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Striving for Conspicuousness.

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

Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation

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Abstract

The present dissertation focuses on how social status is constructed and displayed in contemporary society by looking at so-called social media influencers. The context of a contemporary attention economy inspired by the neoliberal imperatives of self-entrepreneurship and self-realisation represents a fertile ground for the emergence of influencers – a group of highly visible, branded personae, who have gained a consistent following on social media and try to monetise it mainly through sponsored content and advertising. On the other hand, such a context opens up for a reflection on the changing nature of status and the practices of status gaining and signalling across the online and offline domains. Issues of status are particularly relevant for a specific category of content creators, micro-influencers. The size of their publics (usually under 100k followers) together with their perceived relatability, bring them closer to ordinary users than Internet celebrities per se, and make their activities relevant to analyse in a context where consumption and production are strongly intertwined.

Despite much attention being paid to influencers' self-branding practices in terms of micro-celebrity, fame and reputation, an analysis that focuses on such practices as ways to construct social status is still missing. To address these gaps, the research aims to assess the key elements at the basis of the construction of social status on Instagram, analyse the determinants of status in the context of the influencer economy, and address issues of status consumption and the creation of status hierarchies in contemporary society.

In order to analyse social status in the context of the influencer economy, the methodological approach here adopted comprises digital methods and qualitative interviews in an overarching qualitative design. The research consists of the collection, analysis and triangulation of Instagram data and interview data in a complementary and circular process. This study focuses on the social media platform Instagram by looking at

how platform-specific self-branding practices unfold with the aims of accruing and signalling social status within the Italian context.

Drawing on the Theory of the Leisure Class (Veblen, 1988), the analytical lenses of conspicuous consumption are adopted as a heuristic to analyse how micro-influencers deploys self-branding practices as ways to construct and display social status. In particular, throughout the dissertation, I contend that *conspicuousness* represents the main cultural logic underpinning micro-influencers' practices. The concept of conspicuousness points to the practices of being noticeable in front of a potential audience to acquire social status. Conspicuousness thus integrates the notion of visibility by accounting for displays' importance and their social and symbolic valence in signalling status. This entails a conceptual shift from conspicuous consumption as the ultimate status symbol, as described by Veblen (1899), to the strive for conspicuousness in itself as a process aimed to accrue social status.

More specifically, I contend that the logic of conspicuousness entails an iterative process in which status is at the same time displayed and reproduced and consumption practices, adequately displayed, become productive in themselves. Conspicuousness, therefore, deploys through a *circle of prosumption* and in the context of an *economy of display*, which is increasingly characterised by the overt displays of inconspicuous and subtle status markers. Moreover, throughout the dissertation, I argue for the importance of *access-based conspicuousness*, stressing the importance of access as a determinant of status. Access intersects with self-branding, reputation and economic capital to work as a mediating mechanism, by either amplifying or compensating for micro-influencers' existing resources. Lastly, conspicuousness unfolds as a *labour of intermediation* which, in the context of a post-employment society, is sustained by a *constellation of occupations* necessary for micro-influencers to accrue status, both in terms of self-fulfilment and financial compensation.

Ultimately, the present work offers relevant insights about the current dynamics of social status and distinction in the context of the influencer economy and in late-capitalist time and relevant insights about the persisting inequalities in terms of status and resources. The results also open up an understanding of micro-influencers and their practices as the expression of a post-middle class status.