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13. Social media influencer: a new hybrid professionalism in the age of platform capitalism?

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Abstract

Chapter 13 *Social media influencer: a new hybrid professionalism in the age of platform capitalism?* by P. Sedda and O. Husson, analyses the way social media influencers, acting in the context of communities of practice, participate in redefining professionalism and professional practices in marketing and communications fields while promoting social values or advocating for a cause of public interest. Using a methodological approach based on interviews and ethnographic observation, the study considers the influencer as a specific case of “hybrid professionalism” (Noordegraaf 2007) in which quantitative performance criteria, prescribed by platforms, are combined with creative logic and collective action. Centred on the promotion of authenticity and individual achievement, their commitment evokes the figure of “artistic critique” (Boltanski and Chiapello 2011). If they claim recognition and expertise, these actors do not necessarily engage in a real process of institutionalisation as the influence they exert among their communities mainly derives from their differentiation from institutional actors allowing for better visibility of messages of social change. In an effort to go beyond traditional approaches, our perspective looks at professionals as actors of change who are constantly reframing their discourse on “professionalism” on the basis of public demands and the emergence of new political and societal issues.

Keywords: hybrid professionalism, social media influencer, social influence, platform capitalism, collective action, community of practice

1. Introduction

Changes in professions seem to follow a contradictory logic: a tendency to de-professionalise and proletarianise classic professions goes hand in hand with the emergence of new hybrid forms of professionalism (Noordegraaf 2007), mostly pushed by digitalisation and market mechanisms. The importance of new technologies in the evolution of capitalism is already well documented by different works that point to the preeminent role played by digital platforms in the extraction and capture of value (Casilli 2019). Platforms constitute a mediation between a supply and a demand, between any informational good and a social group likely to be interested in it. The concept of “platform capitalism” refers then to the “outsourcing of workers and the displacement of the boundaries of work, but also to the creation of value and its unequal sharing between, on the one hand, the owners of the algorithms, sites and applications that are the platforms and, on the other hand, the workers who are present on them” (Andelnour & Méda 2019, p. 10).

In this context, labels for new occupations are emerging such as YouTubers, Instagrammers, TikTokers, stemming from the names of digital platforms and representing hybrid professional identities situated between profane and expert activities, leisure and work (Conley 2010). As their participation in corporate and marketing communication relies on their capacity to manage and engage a digital community, we can refer to them as “social media influencers” - SMIs - (Freberg et al. 2011). While they do not constitute a “pure profession” - the individualisation of their activity, the high heterogeneity of their practices, fields, remunerations and negotiating power constitute a major obstacle to the recognition of the profession - we assume that they can be studied as a specific form of hybrid professionalism. Hybridised images of professionalism help us to emphasise a “reflexive control” on what is considered “professional” (Noordegraaf 2007) in order to establish meaningful connections between online communities of practices, influence on digital platforms, and organised action.

We conceive “professionalism as a conceptual tool that can be used to analyse and interpret social change” (Bellini & Maestripieri 2018, p. 8). It designates both a “discourse”, conveying norms, values and specific competencies, and a “practice”, allowing workers to be identified and recognised within their community. In communities of practices, relations are created around activities that are performed by the members so that skills and knowledge are recognised by the community and transmitted to the new participants. Practice is then considered a situated and collective social activity that allows one to learn, organise, and acquire knowledge. Practices are said to be “professional” when they are based on a set of skills, resources and capacities mobilised in action by specialised actors in a field (Ardouin 2004).

We thus analyse the way SMIs, acting in the context of communities of practice, participate in redefining professionalism and professional practices in marketing and communications fields while promoting social values or advocating for a cause of public interest. By expanding the modes of making visible their bodies’ experiences and acquired knowledge, SMIs are engaged in the construction of new social problems in the public sphere (Sedda & Botero 2022). The struggle for new forms of visibility (Voirol 2005) is rooted in a process of reconfiguration of the practices of political engagement and their hybridisation with professional practices in managing social media. Activism that relies on the use of digital platforms assumes the form of networks of individuals, ready to act at specific moments in a framework that remains weakly or

differently organised, freed from institutional rigidities and which favours an individual approach (Sedda 2022). In this sense, the digital sphere assumes both an expressive and an organisational dimension, providing a framework where citizens can publicise their needs and give them a political dimension. The actions and strategies of making oneself visible on social media may result in a connection between the registers and repertoires of communication campaigns and those of social struggles.

This can thus allow us to formulate the hypothesis of how the hybridisation processes in professionalism are linked to the emergence of online communities of practices which may lead to new individualised forms of political activism.

2. The influencer: an emblematic professional identity in platform capitalism

Capitalism has appropriated "individualism" and the demand for authenticity and diversity expressed in the 1960s. The use of social media is rooted in aspirations for authenticity and autonomy which are the pillars of the "artistic critique" (Boltanski & Chiapello 2011). The rationalised management of the imaginary, desires and beliefs, through marketing techniques, was presented as a necessity from the moment when the requirement of individual autonomy accelerated.

In a context where professional identities are challenged by individualisation, hybridisation and marketisation processes, influencers participate in the production of new informational and "experiential goods" (Mœglin 2007) transferred to specific communities of interest. If expertise, independence, and professionalism continue to be valued, their legitimacy rests above all on a "regime of proximity" (Coavoux & Roques 2020). The latter also constitutes a form of adaptation to the formalisation of cultural exchanges involving a strong diversification of the supply and, on the other hand, a degradation of working and employment conditions dominated by uncertainty. The creation of a link of proximity thus guarantees content producers a place in the logic of supply through the creation of market niches.

As part of the production relationship in line with the capitalist chain of value, the influencer's activity can be considered as "digital labour": a "networked social work" in which the relational aspect of the tasks of content production, shared among affective communities, contributes to "reversing the respective roles of autonomy and subordination, choice and constraint [...]" (Casilli 2019, p. 163). Unlike on-demand or micro-work, the user-producer is not formally subordinated to the platform although he or she is subject to incentives, which are sometimes symbolic (through reputational rewards), sometimes economic (in the form of monetary compensation or commercial advantages), to perform in a connected social environment. Social platforms sell the promise of the possibility for users to become their own media, giving them the power to influence the behaviour or thinking of other individuals. At the same time, the contribution of the user-producer is eminently social, as it is based on the content circulation between individuals and their evaluation. This "free labour" is structural to the cultural economy of late capitalism which mobilises labour by confining it to an "underpaid activity" (Terranova 2000). In this regard, the tendency towards the autonomy of labour comes into conflict with the attempt to subordinate the whole of social time to the heterogeneous logic of the valorisation of capital (Vercellone 2011).

The core point of these new figures, whose activity is the product of a tension between the construction of digital identity and the deployment of marketing and platform

strategies, is that they manage and rely on a community over which they claim to have influence. Their “practice” should therefore be understood as “knowledgeable doing” as practical knowledge emerges from the context of its production and is anchored in material supports, objects and technologies that achieve agency through their performative connections (Gherardi 2018).

By fitting into the beyond perspective, our chapter emphasises the role of professionals as actors of change. Differentiation in professionalism is actually the result of two processes: on the one hand, professional practices and discourse are more and more defined by political challenges, social movements and socio-technical changes and, on the other hand, professionals contribute to the evolution of organisations, both in terms of strategies and narratives, to the point of ensuring a new activist posture. In order to question SMIs as a specific form of hybrid professionalism, we need to shift the focus beyond the academic discourse on professionalism, in a way that includes the relationships between professionals, technology and society. SMIs’ professionalism is actually built through the recognition of their social and political functions. Their action evokes the figure of “artistic critique” (Boltanski and Chiapello 2011), while also questioning reticular models of cooperation as providing new modular repertoires (Tarrow & Tilly 2008) that are part of the professionalisation dynamic.

3. Methodological approach

Our study contains two parts. The first part concerns the perception of social media influencers and, more generally, conceptions of professionalism, by mainstream communications and marketing professionals. This part relies on an ethnographic observation of the “Com’ en Nord” Day 2022¹, a French event gathering communications and marketing professionals reflecting on Corporate Social Responsibility approaches to face the environmental crisis (professionals’ speeches have been entirely recorded), as well as a series of semi-directive interviews conducted with representatives from agencies specialising in influence marketing. This part of the study is complemented with a discourse analysis conducted on a corpus of four practitioner handbooks presenting the best practices to adopt in the context of influence marketing and of 20 articles published on the website of the communications professional association COM-ENT² between April 2020 and March 2021 and stemming from the section “DirCom (Re)confined”. Created during the pandemic and adopting the interview format, this heading aims to identify the way communications directors defined and perceived changes in their profession during the health crisis.

The second part aims at a better understanding of the professionalisation processes, visible in the evolution of self-presentation practices of health and lifestyle social media influencers. In order to do so, we have conducted an online ethnography of five Instagram accounts of users diagnosed with congenital melanocytic nevus. The selected accounts match the description of an influencer, in that they gather communities around them, with the power to impact their opinions and actions, whether they are small (micro and nano-influencers) or large (macro-influencers).

¹ “La journée de la Com’ en Nord de France”, Lille Grand Palais, March 2022 : <https://comenorday.com/ledition-2022/>

² <https://www.com-ent.fr>

By adopting a diachronic approach, we have analysed a total of 777 posts, uploaded to the platform between February 2013 and July 2021. The analysis of this corpus mobilises both the discourse analysis and the qualitative content analysis approaches. We proceeded to categorise the publications of each profile between health-related posts, commitment to a cause, self-promotional, brand-endorsement, motivational (self-confidence, body-positive messages) and lifestyle-oriented posts. The predominance of each category reveals the account's editorial policy enabling the owners to specialise in one domain, cater to their audience's expectations and, therefore, secure their follower base as well as the resulting opportunities. Since these actors are engaged in raising awareness around body stigma and providing online support for building self-esteem, this part also enables us to further understand the links between digital hybrid professionalism and collective action frames.

4. Social influence at the core of the communications and marketing professions

The differentiation processes of professions related to digital communication is evident in the increasing number of titles and functions (community manager, social media manager, multimedia project manager, etc). For all of them, skills in managing social media to influence online communities are the cardinal point for claiming legitimacy and recognition (Coutant & Millette 2022). However, professions related to digital communication are part of contemporary "knowledge work" that are not characterised by a strong epistemological formalisation or state-backed regulation (Butler et al. 2012). The lack of formalisation encourages professionals to engage in a reflective and discursive activity aiming at (re)framing "professionalism" through a rhetorical process in which their identity and status are perceived to be precarious (Cheney & Ashcraft 2007). As such, professionalism is conceived both as a "disciplinary" mechanism, aimed at controlling professional practice within organisations, and a mechanism of "occupational mobilisation" (Evetts 2006). Based on the reconceptualisation of the notion of "professionalism" in terms of "discursive resources" (CH 1, p. 5), this section aims to explore professionals' framing activities and their links to the mechanisms of social influence and political engagement.

4.1 The social function of professionals in a world of crises

The external pressures exerted by social movements and audiences around the ecological and health crises are shaping professional identities of people who now wish to redefine their professionalism based on political and societal demands. Entitled "Towards an ethical and responsible communication", the 2022 edition of the "Com' en Nord" day allowed us to observe the way professionals adapt their discourse and practices to face the climate and ecological emergency.

"The impacts of marketing on overconsumption, on the accumulation of waste in the oceans, on global pollution, pushed me to deconstruct what I was doing and what I was teaching". (Florence Touzé-Rieu, Associate Professor at Audencia Business School, member of "Responsables!by ADETEM"; extract of the conference "Com' en Nord de France", March 2022).

They then re-frame their discourse around professionalism by asserting their capacity to influence society. In the first instance, influence is mentioned as a field in its own right, involving all types of professionals in the communications sector. In this case, SMIs are considered as new partners/providers with whom professionals establish ethical relationships. In the second instance, it is considered as a function that cuts across all communications and marketing professions. In the end, it also appears that the place of professionals as producers of new narratives to transform society is restored concerning their impact on major environmental and social issues. From this perspective, “influence” refers to:

“The responsibility of professionals in building a collective imaginary with the aim of accompanying and propelling the promotion of another society”. (Valérie Martin, Head of the Citizen Mobilisation and Media Department at ADEME, extract of the conference “Com' en Nord de France”, March 2022).

Professionalism is thus linked to the ability to interpret and encourage social change. If the practice of influence is often considered, in a pejorative way, as a manipulative activity, professionals try to put it forward by re-signifying it in order to build the legitimacy of the profession:

“Let's stop seeing it [referring to influence in communications professions] as a constraint and see it as an opportunity to support the transformation of society and to re-legitimise our profession. [...] We have a responsibility because we have enormous power to influence society”. (Valérie Martin, Head of the Citizen Mobilisation and Media Department at ADEME, extract of the conference “Com' en Nord de France”, March 2022).

The context of the climate and ecological crisis can thus be seized as an opportunity to establish the legitimacy of the profession by strengthening Corporate Social Responsibility mechanisms as a part of a transformation perspective that aims to mobilise actors,

“[...] to shape new consumption and production practices and to integrate them into the company's global strategy. (Adeline Ochs, Professor at Audencia Business School, Founder of Topoye, extract of the conference “Com' en Nord de France”, March 2022).

Acting inside and outside organisations, communicators see themselves as key actors in the socio-ecological transition. Their role then becomes that of accompanying the change in consumer practices through the creation of new narratives, which are linked to the aspirations and demands of civil society. Involving customers as co-creators of value adds complexity in that it introduces tension between professionals' identities (defined by organisational hierarchies, professional legitimacy, specialised knowledge, professional competence, work ethics, etc.) and an imagined customer with expertise and a critical eye on the business and consumer world. This tension opens up a space for reflexive professional action (Echeverri 2022) where practitioners, focused on creative and discursive processes, constantly interact with the public by considering their links with the outside world as a key element of their professionalism. The reflexive posture of communications professionals was particularly intense during the Covid-19 pandemic:

“Today's consumers expect companies to provide values as well as products, meaning as well as services. And the crisis [referring to Covid-19] has only accelerated the phenomenon”. (Domitille Fafin, Director of External Communications, L'Oréal Group, extract from the interview published on the COM-ENT website on 8 August 2020).

In particular, this will involve re-framing the task of professionals on the basis of their ability to influence and bring about change within organisations and in society. The discourse around Corporate Social Responsibility also feeds into the audience's political demands. This stimulates the professionals to look at and adopt a committed attitude towards the causes assigned to the consumer with which they wish both to build a relationship and address the corporate communication:

“[...]People will want to consume better, and more in favour of positive, honest brands that are concerned with the collective interest. There is every reason to believe that consumption will become a political and cultural act in its own right.” (Caroline Tiquet, Director of Communications and Marketing at Le Slip Français, extract from the interview published on the COM-ENT website on 4 May 2020).

While accentuating the “committed” approach of professionals, this discourse has both a “legitimising” and an “integrating” function (Ricoeur 1978) in that it actually seeks to reduce conflict and make a system desirable through cooperation and belief in its legitimacy. The discourse that can be traced back to the categories of critique actually model the reformulations and rearrangements of “artistic” and “social critique” (Boltanski & Chiapello 2011) within the framework of the devices of new responsible communications, aiming to influence and engage human persons in the promotion of a sustainable society.

In addition to the responsibilities traditionally associated with professionals and driven by the ideology of communication - to create links, produce meaning and values, mobilise and unite people around a common project - professionalism is also seen and lived as a political commitment to the ecological transition.

This first part highlights professionals' contributions to the process of change, both inside and outside organisations (CH 1, p. 12). It shows the way they are constantly re-framing their perceptions and conceptions of “professionalism” on the basis of social change and on the emergence of new political and societal causes embraced by the public and in which they are trying at the same time to engage and build.

4.2 Social media influencer: a specific form of hybrid professionalism challenging marketing strategies

With the growth of the SMI phenomenon, influencer marketing is on the rise. Experts expect the market to reach a value of 16.4 billion dollars in 2022³. For online marketing professionals, influencers are gradually becoming new content providers and

³ Geyser, Werner. « The State of Influencer Marketing 2022: Benchmark Report ». Influencer Marketing Hub, 24 janvier 2022, <https://influencermarketinghub.com/influencer-marketing-benchmark-report/>.

professional partners capable of influencing marketing practices and changing relationships with clients:

“You don’t need to appreciate influencer content to know that it works, because influencers know how to talk to their communities. [...] What does work is peer-to-peer communication... and you are not a peer. [...] influence marketing must become one of your key communication levers because [...] the results are really there and measurable” (Bouillet 2020, p. 28).

Influencers' work is recognised here for its measurable profitability that does not necessarily include expertise. It adds value by SMIs' ability to be perceived as an insider by the community. These statements suggest an ambiguity regarding the status of influencers as professionals. Theoretically, anyone might become an influencer, without training or education prerequisites. Unlike the craft consumers of pre-Internet capitalism, influencers are not already endowed with a significant social or cultural capital (Casilli 2019). They go to these platforms to create both the product and the community that can appreciate their content and on whom they can exert influence.

The emergence of new platforms, such as Kolsquare or Hivency, allowing sponsors to access performance metrics and choose influencers accordingly, shows that the field of influence is not exempt from commissioned work, platform work, and digital labour logic. Moreover, according to some of the influencer marketing agency professionals we interviewed, being an influencer requires expertise in a specific domain that it is recognised by a community:

“According to me, an influencer is an opinion leader who specialises in a subject and who, with time, has acquired notoriety and credibility, without any exterior media”. (Christophe P., strategic planner of Agency #1).

“Expertise is what makes influencers legitimate in speaking out”. (Laura P. marketing manager of Agency #3).

In that sense, influencers act as opinion leaders (Katz & Lazarsfeld 1955) and social media as “alternative media”, as opposed to more mainstream media such as television. However, social media influencers have responsibilities requiring skills that can be acquired through their repeated use of social media. Some professionals clearly contribute to the construction of an emergent discourse on SMIs' “professionalism” (Maestriperi & Bellini 2018) that conveys specific values, competencies and practices allowing them to be identified and recognised within both professional groups and online communities:

“Clearly, it is a new profession. I see a lot of people making a living out of it. It’s very new. Five years ago, it was not a profession. People had followers because they were interesting and posted nice content, but now it is a real profession. In the future, maybe there will be some types of training to teach people how to make good, interesting content, good descriptions, and how to film videos and take good pictures, all of that. These are skills that take practice.” (Laura P., marketing manager of Agency #3).

One of the main things pointed out by the interviewees was the central role played by the expertise of the “talent” in the influencer marketing strategies. Rather than being

considered as walking billboards with no say regarding the content, they are the creative minds initiating it:

“The talents themselves are the creatives. They have the most control over their career. [...] On the creative side, in terms of content and what they’re saying and their opinions, that’s all the talent, that doesn’t come from us.”
(Emma W., marketing manager of Agency #2)

The use of the word “creative” when referring to the SMIs demonstrates the hybrid status of the profession of influencer dealing with platform, market and professional logics as well as creative and collective ones. Creativity and professionalism are two elements that can go along together. Their connection can be guaranteed by both professional associations and more informal communities committed to promoting individual competencies and social capital (Dorigatti et al. 2019). Unlike other professional groups, it is not the recognition by intermediate bodies of standards, values and knowledge that is really important for influencers, but the social meaning of their knowledge, and the fact that they are recognised as experts by social media users who share the same interests and commitments. This can be traced back to the “beyond” issue referring to the marketisation process which makes professionals much more dependent on clients’ choices in a context characterised by democratisation of expert knowledge and public distrust of institutional actors.

But the market dimension creates tension both within followers’ communities and professional groups regretting the shift from volunteer work to contractual work involving a loss of authenticity:

“I find that this valorisation via money distorts things a little. (...) Nowadays, when an influencer charges money, you can tell it’s what motivates them. Loving the brand takes a back seat. I think it distorts what influencers are, originally.” (Lucie P., marketing manager of Agency #3).

Nevertheless, practitioner handbooks state that it is now becoming customary to pay influencers and identify them as new members of marketing professional groups:

“If brands are using influencers as part of their marketing strategy, those influencers are an extension of the brand’s marketing team. They deserve to be compensated for their time, energy, and finished product. In this respect, influencers are more like freelance marketers than celebrity endorsers” (Sammis et al. 2016, 62).

Within the framework of collaborations, contracts are drawn up, symbolising the commitment of both parties, emphasising the professional relationship and ensuring some control, leaving no ambiguity about compensation and the expected deliverables. In addition, due to its exponential growth, influencer marketing is now subjected to regulations, meaning, despite the reluctance of some marketing agencies and professionals, the work of influencers is recognized as valuable and it is increasingly regulated by the professional group itself. Once again, in order to understand this new form of hybrid professionalism and its integration into marketing strategies, we must go beyond the traditional framework of professions and focus on the external dynamic in terms of their meaning and power relations in society.

This study thus shows the tension regarding the status of influencers. They actually face a double challenge: they benefit from being seen as peers by their audience, but it is also

advantageous for them to promote a professional status in community management and online content creation. They involve communities of interest and practices and build on social awareness and recognition.

As the latest avatar of advertising ideologies, social media influencer also fits into the legitimation and transformation processes by responding to a search for profitability and authenticity in the face of increased public mistrust. In the end, the external dynamic - dealing with influencing social change - is seen as the main source of professionalism as well as a way to legitimise the profession and its claim for social recognition in a context where deregulation is eroding the capacity of professionals to secure their status (Butler 2012). Influencers make the great heterogeneity of professionalisation processes visible, via their link to the wider dynamics of social change and the increasingly reflexive, negotiated, and essentially “discursive” dimension (CH 1, p. 5) that professionalism assumes in contemporary society.

5. Professionalism and collective action: the case of health influencers

Health and lifestyle influencers can be approached through the analytical category of “hybridised professionalism” (Noordegraaf 2007) referring to new ways of controlling or “standardising” practices, new mechanisms for legitimating work, new searches for occupational identities and new linkages between individual demands, professional claims and organised action. This section is dedicated to a study on the online self-presentation strategies developed by health influencers with congenital nevus, a dermatological, stigma-inducing condition manifested by the presence of visible pigmented proliferations in the skin (called nevi).

Figure 1. SMIs Hybrid professionalism inspired by the table “From Pure to Hybrid professionalism” presented by Noordegraaf (2007, 779).

Name	Followers/ posts/ Domain of expertise	Hybrid approaches	Mechanisms for legitimizing work	Searches for occupational identity*	Linkages with collective action
@luna.love.hope	289k 150 posts Daily life with a rare disease	Professional /Committed	Business Account Editorial Policy	Blogger	Advocacy hashtags Fundraising Mutual endorsement
@yulianna.yusef	121k 253 posts Fashion and lifestyle	Professional /Committed	Business Account Self- promotion Professional photos Editorial	Entrepreneur Sponsorships	Association Advocacy hashtags Fundraising Mutual endorsement
@lovingmydots	16.2k 220 posts Body positive	Professional /Committed	Business Account Editorial policy	Digital creator Motivational speaker Sponsorship	Advocacy Hashtags Mutual endorsement
@robiarcuri	3149 47 posts Daily life	Professional /Personal	Business Account Self- promotion Professional photos Editorial	Artist	Association Mutual endorsement
@_bw_boy	833 107 posts Sport	Personal	Self-promotion		Association Hashtags Mutual endorsement

*Occupational identity means the qualifications associated with the account by its owner and other sources of income.

The analysis shows that influencers' practices involve “mechanisms for legitimating their work” (see figure 1) expressed through the will to conform to the aesthetic

standards of the platform by moving to a business account, the elaboration of an editorial policy and of quality content. We also have noticed an improvement in the content quality over time: captions have become longer and more optimised and the picture quality has significantly improved. Overall, we can see that more attention has been paid to details in order to engage the audience with pleasant, consistent and curated content which brings the practices of influencers closer to those of digital communications professionals.

The quest for legitimacy is also reflected in the “search for occupational identities” illustrated by the choice of a job title in the Instagram account aiming to justify their position as professionals (Maestripieri 2016) in their own expertise field. Even though they are considered influencers by marketing agency professionals, by virtue of their strategic potential and ability to reach and influence an audience, they do not emphasise this label. Instead, they highlight their occupation as entrepreneurs, bloggers, artists, or digital creators, thus demonstrating a desire to build their identity around these activities rather than the “influencer” identity. But even if not exclusive or declared, their occupation as social media influencers appears to be relevant to developing a personal brand allowing them to promote other projects or to get access to more professional opportunities.

We also found a hybridisation dynamic of different approaches: professional (posts aiming at promoting one's work and product placement); personal (focusing on self-narrative and sharing life with the disease) and committed (aiming at raising awareness and influencing others' views on stigma phenomena). By fitting into the analytical model of hybrid professionalism, the rise in professionalism here is closely linked to the other two approaches, personal and engaged, enabling influencers to reach out to the public and build their reputation as a resource-person whose expertise is derived from direct experience of the disease and stigma (see figure 1. “Hybrid approaches”).

As interest for their content grows, new customs emerge and lead to influencers being considered professionals, whose work needs supervision and assessment. The recognition by the professional sector is then complemented by peer-to-peer recognition mechanisms. Professionalism is thus shaped and performed in a relational and reputational way, from linkages to political and social phenomena, external to the professional sphere of reference. Throughout our study, we have observed the implementation of a rationale of reciprocity, with influencers showing mutual support by sharing each other's content and endorsing each other, rather than a competitive position. Influencers with nevus are part of the same online community of practice, sharing the same commitments and registers, building knowledge and harmonising self-representation practices by using consistent visual branding as a vehicle of professionalism. This is not surprising as recent studies show indeed that the sharing and the collective construction of harmonised professional practices apply to a large number of influencers' communities such as expert readers - featuring their reading practices - (Siguier, 2020) and independent videographers (Coavoux & Roques 2020).

This “practical knowledge” (Gherardi 2018), anchored in the platform registers and metrics, achieves a performative dimension. Beyond the self-exposure practices and the rise in professionalism, these strategies are also part of a collective action logic: the images and content posted contribute to creating a collective action framework (Benford & Snow 2000) and reflect the desire to have the user take action, whether it is a change in the way they perceive body differences in society, or to act for a cause, such as taking part in a fundraiser (@luna.love.hope). This is where we find the reference to the third

variable identifying hybrid forms of professionalism: the linkages between work and organised action:

*“ [...] I want people to know that this disease (Congenital Giant Nevus) exists. I also hope that my activity on the networks can somehow help and encourage adults and children affected by CGN. I have found many new members and directed them to our support page on Facebook [speaking about a patients association]. Basically, everything I say and do on Instagram is related to my experience with CGN, my choices and responsibilities!!
#perfectionofmyskin #bareyourbirthmark #inmyskiniwin #nevus”* (Published in April 2018 on Yulianna Yussef’s Instagram profile @yulianna.yussef).

If they are involved in traditional forms of collective action such as patients associations, which work to build expert and experiential knowledge to fight body stigma, their commitment is primarily deployed in the logic of “connective action” (Bennett & Segerberg 2012). In this new pattern, political demands are often shared in very personalised accounts on social networking platforms. These individualised orientations include the propensity to develop flexible and ephemeral political identifications based on personal aspirations and lifestyles, rather than strong ideological identifications. Health influencers advocate for a cause, promote self-esteem, and try to raise awareness about body difference discrimination, in particular through the use of hashtags as new collective action repertoires (#nevuslove, #inmyskiniwin or #bareyourbirthmark). While distinguishing themselves, they preserve the harmony and coherence encouraged by the increasingly professional application of Instagram aesthetic standards and by conveying the same message. In line with the neoliberal ethos, their discourse revolves around personal development, self-mastery and the resilience capacity of the individual.

“Beauty is being comfortable in your own skin. It's about knowing and accepting who you are. #wearebeautiful #selfesteem #selflove #mentalhealthchallenge @bbcbodypotitive @dove” (Published on May 9, 2019 on Natalia Freitas' Instagram profile @lovingmydots).

The online ethnography shows that the role of SMIs goes beyond the generation of income via the promotion of content and products on their social media accounts. Through the professionalisation and the optimisation of their presence on online platforms, influencers can be seen as “infomediaries” (Frau-Meigs, 2017): not only do they share their narratives and opinions online, they become intermediaries and resource persons. Moreover, we can see they use their voices and celebrity capital in order to give visibility to causes such as diversity and representation of bodily differences. From this angle, professionalisation can be understood as a contentious performance (Tarrow & Tilly 2008) that can be seized by dominated groups in order to define new norms or needs.

Hiring SMIs appears to be an opportunity to re-enchant the corporate world by responding to a search for authenticity and by performing, through the biographical narrative, the “real talk” which was actually conceived by traditional advertisers. Social

media influencers share a common range of competencies and a common objective with marketing and communications professionals: they both claim community management skills and expertise and produce creative content in order to influence their audience's representations and practices; they both conceive professionalism as a tool to interpret and answer to real social needs and aspirations for change.

6. Conclusion

Digitalisation and platformisation processes contribute to blurring boundaries between expert and non-expert actors and accelerating the dynamics of differentiation of professions and perceptions of professionalism leading to a wide heterogeneity of occupational identities and professional practices. Platforms reinforce inequalities, accentuate the processes of flexibility, precariousness and outsourcing while opening up new opportunities for employment or professional integration.

Becoming a professional influencer constitutes an opportunity for claiming remuneration to be paid for this social activity, which is extremely productive and profitable for both platforms and traditional companies. SMIs fit into the analytical frame of the book as a part of increasingly precarious expert labour group working outside acknowledged professional models and traditional partnerships and having assumed the market logic as natural (Maestriperi & Cucca 2018). The case of influencers also illustrates the shift from status professionalism, based on social position, to heterogeneous occupational professionalisms, based on the appearance of specialised knowledge and tasks (Douglas 1978) and with an essentially discursive dimension (Evetts 2006).

Influencers can claim professional status by meeting ethics and quality standards in producing and referencing content, showing their expertise in the use of digital platforms and by formalising their collaborations with marketing agencies and other economic actors. However, in this specific case, the existence of a substantial theoretical body of knowledge is not systematically considered a crucial point. In order to understand the SMIs' professionalisation dynamic, we thus need an external approach, able to look at the role of occupational resources and their linkages to the wider social structure and the new forms of building collective action and expertise on digital platforms.

By contradicting the classical notion of "professionalism", in which standards and quality are assessed by peers through the mediation of intermediate bodies, influencers rely on reputational mechanisms, market success, and personal relationships. Professionalism is carried out in the framework of communities of practices where members recognise each others, share values and develop knowledge and skills over social media. In this regard, formal professionalisation would be more of a constraint than a resource.

The influencer thus constitutes a specific case of "hybrid professionalism" (Noordegraaf 2007) in which quantitative performance criteria (number of subscribers, likes, comments, etc.), prescribed by platforms, are combined with creative production responding to the registers of visibility, proximity and authenticity. While claiming expertise, developing and sharing professional practices in communications and marketing fields, these actors do not necessarily engage in a real process of institutionalisation (conveying forms of ethics, skills, knowledge and experience

assessed and supervised by associations and jurisdiction) as this could paradoxically discredit them. Indeed, the influence they exert among their communities derives mainly from their differentiation from institutional actors. In order to go beyond traditional approaches, our perspective looks at professionals both as “institutional agents” (CH 1, p. 12) who influence and reaffirm the project and the social role of complex market organisations (as shown by the discourse on “professionalism” deployed by marketing and communications professionals) and as individual actors directly engaged in a struggle for visibility (as shown by the study on health influencers).

The promotion of social and political causes on Instagram leads to a professionalising practice, rooted in a legitimate desire and need for social change, but resulting in the formation of communities interests capable of anticipating or generating demand. By producing a visual and symbolic continuity with communications and marketing contents, influencers co-write a discourse delivering an ethos and an ideal in which to project themselves to online communities. The two different approaches to activism, a connective one that is individualised and centred on personal development, and the collective one, acting through conventional organisations, seem to mirror the distinction between “social critique” and “artistic critique”, one referring to claims based on social justice and the fight against inequalities, the other centred on the promotion of authenticity, autonomy and individual fulfilment (Boltanski & Chiapello 2011).

In accordance with the new spirit of capitalism, the social influence exerted online by these emerging hybrid professionalisms often rely on the market and favours self-interest and individual motivations and strategies over collective ones.

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