forms of consumption as display and consumption as promotion. In this sense, micro-influencers rely on practice of 'consumption without consumption', where the dimension of display of consumption predominates.

These practices are functional to, and at the same fuelled by, an influencer industry based on the economy of display. Moreover, the circularity and wastefulness of consumption emerging from the data have relevant implications for the understanding of the determinants of status in contemporary society. In particular, the dimension of access, which has been here only hinted at, is relevant to understand the nature of conspicuousness. As the results just presented suggest, access-based consumption (Bardhi et al, 2012) can be considered in itself as a way through which status is constructed and status hierarchies formed. This entails a broader understanding of conspicuousness by taking into consideration the relationship between content creators' practices and the existing resources at their disposal. In the following chapter, I will address the issue of access and its relation to other existing resources, in order to delve into the analysis of the determinants of status in the influencer economy.

# **Chapter 4.**

## **Access-based conspicuousness and the construction of status**

### **1. Introduction**

In the previous chapter, conspicuousness was defined as a cultural logic relying on the economy of display and deploying through a circle of prosumption. Moving from these insights (see also Chapter 1).

The chapter is structured as follows. First, I will introduce the concepts of access and access-based consumption to then move to the definition of access-based conspicuousness. The theoretical framework here proposed addresses how access functions as a mediating mechanism, working in concert with economic capital, reputational capital (Gandini, 2016b) and platform's affordances. Second, I will present some empirical findings emerging from the analysis of content creators' narrations collected through in-depth interviews. The results show how micro-influencers construct status by following the logic of access-based conspicuousness in three different ways: through the search for exclusivity, the claims for belongingness, and the performance of productive leisure (Section 3.1 and 3.2.). I will stress how such practices are mediated by the intervention of access, which works either by amplifying or compensating for content creators' existing resources (Section 4.1.). Moreover, the data show that status is continuously calibrated, downplayed, and negotiated (Section 4.2.). I conclude with a broader discussion summarizing the different ways in which access-based conspicuousness contributes to drawing lines of distinction in the influencer economy and in contemporary society at large.

### **2. Theoretical Framework. Access-based conspicuousness: the role of access in constructing status and shaping status hierarchies.**

#### **2.1. The definition of access-based conspicuousness**

One of the main points addressed in this research is how the processes of status acquisition are changing in the contemporary society, and how this relates to specific determinants of social status. As anticipated in previous chapters (Chapter 1 and Chapter 3), existing research highlights a change in status consumption from the importance attributed to ownership towards an increasingly relevance attributed to access-based consumption (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012; Rokka & Canniford, 2016). Access-based consumption is a new modality in consumption, characterised by the redefinition of ownership (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012). Through this modality of consumption, individuals acquire time with an item and pay for the use, and not the possession, of an object or service. In this way, consumers attain benefits either by gaining the right to use goods and services, or by rental/access-based payments, rather than by owning them (ibid.). Therefore, access represents a different modality of consumption as compared to ownership and sharing (see, e.g. Belk, 2014), which has benefitted from the contextual enhancement of digital technologies (Rifkin, 2000) and the development of an experience economy aimed at monetizing intangible goods and experiences (Pine & Gilmore, 2011). In this context, existing research has highlighted that access plays an important role in status consumption, having relevant hedonistic and status given motivations (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012). While in the recent past access was stigmatised and considered an inferior consumption mode as compared to ownership, nowadays it has been revalued as a means to accrue and signal social status (Bernthal et al., 2005).

Building on this literature, in this work the notion of access is not exclusively considered as a modality through which consumption deploys, but as a fundamental element which characterises production-consumption practices and shapes many of our ways of understanding the contemporary digital society (Bardhi & Eckhardt 2012; Rifkin, 2000). More specifically, access is considered as a pivotal mechanism which concurs to shape the processes of status construction, as well as the constitution of status hierarchies. The theoretical framework here adopted draws on the notion of access-based consumption and extends further its meaning, by looking at the role that access plays in mediating the acquisition and ownership of consumer goods and services, and the implications of these practices in the construction of status.

In particular, it is argued that the acquisition and maintenance of status are granted by the logic of *access-based conspicuousness*, which is characterised by the reconfiguration of the purchase, use, and possession of goods and services. Indeed, access represents an important element underpinning the logic of conspicuousness. In this sense, conspicuousness is strongly intertwined with access as a mechanism mediating the acquisition of status. The role of access is

particularly important because it is functional to fuel micro-influencers' displays of consumption (as already outlined in Chapter 3). Conspicuousness, therefore, relies on a peculiar form of access, that allows for the coexistence of acquisition and provision with the purchase of goods and services. First, there is a reconfiguration of goods' acquisition: as it will be addressed further in what follows, access relies on the maximisation of reputation capital. Secondly, the notion of ownership is more labile and extended. Indeed, ownership becomes, to some extent, temporary and functional to accumulation besides mere utility. To put it simply, the acquisition of consumer goods is mediated by the self-brand and reputational capital, which grant access to products, services, and experiences. In this way, the mediation of access entails innovative relationships between individuals' resources, the possibility to purchase and own goods, and the political economy of digital platforms (particularly Instagram in this case), in reciprocal interaction.

In this vein, access can be considered an important mediating mechanism underpinning the logic of conspicuousness and, as such, a lifestyle facilitator (Bernthal et al., 2005). Bernthal and colleagues (2005), with reference to credit cards, argue that lifestyle facilitating technologies promote and increase individuals' level of participation in the contemporary consumer culture, with relevant consequences in the construction and signal of social status. Analogously, in the influencer economy, status positions are accorded by the mediating role of access, which, working as a lifestyle facilitator, provides the impression of accessibility, ownership and use, regardless of the effective lifestyle and resources of individual content creators. Thus, access works as a lifestyle facilitator as it enables consumers to participate in lifestyle spaces that could not be accessible otherwise (Bernthal et al., 2005; Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012).

The notion of access as a lifestyle facilitator has relevant implications for the understanding of status in relation to the resources (e.g. economic, social, cultural) underpinning its construction and accumulation. This concept apparently fuels a sense of democratization, which is further enhanced by the digital nature of social media and the seemingly equal possibilities they offer to each user. However, the intervention of access is not entirely free from constraints, nor it is detached from existing resources and the digital economy of platforms. One more time, the optimistic perception of equal opportunities leaves room to the persistence of already existing inequalities – in terms of class, class status, and gender, among others. Indeed, access dovetails with other existing resources and can work either as an amplificatory or a compensatory mechanism. In the first case, there is a virtuous circle between already existing resources and the mediation of access. On the other hand, access works as a compensatory mechanism when it

provides the possibility to enhance one's social position, or at least the impression of it, by compensating for the lack of existing resources. Hence, as the results will make clear, access doesn't work as an equalizer, but can reinforce and maintain already existing inequalities. Disentangling the functioning of access and its relationship with conspicuousness represents an opportunity to grasp the persistent inequalities within the influencer economy from a different and still overlooked perspective. Exactly for this reason it is important to consider how access intersects with micro-influencers' resources and the Instagram platform's architecture.

## **2.2. Status determinants and the mediating role of access**

According to what said so far, access can be considered as a mechanism of mediation, as it offers possibilities to access goods, services, and experiences. Importantly, the mediation of access dovetails with content creators' existing resources, specifically economic and reputational capital, and is influenced by specific platform's affordances. Therefore, it is important to delve deeper into the analysis of contemporary status determinants, here analysed at the intersection of reputational capital, economic capital, metrics and their generative power, and the mediating role of access. This entails a strong relationship between conspicuousness as a cultural logic, self-branding as a set of practices, and reputation as currency – all elements which concur to the acquisition status as the final outcome.

As previously outlined (see Chapter 1, section 3.2.), reputation is “the general public feeling or sentiment about a product, person or service” (Hearn, 2010:422), crafted over the judgements made upon information publicly available (Marwick, et al., 2010, in Gandini 2016a). With the rise of the Web 2.0 and social media, reputation has become the aggregation of attention and affect which can be mobilised to extract value, and it is constructed and maintained through self-branding (Hearn, 2010). In his work about freelance knowledge workers in Milan and London, Gandini (2016a; 2016b) makes clear that self-branding combines the curation of a branded persona with the strategic management of social relationships, built around a shared notion of reputation as value. Therefore, reputation is constituted by a set of performative practices, and represents, at the same time, an asset to be leveraged.

In a similar way, micro-influencers construct reputational capital as an asset to be leveraged to accrue status. They do so by branding their personae and nurturing their publics to obtain attention and engagement. In other words, the curation of the influencer persona through



self-branding practices, together with the mediation of access, is functional to the acquisition of reputation as currency (Gandini, 2016b). Reputational capital, indeed, represents an asset to leverage to gain access to free products and experiences and, conversely, access allows for an increase in reputational capital. Hence, access and reputational capital are the two sides of the same coin, as they fuel each other reciprocally. In sum, there is a recursive relationship between access, self-branding, and reputational capital, which work in reciprocal interaction in the construction of status and status hierarchies. It is important to remember that there is a clear distinction between status and reputation (as pointed out in Chapter 1, Section 3.2.). On the one hand, reputation represents an asset based on the evaluation of one's actual or perceived qualities, which is maintained through self-branding and accumulated as a capital. Status, on the contrary, indicates one's prestige and one position in society. Therefore, reputation can be considered as a determinant for status.

Notably, access and reputation intersect with the platform's architecture. Digital technologies and social media allow reputation and status to be measurable and tangible through different indicators, such as platforms' metrics. It is therefore important to consider how access and access-based conspicuousness are connected to the platform's metrics and the power they exert (Beer, 2016). Metrics are here considered as productive measures (Beer, 2015), that is, measurements which produce outcomes as well as measuring them (*ibid.*). This is in line with an understanding of metrics as a complex and prominent component of the social, "as they come to act on us and as we act according to their rules, boundaries and limits" (Beer, 2016:4). In this sense, metrics provide the 'politics of possibilities' (Amoore, 2013, in Beer, 2015) for content creators to operate within the industry. Even more, they set some constraining limitations to the access to goods and services and concur to fix influencers' positions in the status hierarchies. In this sense, metrics can be considered as important elements that shape the mediating action of access, and hence intersect with other determinants of status.

In addition, it is worth acknowledging that financial resources keep on playing an important role in the creation of status and status hierarchies. As Duffy (2015), among others, notes, economic capital is pivotal in granting access to the creative industries and necessary to perform the work of content production. In this research, financial resources are particularly important as they feed the construction of reputation and, at the same time, fuel the possibility of accessing goods and services. Therefore, the acquisition of status is as well influenced by the presence of content creators' economic capital. In this vein, the results will show that access is far from working as

an equaliser. It is instead influenced by the interrelationship between reputation capital, financial resources, and the platform's affordances.

As a final, but necessary, remark, the reference to status in relation to reputational capital calls into question a reflection on the Bourdieusian definition of status in terms of taste hierarchies and symbolic capital (1984; 1989). As seen in Chapter 1 (Section 3.1.), throughout his work Bourdieu defines status in terms of taste hierarchies based on cultural consumption and created by the classificatory intervention of habitus. Moreover, he defines as symbolic capital the form that various types of capital (economic, social, or cultural capital) assume when they are perceived and recognized as legitimate. As such, symbolic capital constitutes the basis for claiming for prestige and status in a given field (Bourdieu, 1989; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

The notion of field is particularly important for Bourdieu, as it points the attention to the relational and dynamic struggles for legitimacy and power. According to Bourdieu, the field represents an analytical space of social positions constituted by the interdependence of entities and structured internally in terms of power relations (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). The field is a relatively autonomous domain of activity that responds to rules of functioning and institutions that are specific to it and which define the relations among the agents (Hilgers & Mangez, 2015). Each field is then a structured space organized around specific types and combinations of capital. As Bourdieu and Wacquant point out, "social agents are bearers of capitals and, depending on their trajectory and on the position they occupy in the field by virtue of their endowment (volume and structure) in capital, they have a propensity to orient themselves actively either towards the conservation of the distribution of capital or towards the subversion of that distribution" (1992:108-9). Hence, the notion of field is particularly important to stress the ongoing struggle over the unequal distribution of capital aimed at imposing a definition of legitimate recognition (ivi). In this context, the accumulation of symbolic capital permits to secure a monopoly over the definition of the forms of legitimacy prevailing in the field (Hilgers & Mangez, 2015).

The framework of field theory has been tangentially applied to the analysis of influencers by scholar Kelley Cotter (2019). In her work, Cotter claims that influencers undertake a visibility game aimed at outsmarting the Instagram algorithm and gain visibility (ibid.). She stresses that such a visibility game inherits many features of Bourdieu's field theory, and in particular the process of acclimation to the rules defining the field, the struggle for accumulating various forms of capital and "an understanding of behavior as resulting from an interrelationship between structure, habitus, and strategy" (Cotter, 2019:2). Yet, unlike Bourdieu, the rules

underlying the visibility game are made explicit and material in the form of algorithms and platform policies.

Following the limits of Bourdieu's theory highlighted by Cotter (2019), this work proposes to understand status and status hierarchies stressing their performative dimensions by focusing on display and access, both important dimensions of conspicuousness. Although acknowledging the relevance of the Bourdieusian concepts of taste, symbolic power, and field, in this research I offer a perspective building on conspicuousness as a logic based on display and deploying through a set of performative and strategic practices. As already shown in the previous chapter, micro-influencers are involved in active, conscious, and ongoing attempts to construct status in an economy of display (see Chapter 3). In this sense, I contend that the processes of status acquisition under a logic of conspicuousness cannot preclude from strategic self-branding practices. This is why the fluid, performative and explicit nature of reputational capital is preferred to the notions of symbolic capital and field. Indeed, as previously outlined, reputational is continuously constructed as capital (Gandini, 2016b), which could also be leveraged to accrue status and has, therefore, become a pivotal status determinant of contemporary society.

Moreover, by adding the dimension of access to the picture, this work aims to provide an analysis of the complexities of contemporary status hierarchies by accounting for the mismatches between status, lifestyles, and micro-influencers' resources. In his work, Bourdieu (1894) argues for a homologous relationship between the distribution of capitals, the different tastes mediated by habitus and lifestyles – the elements which concur to form the 'social space'. On the contrary, in the present research I suggest the presence of a non-linear relationship between micro-influencers' resources, which are mediated by the intervention of access, and the acquisition of status. The notion of access-based conspicuousness, therefore, points out that the relationships between the different levels of the social space are much more nuanced and complex than a homologous relationship would entail.

In sum, the influencer economy as a case study points to micro-influencers' constant strive for status and for the construction of a position in a hierarchy. These processes are at the same time a claim for, and a display of status, which rely on ongoing and strategic self-branding practices and the maximisation of reputational capital. This is not to say that influencers' actions are exclusively oriented towards strategic aims, without any component of hedonism, pleasure, and identification (see, e.g. Belk, 1988). Rather, it is to stress that the logic of conspicuousness is more likely to unfold through strategic and explicit practices rather than pre-reflexive ones. As

the empirical results will show, this also entails that status is strategically calibrated, downplayed and negotiated.

In conclusion, the perspective of access-based conspicuousness provides useful insights for the understanding of status and status hierarchies in contemporary Western societies. The results will illustrate how such access-based conspicuousness deploys and informs practices aimed at seeking exclusivity, claiming for belongingness, and performing productive leisure. Moreover, the data make possible to stress how access works as a mediating mechanism, in its intersection with economic capital, reputational capital and the platform's affordances.

### **3. Access-based conspicuousness and the enactment of social status.**

#### **3.1. Seeking exclusivity, negotiating belongingness**

The results show that micro-influencers construct status by following the logic of access-based conspicuousness, which deploys by either accessing exclusive brands and products or claiming for belongingness to the influencer category. Such practices are mediated by the possibility of gaining free products accorded to content creators' self-brands and using reputation as currency. Therefore, the results illustrate how access works as a mediating mechanism that contributes to the acquisition of free goods, services and experiences, and fuels what has been called access-based conspicuousness.

First, micro-influencers seek for exclusivity through the consumer products and the brands they decide to display. According to Dion and Borraz (2017), the analysis of brands is pivotal because the negotiation of a position in a hierarchy emerges thanks to the creation of status games which often happen via interaction with brands. In content creators' accounts, exclusivity is described as the possibility of accessing scarce goods and working with those brands which select only few creators to represent them. Exclusivity is therefore more related to brand literacy and access to exclusive brands, rather than the display of luxury brands. Lara, a content creator who lives in Milan and works in the field of fashion, states:

When the brand Coccinelle contacted me, I was sooo flattered! They choose just a few influencers for their campaigns so, you know... and then, it's a brand I really really love, and so I was all like 'wow'... 'cause they chose me to represent them at the Fashion Week!  
(Lara, 27, F)

As it emerges from Lara's words, brand reputation becomes an important vehicle of status among micro-influencers. Not only content creators stress their devotion to a brand as a means to balance the promotional dimension of their content with a more spontaneous one (Duffy, 2016). Also, they create a temporary, affective, relationship with specific brands in order to attract attention, in a way similar to the creation of a brand public (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016). The importance of affect and brand devotion is confirmed by Ada, when she states: "*I was so happy 'cause among all the influencers they chose ME*" (emphasis emerging from the interview). In this sense, another pivotal feature of exclusivity is the establishment of intimate and long-lasting relationships with the brand, the PR, or the marketing agency. Such a relationship is considered as a sign of exclusivity and hence as status.

The empirical findings show that within the influencer ecosystem, limited access, brand reputation and the creation of affective relationships are three ways to construct exclusiveness and to accrue status. Notably, the kind of exclusivity strived for in this domain is decoupled from the mere display of wealth and luxury. On the contrary, status is related to brand reputation, the creator's brand literacy, and the possibility to attain exclusive access to important brands. One more time, status is decoupled from the display of wealth as in the Veblenian definition of conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1899/2007), although the relevance of display persists. What is particularly valued in the influencer economy is the aura of exclusiveness a brand or company has and, more importantly, confers to the content creator persona. Importantly, then, the strive for exclusivity is tightly related to the maintenance of the self-brand more generally. Christian, a 30-year old travel blogger who travels around the world as a content creator, explains the constant labour underneath the creation and maintenance of exclusivity which characterises his everyday choices as follows:

When I have to choose whether to accept a partnership or not, the brand's prestige is one of the first elements I take into account. That's because my positioning in the field is very much important so... for example, if a discount market asks me to sponsor some sweets for 50.000 euros, and the most refined pastry brand offers me 10 euros, for me, it's better to choose the refined pastry brand... because this puts in motion a chain of events that posit you up or down. This is the strategy I'm following... For example, I dismissed some offers from brands which didn't have the same or higher level of prestige of the other brands I had worked with... otherwise, I would have spoiled my Instagram feed, and in the end, my Instagram feed is my business card... (Christian, 30, M)

From this excerpt, it is clear that the exclusivity of a brand represents a sort of career achievement for micro-influencers. Once content creators start working with more prominent brands, they have to avoid the risk of taking a step back with a less important one, as Christian states. Implicit in this and similar accounts is that exclusive brands are also those with a more prominent position in the influencer economy, both in terms of budget and prestige. Sponsoring an exclusive brand represents both a career achievement, and a marker of status. It orients content creators' future practices, particularly when they have to choose whether to align their personae to a brand or not. Consequently, the choice of a brand and/or product is not only about credibility and authenticity but is as well determined by strategic planning, following the self-branding imperative. In this sense, the management of exclusivity is a form of labour which constantly involves content creators in the curation of their self-brand and the evaluation of their career, with the more or less explicit aim of boosting their status. As such, the maintenance of exclusivity becomes an important rule to follow, as it allows content creators to go "up and down" the status hierarchy, as Christian suggests. The importance of maintaining exclusivity is further stressed by the fact that a reward in terms of exclusivity is, in some cases, even preferred to monetary compensation.

As these results point out, the maintenance of exclusivity plays an essential role in the creation of status. In particular, exclusivity is rooted in the possibility of acquiring consumer goods and service through the mediation of access. For those content creators claiming for exclusivity, access relies on an already accumulated reputational capital, which is leveraged to obtain exclusive brands and products. In this sense, it is already possible to see how access amplifies micro-influencers' resources, specifically their reputational capital, and in turn reinforces their position in the status hierarchy.

Intended as a form of exclusivity, status is not only managed, but also maintained by creating boundaries and claiming for distinction from other groups. Interestingly, some of the content creators in the sample stress the importance of preserving their status from that of "wannabe influencers", who contribute to inflate the market. This aspect clearly emerges if confronting two different perspectives, exemplified by Emma and Alice. The two girls are both in their early 30s and consider themselves as fashion content creators. While Emma has more than 100.000 followers and works full-time as an influencer, Alice started this activity only a couple of years ago, has got around 30.000 followers, and considers it more as a hobby and a gig.<sup>25</sup> Emma and

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<sup>25</sup> For more insights about the relationships between micro-influencers, status and occupation see Chapter 5.

Alice embody two different ways in which access-based conspicuousness deploys either by content creators seeking for exclusivity or negotiating belongingness.. These two perspectives evidently emerge when Emma and Alice say, respectively:

Some companies have gained, you know, kind of a lousy reputation... they send products to almost everyone out there, I mean, even if you get 2k followers you can have those products, and today 2k followers is nothing! So, it doesn't really mean anything if you get those products... it just means that they send perks to almost everyone, and you are just like anybody else out there! (Emma, 30, F)

A collaboration I really hoped for is the one with the brand Pixi Beauty... all the other creators I know, and who have more or less the same number of followers, they were all receiving the Pixi Beauty Box... I sent them my CV many times, but always without getting no as an answer. Then the day I finally received the Beauty Box I was so happy I started jumping for joy, 'cause I was so glad that the brand had finally decided to rely on me too. (Alice, 34, F)

These extracts show that content creators claim for exclusivity by taking distance from low-value and inflated brands, in the attempt of not being assimilated with the large mass of other content creators. Exclusivity represents a way to differentiate oneself among other micro-influencers, as the antagonism arising from Emma's words testifies. Such forms of status management represent a way in which status hierarchies are further reaffirmed.

However, the data shows that not all micro-influencers can take advantage from accessing exclusive products and brands. For another group of creators, the idea of belongingness prevails as a mechanism to claim for status. In these cases, status is constructed by claiming for belongingness to the micro-influencer category. Thus, creators at different degrees of involvement in the activity value products and collaborations following different criteria. For those at the beginning of their activity, and with a lower position in the status hierarchy, to be recognised as part of the influencer category is a remarkable achievement and represents a chance to boost one's status further. In these cases, receiving a product previously displayed by other creators in the same category (in terms of field of activity and follower count) is the sign of being recognised as content creators and hence one significant achievement in terms of status. Brands and products become badges of membership in a specific group, and this is why they work as status symbols (Berger & Ward, 2010). As Linda, a lifestyle content creator, points out:

Another brand that I worked with is Daniel Wellington, and it was a real success for me. Because you see it in a lot of other content creators' feeds... I talked about it also with other girls, and we all agreed that working with this brand is kind of a rite of passage... to really be considered an influencer... because, for example, if the brand doesn't contact you, then you are all like: why don't they choose me? Maybe I'm not good enough for their standards? (Linda, 23, F)

Linda started actively and strategically using Instagram a couple of years ago and has now reached 25.000 followers. As many other interviewees in the same position within the industry, she points out that receiving some particular goods and aspired brands means that the content creator is taking the right steps along the stairs of the influencer economy. In these cases, micro-influencers frame their acquired status as the chance to access products for free and to gain a position within the influencer industry. Access then works precisely as a lifestyle facilitator, allowing content creators to acquire goods and services by bypassing the purchasing process and using their self-brand as currency. Differently from the definition of access-based consumption, however, in this case the importance of ownership is not completely dismissed. Rather, the possession of goods, and not only their display, remains an important dimension in the processes of status creation.

In summary, the results show that status is accrued by seeking exclusivity and claiming for belongingness through the creation of specific relationships with brands and consumer goods. These practices are mediated by access intended in two different ways: firstly, as the possibility of accessing limited and scarce goods which provide a sense of exclusivity; secondly, as a lifestyle facilitator, which permits to bypass the purchasing of goods and compensate for a scarcity in reputational capital. Here it is already possible to see that in the first case access works as an amplification of resources, while in the second case it is a way of compensating for a weaker position in the economy (as will be addressed more in depth in what follows).

### **3.2. Performing productive leisure**

As seen so far, the mediation of access plays a pivotal role in sustaining the strive for exclusivity or the search for belongingness. Another way in which micro-influencers construct status by following the logic of access-based conspicuousness is through the performance of productive leisure.



As seen in Chapter 3, immaterial experiences and subtle displays play a pivotal role in the construction of social status. The narratives collected through in-depth interviews further confirm this point and allows us to stress the importance of leisure as a means to gain status. Following the definition of conspicuousness as a circle of prosumption (Chapter 3), leisurely experiences are here framed as productive activities aimed at accruing social status. In this sense, leisure represents a crucial way through which access-based conspicuousness deploys. This means that leisure and access work together to define status hierarchies.

Firstly, from the analysis it is clear that leisure is valued as it represents the last step of exclusivity. Content creators stress that another way of seeking for exclusivity is by displaying access to immaterial experiences such as events, parties, and, more importantly, travel experiences. In many interviews, micro-influencers describe the status conferred by the attendance to some specific events where they can have a preview of the upcoming beauty and fashion collection, or mundane and prestigious occasion such as the Milan Fashion Week. Thus, taking part in these experiences represent a clear status symbol within the economy, one based on access to an immaterial dimension of consumption, and that wouldn't probably be achieved without the accumulation of reputational capital. One more time, as in the case of brands, leisure confers status as it offers the chance to access limited resources. It is not only the experience in itself that confers status, but the level of uniqueness it brings and the prestige it confers. Christian expresses this point while describing some of the special moments he was lucky to experience:

I think that one of the advantages of being a content creator is having access to a series of human experiences that others cannot live... I also mean some trivial experience... for example, two years ago I was invited to attend the Saint Agata festival in Catania, Italy... I had the chance to see all the celebrations from the Major's balcony, and I thought 'this is an opportunity that only me and the few creators with me can have'! This is just a small example... or when I travelled by air balloon... so the chance to live exclusive opportunities and see things only you can see, this is a great advantage! (Christian, 30, M)

According to Christian, besides the sense of uniqueness and coolness, leisure confers status as the possibility of accessing an experience that regular people couldn't afford, or that couldn't be accessed without a specific position in the influencer economy and using the creators' reputation as a currency. In this sense, access to leisure experiences works once again as a lifestyle facilitator, as it allows micro-influencers to live moments otherwise unattainable to them.

The degree of prestige conferred by leisure activities is well testified by Sofia, a content creator posting about fashion, beauty, and travel, both to Instagram and on her blog. She was one of the first bloggers emerging in the Italian scene in 2012, and she describes the experience of being invited to fashion events in Milan as follows:

When I started to attend events in Milan, invited by various brands, it was all new for me, and it was a feeling of discovery, wonder, and privilege. Because of course if a prominent brand, or an important agency, invites you to an event, you feel kind of flattered... (Sofia, 34, F)

Besides conveying an allure of exclusivity and prestige, leisure activities, with their experiential dimension, confer visibility and attention to content creators. Such visibility, although aspired by many, is unattainable for the most. This is particularly true in the fashion field of the influencer industry, which is characterized by lower budgets and higher levels of participation as compared to other fields (e.g. automotive), and thus by a more intense competition for existing resources. Accordingly, Ada acknowledges that accessing experiences, with the consequent earning in terms of status, can only be afforded by few micro-influencers:

Well, yes, the photo's background is important because a picture taken in Dubai attracts much more attention than a picture set in Bari, my hometown! If I were to spend every morning at the hairdresser, or go every day at the spa, or travel to Costa Rica, of course my visibility would increase! But, of course, these are all experiences not available to everybody! The regular girl, like me, who occasionally goes to the spa and once a year on holidays, has less visibility.... So, I think that having money to spend can help! (Ada, 27, F)

As Ada's words highlight, those creators who can afford leisure experiences are perceived having a higher status position, both in terms of economic resources at their disposal, which can be further invested in the self-brand and in the acquisition of reputational capital, and in terms of prestige within the economy due to their visibility. This also explains the willingness of being much more involved in leisurely activities expressed by a large number of informants.

Leisure also confers status insofar as it allows influencers to convey an aspirational and glamorous aura. The mediation of access indeed allows them to display "the good life", in a very similar way to the Leisure Class described by Veblen (1899/2007). The display of such a good life, however, has to be carefully calibrated. According to a widespread stereotype, influencers are accused of wasting their time and their parents' fortunes online, which recalls the idea of influences 'doing vain things online' (Abidin, 2016a). As Christian states "*maybe it's*

*just envy, but you can be accused of wasting your time*". To counterbalance such a perception, reported by many of the informants, content creators try to represent themselves as real men and women by accounting for their ordinary activities (e.g. housekeeping) and framing their leisure time as productive. This is, for example, the case of Anna, a 48-year-old fashion influencer. In her account, Anna fiercely describes her activity as a fashion influencer as an important turning point in her life – both personal and professional. She stresses the use of her leisure time in a productive way when she affirms:

It is my mission, so to speak, to let people understand that beyond the blogger, there's a real woman, with a real life. A real woman who wakes up early in the morning, who has to do food shopping and to tidy the house and so on... she is not the kind of person wasting her time, taking selfies all the time, or laying in the bath all day long like The Blond Salad... not at all... a blogger is a woman who has to study, to be updated about fashion and cosmetics in my case, but also to keep up with all Instagram's new implementations... so when I'm not shooting, I usually spend my time studying and keeping myself updated... it's not easy you know... (Anna, 48, F)

On the one hand, these words testify the importance of attuning to a culture of authenticity, showing one's real self, the details of one's private life, and the backstage of everyday activities (Banet-Weiser, 2012).<sup>26</sup> On the other, the excerpt above tells something important about content creators' relationship between leisure and work. In line with already existing research (see, e.g. Bellezza et al., 2016), micro-influencers' leisure time is increasingly invested in a productive way, with the purpose of gaining enjoyment as well as personal improvement. The investment of one's free time becomes a strategy to try enhancing productivity (Chia, 2020) – from here, the productive dimension of leisure can be even more highlighted. It is important to stress that despite the productive value attributed to leisure time, the staging of influencers' leisurely lifestyle remains a crucial component of their activities. Previous studies already point at the contrived perfection (Abidin, 2016a) and the leisure moments effortlessly displayed by social media content creators (Duffy & Hund, 2015), all practices which hide the amount of labour necessary to perform them (ibid.). In addition to these insights, the data suggests that leisure time is not only invested for productive purposes but becomes in itself a productive activity. In

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<sup>26</sup> Interestingly, the culture of authenticity underlying these words also highlight a very gendered dimension. The everyday life which is hidden from influencers' glossy representation is a feminised labour comprising care and domestic labour, which is too often invisible and underestimated (see, e.g. Jarret, 2014).

the context of the influencer industry, therefore, leisure has two main features: first, it is a way to accrue and display status; second it is a truly productive activity. The double-faced nature of leisure is in line with the relevance of inconspicuousness as a way to display status (see Chapter 1 and Chapter 3) and with the definition of conspicuousness as a circle of presumption (Chapter 3). The essence of productive leisure is well testified by Sofia, a travel influencer with almost 150.000 followers. She states:

Travelling isn't always easy, I mean, travelling for work... it means waking up early in the morning and working 'till late at night... you don't have any breaks, not even for eating because, of course, you have to record and photograph everything, meals included... and then you go back to your hotel room, and it's maybe midnight, and you still have to work on choosing and editing the photos taken during the day... and then again you wake up at 6 a.m.... In the end, it's not a holiday at all (Sofia, 34, F)

Once again, leisure assumes the form of productive leisure, which has to be openly displayed despite its inconspicuousness in order to work as a sign of status. Therefore, similarly to the Theory of The Leisure Class, status lays in the possibility of displaying leisure activities. A crucial difference from Veblen's theory, however, is that leisure, together with the feelings of enjoyment and effortlessness that accompany it, has to be performed as a productive activity. In other words, productive leisure consists in the capitalisation of leisure, travels and experiences. As such, it is part of a broader experience economy (Pine & Gilmore, 2011), where experiences are valued as important resources for income and economic progression. As Christian further states:

If my content gives a sense of freedom and happiness, it means that I'm doing a good job. If I'm told 'what a great holiday you're doing', it is positive feedback to me, because my job is that of entertaining and I'm doing it properly! If my audience was able to see the tiredness, the alarm clock set at 6 am, or me sweating, this wouldn't be working as good communication. Because I'm not there to tell a story about how hard my job is, but how enjoyable the experience I'm living is! (Christian, M, 30)

These words highlight one more time that conspicuousness and authenticity are two sides of the same coin (see Chapter 3) and crucial elements that characterise productive leisure. This also entails the need of concealing from the outside the economic resources and reputational capital necessary to gain access to limited experiences. In this way, it emerges the role of access as a lifestyle facilitator, which also confers influencers their aspirational aura.

In relation to leisure, it is important to acknowledge that content creators do display some genuine insights of their leisure time, such as time spent with family and friends. Such activities, however, often fall under the logics of the relentless production of content and the imperative of display. In this sense, the lines between leisure and work, leisure and production are one more time blurred. In relation to this, almost half of the informants describe the downsides related to the practices of productive leisure, such as the risk of missing the experiential dimension which distinguishes travelling. Lorna and Elia are a couple of photographers who use Instagram to advertise their work and to let their photographs circulate. Being content creators is a consistent part of their job, which provides them with new job opportunities and new clients. During their joint interview, they discuss the positive aspects and the downsides of productive leisure as follows:

We have one condition: we don't accept doing live Instagram Stories when we travel. We provide the agency with recorded Stories that we publish when we come back at the hotel, back at home... that's the only way to really live the moment, and enjoying the experience you are living (Lorna, 26, F)

[...]

Yeah, I was so happy when we were in Kazakhstan, the wi-fi wasn't working, and I was forced NOT to share Stories! (Elia, 28, M, emphasis emerging from the interview)

Lorna and Elia stress that the need to constantly create content may prevent micro-influencers from living and enjoying exclusive experiences fully. These insights are particularly interesting as they show that experiences and leisure are considered as a means to accrue reputational capital more than just experiential capital, as other researches stress (see, e.g. Keinan & Kivetz, 2011). In these cases, it appears evident that the logics of self-branding and status-seeking subsume the experiential dimension of leisure. Productive leisure becomes part and parcel of the working activities performed by micro-influencers.

The dimension of access here emerges as the possibility to take part in events and different experiences thanks to the mobilisation of one's self-brand, reputational capital, and resources, in a way that would not have been possible otherwise. However, as mentioned earlier, access is not in itself democratic. The chance to access leisure activities and to leverage them to accrue status firstly depends on one's position in the industry, structured around in-built platform's metrics. Indeed, while it is quite easy to access public events, it is much more difficult to take part in more exclusive experiences such as travels, which are the most valued status symbol in the

industry. Moreover, as existing works already suggest, affording conspicuous leisure is suggestive of a luxury of time. Leisure presupposes the un-necessity of being involved in productive work and could attest to the presence of pre-existing economic capital to rely upon (in line with the Veblenian definition of Leisure Class, see also, e.g. Duffy, 2017). As further addressed in Chapter 5, the relationship between work and leisure, however, is much more complicated for the micro-influencer in the sample, as in many cases it is characterized by the co-existence of social media production and one, or more, other jobs.

In sum, leisure provides status for the sense of exclusivity it confers, the visibility it provides, and the possibility to be considered part of a peculiar Leisure Class of the digital arena. All these practices are expressions of a logic of conspicuousness based on access. Moreover, productive leisure has some downsides due to the conversion of leisure from a recreational activity into the capitalisation of one's spare time.

## **4. The mediating role of access**

### **4.1. Access as a lifestyle facilitator: between an amplificatory and a compensatory mechanism.**

From what said so far, it emerges that micro-influencers construct status through searching for exclusivity, negotiating belongingness, and performing productive leisure, all practices that express the logic of access-based conspicuousness. They deploy strategic relationships with brands, oriented by brand literacy, and leverage leisure as a relevant resource to accrue status within and outside the influencer economy. The results already highlight the role of access as a lifestyle facilitator, which provides the chance of displaying a lifestyle that would be otherwise unattainable for most of the micro-influencers in this research. Lifestyle-facilitating technologies, indeed, are aimed at facilitating the level of participation in contemporary consumer culture in a way that would not be possible in their absence (Berntal et al., 2005). Within the influencer economy, access is based on the reconfiguration of the acquisition and purchasing of goods, which are granted by one's self-brand and reputation. Moreover, it entails a new relationship to ownership, which is not the only valuable way to accrue and display status. As discussed above, access represents an important element in the re-definition of status and distinction in contemporary Western society (Eckhardt & Bardhi 2019). At the same time, access dovetails with already existing resources, and specifically with economic capital,

reputational capital and the platform's metrics. In what follows, the notion of access as a lifestyle facilitator will be further unpacked, in order to show the complexity of the processes of mediation in their interaction with existing resources. In particular, it is described how access can work either as an amplificatory of resources or as a compensatory mechanism.

Firstly, access operates in the form of an *amplificatory of resources*. The empirical data show that the content creators who can access exclusive brands and fully perform productive leisure are also those with a higher position in the economy, defined by their already acquired status. In other words, these micro-influencers already have a certain amount of reputational capital, made measurable and displayed through the platform's metrics, which assume the role of status affordances (Marwick, 2013). The possibility of accruing reputational capital and maximising it to gain prestige is also shaped by micro-influencers' economic resources. This is evident in the case of leisure activities, such as travels and exclusive experiences. In these cases, reputational capital provides the currency to access cost-prohibitive experiences and affluent lifestyles. However, the access granted by the curation of the self-brand does not entirely preclude the need for economic resources to be invested. As an example, many informants, such as Carmen, highlight that the idea of travelling for free is a misleading one. Carmen, a lifestyle content creator living in Rome, describes ironically the myth of 'travelling for free' as follows:

On the web, you usually find ads such as 'travel for free thanks to your passions'... well, it's not really like that! Or at least, it is, but you have to earn it, and to work for it... a lot... and then you don't really travel for free, 'cause unless you have 1mln followers you pay your own flight tickets... and then you leave all your photos and videos to, say, the hotel which is hosting you, so it's not travelling for free, that's for sure! (Carmen, 41, F)

As content creators make clear, the access provided by reputational capital allows them experiencing a lifestyle which would not be possible otherwise. Nevertheless, pre-existing economic capital is needed to access such experiences. Moreover, the idea of travelling 'for free' hides the amount of promotional labour influencers have to perform during and after the travel experience. In this sense, travelling for free represents another way of performing productive leisure. Interestingly, Carmen's words highlight that the possibilities offered by the mediation of access are influenced and constrained by the possession of economic resources. Moreover, it emerges one more time the staging of conspicuous authenticity (as seen in Chapter 3) as an ongoing labouring process, as the expression "*you have to earn it, and WORK for it*" highlights (see Chapter 5).

The same logics apply to tangible, branded goods. As previously hinted, only those content creators in a relatively high-status position within the economy can afford the more exclusive collaborations. In this sense, the notion of exclusivity acquires a peculiar meaning: it is decoupled from the ostentatious display of wealth, yet it is connected to the possibility of leveraging pre-existing economic resources. The role of economic capital therefore includes both the economic resources invested in the creation of the influencer's persona (Duffy, 2016), as well as in the maintenance of the self-brand and the ongoing production of reputational capital.

In these cases, access clearly works as an amplificatory mechanism – a device allowing micro-influencers to capitalise an already achieved position in the influencer economy, defined by economic resources and reputational capital. When access functions as an amplificatory mechanism, a virtuous circle between pre-existing resources and the influencer's position in the economy is instated.

As an amplificatory mechanism, access contributes to reinforce existing hierarchies based on status. Indeed, a high position in the status hierarchy, and the advantages in terms of access it provides, influence the type of rewards content creators obtain – and therefore, again, the amount of status they are conferred. In particular, those brands defined by content creators as 'more exclusive' are also the ones with higher budgets for influencer marketing campaigns and those which attribute more value to influencers' role as advertisers. As a consequence, not only they confer much more visibility, attention and prestige, but are also more likely to bestow status in terms of monetary income. And in any case, when financial rewards are not pursued, the more exclusive brands and leisure experiences offer an earning in terms of prestige, which is so much an advantage to justify the choice to work 'for free'. Even when the reward is inscribed in materiality, the consumption goods acquired in these cases have a higher use and exchange value, as compared to other average collaborations. This aspect emerges when Adele, a 36-year old lifestyle content creator living in Torino, describes a collaboration with an important Italian brand design:

In the past, I worked with XXX, which is an Italian design company. They contacted me to promote a line of organic products and told me to choose one of them as a reward... in exchange, I should have shared a discount code with my community. I really liked this idea, but I also wanted to do something more... so I asked them... why don't I create more creative content in exchange for a product with a higher value? In the end, I was able to choose two of their design chairs, which I really love, and create different posts



photographing them and stuff like this. So the product was my only pay... but still it is one of the collaborations I liked the most, I didn't earn any money but I had a high-value material reward... and then other possibilities to work with them came out after that first collaboration!" (Adele, 36, F)

The design chairs quoted by Adele have a relevant economic value, and not only an experiential one. For sure, their value is greater as compared to that of the average perk gifted in the fashion or beauty field, which represents the most common reward for the micro-influencers in this research. Therefore, inequalities in resources and access are reaffirmed both in the materiality of objects and in the degree of monetary compensation. Despite the mediating intervention of access, inequalities rooted in economic resources and supported by the platform's architecture persist.

The second way in which access works is as a *compensatory mechanism*. In this second case, access aims at compensating for a weak self-brand, a scarcity of resources to invest in it, and the consequent limited amount of reputational capital. There are different ways in which access can help compensating for the lack of resources. In the first scenario, access allows some content creators to compensate for a scarce reputational capital by relying on a relatively high economic capital, which is invested in the acquisition of visibility, attention, and prestige. In these cases, access properly works as a lifestyle facilitator allowing content creators to purchase time to use different consumer goods and to live various leisure experiences. The creators relying on access as a compensatory mechanism have the chance of buying access in order to give the impression of wealth and purchasing power. This aspect emerges in the domain of leisure and exclusive activities, as Ada's words show:

Sometimes I see creators who are spending their time at a luxury hotel, or working with the laptop by a swimming pool... how come that you can afford a lifestyle like this? You probably spent all your money to pay for the entrance to a luxury hotel, in the hope that the picture will bring you money! (Ada, 27, F)

As already pointed out, access to leisure experiences is coupled with investments in one's spare time for the curation of the self-brand and the construction of status. In this and other similar cases, accessing leisure activities recalls forms of aspirational consumption, which are often criticised not only as overly ostensible but also as inauthentic.

On the other hand, access works as a compensatory mechanism for those micro-influencers with a lower position in the economy. In these cases, access is deployed as a way to bypass the

purchasing of goods and services. Status is here conferred by the possibility of accessing and accumulating free products and perks. This element is often framed as a way of compensating for a low purchasing power, an aspect that emerges when many creators admit that, in Ada's words, "*honestly, I can't even afford buying all this kind of goods!*". Alice further articulates this concept as follows, once again discussing the brand Pixi Beauty:

I tried their products [Pixi, ndr] once, and I found them really good for their quality... I have to be honest, this was a fair reward to me, because, you know, they are not really cheap products, they cost more than what I usually spend on cosmetics... I bought some of them once, just to try, and then I was happy because I had them for free (Alice, 34, F)

Access represents a compensatory mechanism as it provides compensation for a shortage of economic resources and a low position within the industry. Once again, access as a compensatory mechanism reflects the extent to which content creators' practices remain inscribed within the domain of consumption. In this sense, access represents an essential determinant for accruing status, yet it does not completely supplant ownership as a status symbol, which remains especially valuable for those lower in the status hierarchy. Although inscribed in the materiality of products, the compensation offered by the access to consumer goods is considered by the micro-influencers in the sample a fair reward to their work. Access therefore provides the sense of a perceived social mobility rooted in consumption and in the possibility of accumulating free products.

In the two scenarios which characterise access as a compensatory mechanism, metrics are ways to account for and display status as well as devices exerting some kind of power and concurring to the definition of status hierarchies. Independently from class status and economic resources, the aspiration to acquire a higher position in the status hierarchy of the influencer economy can be challenging. This is evident if considering the role of metrics as discussed by the content creator themselves:

it is difficult to get the attention of high-end fashion brands... unfortunately, you can't escape from it. If you want to work with important brands you need to have a certain amount of followers; otherwise, you just CAN'T, because you need at least 100k follower to receive some kind of products and work with those brands such as Chanel and Dior (Ada, 27, F, emphasis emerging from the interview)

From the results emerges that metrics truly work as productive measures (Beer, 2015). Content creators recognise that it is difficult to preclude from one's position in the status hierarchy,

defined in terms of reputational capital and displayed by means of status-metrics. On the contrary, it is necessary to follow the rules of the game as dictated by the constitutive power of metrics and analytics (Beer, 2016), in concert with economic resources. Despite the criticism to a like-driven economy and the risks of falsification, follower and like counts keep on providing the politics of possibilities for content creators' practices (Amoore, 2013, in Beer, 2015), exerting they inertial power, and contributing to the creation of status hierarchies.

Therefore, the results point at the different ways in which access functions as a mediator, either by amplifying or compensating for existing resources. Notably, however, the processes here described are not linear. In the next section, the contradictions and misalignments characterising the processes of status acquisition will be highlighted.

#### **4.2. Calibrating, downplaying, and negotiating status.**

The processes of status acquisition so far described are not at all linear. On the contrary, status displays, and micro-influencers' resources, as well as the possibilities offered by access, are to be calibrated, downplayed, and negotiated in order to truly work as a sign of status.

In this sense, the first element worth of attention is how micro-influencers perform practices aimed at calibrating their status. Content creators' resources need to be calibrated according to the characteristics of their audience and following the self-branding mantra. As previously said, within the influencer economy, seeking for status is usually decoupled from the display of wealth and conspicuous goods, and the cultivation of a subtler form of exclusivity is preferred (see Chapter 3). In line with previous works (Duffy, 2016; 2017), in this research micro-influencers tend to calibrate the conspicuousness of their practices as a strategy to further accrue status within the industry. In this light, a portion of the content creators in the sample expresses concern about the practices of conspicuous consumption in a Veblenian sense, stressing the contradictions that accompany the ostentatious display of luxury and high-end consumer goods. Asia is a fashion blogger and fashion influencer with around 70.000 followers. During the interview, she describes the difficulties she is encountering in maintaining her audience engaged:

If you look at the more successful influencers, they all give you the idea of accountability; they are someone with whom you can identify with... if they [the followers] see you as more refined, sophisticated, they may think you are not within their reach... [...] that's why

I define myself as ‘posh and pop’, because if you mix a posh lifestyle with a more pop one, you are more likely to have more following and more engaged followers. (Asia, 34, F)

Asia claims that mixing ‘posh’ and ‘pop’ elements is a strategy useful to maintain a large audience and, at the same time, preserve her true “*passion for fashion, luxury, and lifestyle*”. In this and other similar cases, the display of a conspicuous lifestyle *a la* Veblen is considered a valuable strategy to pursue as long as it allows for reaching a specific target. The possession of financial resources and a refined taste needs to be diluted with the feeling of approachability and relatability, typical of social media content producers (Duffy, 2017; as also seen with the aesthetics of display in Chapter 3). Blending conspicuousness and relatability is thus pivotal to assure the construction of status. Notably, the calibration of status and conspicuousness is based on creators’ ability to create a niche for themselves, and to adopt a lifestyle in line with a specific audience – which is increasingly more knowable thanks to the insights provided by Instagram analytics. These practices also entail the necessity to adequate one’s taste to that of the public:

I think that people like me, with a relatively high income and a different cultural level, need to adapt to their publics for economic reasons... because everything that’s more refined, more sophisticated, is less likely to provide you with money. If you want to do a certain kind of job, a more refined one, with a niche public, it is much more challenging to earn a living from it. (Asia, 34, F)

From this and other interviews, it emerges that the practices of status acquisition are framed as the ability to adjust one’s taste with the cultivation of an online persona and following the rules of the Instagram platform, all elements which are defined in terms of professionalism (see Chapter 5).

Moreover, the results highlight that content creators’ position in society are not automatically and linearly transposed in the processes of acquiring status across the online and offline domain. Even when status is amplified by following the logic of access-based conspicuousness previously outlined, it still needs, to some extent, to be downplayed. Such downplaying performances are aimed at maintaining content creators’ relatability (Duffy 2017) and taking distance from ostentatious behaviours more broadly. In many cases, and especially among male influencers, status is downplayed through irony. This is for example the case of Gabriele, a 30-year-old male influencer working in the automotive field. He describes the use of irony in the following way:

I prefer keeping a low profile, 'cause I don't really like, you know, showing off... sometimes I can't avoid it, 'cause... sometimes I have to go so Saint Moritz from some events, and the place itself already gives a sense of coolness, of snobbery even... and then if I happen to drive a Porsche, or a Maserati, well, it's complicated not being too much ostentatious. But I always try to be ironic, like, you know... I don't really like saying 'look at me, I'm so cool, I'm staying at a five-stars hotel' I prefer to convey irony rather than the idea of luxury (Gabriele, 30, M)

Besides irony, a common element among almost all the informants is the emphasis on meritocracy and the rhetoric of the 'self-made man' – although it is more fitting to talk about 'self-made woman', considering that the vast majority of interviewees identify themselves as females. Whether in a higher position in the hierarchy or in a lower one, content creators tend to stress the efforts and difficulties connected to their achievements, which also entails a consistent amount of 'luck' and the privilege of being "*at the right place in the right time*", as Adele puts it. These expressions are recurrent when creators comment on their persistence within the industry. The rhetoric of meritocracy is also deployed as a means to take distance from ascribed social positions, and specifically from the possibility to rely on pre-existing, family, economic capital. This clearly emerges one more time in Gabriele's words, when he states:

I think that the influencers, at least the a-list ones, they usually have a very rich, or at least consistently rich, and important families covering their backs... in my case, well, I've become who I am because I was lucky! (short laugh) I was lucky to have met great opportunities on my path... and well, I was also good at recognising and catching them, of course. But you see, that's because of what I've been doing all on my own (Gabriele, 30, M)

The emphasis on meritocracy is an essential element in the definition of micro-influencers' status between the online and the offline. It is part of a strategy aimed at recognising the content creators' status and position in society more broadly, and it reflects a struggle for recognition and legitimation. Indeed, not only status is calibrated and downplayed, but it is as well negotiated. Processes of negotiation entail a sophisticated understanding of status intended as prestige across the online and the offline domains. While seeking for legitimation, micro-influencers claim for a recognised position in society, taking distance from the stereotypical figure of idle content creators wasting their taking pictures while relying on family resources, as will be as well addressed in the next chapter. In this sense, the content creators in this research also take distance from the idea of the influencer as a member of an entitled Leisure Class. The negotiation of their status and the acknowledgment of a legitimate position

in society is often expressed as a claim for their activity to be cognised as a form of labour. As Emma points out:

I really like what I do, and I really like what I know has become my job, since I can earn a living from it. Yet... I don't know, sometimes I feel ashamed telling people what I really do, because, you know... all these practices are a little devalued. Today most of the people know what an influencer is, yet this figure is considered as someone just taking photos... so it does bother me feeling so ashamed about my activities! [...] It is seen as a second-class job... when in the end, most of the people who are openly making fun of me are also those who would pay to become a content creator as I am! (Emma, 30, F)

Content creators point out that in the general public perception, and particularly in the Italian context, the position of the influencer is not automatically considered a prestigious one, nor it is recognised as a real job (on the notion of the influencer as occupation, see Chapter 5). Notably, the claims for status and recognition are a common trait among almost all the interviewees, with different nuances according to their position within the economy. Indeed, also among those micro-influencers who deploy access as an amplificatory mechanism, their processes of status acquisition are not straightforward. In this regard, some influencers stress that it is often difficult to be recognised as professional content creators and be rewarded accordingly, especially in the field of travel. Sofia illustrates this aspect when she states:

In Italy, we don't have the idea of the professional traveller yet... actually, also the idea of a professional content creator is not wholly affirmed. (Sofia, 34, F)

This example shows that there could be some mismatches between the different dimensions of status: visibility, attention, prestige, and external appreciation do not always coincide. The lack of recognition of the influencer as a professional figure is linked to the lack of prestige surrounding this activity in the society at large. Moreover, the lack of recognition is reflected in the impossibility of gaining a fair reward for the influencer's labour. This has been a central topic pointed out in many of the already existing research on social media content production in different fields (Duffy, 2016; 2017). One more time, in the present study, those who reach monetary compensation are just a small minority. For the others, a condition of what Anna discusses as 'exploitation' prevails:

I think that it's a kind of modern-day form of exploitation, which us the content creators decide to accept. I'm not forced by anyone to work for free. It is something I'm doing because I want to... but that's even more frustrating! Because if I want to do such a promotional activity... which is a real job, because it needs economic resources, time to

invest, and a lot of money, but I don't have any income. Do you think it is fair? I don't think so, that's why to me it is a form of exploitation, but I can't even define it as exploitation because I voluntarily accept this situation! (Anna, 48, F)

The data just presented, therefore, show that content creators are involved in practices of calibrating, downplaying, and negotiating social status. Exclusivity and leisure are not linearly transposed into status in its different components. This is not only due to the mediation of access, but also to the importance of practices aimed at calibrating existing resources. The results highlight that visibility and prestige achieved thanks to the deployment of access-based conspicuousness are transposed into other dimensions of status, such as social recognition and wealth, only to some conditions. In other words, status in terms of visibility and attention do not always correspond to a status position in terms of prestige, recognition and wealth across the online and offline. Notably, therefore, access-based conspicuousness brings together the dimension of display with the necessity for calibrating, downplaying and negotiating status. This is particularly true for the micro-influencer category here analysed. For these content creators, there seems to be a glass-ceiling, which could difficulty be broken to reach the top of the status hierarchy. Therefore, they seem to remain almost stuck in the middle, balancing their displays and negotiating their status across the online and offline domains.

## **5. Conclusion**

In conclusion, this chapter has illustrated how access works as a mediating mechanism in the processes of status acquisition. The concept of access-based conspicuousness has been introduced to stress that conspicuousness as a cultural logic is based on the reconfiguration of the acquisition and ownership of consumer goods, as well as on the increasingly importance of access-based consumption (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012).

The results show how micro-influencers construct status by following the logic of access-based conspicuousness in three different ways: through the search for exclusivity, the claims for belongingness, and the performance of productive leisure. It is important to notice that the practices underpinning the logic of access-based conspicuousness clearly entail a dimension of labour. The management of exclusivity above described can be conceived as a peculiar labour which characterises content creators' activity. Similarly, the performance of productive leisure can be considered a component of 'passionate work' (Arvidsson et al., 2010).

Moreover, in this chapter I argued that access represents a pivotal mechanism for the acquisition of social status besides traditional indicators such as social class (Eckardt & Bardhi, 2019). Access allows micro-influencers to either amplify their existing resources or to compensate for their disadvantages. In both cases, access provides a sense of affluence and an overwhelming quantity of consumer goods and services (in line with the wastefulness of consumption described in Chapter 3) and the illusion of social mobility. Therefore, micro-influencers' practices are not completely detached from existing resources, and especially from reputational and economic capital. The analysis of the relationship between access, reputation, economic capital and platform affordances permits to shed light on the complex determinants underpinning social status in contemporary society. Furthermore, the results confirm that access cannot be considered as an equaliser, assuring possibilities for consumption displays and social mobility democratically. Rather, it relies upon, and concurs to fuel, already existing inequalities in terms of monetary resources, reputational capital, and status. In addition, the logic of access-based conspicuousness intersects with some other variables such as education, communication skills, social media know-how, which will be accounted for in the next chapter under the label of human capital, as well as timing and a certain dose of luck.

In the next chapter, attention will be devoted to understanding how conspicuousness is connected to the dimension of occupation. This means acknowledging and unpacking the labour underpinning content creators' activity and considering conspicuousness as a form of labour. Furthermore, the chapter will provide some insights on how content creators' skills, education, and professionalism contribute to the creation of status within the influencer economy, and how these resources intersect with the dimension of occupation.



## **Chapter 5.**

### **Conspicuousness as labour.**

#### **Micro-influencers and the labour of intermediation**

##### **1. Introduction**

After having addressed how status is constructed in relation to the economy of display (Chapter 3) and the mediation of access (Chapter 4), this chapter focuses on the relationship between status, work, and labour. As already emerged in Chapter 4, the logic of access-conspicuousness deploys through the unrelenting managing of exclusivity and the performance of productive leisure, which are two of the main practices underpinning the creation of status and status hierarchies. It is clear, therefore, that the dimension of ‘labour’ is an important one and needs to be further analysed. In this chapter, conspicuousness is considered in relation to the forms of labour which characterise the influencer economy. More precisely, conspicuousness can be considered as labour and described as a ‘labour of intermediation’, whereby micro-influencers posit themselves at the conjunction between a brand and a niche public.

The labour of intermediation is characterised by the co-existence of creativity (McRobbie, 2016) and the claim for professionalism (Smith Maguire, 2010). In particular, in this chapter I will show that professionalism deploys as an individual ethos aimed at the acquisition of status, both in terms of monetary compensation and self-fulfilment. However, despite the relevance of such professional ethos, the labour of intermediation is in most of the cases far from representing a formal occupation. Therefore, I contend that the labour of intermediation represents a form of work without occupation, a condition which is symptomatic of what Kendzior (2018) calls a post-employment society. To cope with this situation, micro-influencers integrate and sustain the labour of intermediation with a constellation of occupations, which affords them to simultaneously quest for financial compensation and acquire social status. With this chapter, therefore, I aim to unpack the relationship between work, occupation, and prestige in the context of the influencer economy. The complex interconnection between these different elements will be analysed in the light of existing literature about the work of cultural

intermediaries (Smith Maguire & Matthews, 2014) and the changes in social status in relation to work (Gill, 2002; McRobbie, 2002).

The chapter is structured as follows. In the first part, I will propose a theoretical framework aimed at addressing the specificities of micro-influencers' labour of intermediation. I will show that this kind of labour relies on the co-existence of creativity and professionalism and unfolds by leveraging human capital (Feher, 2005; McRobbie, 2016) (Section 2). Subsequently, building on data from qualitative interviews undertaken with micro-influencers, the chapter will highlight that, in a saturated influencer economy, what truly confers status is the deployment of a professional ethos characterised by the cultivation of creativity and personal skills (Section 3). Moreover, a typology of different content creators will be offered to highlight the constellation of occupations surrounding and sustaining the labour of intermediation (Section 4). In the conclusion of the chapter, I will discuss how conspicuousness as labour raises questions about legitimization and class status.

## **2. Theoretical framework. The labour of intermediation: a work without occupation**

### **2.1. Micro-influencers and the labour of intermediation**

The activities performed by micro-influencers can be considered as a labour of intermediation, whereby they legitimate their role and their status. Such labour posits content creators as intermediaries connecting three different elements: the brand, their lifestyle, and a specific niche audience. As such, they are involved in the processes of representing brands, brokering relationships, and shaping consumption experiences (Smith Maguire, 2010). By framing the labour of intermediation as the expression of creativity and professionalism, content creators try to compensate for a large amount of work vis-à-vis the lack of formal occupation, the scarce remuneration, and the risks for delegitimization.

The labour of intermediation makes micro-influencers similar, to some extent, to the cultural intermediaries firstly described by Bourdieu (1984). Although still overlooked in existing research about influencers and content production (see, e.g. Arriagada & Ibáñez, 2019), a perspective on cultural intermediaries provides useful insights to analyse creative digital work

(Smith Maguire & Matthews, 2014). In this sense, influencers are analysed as a possible case study of cultural intermediary work (Smith Maguire, 2008) and how it intersects with issues of status.

According to Bourdieu (1984), cultural intermediaries are those workers engaged in occupations involving presentation and representation (sales, marketing, advertising, public relations, fashion, decoration and so forth) and in all the institutions providing symbolic goods and services. Micro-influencers share with cultural intermediaries the emphasis on representation, self-presentation, and the creation of symbolic value. First, the role of micro-influencers as intermediaries consists in the creation of value and meaning around their personae as well as the goods and services they embed in their narrations. It is the orchestration and dissemination of an authentic and exclusive experience lived firstly as consumers, and the connection between brands and niche publics consequently created, that make influencers into intermediaries (Arriagada & Concha, 2020). The two elements – creating experiences and narrations, and disseminating them to a niche audience, represent two main features that characterise micro-influencers as compared to other similar intermediary professions, such as advertisers and marketers.

Another element shared by both micro-influencers and cultural intermediaries is the mediation between production and consumption (Cronin, 2004; Smith Maguire, 2010).<sup>27</sup> Content creators' activities can be understood as a labour of intermediation between the need of producers and the desires of consumers. Such a perspective is particularly useful in the context of the present research, as it calls back into question the themes of value co-creation and prosumption (Chapter 3). Not only content creators blend consumption and production in the deployment of conspicuousness as a circle of prosumption; they as well mediate between firms, or brands, and their publics, intended as possible consumers, through the display of their lifestyles. In other words, micro-influencers blend production and consumption both in their practices,

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<sup>27</sup> In the literature on cultural intermediaries, the relationship between consumption and production is as much acknowledged as questioned. In particular, recent perspectives on cultural intermediaries (e.g. Negus, 2002; Smith Maguire, 2010), claim that the relationship between consumption and production should not be considered in terms of blurring or hybridizing of boundaries. Instead, attention should be paid to how the boundaries between categories such as economy and culture, production and consumption (among others) are accomplished, dialectically, through specific material practices and boundary work.

characterised by a circle of prosumption, and in their role as intermediaries between brands and publics.<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, similarly to cultural intermediaries, content creators mediate between consumption and production as a means to create their professional status and occupational identities (Smith Maguire, 2008). In particular, micro-influencers develop a professional ethos drawing on the display of their lifestyle and the cultivation of human capital, which is then functional to the construction of status.

The definition of professionalism here adopted is different from the traditional understanding of professions as defined by mastery and monopoly of a peculiar body of knowledge and based on regulatory bodies and memberships (see, e.g. Abbott, 1988; Caplow, 1954). On the contrary, professionalism is intended as “a professional status that is principled on the independent ethos of workers and their highly-skilled specialization based on multi-functional expertise (Bologna & Banfi, 2011) within contexts where digital technologies are being integrated into productive and organizational processes” (Gandini, 2015:337). This understanding builds on the increasing importance conferred to professionalisation processes as ways to face the uncertain conditions of the labour market by independent workers (Bologna & Banfi, 2011) and freelancers intended as digital professionals (Gandini, 2015).

In this vein, the labour of intermediation relies upon the professionalisation of the display of micro-influencers’ lifestyles. According to Bourdieu (1984), cultural intermediaries employ their personal lives, skills, and attitudes as occupational resources, selling their own lifestyles to other consumers (see also Smith Maguire, 2008). To do so, they rely on personal taste, cultural

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<sup>28</sup> It is worth noting that the labour of intermediation as here described is in direct relationship with other types of labour, described in the existing literature as visibility labour (Abidin, 2016c), relational labour (Baym, 2015), and promotional labour (Wernick, 1991; Davis, 2013). The notion of labour of intermediation, however, is coined to stress micro-influencers’ positioning between consumer goods and experiences, brands and niche publics, production and consumption. Moreover, it points to the labouring of curating and maintaining such a position, which entails processes of display, prosumption, and professionalism (as described in what follows), beyond visibility labour (Abidin, 2016c). In this sense, the concept of labour of intermediation goes beyond the practices of being prominent in front of potential publics, as the notion of visibility labour entails (Abidin, 2016c). Moreover, it could be said that the content creators’ labour of promotion (both of the self and of consumption of goods) (Davis, 2013) and relational labour (namely the curation of intimate relationships with potential publics) (Baym, 2015), are both integrant parts of the labour of intermediation.

capital and lifestyle, and, at the same time, try to bestow legitimacy on both the specific products they endorse and their general authority as arbiters of taste (Bourdieu, 1984; Smith Maguire & Matthews, 2014). In a similar vein, micro-influencers use their lifestyles and experiences to construct their work subjectivities and to claim for legitimation. Differently from cultural intermediaries, however, content creators leverage on the capitals they have largely at their disposal, namely reputational capital (as seen in Chapter 4) and human capital, intended as talent, personal attitudes and expertise (Feher, 2005; McRobbie, 2016).

Drawing on McRobbie (2016), who relates to Foucault (Burchell et al., 2008), human capital includes a set of inner capacities, also indicated as talent, and points at skills and education as key sites for the investment in the self. In an exquisitely neoliberal logic, McRobbie argues, the creative subject is one who is constantly calculating the best ways to cultivate and maximise those capacities which constitute the basis of his or her own notion of value (ibid.). In other words, creative subjects find ways to enhance and exploit specific human assets intended as talent in the attempt to cultivate and maximise their inner self. Following this reasoning, content creators' professionalism encapsulates the personal attitudes composing human capital, which are to be cultivated to develop a specific expertise.

Therefore, micro-influencers perform a labour of intermediation which consists in the mediation between brands and publics, production and consumption. Such labour is underpinned by a process of professionalisation, which blends the personal and the professional in the cultivation of human capital. Professionalism, therefore, is here intended as a set of practices that lead micro-influencers to consider themselves as experts in the creation of content and in the intermediation of their lifestyle to a specific public. In this sense, professionalism underpins the construction of micro-influencers' work subjectivities and, at the same time, represents a sign of status in an increasingly saturated industry. The notion of professionalism relies on the different skills formally and informally acquired by content creators. And indeed, to have specific know-hows constitutes an important prerequisite for entering and maintaining a position within the industry. In the case of micro-influencers as intermediaries, therefore, the personal, in terms of human capital, is conflated with the professional, which come to represent two sides of the same coin. More than taste, as in the case of cultural intermediaries, it is content creators' own framing as expert creatives, expert professionals, as well as expert relatable figures that provide them with the possibility to struggle for visibility, legitimacy, and social status. The emphasis on professionalism may sound at odds with the importance of authenticity and amateurism as strategies leading influencers to succeed in the industry (see, e.g. Abidin, 2017). However, the

interconnection between professionalism, authenticity, and creativity represents another example of how conspicuous authenticity is put in place – an authenticity that, in this case, is professionally staged and displayed (for a detailed account of conspicuous authenticity see Chapter 3).

Notably, the kind of professionalism at stake here is different from the process of standardisation of work and working practices typical of the traditionally intended professions. Rather, it is predominantly an individualised ethos which concurs to the formation of micro-influencers' work subjectivities (McRobbie, 2016). Moreover, the labour of intermediation, and the professional ethos which distinguishes it, are strongly connected to the issue of legitimation. The increasing importance attributed to the gain of a professional ethos testifies the quest for legitimacy by affirming a specific set of skills and a particular area of expertise. Therefore, professionalism works as a way to compensate, at a self-reflexive and strategic level, for a precarious working activity, which in most of the cases represents a work without occupation.

## **2.2. Work, occupation and status in a post-employment society**

According to what said so far, what truly confers status is the deployment of a professional ethos which is performed as work, but which is not, in most of the cases, recognised as a formal occupation and employment. As seen in Chapter 1 (Section 2.4.), the changing relationship between occupation, consumption, and status can be considered as the by-product of broader mutations in the ways in which occupation and work are perceived (Gandini, 2020).

In a context where working does not automatically imply having a job and having a job is not a secure way of earning a living, the ways in which status is conceived and conferred are as well changing. As McRobbie (2016) claims, “middle-class status nowadays rests upon the idea that work is something to which one has a passionate attachment” (p.35). In this context, determinants of status such as class and occupational status leave the floor to other components, such as coolness (Frank, 1998), creativity and passion (McRobbie, 2016), and self-actualisation (Gill, 2010). According to previous studies, jobs in the cultural and creative industries are usually seen as cool, creative and autonomous, all qualities that do not refer to the usual characterisation of occupational prestige and status consumption of the previous century (Gill, 2002; McRobbie, 2002). Moreover, existing research has been stressing that besides coolness,

creativity and self-expression, flexibility has become an important status symbol (Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2019). Flexibility is intended as the opportunity to embrace new possibilities, experience individual freedom, and enjoy personal mobility in the contemporary global economy. Coolness, creativity and flexibility are therefore valued in themselves, as part of a postmodern work ethic based on an individualised acceptance of risk (Gill, 2010). Accordingly, nowadays status rests on the possibility for achieving both financial and emotional rewards, rather than onto occupation in the traditional sense (Gill, 2002).

Against this backdrop, the perspective here adopted shares with Gandini (2020) the focus on the new relationships between consumption, status, and work, in a context of a post-industrial economy in which full-time employment is becoming less and less important and is predicted to further shrink. The influencer economy is indeed instated in this very context. The precarity of the industry, moreover, is augmented by the perception of the volatility of social media platforms such as Instagram, and by an increasingly saturated market. In this context, micro-influencers live a condition of work without occupation, which resembles what Kendzior (2018) calls a post-employment society. The influencer economy, it is here argued, is characterised by a mismatch between micro-influencers' work, their occupational status, and their prestige. Although they construct status through conspicuousness as a labour of intermediation, their work is only very rarely converted into full-employment and financial reward.

Therefore, micro-influencers represent an interesting case study to grasp the ways in which status is acquired in relation to work. In the context of a post-employment society (Kendzior, 2018), the labour of intermediation is sustained by a constellation of occupations which allows content creators to achieve both financial and emotional aims. This entails a reconfiguration of the role and meaning of both work and status. Work acquires a double meaning and a double aim: on the one hand, it responds to the need of earning a living, while on the other, it reflects the necessity to acquire status intended as self-expression and self-fulfilment. Status, instead, decoupled from occupation and traditional career paths, becomes not only conceived as of prestige, money, or power, but increasingly in terms of self-entrepreneurship, personal fulfilment, and self-expression.

Thus, the labour of intermediation performed by micro-influencers entails that the work conferring status is different from, or parallel to, the one(s) providing for material sustenance. In other words, the coexistence of different jobs and occupations represents a sign of micro-influencers' attempt to develop their work activities with the aim of navigating

uncertainty and precarity, while at the same time striving for status (Neff et al., 2005). In this sense, content creators are not dissimilar from those creative labourers who engage in a double shift of ‘regular’ and ‘creative’ work around which a career is developed (Throsby, 2007). Previous studies indeed recognise that nonstandard workers in the contemporary economy are involved in different projects at the same time (McRobbie, 2002) and perform various kinds of work to maintain their creative activities (Gill, 2010). Existing research outlines that fashion bloggers and social media content producers are adopting quite the same strategies (Duffy, 2017) and, therefore, can be considered as part of the so-called ‘slash generation’, meaning individuals in their 20s and early 30s working multiple jobs (ibid.). However, how social media content producers mix different jobs and occupations to sustain their influencer careers, and the implications of these practices in terms of status, is still largely overlooked. To analyse the constellation of jobs surrounding micro-influencers, therefore, is particularly important, especially if considering that the glossy aura attributed to cool jobs often hides mismatches between occupation, retribution and status, and the persistence of status hierarchies (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017; Neff et al., 2005). The persisting structure of inequality in the creative industries as well as in the influencer economy makes it difficult to climb the ladder of upper social mobility. And indeed, as McRobbie (2016) contends, creative and passionate labour only gives the illusion of social mobility.

In sum, in what is increasingly a post-employment society, micro-influencers claim for status by using the capitals at their disposal – in particular human and reputational capital. Moreover, they recur to the deployment of a professional ethos to value their labour of intermediation. Such labour, often unpaid and delegitimized by the broader society, is integrated with a constellation of occupations to assure micro-influencers both the acquisition of status and self-realization. As the empirical results will show, the professional ethos and the co-existence of different works represents two ways in which influencers compensate for a critical situation and aim to accrue status.

### **3. The labour of intermediation between creativity and professionalism.**

#### **3.1. Creativity, human capital, and the professional ethos**



The empirical data illustrates how micro-influencers perform a labour of intermediation characterised by the co-existence of creativity and professionalism. The relentless performance of the labour of intermediation is one of the ways through which conspicuousness deploys and, as such, represents a way for content creators to construct status.

The most important element at the basis of the labour of intermediation is the emphasis on the creation of *creative content*. Accordingly, the micro-influencers in the sample consider and define themselves more as ‘content creators’ rather than ‘influencers’. Sofia, like many other interviewees, describes her role as primarily aimed at the creation of content. She explicitly stresses her role as an intermediary as follows:

The kind of communication we, as content creators, are asked for is now changing. It is not enough to take a picture and display a face mask, for example, because followers will read it as a direct attempt to sell them whatever product! And we are not vendors, nor PRs: we are communicators. Our role is to bring users closer to a brand; we are the link between the brand and the user. It is a completely different kind of job because I have to communicate my personal experience and then, if the user is interested in the product, she will buy it as the last step of the process (Sofia, 34, F).

Sofia points out that the creation of content is the first and more important goal to pursue, whereas influencing users’ and their buying behaviours is just a direct consequence of effective communication. In a similar vein, many informants insist that the label ‘influencer’ has to be conferred by the public, rather than be self-attributed by the creators themselves. More than a persuader or an opinion leader, the content creator is a ‘lifestyle intermediary’, who creates creative content offering suggestions to the audience, by mixing creativity, relatability and the strategic nurturing of a niche public. As Sofia points out, the role of the influencer as an intermediary also marks a difference from other categories of practitioners, such as advertisers, PRs, and vendors more generally.

The creation of content is the first and most important element characterising the labour of intermediation, which also shapes content creators’ occupational subjectivities. The emphasis put on the creation of content leads to considered creativity as a way to construct social status. Indeed, it is through the production of creative content that micro-influencers can manage the increasing saturation and uncertainty of the industry and acquire status. In particular, creativity

is conceived and described as the ability of creating a unique and recognisable style without losing one's real self. This point is well described by Noah when he states:

You always need to put a little creativity and originality in your posts; you always have to be a little bit different from the others. Nowadays there are many, many influencers and you have to... find your way, find your style. You need to take inspiration from other creators, but not to copy them. In the end, you just need to be yourself, and thus unique as compared to other creators [...] the most important thing is to remain true to oneself and not changing who you are just to have more followers (Noah, 28, M)

From this excerpt, creativity emerges as a way of calibrating a unique self-presentation and a personal style with the aesthetics and requirements of the Instagram platform, as well as with the audience's preferences. Creativity as the cultivation of uniqueness therefore represents an important element to guarantee the effectiveness of intermediation and the acquisition of status under a logic of conspicuousness. Moreover, creativity is viewed as a component of one's personality which, at the same time, can be cultivated as talent (McRobbie, 2016). As such, creativity, together with content creators' skills and know-how, forms the human capital necessary to perform the labour of intermediation. More specifically, even the expression of creativity is considered as a way of conveying not only one's talent, but also one's professionalism.

Therefore, the creation of creative content, the cultivation of creativity as talent and the expression of a professional creativity emerge as important components of the ethos of professionalism. Content creators present themselves as experts in the creation of digital and creative content and, in this way, they claim for a professional status for themselves and their activities. Thus, the labour of intermediation as here intended does not only consist in the display of a hip and cool lifestyle, and in the free expression of creativity, which are nevertheless to be performed in a professional way. The deployment of a professional ethos, as described by content creators, consists in the competency, skills and expertise necessary to properly perform the influencer activity.

More specifically, the professional ethos is described by referring to the importance of skills and know-how. Content creators share with knowledge workers the need for being constantly updated as an investment in the self, which characterises so-called 'DIY careers' and labour in post-Fordist economies more generally (see, e.g. Gill, 2010; Gill & Pratt, 2008). Interestingly, the importance of professionalism emerges for nearly all the creators in the sample, whether at the beginning of their paths and with a low number of followers or in a more established

position. The importance of technical skills concerning the production of content and the understanding of the Instagram platform turns out to be necessary to enter the industry, maintain a position in it, and be competitive. Lara, like many other informants, describes the challenges related to the Instagram platform and the labour of intermediation. She started to use Instagram in 2012, when the platform had just started to spread in Europe and Italy, and when the logic underpinning its functioning was easier and more intuitive as compared to the present. During the interview, she describes the changes in the configuration of the platform and the new skills necessary to remain updated:

When I started using Instagram in 2012, it was much easier... you only needed to know a few basic rules, and you were done! For example, I used to post to Instagram the same day of the week, at the same time, and that was it. It was also a way of setting an appointment with my followers! They knew when to expect my post, they were waiting for it, there was a real sense of community. Nowadays it is much more complicated, and it is becoming even fake, I think. You have to get crazy while trying to understand the algorithm... sometimes Instagram is down for hours... there are new features every now and then, and now Mark [ndr: Zuckerberg] even wants to hide likes!<sup>29</sup> (Lara, 26, F)

As Lara claims, if at the burgeoning of the influencer industry it was easier to get visibility, nowadays it is much more complicated. In her and other narrations, content creators stress the increasing amount of skills necessary to play in the influencer economy, such as the understanding of algorithms (Cotter, 2019), Instagram pods and support groups (O'Meara, 2019), and technical knowledge about photography and video recording. Together with the importance of constant updating, the know-how about how platforms' socio-technical features function as agents of mediation is acknowledged (see, e.g. Moor, 2008).

The data show that content creators acquire the skills necessary to perform their activities through learning by doing, as well as thanks to specific courses and workshops aimed at readjusting their educational paths and updating their know-how. Thus, the labour of intermediation heavily relies on the acquisition of professional skills and the cultivation of human capital in order to enhance content creators' passion projects in a strategic way (Duffy, 2017). In particular, specific skills and know-how are needed in relation to the field in which each content creator operates. This is well expressed from example from Anna when she

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<sup>29</sup> At the time of the interview, in September 2019, Instagram had just launched a test for hiding like from users' view, with important implications for the influencer industry. See, e.g. <https://time.com/5629705/instagram-removing-likes-test/>. (Last accessed 26/11/2020).

describes the labour necessary to remain updated about fashion trends and to decide around which type of labels and products construct her self-brand. As she states:

Obviously, I had to study a lot, so to speak, to understand the main emergent brands, made-in-Italy, sartorial brands with something different from the others... I don't like the classic Prada, or Zara, or H&M, no way... too banal, what I'm looking for are some niche brands... So, I decided to search for the "Camera Nazionale della Moda Italiana"<sup>30</sup>, the organization that decides which brands are to take part in the Milan Fashion Week... I checked their website, then I studied all the brands taking part in fashion shows in the last few years, and then I chose the ones which were more in line with my interests and my taste! (Anna, 48, F).

As previously said, at the time of the research Anna was at the beginning of her activity as a content creator. From her words, it clearly emerges that flaunting consumer goods and lifestyle choices is not enough to get status. Equally important for this purpose is the development of one's expertise, the collection of information, and the acquisition of new skills. To express expertise in a specific field is indeed interpreted as a way of performing the labour of intermediation 'professionally', and therefore as a way to claim for status. In other words, the creation of a sense of professionalism around the figure of the micro-influencer is seen as a mark of status. Moreover, the data shows a connection between the labour of intermediation and the management of exclusivity defined in Chapter 4. To choose the right exclusive brands and products, which is at the basis of the management of exclusivity, is a matter of deploying professionally the human capital at the creators' disposal to further improve their status. Exclusivity and professionalism thus become two concomitant elements. This also entails an ongoing process of competence acquisition which blends professional skills and everyday experiences (Feher, 2005).

According to what said so far, the ethos of professionalism becomes an important status symbol and is explicitly used to create status hierarchies within the influencer economy. As seen in Chapter 4 about the relationship between exclusivity and belongingness, the industry is characterised by a strong antagonism among different groups of content creators. Professionalism becomes a way of creating distinction when it is used to stress the differences

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<sup>30</sup> As reported by the official website "the Camera Nazionale della Moda Italiana (The National Chamber for Italian Fashion) is the no-profit Association which disciplines, co-ordinates and promotes the development of Italian Fashion", <https://www.cameramoda.it/en/associazione/cnmi/> (Last accessed 26/11/2020).

between those creators who are professionally involved in the activity and expert in the creation of content against those who are doing it 'just for fun'. This is exemplified, for example, by Carmen, when she states:

We are at a point where lots of content creators are doing it just for fun, they can afford not being paid for their content, for their sponsored posts. The industry is really saturated. Why have we arrived at this point? Because of those who I call the 'bloggerine' [ndr: amateur, small bloggers], the frivolous little girls who can rely on mum and dad's money, and if they get a face cream as a gift they are happy... they don't need to pay attention to a lot of things, like I do! (Carmen, 40, F).

Professionalism works as a sign of status allowing micro-influencers to distance themselves from amateur bloggers, wannabe influencers and reality TV shows participants – three main categories of content creators which are recurrently considered as lacking the competence and skills to do the labour of intermediation properly. The content creators who do not take their role professionally are relegated to a lower status in the influencer hierarchy, and at the same time accused of devaluating the influencer category as a whole.

In sum, in an increasingly saturated influencer economy, what truly confers status is the performance of the labour of intermediation following a professional ethos. Such a professional ethos is characterised by the cultivation of creativity and personal skills as human capital and deploys as an important dimension of the content creators' work subjectivities.

### **3.2. Professional ethos and neoliberal times: some contradictions.**

The ethos of professionalism described in the previous section is not free from contradictions. Above all, the emphasis on professionalism may seem at odds with the importance of authenticity and amateurism, two pivotal elements characterising social media content producers' practices (as seen in Chapter 1). The empirical data show that professionalism includes both the strategic deployment of professional skills and the calibration of amateur content. The saturation of the market, indeed, forces micro-influencers to post more and more polished and professional content to be competitive, even if they are at the beginning of their careers. On the other hand, the ethos of professionalism also entails the savvy use of Instagram Stories as a feature mostly dedicated to produce and share spontaneous and engaging content (see also Duffy & Hund, 2019). Of course, and as further addressed in what follows (see Section 3.2), the more advanced the micro-influencer career is (according to follower count, monetary compensation, and occupational status, among other things), the higher level of professionalism is needed.

In addition, it is worth noticing that the professional ethos informs micro-influencers' work subjectivities and help them maintaining a position in the status hierarchy. However, content creators' professionalism is hidden from display and excluded from their narrations. As Duffy and Hund (2015) and Abidin (2017), among others, point out, influencers' work rests on the practices of concealing the labour necessary to perform it. Similarly, the ethos of professionalism remains hidden from public display. By hiding the professional ethos from view, amateurism becomes ostensibly displayed, and in turn becomes a constituting element of the notion of conspicuous authenticity introduced in Chapter 3 – an authenticity that is conspicuously displayed to appear as such.

Moreover, as seen above, the deployment of a professional ethos is parallel to the cultivation of personal attitudes, creativity and skills in the form of human capital, following the neoliberal imperative of investing in one's personality. However, the unfolding of such a professional ethos does not automatically assure the shift from the labour of intermediation to a more established occupation or a more profitable activity. As some of the informants recognise, most micro-influencers are very much skilled in the production of content and in communication, but miss a broader knowledge about economics and marketing, as well as the managerial abilities helpful to transform an amatorial activity into a micro-enterprise. Other interviewees recognise the difficulties in signing contracts, negotiating income and other managerial aspects. Such

difficulties are accompanied by a general lack of regulation in an Italian market which still falls behind as compared to the more developed US and UK industries.<sup>31</sup> In this context, the creators with more experience in the labour market or formal education in specific fields (e.g. communication, marketing, economics) are advantaged in the performance of the labour of intermediation. More importantly, the rhetoric of the cultivation of one's talent and personal potential hides inequalities in terms of human capital. Plus, it fuels the perception of the labour of intermediation as a passionate labour accessible to almost anyone (Arvidsson et al., 2010; McRobbie, 2016).

Therefore, the ethos of professionalism contributes to the processes of individualisation typical of the contemporary labour market (McRobbie, 2002), where the responsibility of becoming 'entrepreneur of the self' rests on the shoulders of each singular individual. Professionalism deploys as an individualised ethos, rather than as a set of practices and interventions aimed at standardising and legitimating the criteria of work (Smith Maguire, 2008). Notably, this professional ethos is sustained by an increasing number of actions aimed at achieving a progressive regulation and institutionalisation of the influencer industry can be witnessed in the Italian context. Among other things, the increasing presence of manuals, blogs, online courses, and workshops is aimed at training new generations of content creators. In a similar vein, at the time of conducting the research, the first degrees in 'social media influencing' started to appear in European countries such as Italy.<sup>32</sup> Simultaneously, there is also increasing attention to the regulation of sponsored content. However, although the burgeoning process of formal and informal socialisation into a (quasi) professional identity, and increasing attention towards legal issues, what is still missing is a broader code of conduct, a defined set of work practices, and a clear regimentation of the industry. The professionalisation of the influencer economy is indeed left to the individualised self-management of the individual. Therefore, the ways in which influencers' labour of intermediation becomes formalised and regulated as a profession remain an open issue. Even more problematic is the fact that the labour of intermediation, although

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<sup>31</sup> See, e.g.

<https://mediawrites.law/influencer-marketing-in-italy-the-digital-chart-introduces-new-rules-for-online-marketing-communications/>. (Last accessed 26/11/2020).

<sup>32</sup> See, e.g.

[https://www2.uniecampus.it/facolta/facolta-giurisprudenza/corso-laurea-triennale-influencer.asp?gaidm=19118&gclid=CjwKCAjwh7H7BRBBEiwAPXjadmwWPJr0fc-3QR3i7L7Cw3-M4\\_UnZYGdx8iE2ipPtLSHGJVSOeDBrRoCiMoQAvD\\_BwE](https://www2.uniecampus.it/facolta/facolta-giurisprudenza/corso-laurea-triennale-influencer.asp?gaidm=19118&gclid=CjwKCAjwh7H7BRBBEiwAPXjadmwWPJr0fc-3QR3i7L7Cw3-M4_UnZYGdx8iE2ipPtLSHGJVSOeDBrRoCiMoQAvD_BwE) (Last accessed 26/11/2020).

characterised by a strong, although individualised, professional ethos, is in most of the cases far to be a formal occupation, as the following section fully addresses.



## 4. A constellation of occupations to get status

### 4.1. A typology of content creators

As seen so far, the labour of intermediation is characterised by the co-existence of creativity and professionalism. Moreover, it entails an ongoing strive for legitimation of the content creator's role, position, and status in society. In this context, the professional ethos just described represents a way to compensate for, and cope with, the lack of formal employment in the influencer industry. The results indeed show that the labour of intermediation is sustained by a constellation of occupations functional to satisfy economic and status needs. The present research allows for a deeper understanding of such a constellation, providing insights about the multiple interconnections between work, occupation, and status. In particular, four main ideal types of micro-influencers can be found, which allow us to define the content creator persona as a) a full-time worker; b) a passionate worker; c) a project-worker, and d) a gig worker.

All the personae here presented share some of the features typical of the aspirational labourer (Duffy, 2017), and specifically the investment in passionate micro-enterprises, with the hope of earning a living in the near future. The typology, however, adds to this perspective insights about the various paths through which some people decide to start their work as content creators, which result in different configurations of work, occupation, and status. Specific attention is given to individuals' trajectories, the entry path to their activities, and the motivations guiding them. Notably, the different types can also be interpreted as different ways to gain professionalism. Thus, the results broaden the current understanding of the influencer economy, especially in the case of the so far understudied category of the micro-influencers. In the following account I will provide insights about the subjective perspectives expressed by content creators, together with their perception of their professional identity as compared to the objective features of their occupational situation.

#### *A) The content creator as a full-time worker*

The content creator as a full-time worker is involved in the creation of digital content as his/her main activity and earns a living out of it. The creators in this category are part of the privileged ones who have achieved the status of "getting paid to do what you love", to say it in Duffy's

words (2017).<sup>33</sup> They have become able to capitalise their self-brand, maximise their reputational capital, and earn money from their promotional activities. They have not yet achieved the popularity of celebrities, nor the income of A-list influencers. Yet, with an amount of about 100.000 followers (and more) they are able to live from this job. Giovanni, a full-time lifestyle content creator based in Milan, clearly makes this point when he describes at what point the content creator activity can be considered as a proper job:

If you get just free perks, it's not a real job... if you have your expenses reimbursed, it's not a real job. You can really consider it a job only when you start to get some consistent financial income, basically when you can earn a living out of it (Giovanni, 31, M)

Besides Giovanni, almost all of the informants agree that, in order to be considered a 'real job', the labour of social media production needs to be a full-time occupation rewarded with money (and not just free perks). Thus, in the case of the content creator as a full-time worker, the labour of intermediation coincides with a full-time job and with a defined occupational status. Some objective working conditions concur to define such a professional status: the content creators in this category, indeed, are freelancers with their own vat number, they often rely on other experts to manage the administrative side of their work and, in some case, can hire their own staff members (e.g. photographers, video makers, make-up artists, etc....).

Although the micro-influencers in this category recognise the production of content as being their main activity, their self-definition as 'professional content creators' is accompanied by a mix of satisfaction and reluctance. Satisfaction, because they have achieved their dream job; reluctance because of the general devalued perception of the content creator's role. In these cases, it is not only the formal and full occupational status that confers prestige. Rather, social status is bestowed by the privilege of earning a living out of a creative and passion project and doing a job that doesn't look like one. This point is well expressed by Emma, a fashion content creator who considers herself privileged for earning a living from her content creator activity:

I think I'm really lucky because I have the privilege of doing the job that I like. It's not easy, because there's a lot of work to do... although, I mean... of course it's not like working in a factory full time, but it's sometimes very hard and stressful though. I'll be honest with you, I'm so lucky, and I'm glad I have the chance to earn a living from my Instagram activities (Emma, 30, F)

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<sup>33</sup> The results reflect this tendency, as the informants going under this type are just a small number (n=5), as compared to the other categories described.

As Emma's words exemplify, self-expression represents an important part of the job and of the status it confers. Thus, the ability of creating a self-expressive and remunerative job starting from zero, and to become an entrepreneur of the self, is the real sign of prestige for these creators. However, in line with existing literature (see, e.g. Duffy & Wissinger, 2017), the emphasis on freedom and self-expression conceals the high level of control that content creators as full-time workers are in reality faced with. More than for other categories of micro-influencers, their content needs to follow specific rules and has to be approved by the brand/agency before publication. Status, freedom, and autonomy are therefore counterbalanced by the risks and uncertainty that come together with self-entrepreneurial activities as well as by a higher degree of control.

The importance of self-realisation and self-expression as conduits to social status is even more evident if considering the path which had led content creators to pursue this kind of career. The content creator as a full-time worker has typically left his/her previous job, or temporarily interrupted his/her studies, to pursue the influencer career full time. Following their passions and the need for self-fulfilment, the individuals in this category strategically decide to make a change from accidental entrepreneurship (Neff, 2012), to a calculated one. In other words, they decide to maximise the reputational capital they happened to accumulate in an unpremeditated and unforeseen manner into the opportunity of improving their job life by gaining meaning, success, and reward. Sofia narrates her path from being an interior designer to that of the influencer as follows:

Actually, I studied as an interior designer... when I graduated, I was really convinced I was gonna be an interior designer for the rest of my life. Then, when I was around 25, I was working a lot, I was spending entire days in my office... and then I realised... this is great, but I'm working for other people's dreams to come true... what about my dreams? In the meantime, I was opening my own blog and I randomly started blogging [...] my blog then became one of the most popular in Italy back then and so I thought: why couldn't my blog be my job? (Sofia, 34, F)

This excerpt further confirms that the need for self-expression is much more important than having a full-time and stable occupation for the acquisition of social status. The risks and the rewards connected to self-realisation provide a higher status than a traditional and mainstream job.

Interestingly, full-time content creators are as well involved in other activities beyond the creation of content. In fact, in a bid to cope with the risks and uncertainties which characterise

the job, the content creators in this category and involved into a series of other projects to expand their businesses and find alternatives revenues beside Instagram-related sponsoring activities. For example, they are experimenting with the creation of their own fashion line, trying to get a job in the TV industry, or improving their skills attending acting classes (again, in line with the imperative to be constantly updated and to nurture one's skills).

*B) The content creator as a passionate worker*

Secondly, content creators as passionate workers perform the labour of intermediation for passion, without earning any money out of it. The high amount of work and labour they perform does not correspond to a formal occupation, nor to a financial and stable remuneration. Therefore, this is the category of creators for whom the notion of occupation is more stretched to the limit. In these cases, there is a difference between the creators' subjective perceptions of work and their objective employment conditions. The micro-influencers in this category define themselves as 'content creators' and construct their subjectivity around this work identity, despite the absence of occupation and financial remuneration. Thus, the content creator as a passionate worker embodies the idea of work without occupation previously described, characterised by a mismatch between work, occupation and remuneration. In this sense, they truly embody the 'aspirational labourer' persona described by Duffy (2017). They too, indeed, are performing the labour of intermediation in the hope it will pay off, someday.

Moreover, also in this case, content creators' lives and work trajectories provide interesting information. In fact, they too have exited the mainstream labour market to embrace the risk of a full-time content creator career. Similarly to content creators as full-time workers, they decided to leave their former job, but haven't acquired a high level of visibility and reputation yet. Remarkably, such a shift requires highly risky investments, both in terms of economic resources, time and human capital. Moreover, as Anna explains, it is also a process of re-investment of her own personal life, as it represents an attempt to start from zero in a new activity without guarantee of success:

At some point I realised that I wasn't satisfied with my life, everything I was doing seemed wrong to me. I was feeling very bad, physically and emotionally. I think one of the biggest mistakes I made in my life is not having tried to follow what's in my heart earlier. Immediately after graduating I settled down on a career path that I didn't like without even trying to listen to what was in my heart: a passion for fashion, beauty and stuff. Then in

2016, I decided to give myself a try: I left my stable job, I told my parents and my friends ‘I want to do what’s best for me’ (Anna, 48, F).

As Anna claims, there is a visceral need to find a deeper meaning in life and work, which she manifested through the ambition of changing her job. In line with this excerpt, content creators as passionate workers decide to escape a lifetime of routine work in order to live a self-directed and self-actualising life in regard to work and career (McRobbie, 2016). Status thus acquires an aspirational dimension: it is connected to the potential of self-expression and self-fulfilment given by the passionate work they decide to undertake. This shift is not only interpreted as a way to find an alternative to a dull job, but also a way to reconnect with one’s true self. Such narration is very much gendered, also considering that almost all the interviewees under this category (n=10), except for one, are women.

The ideal type of the content creator as a passionate worker also includes some students who, although without changing completely their trajectories, perform passionate work in the attempt of gaining some kind of reward in the future. In these cases, the pursuit of a self-fulfilling career is accompanied by a strategic approach to earn money from one’s passions (Duffy, 2017). For example, Marco explains his strategic choice of enrolling in a marketing degree after a small break of a couple of years from university. This choice is functional for him to acquire the necessary skills to pursue his Instagram-related micro-enterprise and to extend his ‘business’. As he states:

My only regret is that I didn’t realise the potential of Instagram 6 years ago when I first opened a profile. At that time, I started having some followers because I was giving suggestions about how to dress in a stylish and elegant way to lots of guys... but I didn’t know this could be something important and even profitable. Only in the last few years I have started to really work on this... I started again studying, I switched to marketing, just to have some more skills... I’m trying everything I can to increase my business. (Marco, 25, M)

In this and other similar cases, the main aspiration for the future is to keep on going with the labour of intermediation, in the attempt to transform it into full-time and remunerative occupation. As Emma makes clear: “*I don’t want to be famous, I just want to have a decent salary*”.

Within this category, different degrees of realism about objective occupational conditions can be found. In some cases, there is much more understanding of the situation, with content creators recognising that they will have to find another job to sustain their labour of intermediation. In

other cases, such as that of students, their age and their economic conditions allow them a more carefree approach to the activity. In both cases, however, realism is not always neat but somehow obfuscated by the promises of realising their passion projects.

### C) *The Content creator as a project-worker*

A third type is that of the content creator as a project worker. The creators in this category (n=8) usually work in the creative industries (e.g. social media managers, PRs, communication experts, among others), in most of the cases as freelancers. Among their various project works, they also collaborate with brands and create content online. These practitioners are multi-faced professional figures, characterised by a flux of competences, skills, and credentials across different projects and different fields. Although they do not perform the content creator work full time, they have nevertheless been able to reach quite a large following (around 30.000 - 50.000) and are often able to monetise it (and not just receiving free perks). Therefore, in these cases, the main occupation in the creative industries is considered as their first job, while the influencer activity represents a compendium to the first one. The labour of intermediation and the mainstream occupation are therefore complementary. The complementarity of different works clearly emerges from Gabriele's words, when he explains how to deploy his multiple belongingness strategically:

I think I'm kind of a hybrid figure, I'm an influencer, a content creator, whatever, but at the same time, I'm a journalist and a social media manager. That's why I think I'm different from other content creators [...] when I happen to go to some events as a journalist, I want to stress that I'm there *as a journalist*, and to be recognised as such... I don't want the others to think 'oh, here's the influencer', because I am a journalist too! (Gabriele, 30, M, emphasis emerging from the interview)

As this extract shows, different professional identities are complementary as well as separated. That of the content creator is a professional identity strategically used according to the specificity of each situation and when it represents an advantage in front of a specific niche of potential employers. The different works undertaken by the content creator as a project-worker are complementary also in the sense that they propel each other. The curation of an Instagram profile and the work of promotion for brands and companies become part of a broader self-branding strategy aimed at the accumulation of reputational capital (Gandini, 2016b). Jessica, a 25-year-old girl who is about to graduate in Marketing and Communication, clearly

makes this point. She is at the beginning of her career as a social media manager, which she promotes through her personal website. Simultaneously, she works as a content creator in the field of fashion. At the time of the interview, she was starting to get some clients, and she described as follows the balancing of her different activities:

I first started with Instagram, and then I launched my website... At that point, I realised that the website could really have a future, while through Instagram it's much more difficult to earn money. I can have a much more promising future if I push my website by using Instagram as a shop window... I use Instagram as a means to push users towards my website, but also to sponsor an event, a workshop, some of the skills I have... (Jessica, 25, F)

Significantly, Jessica illustrates that the strategic use of Instagram functions as a 'shop window', useful to promote various services and to nurture an audience of potential clients. The complementarity of the different projects is what confers micro-influencers status, intended here both in terms of economic rewards and in the outcomes of reputational capital. This example also shows that students as well as (young) workers consider themselves as project-worker content creators. In this sense, the labour of intermediation they perform while studying represents a first way to build reputational capital as a resource to find a job within the labour market (Duffy, 2017; Gandini, 2016b).

For some of the creators in the category, instead, adding the production of digital content to their port-folio activities is almost a necessity. It is the case of Lorna and Elia, two professional photographers who use Instagram to display their photos and leverage their activities as micro-influencers to gain new clients such as brands and travel agencies. In particular, Lorna expresses her aversion towards Instagram and its logic, which she is nevertheless 'forced' to follow:

I don't like thinking of me as an influencer, and not even a content creator... I mean, I'm a photographer! But if you want to work, unfortunately, you have to follow the market's rules! I don't like putting much effort in getting likes, trying to game the algorithm, getting crazy about Instagram... but at the moment I have to be on Instagram, and to accept to sponsor some products, or brands, maybe, don't know, a yoghurt that I would eat anyway... something like this... if I want to keep on working I have to do this as well (Lorna, 29 F)

For content creators such as Lorna, the work as micro-influencers and the relationship with the Instagram platform are totally instrumental. In these cases, being a content creator is considered as necessary to maintain their status as creatives.

In sum, the complementarity of different project works, of which the production of content represents a component, is a strategy adopted to maintain the status of a creative and to fuel reputation in different fields. For these reasons, there is a certain reluctance to leave the first job in favour of being a full-time content creator. In the case of the content creators as project workers, status derives not only from the acquisition of a second income from the labour of intermediation, but also from the possibility of acquiring and maximising reputational capital as social capital (Gandini, 2016b).

#### *D) The Content creator as a gig worker*

The last type addressed is that of the content creator as a gig worker. In these cases, the production of digital content represents a side-activity, one that has an integrative role for individuals' work biographies. The labour of intermediation is sided by either a full-time, more standard, occupation in the labour market, or the full-time dedication to an educational career. In this sense, the content creator activity integrates one occupation with some extra income, and, above all, by providing a sense of status. The creators in this category usually have a lower number of followers as compared to the other categories (from 10.000 to 30.000). This ideal type is the most present in the sample of the micro-influencers I interviewed (n=12).

The narratives adopted by the content creator as a gig worker are full of the dimension of 'passion'. Differently from the content creator as a passionate worker, however, for the micro-influencers in this category, the production of content online is considered as a hobby and a leisure activity, boosted by their love for photography, social media, fashion, travel and so on. Moreover, similarly to content creators as full-time workers, they too describe their acquired visibility as the outcome of accidental and uncalculated practices, at least at the beginning of their activities. However, the dimension of passion and visibility conceal some issues of inequality. Indeed, the creators in this category have not completely been able to monetize the attention they gained, nor to obtain a remuneration other than consumer goods.



In order to compensate for this mismatch, content creators are involved in one, or another, job. In these cases, indeed, the labour of intermediation undertaken by the content creator is just a portion of his/her working life. The work as a content creator plays an integrative role, providing an escape from his/her main job and adding extra value to his/her life more generally. Content creators as gig workers are usually employed in various occupations - nurses, clerks, and secretaries, among others. In their narrations, they stress how they balance the two (or more) jobs in which they are employed. After their working hours, or at weekends, the creators in this category dedicate their spare time to the production of content and the labour of intermediation – again, transforming their leisure time in productive leisure (as seen in Chapter 4). Thus, what is perceived and described as a passion and a hobby represents, in practice, a non-remunerated ‘double shift’ which adds value, meaning, and status to one’s life. As existing research already points out, creative labourers are often involved in a non-creative market to generate an income from an unrelated occupation in order to support their creative practice (McRobbie, 2002). In these cases, there is a difference between the labour of intermediation, which provides status but no pay, and content creator’s other jobs, which have a lower status, but higher, more stable pays. As an example, Alice is a part-time secretary who works as a content creator in her free time and, occasionally, as a make-up artist. She states:

I received some valid beauty products, and it was a benefit for me. Honestly, I can’t invest too much in beauty products. I always try to buy quite cheap products, ‘cause my income does not allow me to buy a 50-euros face cream... so when I receive free products, I’m happy to try them because they are both valid and expensive. Other than that, you can consider yourself lucky if you have your expenses covered at the end of the month! Recently I received some money for a partnership with a brand, not much, but I was able to buy something for myself, to scratch an itch (Alice, 35, F)

As this excerpt makes clear, being a content creator is considered a way of circumventing unsatisfactory work and to earn a living without giving up on one’s true interests. On the other hand, it is also a way to further improve one’s economic position by having an extra stream of income (although very rarely) and by compensating their primary income with free consumer goods. Status thus results from the integrative role played by the interaction of a standard job and the labour of intermediation: it is an integration in terms of self-actualisation, financial reward and status.

This is also true for those creators whose full occupation is that of students at the time of the research. They are studying subjects as diverse as political science, medicine, and social

sciences. They see the labour of intermediation as an integrative activity to their education, in-between a hobby and a gig. However, they also consider the involvement in such an activity as a temporary one. This element emerges from Manuel, who claims that he would prefer investing in his education in order to find a job in line with his degree in Political Science, rather than doing the content creator full-time:

I'd like to do a job that is dynamic and stimulating... Instagram is more like a hobby; it's there, maybe when I'll be 30 and unemployed, I will consider being a content creator again, if Instagram will still exist. Apart from this, my goal is to do a job in line with my degree, I wouldn't mind working in the political communication field... (Manuel, 25, M)

Interestingly, in these cases the labour of intermediation is conceived as a transient activity, while much more importance is attributed to formal education and effort is devoted to find a standard job. Whether students or not, content creators as gig workers hope for themselves a continuity with their jobs and occupations for their future careers. Although they may have the dream of becoming a full-time influencer deep inside, they show a more realistic orientation to keep their primary jobs, which are considered more stable than the fluctuating and insecure nature of the influencer economy.

In conclusion, from the results just presented it is clear that influencers' work biographies are extremely rich and complex and bear little resemblance to traditional notion of the 'career' with their expectations of linear development and progression of hierarchy (Gill, 2010). At the two extremes, a situation of full occupation in the influencer activity (full-time content creators), and the lack thereof (passionate content creators) can be found. In the other cases, there are relationships of complementarity (project-workers content creators) and integration (gig workers) between the work of intermediation and other jobs. Therefore, the data points out that status, in its different dimensions, is sustained by a constellation of occupations composed by different adjustments between the labour of intermediation and other jobs performed by content creators.

#### **4.2. Micro-influencer, the slash-generation, and the acquisition of status in times of precarity**

The constellation of occupation underpinning content creators' activities leads to some further and more general considerations about the processes of status acquisition in relation to labour. One relevant finding of this research is that none of the content creators in the sample is doing only one activity at the time: they all are involved in different types of jobs. The combination of these activities is aimed at having a sustenance in the present, acquiring resources for the future, and aspire to social status. In this context, micro-influencers truly embody the so-called 'slash-generation': a generation involved in different types of jobs, performed to navigate in an uncertain, risky and precarious labour market, as well to assure them the acquisition (or at least the aspiration to acquire) of status and prestige. There are three elements transversal to the typology above described that are useful to understand further the relationship between status and occupation: a) *the presence of career breaks*; b) *the intermittent work biographies*; and c) *the emphasis on the transfer of competences*.

Firstly, almost all the informants share the strive for self-fulfilment and self-expression, which becomes the engine fuelling a *career break* for many of them. The pursuit of status thus results in an adaptation of their educational and working careers, as well as of their personal lives. Such career breaks take the form of leaving a former job to become either a content creator as a full-time worker or as a passionate worker. This is the case of Christian, a former psychologist who has now become a full-time content creator; or of Anna, previously an entrepreneur in the family business and now a content creator as a passionate worker. For those who haven't entered the job market yet, such a break occurs in their education path. For Jessica and Manuela, for example, there is a change from a degree in Mathematics and Engineering to one in Marketing and Communication, which is more in line with their passions and aspirations. But this is also the case of Gabriele, who decided to re-adjust his educational path to his present occupation – the social media manager, by taking a postgraduate degree in Communication after a bachelor's degree in Economics. Such career breaks highlight the aspiration either to become part of the influencer economy or to use a pre-existent reputation to break through the creative industries. The trope of a change in trajectory to follow a personal aspiration is thus a very recurrent one. Such a narration is related to the idea of finding one's true self (Gill, 2010), and is connected to the mythologies of work as passion typical of the contemporary neoliberal context (McRobbie, 2016; Duffy & Wissinger, 2017).

Secondly, micro-influencers activities are characterised by *intermittent work biographies*. Indeed, the influencer economy shares with the other creative and cultural industries a situation of precarity and flexibility typical of the contemporary labour market. The changes they have

been through, as well as their previous working and educational experiences, provide micro-influencers with a mindset accustomed to facing the precarious nature of their activities. In addition, the constellation of occupations surrounding the labour of intermediation allows content creators to cope with the uncertainty of the industry by being involved in what can be called ‘intermittent careers’. In particular, for content creators as gig or project workers, the labour of intermediation is considered as a temporary one, as it represents a means to gain reputation, improve one’s skills, have some extra money, or benefit from free goods and services. These micro-influencers share a perception of their labour of intermediation as limited in time and as a phase of an intermittent career. Such a perception also explains some paths characterised by moves in and out the work of intermediation, with the alternation of active and latent moments. This is for example the case of Manuel and Paolo, who alternate their content creator activity with their studies and gig works.

The notion of intermittent careers also highlights that micro-influencers may change their trajectories by adding new labels to their work biographies and new jobs to face uncertainty. From the empirical analysis of Instagram Stories, indeed, it emerges that content creators may shift from the category of passionate worker to that of gig worker. It is the case of Lisa, who reports to her public the decision to leave her full-time, non-rewarded work as a content creator to become an employed social media manager. Moreover, it can happen that content creators simply cannot make it anymore – to earn from their work of intermediation, to be competitive, to manage their double shifts, or just to sustain the expenses of their aspirational enterprises. It is thus very likely that content creators may exit from the industry for good. Further research in a longitudinal perspective is needed in order to account for these fluctuations and stress not only the rise but also the fall of a content creator. Such insights would be much needed, given that the stories of success are usually widely shared, while those of failure fall in the dark of oblivion. Notably, these insights allow us to stress one more time the different status accorded to the various ideal types of content creators, and thus to see the typology here presented as a status hierarchy. The content creators full time are those who ‘made it’, the ones who are accorded more status, and in an aspirational position. On the contrary, especially the content creators as passionate workers and gig workers are those in a lower position in the status hierarchy.

Lastly, the results point to processes of *transposability of competences*. Above all, the uncertainty which characterises the influencer economy is faced by combining different works but also by thinking about an alternative for the future, a ‘plan B’. Such an alternative often relies on content creators’ investments in formal education, as well as on their experiences,

albeit limited, in the labour market. For some, such as for Christian, the fact of having a degree and a former work experience is reassuring. In the worst-case scenario, he still has the possibility of going back to its former job. Interestingly then, the role of formal education is not dismissed (Abidin & Gwynne, 2017) but represents an important investment for the future of their careers, whatever it will be, and an important resource in times of flexibility and precarity. It is worth noticing that most of the content creators in the sample have medium-high educational level, as the majority of them obtained a master's degree, some a postgraduate degree, while many others are enrolled to an university course (see also Appendix 3). Moreover, a vast amount of them (whether student or not) have had some kinds of work experiences, and thus have some financial resources to reinvest in their influencer activities. Therefore, we can see a circular relationship between education, work experiences and the labour of intermediation performed by micro-influencers. Such a relationship is characterised by a flux of skills and resources which are transposed across micro-influencers' different activities and experience.

Moreover, a feature shared by all the categories of micro-influencers described is the possibility of adjusting their careers by investing in the competencies acquired while performing the labour of intermediation. The experience in managing an Instagram profile and making its visibility grow is a required competence in the current labour market. Many of the informants of the research explained to me that they work (more or less formally) for small businesses, helping them to manage their communication online. Marco, for example, is helping a personal-training friend in exchange for free access to the gym he owns; Paola, instead, is offering services as a consultant in social media communication to different small businesses in Rome. This is to say that the reputation acquired through the labour of intermediation, together with the skills often learnt directly 'by doing', represent an important resource for content creators to reinvest in different fields and in different occupations.

As seen so far, content creators are involved in a constellation of occupations to sustain their labour of intermediation and to acquire social status. The different categories of micro-influencers provide a description of these different constellations, which are also different paths to acquire a professional ethos and form a status hierarchy.

## **5. Conclusion**

The empirical findings presented in the chapter show how conspicuousness deploys as a form of labour, and particularly as a labour of intermediation. Such a labour is described in terms of creativity, passion, self-fulfilment, and it is characterised by a strong and pervasive professional ethos, which constitute an important element to claim for status. However, such a professional ethos remains highly individualised, as the responsibility for navigating in times of uncertainty and claiming for professional status mostly remains on the shoulders of singular individuals.

Moreover, the results highlight that micro-influencers embody the so-called 'slash generation'. Their work biographies are not only characterised by the juxtaposition of different jobs and activities, but also by breaks, intermittences, and competence transposition across different fields. All these practices are functional to navigate in times of work precarity and uncertainty, as well as to quest for status both in terms of self-expression and financial rewards.

It is worth noticing that in the performance of the labour of intermediation micro-influencers are constantly struggling for legitimation for their role and their status in society, especially through the deployment of a professional, although individualised, ethos. The process of legitimation leads content creators to take distance from, and reaffirm themselves against, the previous generation and considerations of status connected to stable and life-long occupations. The micro-influencers in the sample occupy a complex position. On the one hand, they claim for meritocracy and self-realisation. They defend their educational level and take distance from the unskilled, unprofessional figures they are often compared with. On the other hand, and in line with the literature on meritocracy (see, e.g. Savage et al. 2015), content creators too start their paths from quite advantaged positions, which provide them with the chance to access education, experiences both in work and leisure lives, as well as the above-mentioned career breaks and intermittences. The possibilities of affording such lifestyles are underpinned by the implicit assumption that they have (or have had) some safety net to rely on. This constant legitimization process makes content creators similar to the *petite bourgeoisie* of cultural intermediaries described by Bourdieu (1984). As part of a group jostling for a position in society, micro-influencers as lifestyle intermediaries aim to legitimise their own areas of expertise.

Therefore, the issue of status in relation to work and occupation opens up issues of class status. More specifically, the emphasis on labour, work, and professionalism leads to questioning whether micro-influencers can be considered an expression of the Leisure Class of the digital arena. Indeed, on the one hand, framing conspicuousness as labour entails reconsidering the emphasis on leisure and the display of idle activities as one of the main features of the Leisure Class (Veblen, 1899/2007). Moreover, given the changing context in terms of consumption and

working practices, it is here argued that the dynamics of distinction in the influencer economy are in line with the idea of a post-middle class status (Gandini, 2020). Such a perspective is underpinned by the conditions of work without occupation here described and consumption practices as displays (Chapter 3). This point will be further addressed in the next section, dedicated to the general conclusion of the dissertation.

## Conclusion

The main focus of this dissertation has been the investigation of how micro-influencers, prominent social media users and branded personae, construct social status across the online and offline domains, in the context of the social media attention economy and the current neoliberal times. Throughout the thesis, I argued that micro-influencers accrue and signal status by relying on conspicuousness as the main cultural logic underpinning their practices. Conspicuousness has been defined as a cultural logic that orients all those practices aimed at being noticeable before a certain audience and oriented towards the construction of social status. Conspicuousness has been said to integrate the concept of visibility (see, e.g. Abidin, 2016c) by stressing the relevance of displays and their social and symbolic valence in signalling status. What is constitutive of the notion of conspicuousness is the importance of display and the seamless coexistence of consumption and production practices. In particular, conspicuousness has been said to be characterised by the co-existence of production and consumption in the context of an economy of display (Chapter 3), a logic based on the mediation of access (Chapter 4), and a form of labour (Chapter 5). Reading the empirical data through the analytical lenses of conspicuousness has allowed an in-depth analysis of the logics of status gaining and signalling in the contemporary, late-capitalist time.

More specifically, the overarching aim of the research was to understand the key elements that contribute to the construction of social status. The empirical research has shown that status is constructed by means of various aesthetics of display, which rely upon, and concur to fuel, an economy of display (Yuran, 2016). Moreover, the construction of status depends on the performance of conspicuous authenticity, which blends the tendency toward subtle displays with the imperative of conspicuousness, as well as the aspirational and ordinary natures of micro-influencers' content (Chapter 3). Secondly, attention has been paid to the practices oriented by the logic of access-based conspicuousness, such as the creation of exclusivity and the enactment of productive leisure (Chapter 4). Lastly, the empirical data illustrate that status is constructed in relation to work and occupation and outline the contours of conspicuousness as a form of labour, a labour of intermediation (Chapter 5).

The insights about the construction and display of social status also entail reconciling the theory of conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1899/2007) with the context of the contemporary social



media attention economy. One of the main research sub-questions of this research was indeed to understand how conspicuous consumption has changed in an increasingly mediated context such as the one fostered by the Web 2.0 and considering the blurring distinction between consumption and production. As contended throughout the dissertation, the potential of the theory of conspicuous consumption lays in the concept of display, which is here put at the centre of the analysis as a heuristic to read micro-influencers' practices. In an attempt to adapt such a concept to the contemporary social media economy, I argued that status is not only displayed but at the same time constructed through the enactment of a circle of prosumption, which blends production and consumption activities. Second, the research points out that conspicuousness and inconspicuous consumption coexist, and both enter the circle of prosumption to effectively create and signal status. Lastly, the construction of status does not consist of the mere display of a pre-existing wealth, as Veblen puts it, but is related to a more complex relationship between access, existing resources and micro-influencers' backgrounds.

In this respect, the research has drawn attention to the determinants underlying the acquisition and display of social status in the influencer economy. In particular, I have shown that, besides attention, as argued by scholars Eckhardt and Bhardi (2019), other resources for accruing social status enter the scene. In this regard, I would like to stress one more time the importance of access as a mechanism for the mediation of existing resources. The present enquiry has shed light on access as a mechanism for amplifying or compensating for already existing resources, especially in terms of economic capital and reputational capital (Chapter 4). In this sense, access confers the illusion of affluence, accessibility and social mobility. Thus, the research confirms that inequalities in terms of economic capital and reputational capital are still to be found in the influencer economy and have important implications, both online and offline. In particular, in a context characterised by the increasing platformization of content (and of society at large) (Duffy et al., 2019), the interaction between access, resources and the platforms' metrics as generative metrics (Beer, 2016) is a powerful mix which concurs to the definition of status hierarchies and status inequalities. The research has also shown that these status hierarchies are not relegated to the online domain, but also reverberates in the offline, in line with a perception of the two realms as two poles of a continuum. The status hierarchies informed by access, resources and metrics, indeed, shape the space of constraints and possibilities in which content creators operate.

This is evident in the study of conspicuousness as labour, whereby the interaction of these elements also shapes the performance of the labour of intermediation as proper work (Chapter

5). In line with other existing studies (see, e.g. Duffy, 2017), only a minority of the micro-influencers in the research are able to fully earn a living out of their activities. And yet, even those who ‘make it’, like all the others, have to continually reaffirm their position and claim for legitimation in society. Therefore, the research shows that, although status and occupational status are nowadays increasingly decoupled, work and labour keep on being important status determinants. In particular, the data shed light on the co-existence of the labour of intermediation, which distinguishes the content creators’ activity, and other occupations to sustain that same labour. Moreover, another determinant which enters the scene is the relevance of human capital as an asset to nurture in order to deploy a professional ethos, which is in turn necessary to stand out in a progressively saturated influencer economy. In sum, the research shows that there are different patterns according to micro-influencers economic, educational and occupational backgrounds.

In relation to the issue of status hierarchies and inequalities, one last point to address is whether, and to what extent, micro-influencers can be considered as the contemporary Leisure Class (Veblen, 1899/2007) of the digital arena. With this term, Veblen points to a class faction involved in idle activities and recurring to the display of leisure time (and conspicuous consumption) as status symbols (ibid.). Moreover, in the Veblenian perspective, the leisure class was composed by individuals in a position of power, who had at their disposal inherited wealth, who weren’t involved in productive labour and were trying to defend their power against the emulative consumption of the lower classes. The main aim here is not so much that of reading the phenomenon of micro-influencers in terms of class analysis, but rather to address the issue of class status in the context of the influencer economy. In this vein, considering micro-influencers through the lenses of the Leisure Class entails taking into consideration three different points: the social composition of this group; the role of conspicuous leisure and consumption in relation to prosumption activities; and the mechanisms underpinning the construction of class status.

First, micro-influencers can be considered as part of a seemingly middle-class faction composed by a group of youth and young adults struggling between creativity, passionate labour and precarious work (McRobbie, 2016). Although it is difficult to detail the social composition of this faction, and it also goes beyond the scope of the present research, it is important to make a point about micro-influencers’ demographics and socio-economic backgrounds. Indeed, the content creators in the research are far from being part of the top echelons of society, such as in the luxurious practices performed, for example, by the Rich Kids of Instagram (see Chapter 1,

section 4.3.). They are, instead, positioned in the middle of the social ladder, and try to maintain an inherited middle-class status or to claim for it while trying to get upward social mobility. In this sense, micro-influencers are different from the Veblenian Leisure Class firstly because they do not embody the powerful and moneyed elite. Despite the attempt to propose themselves as elite personalities of the attention economy, their condition actually hides the kind of labour necessary to perform a branded persona and to boost social status. In this sense, micro-influencers can be considered much more similar to the so-called precariat (de Peuter, 2014) rather than an elite or leisure class. In this sense, micro-influencers can be considered as part of a ‘luxury precariat’, a concept which aims at grasping their apparently contradictory class status.

In line with these insights, it is important to focus on the role of conspicuous leisure and consumption in relation to the domain of production, which has been considered here as a circle of prosumption. In particular, considering leisure and consumption as productive activities is against the notion of a Leisure Class dedicated to the display of idle activities and wasteful consumption (Veblen, 1899/2007). Throughout the dissertation, I illustrated that the display of consumption represents a way through which a circle of prosumption unfolds, which is reliant upon self-branding practices and the logic of conspicuousness. Moreover, the display of leisure is, for sure, one crucial feature of micro-influencers’ activities, which enters the logic of the so-called experience economy (Pine & Gilmore, 2011) and becomes a form of productive labour. In this vein, the display of wasteful consumption and of a leisurely lifestyle, both facilitated and enhanced by access, becomes productive in itself. In addition, findings about conspicuousness as labour stress that besides the performance of productive leisure, content creators are involved in a constellation of occupations to support, complement, and integrate their labour of intermediation (Chapter 5). These results put micro-influencers against the notion of a leisure class whose members distance themselves from any form of productive labour as a sign of status (Veblen, 1899/2007). On the contrary, micro-influencers’ class status is dependent upon the performance of the circle of prosumption, as well as the coexistence of different occupations to sustain their labour of intermediation. Notably, and in line with the concept of conspicuous authenticity introduced in Chapter 3, content creators’ leisure time and consumption activities are elements to be displayed, while the work necessary to support these displays and self-branding practices, and to literally sustain themselves, are hidden from view. The concealing of the labour and work behind micro-influencers’ activity is purposefully

undertaken as a way to calibrate and maintain social status. Class status is, therefore, supported by the dimensions of occupation and consumption, albeit of a specific kind.

This leads to discussing the mechanisms underpinning the construction of class status. As hinted above, the micro-influencers in this research do not represent an entitled, upper-middle-class that displays power and wealth as status symbols. On the contrary, they are part of a middle-class that aims to maintain and boost social status. Despite the similarities with the petite bourgeoisie of cultural intermediaries outlined in Chapter 5, I would like to follow here a different approach. In particular, what I would like to suggest is that the dynamics of distinction put in place in the influencer economy are in line with the idea of a post-middle class status (Gandini, 2020). Arguably, micro-influencers pursue a quest for class status starting from a difficult economic position (i.e. medium-low economic capital) and by leveraging human as well as reputational capital to compensate for the lack of economic capital (as seen in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5). These practices are very similar to those enacted, for example, in the hipster economy, where individuals compensate for the lack of economic capital by using cultural capital (ibid.). In this sense, following Gandini (2020), micro-influencers can be considered as exemplifying the emergence of a ‘post middle class’ logic of distinction, which is characterised by the imbalance between economic capital and other forms of resources, namely reputation and personal competences. The emergence of such a post middle class logic is underpinned by a set of changes in the relationship between work, consumption and status. On the one hand, it is connected to the decline of work in the contemporary post-Fordist society, and to the inability of occupation to sustain middle-class quests for status – as testified by the labour of intermediation as a work without occupation (Chapter 5). Moreover, the post middle class logic is instated in a context where the notions of display, promotion and access concur to redefine the ways in which consumption is performed. This entails the rise of a mode of consumption characterised more by the display and promotion of consumption than the performance of consumption per se, thus resulting in a form of consumption without consumption (Chapters 3 and 4).

In sum, micro-influencers can be considered the expressions of a “productive leisure class”, meaning a group of people whose practices are oriented by the logic of conspicuousness, who mediate between brands and niche publics through the display of their lifestyles built around the intervention of access-based conspicuousness and do multiple jobs at the same time. Their practices make them similar to creative workers and freelancers more broadly and, as such, they can be considered in the context of the processes of the middle-classification of society described by McRobbie (2016). However, moving one step further, the dynamics through which

they aim to maintain and boost their class status are described as a form of post-middle class distinction, based on the reconfiguration of consumption and occupation as two key dimensions for the definition both of class status and status more broadly.

The study is not without limitations. Firstly, from a methodological point of view, the research aims at studying status from a consumer culture perspective by using digital data and qualitative interviews. As described in Chapter 2, the research is based on the analysis of small digital data from a qualitative perspective and is focused exclusively on the Instagram platform. The point of view adopted provides an in-depth analysis of status, related to a specific timeframe, and provides information about platform-specific self-branding practices. Despite the advantages of such a perspective, some relevant aspects remain overlooked. A larger dataset, for example, would allow for an understanding of the broader trends which characterise micro-influencers' practices by means of automated content analysis and more refined network analysis. Moreover, by collecting big data and automating the selection of influencers, it would be possible to follow these actors over time, in order to account for their changing trajectories (as suggested in Chapter 5 with reference to interview data) and the volatility of the industry. Furthermore, considering that content creators' activities are exquisitely cross-platform, future empirical research would benefit from a cross-platform analysis of influencers and their practices. In particular, it would be interesting to implement cross-platform research for the visual analysis of micro-influencers' patterns (see, e.g., Niederer, 2018) which would be very much important for the understanding of how the economy of display works across platforms. The rise of TikTok as a prevalent player in the influencer economy also represents a new field of inquiry. All of these implementations and suggestions for future research are in line with the necessity of extending digital methods to the study of phenomena such as status, class, and taste (see, e.g. Airoidi, 2019 on this last point), and to consumer culture research more broadly.

Lastly, but not less importantly, the present research only incidentally includes insights concerning the Covid-19 pandemic, outbreaked in Italy in March 2020. Given that the data collection was undertaken before that time, the present work does not attest to the relevant changes in the influencer economy due to the pandemic yet. This is both a limitation and an opportunity for further research. On the one hand, the study is a picture of the pre-Covid-19 influencer economy and frames some relevant dynamics useful to describe the actual state of the ecosystem and how it has been evolving from the first 2000s. On the other hand, the extent to which the influencer economy is changing, and will further mutate, in relation to Covid-19 is, of course, an important point to investigate further, and around which the future research on

influencers will be likely revolving around. The importance of tracking influencers' trajectories in time is even more critical if considering the current global situation, the contraction of consumption and the upcoming economic recession. Specifically, the months of lockdown (especially in March and April 2020 in Italy), and the subsequent reassessment of the entire social life, have significant consequences for the influencer industry as a whole (Bishop, 2020; Tsapovsky, 2020). In particular, micro-influencers are the most vulnerable subjects and those who can be more exposed to the backlash of the pandemic. Some of the main themes addressed in this research can, therefore, be analysed in light of the emergence of Coronavirus. In particular, it would be interesting to see how the dimension of leisure and experiences, which have so far played a pivotal role for influencers, will evolve. Moreover, attention could be drawn on the processes of re-branding and the new economies arising in pandemic and post-pandemic times. With reference to the previous research, the issue of consumption display and wasteful consumption will probably be – and to some extent already are, at the centre of the debate around the social role of the influencer. This is in line with the already existing interpretation of inconspicuous consumption as ways to adapt to the regimes of austerities put in place by many European countries, and in Italy as well, in the last decade (Eckhardt et al., 2015). The new ways of balancing display, access, and conspicuousness, and therefore the new dynamics of status, are likely to undergo relevant changes in the next months and years.

The reflection on the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic opens up another line for future research. Indeed, it would be interesting to reflect on the definition and characteristics of influencers as the contemporary elite, to broaden than the analysis to the role of elites in the present society. Such a topic would be interesting not only as a follow up of the reasoning about influencers and the leisure class, or in relation to the pandemic situation. In fact, the meaning, position and general perceptions of the elite have already been changing in a context where elites are synonymous with establishment and, as a consequence, have been questioned and criticised by populist discourses imbued with nostalgia (Gandini, 2020).

Lastly, the analysis of micro-influencers and status in an intersectional perspective is still largely overlooked in existing research. Despite the relevance attributed to gender (see, e.g. Duffy, 2017), an analysis that fully embraces the relationship between status, class status and gender in the influencer economy is still missing. Therefore, I would suggest as a line for future research an intersectional perspective of status and influencers.

In conclusion, the present adds to the literature on social media production and consumer culture a perspective of the new dynamics of social status and distinction in the influencer economy as a relevant aspect of our contemporary, and probably future, society.

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# Appendix

## Appendix 1. Digital data: data cleaning and sampling procedure

Table A. User and post classification

Category	Definition
<b>Brand and Companies</b>	Feed related to a brand
<b>Community</b>	Feed related to community pages, fan pages, general accounts
<b>Traditional Celebrity</b>	User feed related to a traditional celebrity in mainstream media, creative industries and/or sports.
<b>Non-Italian User</b>	User feed not related to the Italian context
<b>Regular User</b>	User feed related to a regular Instagram user, with no sponsoring content neither explicit nor implicit. Average Instagram feed, who are not involved in consistent forms of self-branding and micro-celebrity practices.
<b>Influencer Explicit</b>	User feed with at least one explicit sponsoring content
<b>Influencer Implicit</b>	User feed with at least one implicit sponsoring content, in terms of ostentation of a brand and/or a product
<b>Other</b>	User feed that does not fall within the previous categories
<b>None</b>	User feed that cannot be retrieved from Instagram data (e.g. url expired; profile settings turned from public to private)

**Table B. Dataset 1 - ‘Geotag Italy’- Data Cleaning Procedure**

Categories	Total amount of users		Total amount of posts	
	Units	Percentage	Units	Percentage
Brand and companies	242	7,5%	436	7,7%
Community	1.135	35,3%	1.946	34,2%
Regular	437	13,6%	859	15,1%
Non-Italian User	718	22,3%	1.005	17,7%
Traditional celebrity	31	1,0%	63	1,1%
Influencer Explicit	209	6,5%	513	9,0%
Influencer Implicit	134	4,2%	407	7,2%
None	278	8,6%	338	5,9%
Other	33	1,0%	124	2,2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>3.217</b>	<b>100,0%</b>	<b>5.691</b>	<b>100,0%</b>

**Table C. Dataset 2 - ‘Hashtag #influencer’ - Data Cleaning Procedure**

Categories	Total amount of users		Total amount of posts	
	Units	Percentage	Units	Percentage
Brand and companies	26	2,9%	92	3,4%
Community	30	3,3%	93	3,5%
Regular	139	15,4%	274	10,3%
Non-Italian User	96	10,6%	181	6,8%
Traditional Celebrity	1	0,1%	8	0,3%
Influencer explicit	399	44,2%	1496	55,0%
Influencer implicit	184	20,4%	465	17,4%
None	26	2,9%	55	2,1%
Other	1	0,1%	4	0,1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>902</b>	<b>100,0%</b>	<b>2.668</b>	<b>100,0%</b>

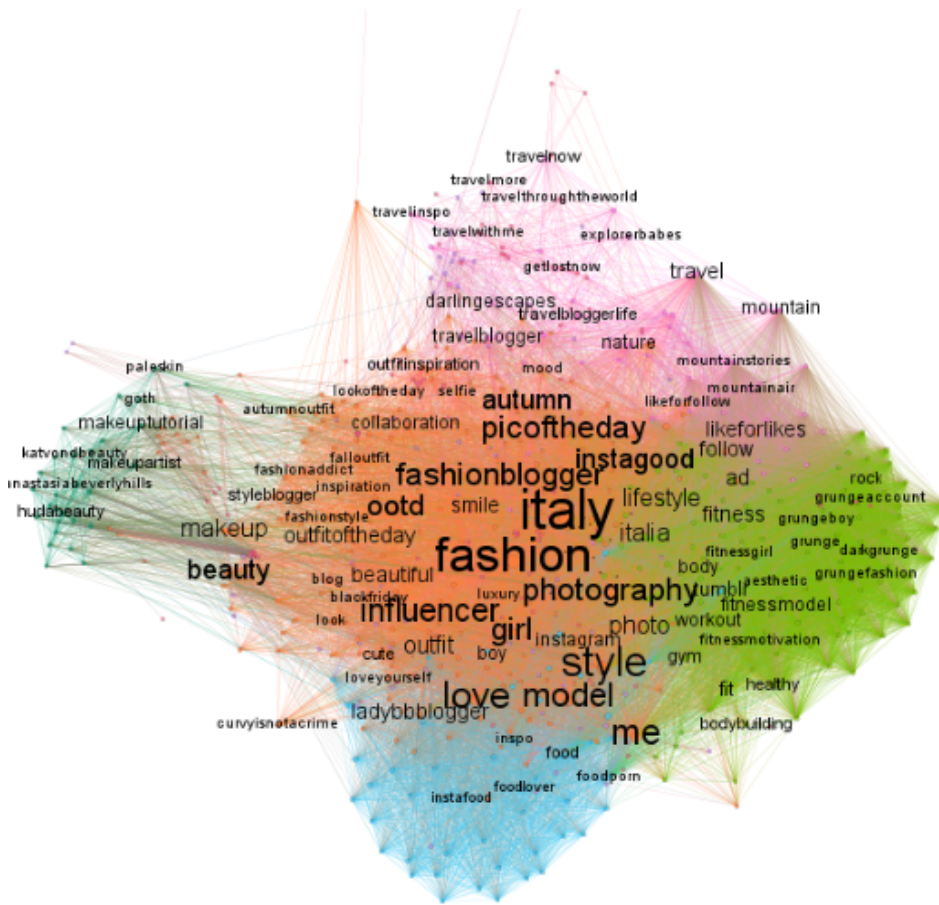
## **Appendix 2. Digital data: preliminary analysis**

### **Hashtag analysis**

The hashtag analysis provides information around the discourses and imaginaries around the theme of influencer in Italy. By showing the semantic structure of the dataset, it is useful to contextualise and understand micro-influencers' practices on Instagram.

Starting with the first dataset ('geotag Italy') and treating hashtags as nodes in a network, it is possible to reconstruct the network of hashtag co-occurrence. Given the large amount of hashtags and their dense interconnections, the network has been built by excluding hashtags with just one occurrence, for a total amount of 699 hashtags. The visualization of the network is provided in Figure A

**Figure A. Co-hashtag analysis - dataset 'geotag Italy')**



The network visualization shown in Figure A is based on modularity scores, which is defined as the measure that accounts for the strengths of division of a network into modules, namely clusters or communities (Caliandro & Gandini, 2017). Figure A shows in different colours the main aggregations of clusters of hashtags that are more likely to come together with each other. The five clusters can be defined as follows:

1. **Fashion & Lifestyle** (orange): the main hashtags in this cluster refer to the domain of fashion (#fashion; #style; #ootd). Some of them refer to the main actors that can be involved in the field (#influencer; #model; #fashionblogger). Another aspect emerging from hashtags co-occurrences regards different items (#dress; #heels; #selfie) and brands (#shein; #danielwellington; #zara) related to the fashion field. Moreover, there are some references to temporal and spatial locations (#italy; #autumn; #blackfriday), as well as meta-hashtag mostly used to gain attention (#picoftheday; #follow; #likeforlikes).

2. **Beauty & Makeup** (dark green): the hashtags in this cluster relate to the world of make-up (#makeuptutorials; #makeupartist; #makeupideas). Some relevant labels point to influential brands (#nyxcosmetics; #sephoraitalia) and prominent personalities in the cosmetics industry who also created their own beauty products line (#hudabeauty; #anastasiabeverlyhills).
3. **Sport & Fitness** (light green): this cluster includes different hashtags related to the dimensions of sport and fitness (#fitness; #sport; #workout) but also about health and dieting (#healthylife; #wellness; #diet; #motivation).
4. **Travel & Nature** (purple): the hashtags in this cluster refer to travelling as a lifestyle and a passion (#travelnow; #beautifuldestination; #travelblog). There is also a connection with the idea of nature (#nature; #naturelovers). References to photography and photographic devices are present (#smartphones; #smartphonephotography; #samsungphone).
5. **Food & Beverage** (light blue): the most important hashtags in the cluster relate to the domain of food (#food, #foodporn, #foodlover), with a specific focus on the Italian context and cuisine (#bontaitaliane, #piattiitaliani, #fooditalia).

The five clusters reflect the most important categories in which influencers' activities are usually classified. The analysis thus shows the main fields in which Italian micro-influencers operate and the predominance of the domains of fashion, beauty and lifestyle. Moreover, the co-hashtag network analysis provides some relevant information about the ecosystem surrounding micro-influencers, in terms of the actors, material objects and aesthetics which they use to frame their Instagram activities.

As for the second dataset ('hashtag "#influencer'), the semantic analysis provides interesting insights about the different imaginaries and publics around a specific hashtag. In this case the co-hashtag analysis (not presented here) resulted in an even more dense and interconnected network, in which it is difficult to identify different clusters. Hashtags are very much correlated with each other, reflecting a platform-specific tagging behaviour based on the use of numerous and descriptive hashtags. Despite this limit, the hashtag analysis shows that the dataset is largely related to the domain of fashion. As Table D shows, the discourses around the hashtag '#influencer' refer to: the role of the influencer him/herself (#influencer; #fashionblogger; #influencermarketing) and his/her practices (#collaboration; #ads); the main domain of fashion (#fashion, #moda; #fashionlover) and style (#outfit; #look; #influencerstyle).



**Table D. Top 20 Most recurring hashtags – Dataset ‘hashtag #influencer’**

<b>Hashtag</b>	<b>Occurrences</b>
influencer	1790
fashion	723
fashionblogger	530
blogger	439
style	431
influenceritalia	427
model	420
love	337
picoftheday	303
photooftheday	302
instagood	289
me	287
photography	287
girl	281
outfitoftheday	266
italy	248
outfit	245
ootd	244
instagram	232
igers	216

**Profile analysis**

In order to go further in-depth with the analysis of the dataset ‘#influencer’ an analysis of the different publics revolving around this hashtag has been performed. This preliminary analysis is based on the profile analysis and user classification. In particular, the analysis is based on the qualitative recognition of the profiles in the dataset, according to the criteria set for the data cleaning (see Chapter 2, section 3.3.). These insights are useful to look more closely the categories of users recurring to the hashtag #influencer, in order to unpack how such a hashtag is used in different ways. And indeed, besides micro-influencers and regular users, it is also possible to find wannabe micro-influencers seeking for visibility, or members of the so called

‘creative class’, used here as a descriptive label to include both personalities working in marketing and communication, as well as those professions useful to sustain the influencer economy such as photographers, make up artists, etc. The results are reported in Table E and Table F.

**Table E. User classification – Dataset ‘hashtag #influencer’**

<b>Category</b>	<b>Definition</b>
<b>Micro-influencer</b>	Users who are involved in elaborated forms of self-branding, have a curated Instagram feed, and are involved in explicit sponsored content activities.
<b>Micro-influencer wannabe</b>	Normal users with ostentation of brands/products in their feeds, posts, and/or hashtags; they are acting as micro-influencers through specific micro-celebrity practice
<b>Creative Class</b>	Users related to the creative class, employed in various sectors of the cultural industries (e.g. fashion, design, photography, journalism)

**Table F. User and Post Classification – Dataset ‘hashtag #influencer’**

<b>Categories</b>	<b>Total amount of users</b>		<b>Total amount of posts</b>	
	<b>Units</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Units</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Micro-influencer	399	68,44%	1.469	75,96%
Micro-influencer wannabe	74	12,69%	156	8,07%
Creative Class	110	18,87%	309	15,98%
<b>Total</b>	<b>583</b>	<b>100,00%</b>	<b>1.934</b>	<b>100,00%</b>

### **Appendix 3. Qualitative interviews: sample composition**

**Table G. Interviewees’ demographics.**

N.	Name	Gender	Age	City	Education	Main Occupation(s)
1	Lisa	F	33	Torino	Master's Degree	Instagram specialist, trainer
2	Carolina	F	31	Bergamo	Postgraduate degree	Content creator
3	Elena	F	26	Firenze	Bachelor's degree	Employee
4	Stefania	F	20	Lecce	High School Diploma	Student
5	Noha	M	28	Lecce	Bachelor's degree	Employee
6	Ada	F	27	Barletta (BT)	Postgraduate degree	Nurse
7	Gabriele	M	30	Bergamo	Postgraduate degree	Social media manager, journalist, blogger/influencer
8	Carmen	F	40	Roma	Master's Degree	Influencer marketing specialist, trainer
9	Anna	F	48	Cremona	Master's Degree	Influencer, fashion blogger
10	Alice	F	35	Pistoia	High School Diploma	Employee
11	Manuela	F	22	Fidenza (PR)	High School Diploma	Student
12	Linda	F	23	Valverde (CT)	High School Diploma	Influencer
13	Paolo	M	23	Parma	High School Diploma	Student, performer
14	Giovanni	M	31	Milano	High School Diploma	Content Creator
15	Manuel	M	25	Parma	Bachelor's degree	Student
16	Paola	F	28	Roma	High School Diploma	Photographer, content creator
17	Emma	F	30	Genova	Bachelor's degree	Influencer
18	Adele	F	39	Torino	Master's Degree	Content marketing consultant, editor, content creator
19	Irene	F	24	Milano	Bachelor's degree	Student
20	Christina	M	30	Bologna	Master's Degree	Digital Content Creator
21	Jessica	F	25	Milano	Master's Degree	Student, social media manager
22	Asia	F	34	Milano	Postgraduate degree	Content creator
23	Eleonora	F	23	Bolzano	High School Diploma	Student, content creator
24	Laura	F	19	Cuneo	High School Diploma	Student
25	Lara	F	26	Milano	Bachelor's degree	Student, content creator
26	Elena	F	24	Milano	Bachelor's degree	Art director
27	Nathan	M	24	Milano	High School Diploma	Digital PR
28	Sofia	F	34	Milano	Master's Degree	Blogger, content creator
29	Guido	M	25	Savona	High School Diploma	Surveyor
30	Arianna	F	27	Torino	High School Diploma	Content Creator

31	Marco	M	25	Potenza	High School Diploma	Student, content creator
32	Elia	M	31	Cuneo	High School Diploma	Photographer
33	Lorna	F	29	Cuneo	High School Diploma	Photographer
34	Davide	M	46	Firenze	High School Diploma	Employee
35	Dario	M	26	Milano	High School Diploma	Surveyor