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Gabriella Taddeo

Abstract: In the last years, scholars have begun trying to investigate the role played by social networks as tools for an informal approach to education. In this direction, the so called “influencers” are seen by young people not only as distributors of entertainment pills, but also, in many cases, as references for inspiring consumptions, values, lifestyles and also to build knowledge. Based on 294 auto-ethnographic reports provided by young people between the ages of 20 and 23, the research presents findings about what are the most relevant educational topics covered by the influencers and the reasons why young people considered them influential from an educational point of view. Through the analysis of the reports, that provided reflections on 513 influencers, some interesting findings can be highlighted on the potential of influencers as informal educators, specifically able at inspiring and nurturing socio-emotional learning and “life skills”. Some traits seem to characterize the informal educational approach of the influencers: authenticity, attainability, humor and self-deprecation. They bring together aspirational self and aestheticization of failure, thus inspiring, for young people, continuous development in an amusing and unusual key. The research also introduces some of the frailties and contradictions of these educational models for the younger generations.

Keywords: Influencers, Instagram, young people, life-long learning, soft skills

The educational value of Instagram

Nowadays, there is increasing recognition of the importance and role of informal forms of learning, which can complement, continue and in some cases compensate for formal learning paths.

Informal learning commonly refers to forms of learning that result from activities related to work, family, leisure. Usually, these activities are not organised and planned in terms of objectives, time, tools, and therefore take place in a predominantly unintentional manner from the learner's perspective (Rogers, 2014; Cedefop, 2014)¹

Several scholars in the last years (Gee, 2003; Sefton Green, 2004; Jenkins et al. 2015; Sefton Green & Erstad. 2018; Guerrero-Pico et al. 2019; Tirocchi & Taddeo, 2019; Taddeo & Tirocchi, 2021) have investigated how digital and online participatory environments (social media, websites, online communities, videogames, YouTube, etc.) also contribute to reconfiguring forms of learning.

For instance, Scolari and Contreras-Espinosa (2019) identified informal learning strategies in the field of videogames, such as learning by doing, problem-solving, imitation, playing, evaluation, and teaching to peers.

Informal learning strategies based on irony, self-mockery and the narrativisation of one's own growth path have been identified in youth practices on social networks dedicated to writing and reading, such as Wattpad (Taddeo, 2019).

Other scholars (Costa-Sánchez & Guerrero-Pico, 2020) have highlighted how, even in the use of messaging systems such as Whatsapp, young people develop and train various skills through learning strategies based on management and teamwork, organisation, production and sharing of ideas.

Within this framework of general interest in the relationship between digital environments and learning, the role of Instagram still remains little investigated.

The social network Instagram has grown exponentially in recent years to position itself among the predominant web environments globally, reaching over one billion users in 2021 (Statista, 2022).

¹ The definition of formal, non-formal and informal learning is still debated (Malcom et al. 2003; Sefton- Green 2012). Besides the scientific debate, various international organisations have contributed to its theoretical systematisation (UNESCO 2012, OECD 2010, Cedefop, 2014). Despite the differences, common traits emerge from the various approaches to distinguish "formal" from "non-formal" and "informal" learning. The distinguishing features are based, essentially, on the different level of structuring of learning processes in relation to setting, planning and recognition. The three forms of learning (formal, non-formal, informal), thus, rather than being seen as rigid categories, can be imagined as a continuum of intensity on 3 factors 1) the setting, more or less institutional, of the learning 2) the intentionality and structuring of the activities provided for the learning 3) the accreditation and quality assurance of the pathway (Rogers, 2014).

It presents itself as a pivotal social network in the youth practices of Western countries, allowing young people to develop a curation of the self through different dynamics of editing, selection and self-promotion (Leaver et al., 2020; Marquez et al., 2022).

Its use is also emerging as a driver of new forms of consumption: especially teenagers and young adults orient their purchasing choices more and more after seeing content on this social network or following suggestions from influencers, who move across authenticity and commercialism of their content (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

Social scientists studying this platform have focused on the role of the platform in identity-related processes and intimacy practices (Abidin, 2018), the normalization models, especially about gender, that are conveyed and consolidated through its use (Butkowski et al., 2019), the professionalization of users (Abidin, 2016).

Other scholars have analyzed drives toward prioritizing aesthetics on the platform and the apparently contrary impulses towards ensuring the “authenticity” of content (Duffy 2017).

A growing number of studies have also turned to investigate the negative effects of the use of this social network on children: in particular, numerous studies have highlighted the relationship between social media usage practices and disturbances in the relationship with one’s own body, in the self-esteem and the ability to accept oneself. In fact, social media use in children and adolescents may be related to poorer body image, through the promotion of an unrealistic and unattainable appearance ideals (Butkowski et al. 2019; Santarossa & Woodruff, 2017; Tiggemann & Barbato, 2018), or the sexualization and objectification of individuals (Davis, 2018).

Despite therefore there is a lot of scientific work to understand the effects of the use of this social network on young people, research on its specific operation in both formal and informal educational processes is less in-depth.

In terms of Instagram’s role in educational contexts, it is only relatively recently that there has been experimentation with its possible use in formal educational contexts such as university and other tertiary school courses and empirical studies of such use.

The potential of Instagram as an educational tool lies in the fact that information presented in a visual format has a higher retention rate (Levie & Lentz, 1982). Mobile learning is also recognized as having the potential to complement and support more conventional educational activities (Wu et al., 2012), and indeed such potential has been widely explored. Some of the observed results of its empirical usage in educational fields include an improvement in students’ presentation of work through a flipped classroom model (Supiandi et al., 2019) and the improvement of expression skills in the acquisition of a second language (Jalaludin et al., 2019). Previous research

has also experimented with students using Instagram to write short essays or using it to assess listening comprehension skills (Akhiar et al., 2017). Exploratory research into students' perspectives on the use of Instagram as a blended learning educational and administrative tool in tertiary education shows that students perceive it as an effective educational tool which helps them in better understanding difficult topics as well as an administrative aid that complements current systems (Swanepoel & Bruwer, 2020). In secondary schools, a potential of this platform to improve the teaching process by introducing a mobile and pervasive approach is recognized. Adding tools that students find attractive such as challenges, quizzes and so on, has been shown to motivate students to gain and improve knowledge of economics, develop environmental awareness, and increase their awareness of the importance of caring for their health via modern health services.

Another educational application of Instagram is the phenomenon of "studygrammers" or educational influencers (Izquierdo-Iranzo & Gallardo-Echenique, 2020): users – sometimes actual teachers, sometimes students – who share notes, doubts and educational reflections with their followers and use social networks to promote learning situations with the community by sharing educational resources. In many cases, these influencers have built huge follower bases and earn money by sharing their teaching stories and offering advice.

Few scholars to date have analyzed the role social networks, and Instagram in particular, play in informally teaching skills, such as those related to health education and behavioral models for cultivating psycho-physical well-being.

The satisfaction of educational needs, however, can be considered one of the uses and gratifications of this social network, to be added to the wider needs for entertainment, self-expression and socialization already recognized.

This article thus proposes to analyze the role of Instagrammers as a vehicle for training in informal and transversal skills related to emotional intelligence and the natural abilities each person possesses in relation to their socio-cultural background (OECD, 2021).

Instagrammers in this arena do not explicitly set educational objectives, but they do perform informal educational practices by sharing informational content, engaging in scientific dissemination, offering suggestions for daily life (so-called "life hacks"), or posting content related to values and lifestyles.

The objective of this paper is to analyze how these actors are entering the growth and self-training paths of young people, providing contents, suggestions and life models that accompany them in their socio-emotional development.

Objectives and methodology

The research method involved collecting and analyzing 294 auto-ethnographic reports prepared by university students (74% female and 26% male). The accounts were collected during two university courses in Communication Sciences at the University of Turin, taking place in two different periods: October–November 2021 and February–March 2022.

The target audience ages ranging between 20 and 23 years old. In their auto-ethnographic reports, the participants indicated a total of 513 references (343 unique influencers).

The approach of auto-ethnographic reporting (Denzin, 2014), as well as being widely used in sociology, fits with the framework of critical pedagogy (Risi, 2022) and its valorization of auto-ethnography as a practice comprising both pedagogical (development of the issues of the course in an interactive and personal way) and data-collection aims. In this case, this approach was useful for the students to develop a personal and critical point of view on topics covered in the course, such as the effects of the media and the role of social media in their daily lives. Furthermore, unlike the “short” methods represented by surveys, auto-ethnography gives observers/informants more time to reflect on their observations and thus has the potential to result in detailed reports based on long-term reflection. It can therefore be a good method for generating rich narrative data relating to social and cultural practices on digital platforms while at the same time nurturing an active and transformative approach on the part of informants (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Chang, 2016).

The students were asked to develop an auto-ethnographic report based on the observation of their own practices over the last year that provided a description of who their influencers were and the reasons why they considered them influential. The analyses presented by the students ranged from a few pages to a few brief paragraphs and were supplemented by visual images and screenshots. They responded to the following broad questions: “Who are your influencers? (both physical and virtual?). Why do you think they are influential? Describe the actors you think are influential in your life, starting from an analysis of your experience over the last year, and providing examples and reasons from your point of view”.

The collected diaries constituted a corpus of over 250 pages and this was analyzed, using the software Nvivo 11 for Teams, in order to construct interpretative categories. The research was therefore based not on analyzing content broadcasters, the Instagrammers and their profiles, but on collecting the perceptions of content receivers. This methodological design made it possible to analyze the decoding processes performed by end users in light of the encoding strategies implemented by Instagrammers.

Analysis of the material took place according to a bottom-up approach typical of Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in which the production of interpretative categories was progressively refined through processes of generalization, comparison and the selection of emerging themes. The process of analysis followed the six steps procedure of Braun and Clarke (2006), that provides these passages:

Step 1: Become familiar with the data by reading them carefully;

Step 2: Generate initial codes;

Step 3: Organise codes into broader themes;

Step 4: Review all the materials, reading the data associated with each theme and consider whether the data really supported it;

Step 5: Define themes, identifying the 'essence' of what each theme is about;

Step 6: Write-up.

An inductive approach, which allows themes to emerge from the data rather than being informed by pre-existing literature, was applied to generate themes.

The contents were thus coded and organized in four themes:

Theme 1: topics covered by influencers, according to respondents;

Theme 2: specific educational sub-themes;

Theme 3: personal reasons why the influencer is influential for the student;

Theme 4: educational and communicational strategies activated by the influencer.

The questions fueling the research were therefore:

Q1 (Theme 1 and 2): what educational content are conveyed by influencers?

Q2 (Theme 3 and 4): through what strategies and with which effects?

In the next paragraphs I will try to answer to such questions, providing a synthetic analysis of what emerged from the above mentioned themes.

Educational topics covered by influencers

As previously described, the first analysis involved coding content and categorizing it according to the themes.

In relation to the topics covered by influencers, 11 thematic categories have been identified (Fig. 1). The categories were not mutually exclusive, given that often one influencer was associated to more than one topic.

This overview of topics is filtered by the students' perceptions and is therefore not a quantitatively objective photograph of the topics covered

in the influencers' posts; rather, it conveys a synoptic perception stemming from the way young people view such producers.

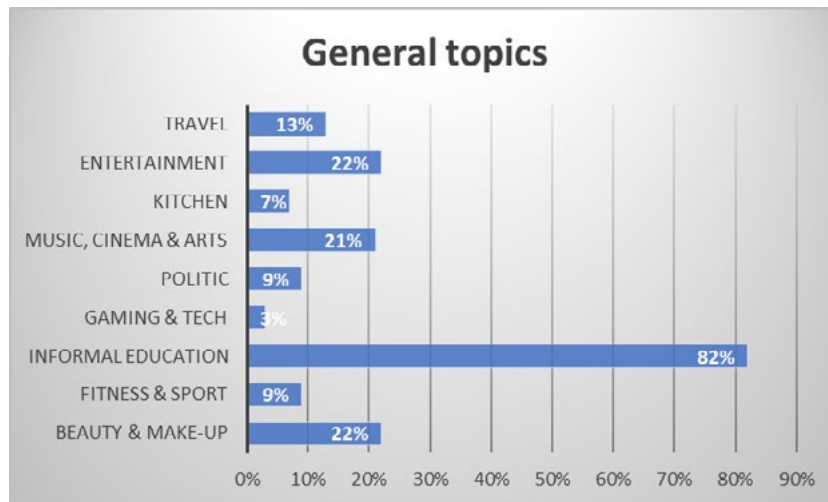


Fig. 1. General topics dealt with by influencers (513 cases)

It is interesting to note that influencers dealing with learning issues represent the 82% of the examples cited by students. Educational and life long learning instances are thus considered transversal aspects crossing the majority of the influencers discourses, according to the students.

More specifically, when examining only the content about influencers who convey educational issues – i.e. 419 cases – we divided the theme into four different sub-categories: disciplinary skills, social activism, tutorials and life hacks, and self-help (fig. 2).

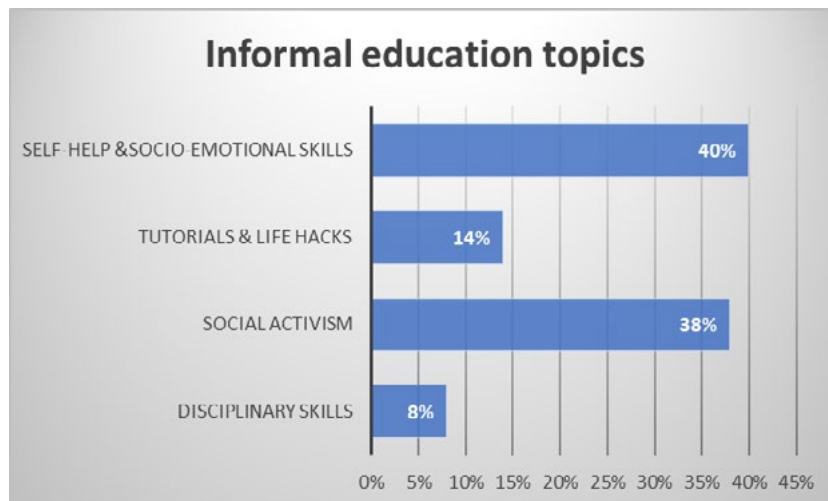


Fig. 2. Educational sub-topics dealt with by influencers (419 cases)

Also in this case, these categories are not mutually exclusive, as in many cases influencers deal with multiple issues during the course of their creative journey.

The following sections examine in more detail the topics that the influencers engage and the methods comprising their educational approaches, in this case as well based on the interviewees' reflections and observations.

Self-help and socio-emotional skills

A fair number of influencers engage with self-help themes and objectives (40%): they suggest techniques for facilitating daily habits and/or transmit civic, social and moral values. According to the accounts provided by interviewees, these influencers have been useful in helping them to develop and improve various socio-emotional skills, as the capability to recognize and manage emotions, successfully deal with conflicts, face and solve interpersonal problems, understand and show empathy towards others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and establish and achieve positive goals (Durlak et al., 2011).

"I consider her (@chiaraferragni) an influential person because in a moment of my life where I had given up and decided to abandon my dream because it was too far to reach, hearing some of her interviews gave me the push to believe in myself and fight for my goals, without letting myself be discouraged by the fact that a dream is too big". (Female, 21).

In some cases, the content posted by influencers has allowed young people to reconsider and correct dangerous life models that were causing them to suffer, models that – paradoxically, in some cases – had been communicated by professional educators they encountered in everyday life.

"In my life there was a period in which I played soccer at a competitive level, notoriously it is a sport where there is a lot of pressure and judgment from the actors of the world, but I had never encountered problems until a coach expressed a far from positive judgment about my body in front of the whole team. That for me was a negative turning point in my relationship with food. I started eating only rice and chicken, believing it was the method to lose weight and I introduced very small quantities, luckily I discovered an Instagram page, @Giuseppe Healthy (...) This page was a lifeline for me: allowing me to not make mistakes that would have affected my physical health and learning more about the world of fitness that fascinates me more every day". (Male, 21).

Overall, the theme of body positivity is highly represented in such narrations.

"Thanks to her way of communicating (@aurora_bertinetto), of showing her body, she helped me to love myself for who I am, to feel more confident, without having to hide". (Female, 20).

Social activism

A significant portion of influencers have been associated with areas such as social activism (38%).

Many students have identified, among their influencers, characters who promote the defense of minorities, gender diversity, the fight against racism and various forms of discrimination.

They declare to be inspired by these influencers for the type of values they convey, which they feel very close.

Some of them engage with activism indirectly (for example, the pair of influencers @Ferragni @Fedez launched campaigns to raise funds for COVID hospitals); there are also many cases in which the influencers stimulate a more active and direct form of activism, for example in relation to responsible consumption.

“@ Trip.n.roll” (with about 70 thousand followers) managed by a young couple who live by traveling. (...) They influenced me in particular from the point of view of ecology: they try to promote only ecological and recyclable products that I may not personally know about. Some examples are plastic-free products such as solid shampoo and conditioner, cardboard deodorant sticks, and solid toothpaste. Therefore they sponsor these kinds of things that do not pollute and that in my opinion, especially in this historical period, it is important to know about and start using to protect the planet”. (Female, 20).

Tutorials and life hacks

In other cases, influencers were cited for the value of their tutorials (14%). Young people described these as fostering new knowledge, especially in the fields of cooking and makeup or, more rarely, in areas such as graphic design, photography, and art craft.

“A character who has played an Influencer role in my life is @Loretta Grace, a young woman expert in makeup and facial skin care. Thanks to her video tutorials and activities on social networks, she helped me a lot in a period when I didn't know how to take care of myself.” (Female, 22)

These data, for that matter, are in line with some recent studies that show that the use of tutorials, and challenges are learning methods, based on imitation, that are highly valued by the younger generation (Taddeo & Tirocchi, 2021).

Disciplinary skills

Analyzing the distribution of educational sub-themes (fig. 2), the research found that in some cases the digital content refers to specific disciplinary skills (8% of the influencers cited by students deal with these themes) relevant to the world of formal education. They include posts and videos aimed

at transmitting information or experiences related to scientific, literary, linguistic, legal, historical or geographical themes.

“Giulia has created a column in her insta stories, called TGIG (Thank God It’s Giulia) in which she gives English lessons in a fun way. Having attended the American school, Giulia knows English very well and in these stories, collected in a folder highlighted in her profile and also published on her Youtube channel, she teaches English idioms through TV series / films / interviews, introducing an alternative way of learning English, using Instagram”. (Female, 20).

In several cases, travel influencers were described as having an educational role, representing an open window on the world, with content capable of enriching students’ views anthropologically and geographically and stimulating a more open-minded approach to the world. This proved to be particularly beneficial during the months of lockdown imposed due to the pandemic.

“The influencer I chose to talk about is Nicolò Balini, aka @Human Safari. (...) I considered it very important to have a continuous vision of the world, its landscapes and their cultures in a period in which there was a global pandemic emergency, and it influenced me a lot, also giving me significant mental openness compared to how I was before”. (Male, 20).

“I decided to mention a girl named Gaia who runs an Instagram profile called “@Siankiki “. Gaia is an Italian girl who in 2014 took a trip (from the university where she was studying) to Kenya. (...) From when I started following this profile I had the opportunity to discover new customs, habits that although very different from ours and thanks to the love for life that Gaia transmits, kindled in me a great curiosity in terms of visiting those places. In my opinion this is very interesting because that a culture, tradition and lifestyle that seem so distant and difficult to believe in actually contain many invaluable nuances that everyone should listen to at least once”. (Female, 21).

In other cases, the information coming from influencers allowed young people to explore sector-specific contexts that would normally be difficult to access outside of specific formal educational trajectories.

“The Instagram profile “@checcaflo” transmits notions of law, politics and current affairs day by day. In my opinion, her profile is interesting because it explains in a clear and simple way the laws of the Italian Constitution that are the basis of what we do every day, such as, for example, the regulation of Instagram content”. (Male, 21).

A minority of influencers instead focus on professional and continuing education, for example of a technological nature.

“Characters like @Aranzulla and @Galeazzi have made me want to work in their sector and perhaps they have also influenced my choice of university (even more than being passionate about technology, they are excellent communicators). To date, I collaborate with iSpazio, an Apple-themed blog, for which I create reviews of technological devices, guides and insights on YouTube and recently also small iPhone-themed tutorials on TikTok. (...) I still continue to follow the advice of others to supplement the ideas I have already formulated about a service or a product. Listening to other voices is always a good way to improve and get an overview”. (Male 20).

Influencers’ informal educational strategies

A second part of analysis focused on identifying and categorizing the communicational, relational and emotional strategies that young people describe as central to the practices their influencers employ to achieve their success and ability to influence (themes 3 and 4). In this case as well the analysis was carried out using a grounded approach, revising and iteratively expanding and/or synthesizing the interpretative categories that emerged from reading the auto-ethnographic accounts.

Socio-technical affordances

The first level on which these strategies were interpreted was the technical and communicative level, for example the specific use of interface affordances: multiple choice quizzes, in which followers are asked whether a statement is true or false or to select the correct option; question tabs in Instagram Stories, in which the community is asked to express doubts, feedback, or suggestions on future topics to be discussed; posts, the format most commonly used to explain the topics in question; Instagram Reels, used to focus on particular details, such as pronunciation (in accounts dealing with foreign languages); and IGTV live, thanks to which influencers can interact directly with their followers in the sense that users can pose questions as if they were in a “private lesson”.

The adroit management of the medium and its specific languages are also seen as meta-reflective signals that can communicate values, respect for others and social engagement.

“In short, he (@Piuttosto_che) pursues “politically correct” and does it while amusing anyone who looks at him. Another aspect that I think is very important is the summary captions, which he puts in all his videos or Instagram stories, in order to give even deaf people the possibility to understand and not to discriminate against anyone”. (Male, 22).

Content mash-up

The dominant style in the editorial policies of these influencers is that of a mix in which different kinds of content are presented according to different formats of both fruition and interaction.

“The Instagram page ‘@Anxiety_wellbeing’: a page that helps you learn more about anxiety, control it and feel less flawed if you suffer from it, making the information more fun, not boring and very easy to interpret. Through memes, videos, cartoons and scientific articles.”. (Female, 21).

“(@Cecilia Zagarrigo) To involve those who follow her, she creates reels, IGTV, stories and funny videos in which she deals with light-hearted themes that characterize the lives of many young people, taking some attitudes to the extreme. She creates challenges in which she invites her followers to do dances, or asks them to send her particular personal experiences that she then reworks in a fun and exaggerated way. To tell about particular periods of her life or moments with which you can identify, she re-writes famous songs or creates “serialized” columns”. (Female, 20).

The mash-ups often involve not only juxtaposing different formats, but also creating content that hybridizes multiple themes and “disciplines” in keeping with an approach that, drawing on Jenkins (2008), could be defined as convergent culture:

“@Max Miller, of the “Tasting History with Max Miller” channel. He is a guy from California who makes historical food-themed videos, that is, he combines the action of cooking real dishes but ones that have a story behind them. I really like the fact that it gives real ideas for cooking new dishes and that at the same time he tells little-known anecdotes about human history”. (Male, 23).

Playfulness

In some cases, influencers’ strategies entail creating and managing occasions for playful interaction:

“I think it is influential because @mr. Nobody occasionally organizes events and games with followers, bringing many people together through fun and common belonging to his followers.” (Male, 21).

Learning while playing online allows youngsters to construct learning moments embedded in their leisure contexts, assessing themselves and being assessed in contexts free of the performance anxieties (Gee, 2003).

Irony

An important element that appeared in the majority of the accounts collected regardless of cultural level is the influencers’ ability to work with

themes, content, and concepts through irony, humor and playing with the apparent “triviality” of the topic.

“A person that I consider an “influencer” is @Valentina Vignali. With around 2.5 million followers, her influence spans a variety of industries and fields. Over the years, she has managed to reach an increasingly large audience, as she has increasingly dealt with topics considered “taboo” or in any case very sensitive. (...) Through sarcasm and irony, she manages to make everything “softer”, and this allows her to deal with even difficult topics without being moralistic or pedantic. According to my point of view, she is influential because, in years in which social networks increasingly show content that is trivial or in any case conflict-provoking and trite if not actually harmful for people’s health, she manages to broaden the point of view and highlight content that is very often underestimated, such as femininity linked to body weight or height”. (Female, 21).

Aspirational self

A further level of analysis concerns what might be defined as profound strategies of educational involvement, strategies that work on building charisma and affection by setting in motion emotional and identity dynamics. The educational power of influencers is based on levers such as followers’ aspirational connection with these characters experienced, by youngsters, as ordinary and attainable but, at the same time, also special and “better”.

“The thing that I have always appreciated about @Shanti is her ability to range between multiple topics without ever losing her spontaneity and authenticity, in fact, one does not have the perception of having to deal with an influential character who flaunts that kind of life that many would like, but she is almost a friend, a person with whom you can have a chat that lasts the length of the video, an ordinary girl who has however made her simplicity her strong point”. (Female, 21)

“I follow @Jenny_di_nucci first of all because we are almost the same age so I identify a lot with her way of thinking and expressing ideas, but also because on social media she is almost always happy and satisfied with her life so when I look at her, content, I feel inspired to achieve my goal in life like she is doing. (...) Jenny inspires me to be grateful for what I have and to work hard to get what I want”. (Female, 21).

“@Pigrieco, he might seem to be a young man like many others, and perhaps this is what distinguishes him: graduated in physics, passionate about literature, history, philosophy and much more, determined to achieve his goals. (...) Personally, I appreciate his content because it guarantees me that necessary dose of daily irony without however falling into more predictable humor, also providing food for thought thanks to

the cultural references contained in [his posts]. Furthermore, in addition to memes ranging from Nietzsche to Heisenberg, passing from politics to science, on the linked site there are also original articles of some interest. I therefore appreciate how this is a cultural humor in which understanding the content often requires a minimum basis of general knowledge". (Male, 21).

Through the juxtaposition of ordinary and exceptional aspects in their narratives, influencers build “zones of proximal development” (Vygotsky, 1978) and “peripheral participation” (Lane & Wenger, 1991) that allow youngsters to learn by exploring the neighboring borders of their own identity model.

Intimacy and emotional involvement

Another level is based on emotional involvement, the creation of an empathic and emotional bond between the Instagrammer and the public. In many cases, content producers achieve this involvement by sharing intimate, daily aspects of their own experience and revealing their vulnerability.

“Paolo is a normal boy, a little older than me, but with a desire to live outside of the ordinary. I started following him on social media two years ago, almost by chance, and I haven’t stopped since. Every day he publishes photos of the difficulties he faces, without ever letting himself be disheartened, large or small, and he does so with a desire to live and to not give up that he transmits to me in each of his posts. Phrases that when I’m down or angry “influence” me like few other things. [They] make me reflect and appreciate the little things in life. Because thinking about it, perhaps, seeing the bright side of things can be easier than it seems, and a bad day may be better than having to deal with S.L.A. at 20 years old. As Paolo would say: “Long live life!” (@paolopalumbo)”. (Male, 20).

Through this approach, in many cases influencers manage to activate the “intimacy of learning” (Belanger, 2011) that can be much less (though not entirely absent) in formal contexts.

Conclusions

Although influencers role would seem to be located predominantly in an informal, user-friendly and “low-bandwidth” dimension of experience, their emotional, identity and inspirational power – already identified by larger studies – leads us to question their real role in the educational ecosystem of young people. It drives us to understand if they are experienced as simple vehicles of easy-to-digest content or as driving elements of training practices that have transformative and profound impacts on the people consuming them.

As we have seen in the first part of the analysis, concerning the topics covered by the influencers, a large proportion of the influencers identified by the young people as important to them are associated with forms of learning, highlighting how in many cases these actors manage to position themselves as “significant others” in the young people’s growth path.

The educational dimension, pertaining the 82% of the influencers described in the reports (Fig.1), thus appears to be a transversal element that intersects and hybridizes other functions and gratifications linked to the social media consumption: such as entertainment, play or geeking out.

From the thematic analysis on the specific typology of educational content (Fig. 2), we then noticed that there is a mix of contents pertaining several spheres of learning:

contents, such as disciplinary ones (STEM, history, geography and so on), which pertain usually to the formal learning pathways;

contents (such as contents related to social activism or tutorials, usually related to hobbies and personal interests), usually developed, for the most part, in non-formal learning pathways;

contents, such as those related to emotional self-help, often exclusive object of informal learning practices and scarcely dealt with in the world of school or other formal institutions.

Influencers, therefore, seem to have entered the sphere of young people’s learning, either by hybridizing and innovating traditionally formal and non-formal learning pathways and, more intensively, by proposing new informal learning practices on areas related to emotional development and soft skills.

The diagram in Fig. 3 summarizes both the contents and the informal learning strategies activated.

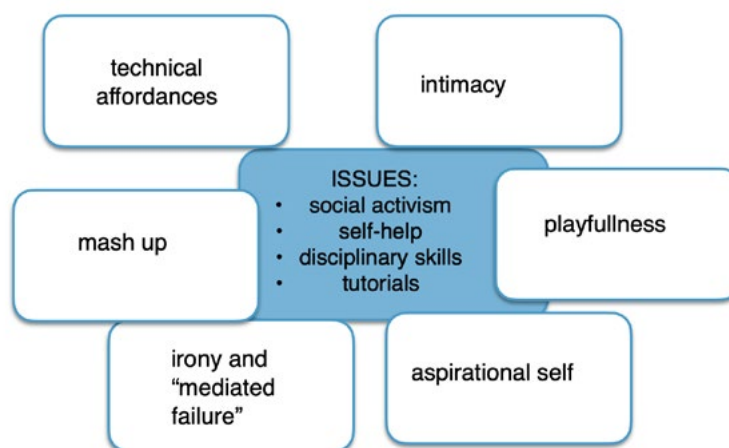


Fig. 3. Scheme of the topics and informal teaching strategies dealt with by influencers

If learning, especially in informal practices, holds together aspects of content, interactional context and emotionality (Illeris, 2017), the data collected in this analysis show how influencers are able to create engagement strategies that connect these three spheres in new and relevant ways for young people.

Trying to identify common, deeper traits from the accounts, we find that influencers are highly appreciated by young people, simultaneously reflecting Roussonian ideals of the freedom to be oneself and forces, stemming from the new economy of happiness (Illouz, 2018), requiring individuals to struggle and continually demonstrate their ability to be happy. Happiness appears to be the absolute value on which influencers' communicative strategy is based and the goal of their educational "mandate". In some cases such happiness is narrativized in the most obvious forms of wealth and the ostentation of exclusive lifestyles, in keeping with the Veblenian dynamics of luxury (Veblen 1899). In other cases it is instead narrated in the form of an aestheticization of everyday life, a fetishism of the weekday that, through the simplicity, ordinariness and repetitiveness of daily snapshots, demonstrates the daily adventure of working toward personal realization, framed as the conquest and enjoyment of the "new values" of luxury: time, attention, space, the natural environment, and safety (Ezensberger, 1997). While the first type of influencers display an approach that is more closely linked to consumer society, usually positioning themselves as actors in new forms of influencer marketing, the second instead shift the attention away from consumption and toward emergent value assets that inspire contemporary society.

Consumption is not eliminated from the communicative practices of these influencers, therefore; rather, it is decentralized with respect to a more existential type of narrative. At the center of this narration appears the "authentic self" in-the-making, positioned on a life-long trajectory of learning. Narrated through the sharing of everyday life, this authentic self appears attainable, informal, and emotionally captivating. Very specific communication strategies are employed to convey this narrative, strategies that appear to play a central role in defining the educational influence of these actors: the use of the interactive affordances of the digital medium, the mash-up of types of content, intimacy and emotionality, humor, and the presentation of an aspirational self. According to the respondents, the macro strategy of informal learning enacted by most of the influencers is based on showing a nearby but better world, a zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) that even youngsters can reach provided they adhere to the set of values that permeate the society of happiness and its rules. Authenticity is therefore at the center of this communicative rhetoric and it gives rise to the homophilic dynamics that create engagement and emotional participation.

In contrast to the traditional models of educational institutions' credibility, based on displaying prestige, knowledge and authority (Gili, 2021), these influencers display new forms of credibility based on the emotional involvement of issuers, their similarity with recipients and their role as peers, a positioning that enables them to be familiar with and experience the problems and obstacles that the young people encounters when seeking to grow on a daily basis. And yet the authenticity at play here is also regulated and constructed. The influencers allow their audiences to see everything – failures, frustrations, emotional and social impasses – but the way they represent them is framed in the positive rhetoric of the “self-made man”, aestheticizing and emotionalizing the elements of transformation and growth inherent in failure. Influencers are therefore called on to represent the “beautiful side” of failure, building around it a broader framework of social desirability and the transformative dynamics involved in acquiring socio-emotional skills.

Alongside the authenticity and “mediated failure”, there is also a third trait that characterizes informal life-long learning strategies: the use of the dynamics of humor and self-deprecation that bring together the styles and aesthetics of young people, reinventing the theme of failure in an amusing, politically incorrect key.

Finally, it is also interesting to consider the issues at the center of failure and, therefore, at the center of learning strategies for overcoming it: these include the body and the individual's relationship with it, relational and social dynamics, and objectives and expectations imposed by society. Essentially, the failures that influencers address and about which they provide advice have to do with problems that are central to the world of youth and the developmental phase of young adulthood: the young person's relationship with his or her own identity, with peers and, finally, with broader society.

In synthesis, influencers use their specific means and communication strategies to stimulate forms both of self-directed (Solomon, 2003) and of unintentional learning (Hager & Halliday, 2009) working in particular on the field of the soft skills: a set of competencies which remain relatively unclear and elusive and rarely, if ever, addressed by the curricula of formal educational programs.

Limitations and future research

Concerning the limitations of the study, first, we should consider that the socio-educational, technological, and cultural context of the population under study is restricted to one setting and a specific age: Italian youngsters between 20 and 23. Second, we have to take into account the specific frame of this study: a reflection proposed into Communication courses, in which several theories and debates about the influence of media had been discussed.

This is something that obliges to further contextualize both data and findings.

Moreover, the type of questions posed to the young people in the research addressed them somehow to reflect on the positive aspects of the influence: a further study should be done, also through other methods of investigation, in order to debate also the critical aspects of their relationship with the influencers and the eventual recognition of negative and harmful effects.

Furthermore, it would be interesting to in depth understand the long term educational impact of these fruition practices, for young people: in particular, if and how youngsters use influencers' contents in a concrete way, modifying daily behaviors and attitudes, or if, on the other hand, these influencers remain just aspirational models, able to promote more ethical forms of entertainment and consumption, but with a relatively modest impact on concrete lifestyles.

In particular, an in-depth study on the issue of social activism and self help practices would be of great interest, due to the fact that these issues emerge as central elements in the experience of young people with social media influencers, according to the research.

The emergence of a new type of critical approach, that concerns the aesthetic and critical appropriation of social media contents, is therefore a question of having to better investigate.

Moreover, it is not clear how this type of learning, typically linked to concepts of belonging, playfulness, infotainment, can be integrated, in a complementary and non-competitive manner, with the typical logics of formal learning, such as those of effort, commitment and merit (Colombo & Censi, 2010).

In this direction this research still exposes limited data, however, it has proposed findings of interest for future work about the role of social media influencers as informal educators, suggesting to deeper investigate their importance in the processes of development of young generations and in the future landscape of lifelong learning.

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