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From attention to affect: gendered practices of status-seeking among Instagram content creators

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the dynamics of status gaining and signalling among Instagram micro-influencers. The article posits that within the influencer industry, the process of status acquisition is undergoing a shift from attention to affect, where the collection and display of public expressions of sentiment have become central to accruing social status. The emphasis on affective responses and interactions, however, goes hand in hand with the constant quantification and commercialisation of affect, which becomes conflated into measurements of engagement. Furthermore, the concept of calibrated femininity is introduced to account for the gendered dimension of status-seeking practices and highlight their entanglement with a fine-tuned representation of the self and the body in accordance with social media analytics. The empirical research consists of qualitative interviews ($n = 25$) with Instagram micro-influencers, as well as insights emerging from digital ethnography. The results show how content creators construct social status as affect through three interconnected practices: the nurturing of their audience, the calibration of femininity, and the display of affective responses as status symbols.

KEYWORDS

Affect; calibrated femininity; Instagram; social status; Micro-influencers

Introduction

In our contemporary society, the demotic turn (Turner 2010) has enabled ordinary individuals to attain popularity, linking fame with the lived experience of common people. As a result, gaining fame on social media platforms has become a seemingly attainable goal and a status symbol for many (Abidin 2018). Social media influencers, individuals who gain and monetise a large following online, embody these new ways of becoming famous. Despite increasing attention on how influencers achieve micro-celebrity (Khamis *et al.* 2017) and fame (Abidin 2018), only a few studies focus on how they build social status (Fiers 2020, Christin and Lewis 2021, Bainotti 2023).

To contribute to this literature, this article focuses on how social status is gained and signalled in the context of the influencer industry. While recent research emphasises that prestige is related to the accumulation of attention on social media (Eckhardt and Bardhi 2019, Christin and Lewis 2021), I contend that social status is increasingly connected to *affect*, understood as the collection and display of public expressions of sentiment

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(Papacharissi 2015). More specifically, this article posits that the dynamics of status gaining and signalling are undergoing a change, characterised by a shift from attention to affect. Such a shift entails that, alongside the cultivation of attention and the conspicuous display of metrics such as like and follower counts, social status is increasingly accrued by eliciting, accumulating, and showcasing affective relationships.

Previous literature has already investigated how content creators build their online personae by curating intimate relationships with their audience (Marwick and Boyd 2011, Baym 2015, Cotter 2018) and nurturing a sense of perceived interconnectedness to amplify their visibility and enhance their prospects for monetisation (Abidin 2016). However, less attention has been put on how public expressions of sentiment can represent a new resource to attain social status and, at the same time, a way of displaying one's prestige. To fill this gap, the article outlines the transition from status as attention to status as affect, as well as the tensions inherent to this process. In particular, I will focus on how affective responses become conflated into measurements of engagement and other analytics, with relevant consequences for the commercialisation and monetisation of affect.

Furthermore, this article aims to analyse the gendered aspects of status gaining activities, an area of research rather unexplored, especially in relation to content creators and their practices. In this pursuit, the concept of 'calibrated femininity' is introduced to account for the techniques employed by content creators to fine-tune the representation of the self and the body following social media analytics and audience feedback. These practices are aimed at creating female, homosocial bonds and elicit affective responses, which are functional to accrue status as affect.

Overall, this work contributes to existing research in the field of Celebrity Studies by shedding light on the changing dynamics of social status and distinction within the influencer industry and specifically on the interplay of status, affect, gender, and social media analytics. It is important to notice that status-gaining activities involve, but are not limited to, content creators' self-branding strategies. The attention is here put on how self-branding and visibility labour (Abidin 2016) can be used to gain prestige, affirm one's social standing, and distinguish oneself from others in the digital arena. Drawing from the work by Thorstein Veblen (1899/2007) and Alice Marwick (2013), social status is conceptualised as the degree of prestige assigned to individuals and their position in the social hierarchy, as well as a set of performative practices of display. As the analysis will make clear, social status is a dynamic construct that is constantly built and displayed in a recursive manner (Bainotti 2023).

To showcase the transition from attention to affect, the article focuses on a specific category of content creators, known as micro-influencers. Unlike A-list influencers, micro-influencers have smaller audiences (typically under 100,000 followers), which allows them to be more interactive and engaged with their followers (McQuarrie *et al.* 2013). Consequently, they are considered more authentic and trustworthy (Abidin 2021), thus representing a privileged category for brands and companies to work with (Ehlers 2021). For these reasons, the analysis of micro-influencers' activities is useful to understand how they construct and display social status to affirm themselves on social media, particularly on Instagram. Instagram was chosen as the primary venue for empirical research as it continues to represent one of the most important platforms used by influencers to display their lifestyles and run their businesses (Rodrigue 2023). Additionally, the distinctive visual culture and algorithmic logic inherent to the platform (Leaver *et al.* 2020), make it relevant to analyse status-seeking practices.

The empirical research builds on data from qualitative interviews ($n = 25$) with Instagram micro-influencers operating in different fields (mostly fashion, beauty, travel) and based in Italy, as well as on insights emerging from a digital ethnography investigation of the field. The results show how social status is constructed and signalled as affect through three interconnected practices, specifically by: a) nurturing content creators' publics between humanisation and commercialisation; b) calibrating femininity in response to Instagram analytics and audience feedback; and c) displaying affective responses as status symbols. This way, it is possible to highlight the changes in status-seeking processes as well as the complex entanglements of affect and analytics, intimacy, and scrutiny, as well as self-expression and (self)surveillance.

Theoretical framework

From status as attention to status as affect

The main purpose of this article is to investigate how social status is gained and signalled in the context of the influencer industry. The concept of social status is a complex and multidimensional one, which has been theorised in many fields and applied across a variety of studies. Prominent scholars in the social sciences have highlighted that status can be associated with honour (Weber 1922/1978), cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984), or the conspicuous display of wealth and consumption (Veblen 1899/2007). However, our contemporary society has evolved significantly in recent years, driven by the heightened flexibility and mobility of individuals, coupled with the all-encompassing impact of digital technologies and social media platforms (Eckhardt and Bardhi 2019). Against this backdrop, more traditional indicators of social status, including social class, level of education, or the display of luxury, have gradually yielded ground to *attention* as a prominent resource for attaining prestige (Marwick 2013, Eckhardt and Bardhi 2019). Accordingly, social status is now increasingly related to the ability to gain a large audience on social media (Marwick 2013) and is measured and signalled by social media metrics, such as likes, clicks, and follower count, which have become new status symbols (Christin and Lewis 2021). The ability to attract and direct attention has, after all, constituted the very definition of celebrity from the earliest years of the cultural and media industries (Marshall and Redmond 2015). Its enduring importance is even more pronounced in an economy that views attention as a scarce resource to accumulate and leverage for generating profit (Terranova 2012). Following the demands of the attention economy, content creators have been prompted to cultivate a meticulously curated online persona and increase visibility on social media platforms to enhance their social standing (Marwick 2013, Abidin 2018).

If attention represents a resource to accrue social status, metrics serve as measurements to render status tangible (Christin and Lewis 2021). The relevance of metrics has been affirmed with the initial growth of influencer marketing that happened by the mid-2010s, when brands, companies, and advertisers found themselves in need of 'objective' criteria to identify, classify, and reward social media influencers (Hund 2023). To survive in such a competitive industry, content creators felt compelled to adapt by performing for the score and producing Instagram-worthy content (Marwick 2015). However, it has been noted that metrics are far from being objective measurements, as they actively contribute

to constructing what they are supposed to measure (Beer 2016). In other words, by prompting individuals to strive for higher scores, metrics contribute to shaping the reality that they claim to neutrally assess (see also, Hearn 2010). Furthermore, the value and reliability of metrics have been undermined due to the proliferation of practices such as buying fake followers or likes (Abidin 2018), or resorting to engagement pods¹ (O'Meara 2019), rather than genuinely and organically cultivating attention on social media platforms. Hence, both marketers and content creators began to question the effectiveness of metrics in representing the status and value of micro-influencers, given their inherent subjectivity and vulnerability.

Considering the increasing complexity of the influencer industry, and content creators' adaptability to it, attention is no longer the most valuable resource to attain social status, nor are metrics the most reliable indicators to select and reward content creators. In this context, I argue that practices of status gaining and signalling are undergoing a change, marked by a shift from attention to affect. Instead of attention, affect is becoming an ever-important resource to accrue and display social status. By building on the work of Zizi Papacharissi (2015), affect is understood as the collection and display of public expressions of sentiment. The notion of affect is not synonymous with feeling or emotion but refers to an intensity that precedes the potential for activity (Papacharissi 2015). Indeed, affect represents a driving force that is 'suggestive of tendencies to act in a variety of ways, or, to not act at all' (Papacharissi 2015, p. 12), and refers to the ability to affect and be affected (Deleuze and Guattari 1980/1987). Affect, therefore, represents a useful concept to investigate the expressions of sentiment emerging from users' affective attunement to online content and the micro-influencer persona. An affective relationship is established between the creator and their audience, which produces an intensity that leads users to like, comment, and interact with the content creator. Such intensity is ephemeral and creates temporary forms of connection and displays of sentiment, which represent a new resource to accrue and display social status.

Notably, understanding status in terms of affect means that the social standing of content creators is contingent upon the quantity and quality of affective responses they can evoke towards their personae, and, at the same time, *display* to the larger public. Affective expressions of sentiment cannot remain confined solely between the content creator and their audience but need to be showcased to fellow influencers, potential clients, marketers, and other stakeholders. This echoes Veblen's (1899/2007, p. 30) perspective on the significance of display, especially when, in the *Theory of the Leisure Class*, he contends that 'wealth or power must be put in evidence, for esteem is awarded only on evidence'. Along these lines, content creators need to elicit affective expressions as well as showcase them, as this would signal their status and at the same time enhance it. Notably, the relevance of displaying affect is related to an understanding of social status as a dynamic construct, which is recursively accrued and displayed (Bainotti 2023).

Social relationships and engagement measurements

The transition from attention to affect is not to be naively understood. Existing research has already underscored the tensions between the creation of intimate relationships and their use for attaining visibility, circulating content, as well as gaining partnerships and collaborations (Marwick and Boyd 2011, García-Rapp 2017, van Driel and Dumitrica 2021).

When investigating the transition from attention to affect, therefore, it is important to acknowledge that the relationships constructed by content creators are always strategic, intertwined with the logic of self-promotion, and guided by the principles of profit maximisation (Duffy 2017, Arriagada and Bishop 2021).

Furthermore, if processes of status gaining and signalling are increasingly focused on expressions of sentiment, affect is nevertheless scrutinised, measured, and monetised by the evermore ubiquitous role of social media analytics. Differently from metrics, analytics indicate the performance of content creators' self-brand that is not publicly displayed but created and monitored behind the scenes. These measurements are collected in databases and made available by third-party companies through their websites or can be built into social media platforms (Gräve 2019). Instagram, for instance, offers to all business profiles a dedicated section called Insights, which provides information about the accounts reached, the accounts engaged, and details about followers, such as their gender, age location, etc ... (see, e.g. Barnhart 2022). The accessibility and user-friendly nature of social media analytics have rendered them valuable tools for marketers and companies as well as individual micro-influencers. As the results will make clear, it is more and more common for content creators to align the production of their content with the information provided by Instagram Insights or other measurements. The relevance assumed by analytics goes hand in hand with the demands of an evolving influencer industry, and particularly its need for more nuanced ways of selecting content creators and assessing their performances (Hund 2023).

Among these analytics, engagement represents one of the most important indicators of success (Gräve 2019). This concept has been differently defined to emphasise users' participation and connection with a social media account, the measurement of social interactions, and forms of cognitive and affective commitment (see, e.g. Uzunoğlu and Kip 2014). All these definitions share an emphasis on cultivating affective relationships while also measuring and monetising these interactions. In the transition from attention to affect, such a duality persists. On the one hand, there is a recognition of the importance of eliciting affective responses to navigate a complex industry and accrue prestige. On the other hand, affect becomes progressively conflated into the notion of engagement, thus reflecting processes of datafication of affective intensities and the possibility of capitalising on them. The focus on engagement, therefore, is useful to better understand the changes in status-seeking processes and their entanglements with the measurement systems offered by platforms such as Instagram.

As previously anticipated, another relevant element that intertwines with the construction and display of social status as affect is gender. The next section establishes a connection between social status, affect, and gender, by unpacking how micro-influencers construct social status through their gendered body and the calibration of their femininity.

Status, affect, and calibrated femininity

According to existing literature, the curation of an online public can be highly gendered (Abidin 2015, Duffy and Hund 2019), and cuteness can be used in strategic ways to gain followers and maximise profit (Abidin 2016). Similarly, a relationship between attention and attractiveness has been identified, where 'hot female bodies generate more likes,

tags, and views, and, over time, algorithms learn to make them more visible' (Carah and Dobson 2016, p. 1). In the transition from status as attention to status as affect, the gendered dimension remains crucial, even though it assumes peculiar features.

Crucially, the construction of social status is becoming more and more materialised through reference to the female body (McRobbie 2009). As Mike Featherstone (2010) argues, individuals' body images can be used in instrumental ways, as social acceptability and status go hand in hand with how a person looks. Consequently, the body can be modified, altered, and policed in a way that generates positive feelings and affective charge (Featherstone 2010). As previously mentioned, the concept of affect encompasses both the possibility to affect and being affected, and these possibilities are inscribed and vehiculated through the body and in interaction with other bodies (Papacharissi 2015). Along these lines, research has shown that make-over and reality TV programmes encourage individuals to participate in consumer culture and perform conspicuous consumption on the self (e.g. manicures, fashion, pampering) as a route to individual recognition and social success (Nunn and Biressi 2015). These practices are also viewed as assets to leverage for the formation of the entrepreneurial self in the attention economy (Abidin and Gwynne 2017, Banet-Weiser 2018). Furthermore, previous studies show that the posturing and displaying of the female body is, at the same time, a kind of aesthetic labour (Entwistle and Wissinger 2006) and a platform-mediated, algorithmically oriented type of activity (Carah and Dobson 2016). There is evidence that visibility labour is intertwined with algorithmic visibility resulting in self-optimisation practices, which are performed to create content that adheres to algorithmic requirements and avoids algorithmic punishment (Bishop 2019).

Building on these research streams, I contend that the construction of social status as affect builds on gendered practices of calibrated femininity, which consist of adjusting and fine-tuning the presentation of the self and the body in accordance with data flows and followers' preferences. Calibrated femininity encompasses self-optimisation techniques (Bishop 2019) employed by content creators to foster female, homosocial bonds, which are functional to generate affective response and, in turn, build social status. These practices are optimised by following the information made available by Instagram analytics, which renders micro-influencers' audiences much more knowable than before. Therefore, practices of calibrated femininity are connected to a change in how online publics are understood, which moves from the concept of imagined audiences (Marwick and Boyd 2011) to data-driven ones. Indeed, analytics, and their accessibility, have made it possible to accurately understand an audience's compositions and patterns in behaviours, offering opportunities to orient one's content and bodily representations accordingly. As a consequence, the performance of calibrated femininity also contributes to the growing scrutiny and datafication of the female subject and body. If women have already been 'constantly deliberated over, surveilled, evaluated, judged, and scrutinised through media discourses, law, and policy' (Banet-Weiser 2018, p. 28), the relevance yielded by analytics adds yet another level of scrutiny.

In sum, this article claims that affect represents a new resource to construct and display social status. Accordingly, content creators accrue prestige by eliciting affective intensities and accumulating public displays of sentiment from their audiences. Although these practices emphasise the affective dimension, the relationships instated are nevertheless quantified in the form of engagement rates. Furthermore, status-

seeking practices are highly gendered and characterised by the ongoing performance of a calibrated femininity, which follows the requirements of the analytics provided by Instagram.

Methodology

This paper builds on a methodological approach that blends qualitative interviews (Patton 2014) with insights from digital ethnography (Pink *et al.* 2015) and focuses specifically on Italian micro-influencers on Instagram. The combination of the two strategies is relevant to account for the (visual) representations and practices that content creators deploy on Instagram, which are then further investigated by asking micro-influencers for descriptions and explanations about their activities. In this way, it is possible to go in-depth with the complex practices of status gaining and signalling, which always happen at the crossroads between the online and offline domains. Instagram was chosen as the main locus of investigation because, with its economies, affordances, and emphasis on visual cultures, it represents a preferred platform for content creators to thrive (Leaver *et al.* 2020).

More specifically, the research consists of qualitative, semi-structured interviews with Italian micro-influencers. This technique is apt to understand subjective and anecdotal narrations of content creators' practices and better understand their status-seeking activities (Patton 2014). Participants were recruited starting from a dataset of Instagram data, extracted by querying the platform for all the posts labelled with the hashtag #influencer and geotagged in Italy, posted in February 2019. From there, a list of potential recruits complying with the following criteria has been created: 1) users who posted regularly; 2) users involved in the display of sponsored content; 3) users with a following between 10,000 and 100,000 followers, according to widely accepted definitions of micro-influencers. The sampling procedure was aimed at privileging information-rich cases to account for relevant nuances of the phenomenon (Patton 2014).

Potential participants were contacted via the email provided in their Instagram profiles. In total, 25 interviews with Italian content creators who self-identified as females were conducted between April and October 2019, an amount which aimed to achieve theoretical saturation (Charmaz 2000). Fifteen interviews were conducted face-to-face, while the others were conducted either via Skype or WhatsApp Call. Among the themes addressed, creators were asked to narrate their everyday experiences, their relationship with their following, the values that orient their promotional activities, the relationship with their physical appearance, and what they value about their work. The average duration of the interview was 50 minutes. Interviews were then fully transcribed. In the analysis phase, interview data was coded according to various thematic categories oriented by the theoretical framework of the research, with some space for new themes to emerge directly from the data, in a grounded theory spirit (see, e.g. Charmaz 2000).

Participants were selected to maximise their diversity in terms of age, race, sexual orientation, and ability. Moreover, the research aimed to recruit a varied pool of participants across different fields of work (e.g. fashion, beauty, travel), number of followers, geographic context, as well as personal and professional backgrounds. Despite the attempts, however, the sample is composed of mostly white, cisgender, and able women, active in the fields of fashion and beauty, and mostly living in the North of

Italy. Nevertheless, such a sample offers important insights into the cultural feminisation (Adkins 2001) of influencers' activities of production and consumption. To preserve the interviewees' privacy, the results are presented using pseudonyms.

The results of the interviews are supported by insights emerging from the ethnographic observation (Pink *et al.* 2015) of content creators and their practices for the duration of the research (2019–2021). The results of the digital ethnography emerge from the observation of content creators' Instagram profiles, as well as from the inspection of the interactions that happened during the interviews. Each interview was an experience rich in ethnographic insights, given the constant references to Instagram and the ecosystem of apps used by micro-influencers, as well as the presence of smartphones in their materiality. Interviewees were prone to showcase their Instagram profiles during the interview, comment on the choices they made, or explain the tools they used. All these experiences and the knowledge acquired through them were documented in the form of ethnographic notes, which were used to delve deeper into the analysis of the interview results.

Results: from attention to affect

Nurturing the content creator's audience

The first part of the results sheds light on content creators' endeavours to accumulate affect as a resource to accrue social status. To do so, they employ various strategies of nurturing the audience, navigating the delicate balance between humanising and commercialising their followings.

According to the majority of micro-influencers interviewed, nurturing one's audience centres around the golden rule of reciprocity. Even though content creators are the ones to whom the flow of communication is primarily directed, they need to support a reciprocal relationship by interacting with the audience in comments and direct messages and answering its questions. Claire, a travel micro-influencer, highlights the labouring necessary to cultivate affect: 'The job doesn't end with posting a picture on your Instagram feed, then you have to check for the reactions and answer the comments!'. Cultivating a reciprocal relationship is deemed fundamental yet, at the same time, 'overwhelming' as Claire puts it. The importance of interacting with followers also emerges from the interview with Maria, who has been active as a content creator since Instagram's inception in 2012:

Sometimes it's hard for me to answer everyone; it takes a lot of time and energy! But then I think about it and . . . 20,000 [followers] is just a number, but they are real people, and if some of them spend just a few minutes writing to me, I think they deserve an answer.

These insights highlight the relational labour (Baym 2015) required to elicit affective responses and, in turn, gain social status. Moreover, within a subset of content creators, like Maria and Claire, there is an inclination to go beyond the idea of followers as mere numbers, recognising them instead as real people deserving of consideration. The results show the tendency to humanise one's following, which emerges in conjunction with the labour needed to generate affect and stimulate expressions of sentiment. This aspect emerges further from Betty's words when she comments on what she calls 'the side

effects of visibility'. Betty, a lifestyle content creator, explains that her following has been around 20,000 for years until one day she posted an exceptionally popular post, which caused a boost in her follower count:

It may sound crazy, but I was really worried! All these new followers, mostly from India, not on target with my profile . . . I know that my follower count increased and that's good, but I also know that they will never be engaged . . . and that's bad!

This excerpt reflects the essence of the shift from attention to affect and exemplifies the position of most of the creators who participated in the study. Followers need to be 'real', but also 'in target' and 'engaged', meaning, active in interacting with the creator. Echoing concerns emerging among professionals in the influencer industry, micro-influencers acknowledge that follower and like counts are not reliable enough indicators of value. To overcome this issue, they cultivate genuine and affective interactions by prioritising qualitatively valuable relationships with their followers. Betty's words are also useful to highlight that visibility does not always equate to social status. Instances of high visibility can carry an air of suspicion or even negativity and, therefore, might not be indicative of prestige and social standing. Notably, nurturing an audience of real and engaged followers is what allows content creators to distinguish themselves from influencer wannabes who, as fashion micro-influencer Amy puts it, 'think they are important just because they buy their following'. At the same time, this offers the possibility to be competitive in a saturated economy, appeal to marketers and advertisers, and secure partnerships and collaborations – all factors that contribute to enhancing one's status.

The results underscore the increasing importance of affect as a resource to accrue social status, which emerges in content creators' tendency to prioritise quality over quantity. Nevertheless, commercialisation and quantification remain important components of micro-influencers' practices. In particular, the commercialisation of the creator's public emerges in how affective responses and interactions are conceived and framed in terms of engagement, as already demonstrated by the excerpts above. References to the notion of engagement were recurring in almost all the interviews. In line with other studies (Cotter 2018), the content creators interviewed are convinced that high levels of engagement lead to higher visibility in the Instagram algorithmic ranking. As Maria points out: 'Without interaction, your visibility is compromised. The less interaction there is, the further down you go'. As these words show, a lack of interaction corresponds to the threat of invisibility, which could lead to a lower position in the status hierarchy of the digital arena. The results demonstrate the conflation of affect with engagement, which leads to the datafication and commercialisation of affective relationships.

The importance of quantity and measurements is thus brought back by the ubiquitous use of, and relevance attributed to, analytics, particularly the in-built Instagram Insights. During the interviews, a couple of content creators, such as Emma, showed me their Instagram Insights page to explain its relevance to their work. Emma explained that her activities in the field of fashion and beauty are more and more influenced by Instagram Insights, particularly by details on the number of unique accounts reached by her content, the number of interactions received (audience) engagement, and details about follower growth. Through analytics, public expressions of sentiment can be measured, quantified, and converted into visibility, collaborations, and social status. Instagram analytics are also valued as they represent the data micro-influencers are required to showcase to

marketers and advertisers to secure partnerships and deals. It becomes clear, then, that the tendency to commercialisation is strongly intertwined with measurements and quantification in the form of social media analytics. These analytics are not publicly and overly displayed (as in the case of metrics), but they nonetheless orient the processes of status acquisition by measuring and commercialising affect.

The results show that micro-influencers construct social status as affect through practices of nurturing the audience, with the aim of balancing quality and quantity, humanisation and commercialisation. The emphasis put on affective and 'real' relationships coexists with the importance attributed to engagement rates and Instagram analytics as ways to quantify and account for micro-influencers' value. In what follows, the article delves into how content creators combine the nurturing of their publics with the need to carefully calibrate the expressions of their gendered selves and bodies in response to Instagram analytics and audience feedback.

Performing Calibrated Femininity

As explained in the previous section, Instagram Insights provides relevant information about content creators' audiences in terms of gender distribution, geographical location, and age demographics (Barnhart 2022). When reflecting on their Instagram analytics, some content creators acknowledge the importance put on the gender composition of their audiences. Fashion and beauty micro-influencer Emma, for example, finds it problematic that her following consists of approximately 50% of men and 50% of women. Another content creator, Megan, underscores her concern that the number of male followers outweighs that of female ones:

I obviously try to reach girls, because brands and companies look at the kind of public you have and obviously if there are more boys than girls, they won't choose you!

Megan, who is a fashion content creator, further elaborates on this point by stressing that women are more likely to share her same interests, be more involved in what she is saying, and express their opinion, support, or feedback on it, thus fuelling her engagement rate. She also stresses that women are more likely to spend money on the products and services she suggests, thus proving her value to marketers and companies and increasing her possibilities for income. These insights showcase that not only the quality but also the gender of interactions elicited by content creators is as important as their number. The construction of status as affect builds upon the need to cultivate female homosocial relationships, meaning relationships among women. These relationships are functional to accumulate affective responses, which can be turned into engagement rates and serve to secure collaborations. While involving an affective dimension, the issue of creating gender-oriented publics is framed by content creators as an entrepreneurial issue, which they need to solve to maximise their success, or at least to ensure the continuity of their activities. This brings back the tension between humanising one's audience and capitalising on it, which the content creators in this study constantly face.

To improve the quality and gender balance of their following and construct homosocial bonds, micro-influencers report engaging in various forms of calibrated femininity. While practices of nurturing the audience were consistently reported in most interviews, the process of calibrated femininity appears more as a constellation of practices

performed by different creators. What all these practices have in common is the shared emphasis on self-optimising and fine-tuning the presentation of the self and the body by following Instagram analytics and audience feedback. Katy, a fashion and beauty content creator, explains the 'trial and error' procedure she adopted over the past 3 years, based on various attempts at balancing the sexualised display of her body:

I am trying to work on it, I mean, I'm trying to modify my image a little bit, 'cause I used to display myself as sexy, but in the end, such content attracts only men, not women ... to be honest, it seems that women find it difficult to follow me.

Similarly, Silvia, a micro-influencer working in fitness, expresses her struggle to calibrate the representation of the body on Instagram Stories when she says:

You know that I do post pictures of me in a bikini when I'm at the beach, but sometimes it's just so frustrating that people can't understand the real message, can't understand what I really want to say, and they are just like 'oh you are sooo fit!'. I just wanted to share this reflection. ...

Content creators are aware of the potential of their bodies and attractiveness to garner attention and visibility. Yet, as Katy points out, such attention would not be effective in setting them apart from other creators or gaining valuable deals and collaborations. The attention gained through a sexualised body is not necessarily 'on target', to use an expression recurrent in the interviews, and, as such, can hardly be converted into affect, engagement, and social status.

In Silvia's case, instead, the complaint is directed towards the fact that people online tend to focus exclusively on her body and physical appearance, without taking into consideration the messages she wants to convey. Similarly, Annika, a content creator who shares tips to improve one's online presence and personal brand, expresses her frustration, stating: 'No matter what I'm saying, it can be the most important thing, I will always be asked: "where did you buy that dress?!"'. The data suggests that the calibration of femininity occurs not only in response to Instagram analytics, but also following audience feedback, conveyed in the form of comments, criticism, appreciation, requests, or questions. Moreover, the calibration of femininity is shaped by the aesthetic principles prompted by Instagram and the highly stereotypical, feminised visual and consumer culture it fosters (Leaver *et al.* 2020). In line with previous research (Duffy and Hund 2019), the micro-influencers in this study find themselves navigating a complex landscape where they are perceived as either 'too sexy' to be relatable or not attractive enough to receive attention and affect.

In line with the notion of data-driven publics introduced before, femininity is calibrated with a specific idea of the content creators' public and their requests in mind, one that builds on measurements and followers' demographics. The results make clear that content creators know precisely who is looking and, above all, by whom they would like to be seen. In this sense, practices of calibrated femininity allow us to integrate the concept of the male gaze (Mulvey 1975) and the internalised male gaze (Gill 2007) with the idea of an 'analytic gaze', which has to do with the performance of femininity for the analytics promoted by Instagram and for the public that these analytics reveal. Practices of calibrated femininity also highlight that the pursuit of social status builds on self-optimisation as well as self-policing

practices. This observation is significant as it sheds light on the costs in terms of discipline and self-surveillance that come with status-gaining practices in the influencer industry.

As seen so far, through the performance of a calibrated femininity content creators cultivate female, homosocial bonds and accumulate affective responses useful to boost social status. In this sense, the performance of calibrated femininity is complementary to practices of nurturing the audience. The last point to be discussed to understand the transition to status as affect is how these practices are entangled with the display of affect.

Displaying affect

To fully work as a resource to accrue social status, affect needs to be showcased to the larger audience encompassing fellow influencers, potential followers, marketers, and brands. This aspect emerges from Julia's words, a travel content creator, when she claims:

I'm trying to figure out what to do because the quantity of messages I receive in private compared to the comments under my posted pictures is not good for my engagement rates. Usually, I don't care if they [followers] comment or not, I'm happy with all the feedback and experiences they share with me in DMs [Direct Messages]. The problem is that comments boost your visibility, and advertisers look at them to see if your profile has an authentic engagement or not because, you know, with all these bots and fake followers ...

The results confirm that followers' participation needs to appear on content creators' profiles, and not only in direct messages that are inaccessible to the wider audience, as public displays of affect, together with engagement rates, now serve as indicators of prestige. Furthermore, the display of affective responses is in line with the logic of algorithm optimisation since, as seen in the above excerpt and confirmed by most interviewees, high numbers of comments help increase micro-influencers' algorithmic visibility (see also O'Meara 2019). This is also why, periodically, some creators in the research invite their followers to publicly show their support by commenting on their posts. Sarah, a lifestyle content creator, tries to elicit affective responses from her public through Instagram Stories, writing the following message:

I don't like to do this often, but if you can leave a comment on my latest post that would be super important to me. This is my job, but when Instagram messes around with it, everything becomes meaningless to me. I'd appreciate your support ♥♥

The extract highlights that the display of affect is functional to outsmart the algorithm as well as to navigate the often unpredictable and obscure functioning of the Instagram platform (see, e.g. Duffy *et al.* 2021).

Significantly, the relevance of showcasing affective responses to signal (and enhance) social status has emerged not only as a response to the critique of metrics but also to major changes in the Instagram platform. In the summer of 2019, Instagram started testing in various countries, Italy included, a new feature that would have removed the number of likes from posts that show up on the main feed and profiles (Martin 2019). Such an attempt to 'demetrify' the platform was itself a reaction to allegations of inauthenticity and was justified by Instagram itself in terms of prioritising content quality over feedback mechanisms (Martin 2019).

While the decision to hide like counts ultimately wasn't consistently pursued, and, as of the time of writing, likes are visible on the platform, this move nonetheless played a role in the shift from attention to affect, specifically in the Italian context. Faced with the possibility of losing like counts, one of the main status symbols of the digital arena (Marwick 2013), the micro-influencers examined in this research have started to adapt Instagram affordances to their necessity of finding innovative ways to showcase social status. Particularly significant in this regard is their resourceful utilisation of Instagram Stories, which has become a venue to narrate their everyday lives, sponsor products, as well as display their prestige by showcasing positive comments and feedback received from the audience. Giada, for example, is an established lifestyle content creator, who managed to gain a following of around 100,000 in almost six years. Starting from the summer of 2019, she periodically shared some positive feedback messages received in Direct Messages. All these Stories are then saved in an Instagram Highlights folder significantly titled 'YOU ♥'. In this way, Giada and other micro-influencers ensure that these expressions of sentiment persist beyond the standard 24-hour window, making them prominently visible on their profile feed. This approach effectively 'freezes' public displays of affect, transforming them into innovative status symbols.

During the digital ethnography, it was possible to find other recurrent ways in which micro-influencers elicit and display affect via Instagram Stories. For instance, content creators started to increasingly make use of Instagram Stories' stickers to ask questions and stimulate users' affective responses, with expressions such as: 'Can you tell me why you are following me?', 'I need your feedback guyssss! Please let me know three positive things about my profile', or 'Which type of content would you like to see more on my profile?', and then publicly re-share the answers. Such a technique is useful, once again, to fuel engagement rates to boost algorithmic visibility. Furthermore, it also provides the kind of feedback that guides micro-influencers' production of content and orients practices of calibrated femininity. Most importantly, however, the results show the reciprocal relationship between the display and the production of social status. The display of affective responses represents a way to showcase one's status to the audience. At the same time, such a display could lead to more followers, more affective responses, more engagement and, therefore, more status. From these insights, the productive nature of the display emerges, as showcasing one's status can propel and further enhance that same prestige in a productive way (Bainotti 2023).

The role of the display adds the last component of the shift from status as attention to status as affect explained throughout the paper. The tensions inherent to this shift are also further confirmed, particularly because the display of affective relationships is not only about humanising the audience and reciprocating the affect received but also serves strategic and commercial purposes.

Conclusion

This paper analyses the shift from status as attention to status as affect in the influencer industry, with a specific focus on the role played by gender in this process. In the context of a more complex and competitive environment, Instagram micro-influencers gain and signal social status by collecting and displaying public expressions of sentiment and affective relationships with their audience. Therefore, affect has come to represent a new resource to attain social status and, at the same time, a way of displaying one's prestige.

The results show that micro-influencers construct social status as affect by nurturing their audiences and stimulating affective intensities towards their content and their personae. Despite the emphasis on affect, attention, quantification, and commercialisation are not completely dismissed. On the contrary, affective responses to the creator's persona are conflated into engagement rates and measured through Instagram Insights, thus becoming datafied social relationships, which can easily be monetised. Complementary to the nurturing of one's audience is the calibration of femininity – the constant labouring aimed at balancing the presentation of the gendered self and body. Such calibration is necessary for micro-influencers to establish themselves as relatable personae and create female, homo-social bonds, which are functional to stimulate affective responses, increase engagement rates, and ultimately, boost social status. The notion of calibrated femininity underscores that micro-influencers are influenced by Instagram analytics and audience feedback, which lead to the performance of (self)surveillance and optimisation practices under an 'analytic gaze'. Lastly, attention has been put on the display of affect as a way to signal and at the same time construct social status, in reciprocal interaction. The importance of the display of affect also highlights how content creators need to keep up with the ever evolving and uncertain nature of the Instagram platform.

As pointed out throughout the text, the transition from attention to affect is intricately connected to significant transformations within the influencer industry (Hund 2023). Content creators' emphasis on quality over quantity, the critique of the conspicuousness of metrics, and the search for innovative and subtler status symbols can also be interpreted in light of broader shifts in the dynamics of social status and distinction. All these elements can be reconducted to a trend towards inconspicuous ways of gaining and signalling social status, characterised by the importance attributed to little luxuries, everyday pleasures, and subtle signals of distinction, often rooted in culture and knowledge more than money and luxury (see, e.g. Eckhardt *et al.* 2015). The transition from attention to affect thus offers insights not only into the evolving nature of status-seeking processes within the influencer industry but also their broader societal implications.

In this research, attention has been paid to positive expressions of sentiment, which are not the only ones to which content creators are exposed. Future research could delve deeper into the negative dimension of the shift to status as affect and investigate the effects of receiving harmful responses. Furthermore, attention could be focused on how status-seeking practices are shaped not only by gender but also by other dimensions of inequality, including class and race.

Note

1. Engagement pods consist of groups of content creators who agree to mutually like, comment on, share, or otherwise engage with each other's posts, no matter the content, to game Instagram's algorithm into prioritising the participants' content and show it to a broader audience (O'Meara 2019).

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