MASTER THESIS

Fighting for social change while doing marketing: hybrid influencers under the institutional logics perspective

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Summary

Introduction

Nowadays, during a pandemic, the streets are hollow, and the internet is overcrowded. Social media platforms, i.e. web 2.0 applications characterized by user-generated content (UGC) (Obar & Wildman, 2015; Van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020), like Instagram are experiencing a wave of new users because people are taking refuge there in order to seek normality. In the current scenario, the missed sense of a real community, due to social distancing, is being replaced by a social one, characterized by a new way of communication, engagement, and interaction between people (Arora et al., 2019). These platforms represent not only a medium of communication among people but also a way for companies to promote themselves, features that, during a historical moment like the one we are currently experiencing, are essential (Arora et al., 2019).

A central phenomenon represented by social media is given by the emergence of the Social Media Influencer (SMI). SMIs are individuals who appear authentic (Audrezet et al., 2020) and have a large community, hence connections with a big audience and have gained huge credibility on the platform engaging in the opportunity to emerge as mediators between companies and consumers (Van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020). However, the chance is linked not only to the number of followers, hence the size of the community, but also to the quality of the posts, and the latter counts more (Freberg et al., 2010). As people who are considered to have an influence on others, SMIs create posts to promote brands that they are paid to promote in order to influence their followers' purchase decisions. Therefore, due to the influence they have on their followers, they are used by brands as powerful marketing tools (Biaudet, 2017).

A large body of literature has shown that SMIs can be considered as marketing tools that are cost-effective and allow reaching target groups in a natural way (Kadekova & Holienčinová, 2018). They share their life, build community trust and get an audience, i.e. followers, and the exposure they want in order to become popular. Therefore, their strategy aligns perfectly with the one of social media platforms because they both live to increase their exposure and not to be forgotten (Ferdinands, 2016). Indeed, social media platforms are used mainly for commercial and marketing purposes and both the platforms' owners and SMIs are strongly oriented towards profit in order to make a living out of this digital work (Van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020).

However, even if many SMIs started through advertising products they later developed the need and the right to not only be the bridge between companies and consumers but also to let others hear their voice. In fact, an increasing number of influencers is trying to engage the

community in social issues considering that the public is interested not only in the products they advertise but also in following people who actually express their opinion and engage in activism[1]. Here, the term activism is defined as digital activism, clicktivism, or slacktivism, which is a combination of multiple approaches concerning protest, fundraising and visibility made online (George & Leidner, 2019; Hutchinson, 2019). People who engage in activism activities are strongly driven by their belief: they believe in what they think is a good cause and fight for it.

At this point, we have to make a distinction: some SMIs focus their activity only on activism, i.e. free-agent influencer (FAI), and stand up for issues that mean to them; and other SMIs decide to balance both marketing and activism activities, we will refer to them as "hybrid SMIs" (Cohen, 2016).

This paper focuses on the hybrid category of SMIs and their responsibility in digital activism because people are highly influenced by what others say, i.e. the word-of-mouth (WOM), and social media can be a powerful tool characterized by a persuasive power represented by influencers (Roelens et al., 2016). For this reason, it can be affirmed that SMIs have an impact and the power they have is huge because people, especially young people, i.e. generation Z, are more active on social media than on other sources of news (Kadekova & Holienčinová, 2018) and thus are easy to persuade. Indeed, the key to an influencer's job is exposure. They achieve this exposure thanks to the popularity they reach through their marketing activities and then use it to get the opportunity to express their opinion and to protest for what they believe matters. An example is Loretta Grace, an Italo-Nigerian beauty influencer who started her activity on YouTube. Thanks to the popularity she gained through her videos, she had the opportunity to work for huge brands related not only to the beauty industry, e.g. Mesauda Milano and Samsung. Moreover, through the years she started to use her popularity to address social topics related to equality of gender and race. She openly denounces brands that call themselves inclusive, but demonstrate the opposite through their products, e.g. make-up products that are made for people with dark skin but do not work properly on shades. Therefore, as a woman who works through social media, she apparently aligns the two types of activities.

We can understand if SMIs experience any difficulty in aligning marketing and activism activities by adopting an institutional logic lens. In fact, during their everyday activity on social

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[1] Retrieved from: https://theconversation.com/why-the-uk-government-is-paying-social-media-influencers-to-post-about-coronavirus-145478

media, SMIs draw upon different *institutional logics,* i.e. an ideal type representation of norms, values, and identities that individuals draw on to comprehend and evaluate their everyday activities (Thorton et al., 2012). Since they are influenced by different logics such as the *market* and the *state logic* they could experience tensions between the pull of these different logics. Therefore, institutional theory can help us in understanding the tensions because it focuses on understanding the influence of external forces, namely social, political and economical, on the behaviour of individual actors (Di Maggio, 1997). As already mentioned SMIs may have the power to influence others but influencers themselves are influenced by the external forces mentioned above and thus everything is related.

Moreover, the job of an influencer is strongly linked to gaining social acceptance in order to reach a larger audience and be legitimated. For this reason, SMIs need some resources to survive such as their reputation, income and followers. In order to acquire these resources hybrid SMIs need to balance both their profit and non-profit activities, which means that they have to align the different logics they draw upon. Indeed, the resources are only acquired by SMIs if they are seen to be legitimate and when they are not seen to be legitimate they face institutional complexity. Therefore, it can be argued that SMIs need to legitimize themselves in order to increase their community and increase the chance to work with brands. Since SMIs need to gain legitimacy they can be compared to hybrid organizations, i.e. organizations that mix institutional logics in new ways (Battilana & Dorado, 2010). In fact, not only hybrid influencers but also hybrid organizations deal with different logics. However, hybrid organizations adopt different strategies in order to deal with the institutional complexity that may arise due to the different logics (Battilana & Dorado, 2010). The adoption of strategies is linked to the survival of those organizations who need social acceptance in order to get the resources they may need from the external environment. Indeed, if an organization is not legitimate it may not get the resources needed for its survival, the same happens for hybrid SMIs.

At this point, it can be argued that SMIs who are involved in activism are strongly rooted in the *state logic* because they fight for social goals. However, it is important to highlight that hybrid SMIs are subject not only to the *state logic,* mirroring their interest in activism, but also to the *market* one, mirroring their marketing interest, and, if logics are not aligned, these may conflict and create *institutional complexity*. Therefore, by adopting an institutional logic lens we may deepen the issue.

While the studies regarding SMIs focus mainly on their marketing activity and provide invaluable insights there is no research on the way SMIs deal with both profit and non-profit activities. Indeed, there is a lack of knowledge regarding how hybrid influencers find a balance between these different interests thus between different logics. We can expect that if they do not align well with the different logics they may face institutional complexity but we do not know if this expectation is right or not, because there is no research on this possibility. Therefore, the current research focuses on the involvement of SMIs in activism as an alternative to their usual for-profit marketing activity through the following research question that we will try to answer:

In which way do influencers deal with the institutional complexity created by the two types of influencing?

In order to answer the research question, an exploratory case study will be conducted, further investigating this gap through a prime example provided us by the pandemic that is constraining and changing our lives, i.e. COVID-19. We will analyze what is happening through the theoretical lens of institutional theory that can be useful in emphasizing the involvement of SMIs in activism and in examining the logics that influence them. Moreover, we will study the link that hybrid influencers have with hybrid organizations, to understand if they can act in the same way and apply the same response strategies or not. The study of this phenomenon can lead to a better understanding of why influencers have to deal with the creation of institutional complexity, in order to not lose their legitimacy and how they should deal with it. Therefore, various practical and theoretical implications could emerge from this study. For example, hybrid influencers could understand the usefulness of applying some response strategies which could benefit both their marketing and activism activities and also the organizations they work with.

Literature review and theoretical background

Social media

The advent of social media platforms brought the world to a radical change. Social media are web 2.0 activities, hence internet-based activities, that require a social network platform in order to work properly. They are characterized by the competence of the user to generate content, i.e. UGC, and to let other users interact with it (Obar & Wildman, 2015). The introduction of this new way of communication has brought about different changes. Indeed, they have revolutionized not only the way people communicate and create bonds but also the way people can spread information, expressing their opinion (Obar &Wildman, 2015). By employing these platforms, social media users, i.e. people who have created an account on the platform, can stay connected with people from all over the world and they can also freely express their opinion, no matter what the topic is. Therefore, these kinds of platforms create the conditions for large-scale propagation of the messages through word-of-mouth (WOM) (Roelens et al., 2016). Moreover, the increase in the popularity of social media has led to greater use and through time to the transformation and the creation of new jobs, the most revolutionary one is the social media influencer.

Social media influencers

An influencer is someone who creates his own space on a social network, i.e. UGC, and through his hard work and autonomy makes a living out of this kind of hobby professionalizing it (Van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020). Even if initially only celebrities were considered as SMIs, over time, "normal" people made their way through this opportunity and reinvented themselves in a super-challenging way (Arora et al., 2019).

Celebrities were the first ones who created and developed the concept of the influencer, i.e. celebrity influencers (Arora et al., 2019). They started to share their daily life on social media and received unexpected feedback from their followers, who became addicted to knowing what their life was truly about. Through this mechanism, different opportunities were created because brands noticed the impact this exchange of information might have brought over time and took the opportunity to revolutionize their marketing strategy by hiring celebrities as advertisers for their products in order to attract a wider range of customers (Arora et al., 2019).

Looking at this new trend many ordinary people began their adventure on social media in order to become a social media influencer (SMI) in a "self-made" manner. They started in different ways and with different goals considering that there is not only one category of influencers. Indeed, they started by posting on various social media platforms, such as YouTube, Instagram and TikTok, with different intentions: share their opinion, e.g. free-agent influencers, share their passions like fashion, beauty or travel bloggers, share their knowledge within a field, like food bloggers and green influencers (Audrezet et al., 2020). However, being a SMI is not as easy as one may think because SMIs have to daily entertain an audience, i.e. the community made up by their followers, by sharing their daily life, their thoughts and some even share their lowest moments in order to create a bond with their followers and strengthen the relationship. Indeed, the key to the success of a SMI lies in the authenticity he conveys (Van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020; Audrezet et al., 2020).

The way influencers carry on their activities is strongly rooted in communication. In order to reach success, they need to have and continuously develop strong interpersonal skills (IPS) (Bedwell et al., 2014). The latter is mainly defined by two areas, communication, and relationship building (Bedwell et al., 2014). A notable skill to achieve success is oral communication (OC). SMIs must be able to build relationships and by using linguistic and nonlinguistic dynamic communication, that is related to OC, they can easily develop this ability (Brink & Costigan, 2015). Both can be easily shown by SMIs for example in YouTube videos or Instagram stories and whilst nonlinguistic communication refers to body language, the linguistic one refers to oral communication, so to words (Brink & Costigan, 2015). OC and the various ways to communicate are pivotal skills an influencer must have to be understood by the community and other people in order to reach success. Even if OC is important, non-oral communication is also important because all aspects of communication are important for an influencer to increase the size of the audience. Influencers have the power to influence people, and this may happen not only through a video but also through a post matched by a caption. However, this caption must have certain parameters, such as authenticity and criticality, to persuade people to think that it is reliable and has a purpose (Jonsen et al., 2018). Therefore, communication can be seen as the pivotal soft skill of SMIs for the reasons mentioned above and because it can fill the perceived gap between knowledge and capabilities (Andrews & Higson, 2010).

Furthermore, SMIs are active agents who have a degree of agency because they can decide when and what to post, making it public, and what to leave private.

Not all the people who tried to become an influencer made it out, because it is a very challenging job and also it is not easy to reach the popularity that is necessary to make a living out of it. However, many reached success because people seem to be more interested in the opinion of a normal person like themselves, seeing it more reliable. This is the reason why, nowadays, SMIs are not only celebrities but also ordinary people who took the opportunity of having their own space on the internet and found the right way to use it, surrounding themselves with digital supporters and making a living out of it. In fact, there is at least one obvious difference between celebrity influencers and SMIs that is given by the way they achieved popularity. The latter had to self-brand on social media to reach fame, while celebrity influencers are already famous due to their main activity such as singing, modelling or acting (Khamis et al., 2016).

As already mentioned, SMIs have a huge power that can be defined as persuasive because they can influence other people's decisions regarding different topics (Roelens et al., 2016). The most known is the purchase decision because once the SMI has established a strong connection with the community, gaining trust, the community will blindly trust the SMI's opinion regarding a product or even a movie. However, other decisions may affect the audience's behaviour, like the freedom to express their opinion regarding different topics from politics to civil rights (Kadekova & Holienčinová, 2018). By expressing freely what they think, SMIs may influence other people too. Through these mechanisms, they gain acceptance and are able to build a community winning their followers' trust. For this reason, they have been considered as the new and most powerful weapon to conduct marketing activities, i.e. influencer marketing (Kadekova & Holienčinová, 2018) but also to fight for a common goal, e.g. the #BlackLivesMatter social movement, Fridays for Future, a global climate strike movement or the Extinction Rebellion movements.

Social media influencers and influencer marketing

Reaching the status of influencer is not easy, because they have to appear authentic to the community and trustworthy. The higher the acceptance they reach on the internet, the higher the number of new followers they gain, the higher the number of opportunities to get in touch with huge brands, hence having more jobs (Kadekova & Holienčinová, 2018). Indeed, brands more

and more often decide to hire influencers to promote their products because they have an influence over potential buyers. This way of advertising is currently the most required and used and it is known as influencer marketing, which reflects the empowerment that the advent of the internet has given to today's consumers.

SMIs through their activity on social media might gain the role of ambassador for some brands and increase their popularity. However, they have to stay true to themselves to avoid any kind of drawback because authenticity is essential for this kind of job and is the basis for the strategy of influencer marketing (Audrezet et al., 2020). Usually, brands contact relevant influencers because their audience is bigger and so the opportunity to reach new audiences and increase the sales is higher. At the same time, many brands prefer to contact only influencers that share their same values, even if they are not that famous because they are more likely to have a focus on the same target of people. In this way, the advertisement will appear more genuine and reliable and the SMI will appear loyal to the community (Audrezet et al., 2020). Moreover, the work of influencers is continually subjected to change. If initially the advertising activity was mainly based on presenting the product by simply posting a picture containing it, now SMIs are more free to present the product in the way they prefer including for example a video while they are trying it, or they can share tips to use the product in the best way or offer a discount code to purchase it (Audrezet et al., 2020). Acting this way, they can fill the doubts of the followers who are interested in the product and so can increase the sales of the product, increasing profits not only for the brand they are sponsoring but also for themselves. After all, by becoming brand ambassadors they establish a collaborative relationship that should be beneficial for both parties, but it may carry risks. In fact, a review from an influencer can have a significant impact on the perception and reliability of the brand. If it is positive, it can lead to an increase in sales but, on the other hand, if it is negative it might lead to adverse effects that undermine the reputation of the brand. At the same time, also the authenticity of the influencer can be at risk especially when they decide to promote brands that they would not regularly promote just because of an advantageous contract (Audrezet et al., 2020). Therefore, it is important to highlight that even keeping the status of influencer is a real challenge. Indeed, they have to be smart and careful with everything they post otherwise they could lose the authenticity that followers perceive towards them and destroy their career even with a single wrong sentence. For this reason,

usually, influencers promote only brands that fall within their sphere of influence and try to enlarge the latter long before deciding to promote something they would not usually promote.

Moreover, they must be able to keep up with social media changes, brand changes and show their trustworthiness. For instance, if a brand they sponsor changes its vision or tries to do something they do not agree with, they must express their real opinion to the audience in order to not lose credibility. An example of this could be done by a beauty influencer who only sponsors cruelty-free cosmetics and decides to end the collaboration with a company that usually acts as cruelty-free but asks to sponsor a product that does not respect that criterion. In a case like the latter, it is better to end the collaboration, rather than lose the credibility of the community.

SMIs are mostly known for their marketing activities however, not all of them focus their work on it. Some influencers focus their attention on other activities like activism and fight for what they believe matters.

Social media influencers and activism

In this climate of the digital revolution, even activities based on activism found their way leading to a new type of activism, that is digital based, called slacktivism or clicktivism (George & Leidner, 2019; Cohen, 2016).

Slacktivism is characterized by little effort and leads people to reach major results[2] and is the key to new opportunities (George & Leidner, 2019). Indeed, because of social media, many powerful campaigns have been created, hence the click of a mouse has become very powerful considering that it can lead to immediate attention from a worldwide audience. This new wave of thinking and acting has also led to the rise of the *free-agent influencer (FAI)* (Cohen, 2016).

FAIs are individuals who argue for various causes through social media. They can be defined as influencers who focus only on activist activities, hence find multiple ways to protest, gain visibility and fundraising for what they believe in. On social media, everyone is free to stand up for issues that mean to them, in the easiest way possible. Indeed, while for usual activist activities an intermediary is essential, for digital activism no intermediary is needed (Cohen, 2016). For this reason, many people turn their attention only to social issues and use the interactive power of social media, the easiness to build connections and the possibility to spread information worldwide quickly to gain supporters and reach a wider audience than through

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[2] Evgeny Morozov, 2009. "The brave new world of slacktivism," *Foreign Policy* (19 May), at
https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/05/19/the-brave-new-world-of-slacktivism/

traditional media. In this way, FAIs intend to create awareness on various topics and influence a big change starting from social media. For instance, Carlotta Vagnoli[3] can be identified as a FAI. She is an Italian feminist blogger, who is fighting for gender equality and raising awareness about gender-based violence. Through her Instagram videos that have gone viral, many other hybrid influencers who operate different activities with multiple platforms seem to be very happy with the activity they perform, despite the little inconvenience of being so selective. Indeed, they seem to be very touched by the kind of activity they decide to perform even if the pressure that derives from social media is sometimes too much. For them, social media platforms and their accounts have a great power that is worth the possibility to find a balance between marketing and activism activities. They have shown that money is not the most important thing in someone's job, because if you love what you do, you'll do it even if it means having a lower income than what you could have by not being so selective. The secret is in being able to exploit the economic opportunities provided by whom they want to represent. In conclusion, hybrid influencers have proven to be attracted to platforms for intrinsic pleasure, personal and professional development rather than making influencers have been affected by her words and started to promote gender equality. Indeed, even influencers, whose work is based on influencing others by attracting their attention, are at the same time influenced by others.

Along with FAIs also SMIs found their space regarding digital activism. Although the majority of SMIs focus their attention and engage only in for-profit marketing activities there are also SMIs who are following the wave of slacktivism and are turning their attention to social issues (Cohen, 2016). For this reason, we will refer to them as SMIs that do both marketing and activist activities, i.e. hybrid influencers.

Hybrid SMIs are influencers who have decided to use the power they have gained through their marketing activity to be able to express their opinion regarding social issues. Thanks to profit activities, related to their marketing occupation, they have the advantage of already having a large community so they can let their opinion spread faster than FAIs. Expressing their opinion is a double-edged sword because they can both lose a lot of consent from their community due to different ideas or reach even more approval, increasing their popularity. Indeed, by exposing themselves on social media they increase the opportunity to reach even more target groups in a natural way (Kadekova & Holienčinová, 2018). And this is

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[3] Retrieved from https://www.donnaglamour.it/chi-e-carlotta-vagnoli/curiosita/?refresh_ce

because the audience is interested in those influencers that can freely express their opinion and engage in digital awareness-raising campaigns regarding topics that are not only close to their community but also to other people.

There are hybrid influencers who are fighting for equality in different ways, like gender equality or equality between different races. For instance, Loretta Grace, i.e. @graceonyourdash, started her activity on YouTube and then also on Instagram reaching the needed popularity to be defined as a SMI. By collaborating with well-known brands and through her charisma she was able to reach the needed fame to be recognized as a SMI and right now can increase her profits. In addition, she started acting as a digital activist, i.e. slacktivist, fighting for equality and raising awareness about racism. Indeed, through her YouTube videos, but also via her Instagram stories, she stands up for dark skin people for example by calling out cosmetics brands that do racist advertisements or promote inclusivity while not producing products for dark skin people. She also exposed herself about the #BlackLivesMatter movement and episodes of "blackface", promoting awareness, expressing her point of view, and even giving advice on how to act to not be mistaken for a racist, everything to interest and involve her audience into such topics which are treated as a taboo. By carrying out these two activities that are not strictly related to each other she can be named a hybrid SMI.

Moreover, some influencers are using their exposure to fight for common goods like a better healthcare system. This is very important especially during a pandemic like the one we are experiencing. A prime example of this is Chiara Ferragni, an Italian influencer and entrepreneur. According to the classification given by the Association of National Advertisers (ANA), she can be classified as a celebrity because right now counts more than 500.000 followers, which is the maximum number to be identified as a macro influencer. Indeed, right now her community can count more than 23 million followers on Instagram. She started her activity blogging on "The blonde salad", her style and travel blog and then opened an account on Instagram reaching an incredible success. She is one of the very first SMIs who built her path in this digital revolution scenario and has been recognized for three years in a row as the most influential Italian under 30 in the world according to Forbes[4]. Moreover, she collaborates with many brands in various fields, e.g. Lancôme, Prada, Nespresso and many more, and through these partnerships, she is carrying out a huge part of her profit interests. She decided to use the influence power she has to

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[4] Retrieved from https://www.forbes.com/profile/chiara-ferragni/?sh=3903108b5a54

communicate meaningful messages increasing awareness on topics like domestic abuse, revenge porn and starting fundraising for different reasons linked to social issues. Indeed, during the "first pandemic of the digital age" (Yousuf et al., 2020), Chiara Ferragni and her husband Fedez, an Italian singer, entertainer, and influencer, commonly known as the Ferragnez, used their notoriety to spread information and engage in societal causes. They activated different initiatives, like "Coronavirus, rafforziamo la terapia intensiva" (Pucciarelli & Kaplan, 2020), putting their voice to the service of the Italian people. Through this initiative, they started a worldwide fundraising to collect the money necessary to build a massive intensive care unit and then built it in thirty days during an extremely difficult period. This is only one of the initiatives that they started or took part in, like "Milano aiuta"[5]. They decided to take part in this initiative, started by the Municipality of Milano, as volunteers to spread information about these kinds of initiatives aimed at promoting a network to support citizens in different ways, such as groceries delivery and different types of assistance, especially for elder people.

Those presented above are only a few examples of different SMIs who showed the diversity of their interests and the will to come forward for a common change.

Tensions arising of combining different social media activities

The behaviour of SMIs can be better understood through the theoretical lens of institutional theory. Depending on the activity they engage in they draw upon different *institutional logics*, i.e. socially constructs that define beliefs, values and expectations that are socially acceptable (Thornton et al., 2012). Actors' actions affect the logics in different ways. Indeed, they can reinforce the logic by acting according to it, i.e. maintaining, or modify an existing logic through daily actions which bring to a natural change, i.e. changing, or de-institutionalizing a certain logic, i.e. disrupting.

SMI's marketing activity is anchored in the *market logic* in several ways. SMIs are independent workers who use social media mainly for commercial and marketing purposes and are trying to make a profit. They are trying to live out of this digital work and the way they carry on their work is anchored in the logic they implement and make use of (Van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020). Actually, they draw on the *market logic*, because they use the power, they reach on social

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[5] Retrieved from:
https://milano.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/04/30/foto/chiara_ferragni_e_fedez_volontari_per_milano_aiuta_in_bici_consegnano_i_sacchetti_di_cibo_alle_famiglie_in_difficolta_seg-255267854/1/

media to increase their profits. However, they do marketing activities not only for themselves but also for organizations in order to let them make a profit too, reinforcing the logic, i.e. *institutional work maintenance*. As already said above, brands hire SMIs and use them for marketing purposes because they have the huge power to persuade people's ideas through the trust bond they have created. However, they have to be careful in balancing the expectations of three different actors: themselves, their followers and the organization they work with. Only by balancing the different interests of these actors, they will be able to keep this trust relationship alive and maintain the status of SMI. For example, Chiara Ferragni is a well-known influencer who made her life a living business. Indeed, she bases her daily life on advertisements for companies while doing everyday activities like cooking. The striking example showing her profit interests through her ability in doing influencer marketing is given by her wedding. She made it one of the most-streamed events ever, transforming it into a 3-day event labelled #TheFerragnez through which she "generated a total audience-driven Media Impact Value™ of $36 million across online and social, and sparked over 67 million interactions (a.k.a. engagement)"[6]. She used the event to advertise many brands, like Alitalia, Versace and Dior, that have decided to sponsor the wedding given the high worldwide social media impact that it most likely would have aroused. This is just an example of how Mrs Ferragni takes on her marketing activities, reaching dizzying profits, showing how she draws upon the *market logic* daily.

SMI's activism activity instead is anchored in *state logic*. They might fight for a common goal like equality. For instance, Mrs Ferragni, following the example given by Carlotta Vagnoli, an Italian FAI, showed actively her willingness to promote awareness about gender-based violence. She recorded videos expressing her concern on the topic, calling out traditional media that often report news in the worst way, due to a patriarchal point of view. For this reason, she also shared different informative videos to increase awareness of the topic. Acting this way, she acted as a slacktivist, expressing her invitation to act, to stand up and speak up, in order to build a better society based on gender equality, drawing upon the *state logic*. Regarding this topic, she also worked on different initiatives by Pomellato[7] to promote awareness, aligning both *market* and *state logic*.

Another example shown by the Ferragnez, is the worldwide fundraising they launched in Italy, i.e. "Coronavirus, rafforziamo la terapia intensiva", in order to try to secure an equal healthcare

[6] Retrieved from https://www.launchmetrics.com/resources/blog/chiara-ferragni-fedez-wedding
[7] Retrieved from https://wwd.com/fashion-news/fashion-scoops/pomellato-domestic-abuse-chiara-ferragni-1234664121/

treatment to everybody during the first lockdown due to COVID-19 (Pucciarelli & Kaplan, 2020). They acted as slacktivists showing their interest for other people, doing everything they could to improve the healthcare system of Italy, drawing upon the *state logic* but also the *community logic,* giving something back to their community. For this reason, they acknowledged the annual award "Ambrogino d'Oro", conferred to express gratitude for the contribution they gave in a historic time like the one we are currently experiencing[8].

As discussed above, via some examples, SMIs draw upon different logics. During their marketing activity, they relate to the *market logic*, because they are oriented towards profit-making, while during their activist activity they relate to the *state* and *community logic* because they fight for social goals such as equality. As a result, SMIs may face difficulties in balancing these logics because they may clash bringing out *institutional complexity*.

According to Thornton et al. (2012), the prevailing *institutional logics* create the underpinnings for what is seen as desirable and that is exactly why logics could clash. Since non-profit activities take more time than profit ones, the time hybrid SMIs spend on reinforcing the *state logic* is time that they cannot spend on making profit, highlighting a clash between *market* and *state logic*. Moreover, the clash could be contentwise: while the *community* and the *market logic* are not only about themselves, the *market logic* is only about them, so it could be the case that some values that are represented by these logics might conflict as well. Indeed, drawing upon the *market logic* SMIs pursue an increasing profitability, while relying on the *community logic* they pursue local trust and reciprocity. Fighting for common goods in order to give something back to the community could give rise to tensions with the profit interest of SMIs, that is based on the efficiency of their digital business, hence a clash between *market* and *community logic.*

However, logics do not have to necessarily clash with each other, indeed, when SMIs talk openly about their activist interests, *state logic*, they may strengthen their relationship with their audience which can be then linked to an increase in profit, *market logic*, thus aligning both interests, as Mrs Ferragni did in the example regarding the spread of awareness on gender-based violence. In case of a clash between logics, the *institutional complexity* gives them a degree of agency, hence the opportunity to define a certain strategy to balance logics.

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[8] Retrieved from https://wwd.com/fashion-news/fashion-scoops/pomellato-domestic-abuse-chiara-ferragni-1234664121/

Social media influencers and hybrid organizations

Since hybrid SMIs may face complexity as they draw on different logics, it is necessary to understand if there may be some strategy that they can adopt to prevent the rise of tensions. By analyzing other actors that face this kind of tension but already found a strategy to deal with it we may find a relevant way to understand how hybrid influencers could do the same. In this regard, it could be helpful to compare *hybrid organizations* and hybrid SMIs in order to understand if they can or not use the same strategies as hybrid organizations.

According to Battilana and Dorado (2010), hybrid organizations can be defined as organizations that combine institutional logics in ways never seen before. Indeed, hybrid organizations have to deal with different logics, and this is a real challenge for them because it will surely lead to generating conflicts between employees. In fact, hybrid organizations will face a tension between the different logics employees draw upon and will experience institutional complexity. These organizations are facing the same problem as hybrid SMIs. However, hybrid organizations can adopt different strategies to deal with this complexity, striving to create a balance between the different logics. To face the complexity hybrid organizations can use hiring and socialization strategies (Battilana & Dorado, 2010).

Hiring strategies are different and their application has effects on the socialization process of the organization's members. In this context, the socialization strategies have an important role because they can help in focusing the members on the desired vision. Using only one strategy is not the best approach. Indeed, it is better to combine the different strategies. The findings of Battilana and Dorado (2010) suggest that the best approach for a hybrid organization to overcome institutional complexity is the apprenticeship because it leads to a reduction of the tension and strives for a balance between the different logics.

Even if these strategies work well for hybrid organizations, they might not apply well to hybrid influencers due to the fact that while hybrid organizations are big firms, composed of many employees who focus on different logics, hybrid influencers are not a big firm. Indeed, they can be defined as one-man businesses that have to deal with different logics which clash and arise institutional complexity. As already mentioned, legitimacy is key to hybrid organizations to get the resources needed to survive. At the same time it can be argued that by comparing hybrid organizations and SMIs, legitimacy is pivotal to hybrid influencers' activity. In this context, the application of response strategies, i.e. the selection of one of the two competing logics, is

important to understand how influencers could not lose their legitimacy. From the literature regarding hybrid organizations we know that there are some response strategies, but we do not know if hybrid influencers could adopt the same strategies.

The figure below, figure 1, shows a vision of the connections pointed out in the theoretical framework, in order to facilitate the understanding of the research problem and of the subsequent study.
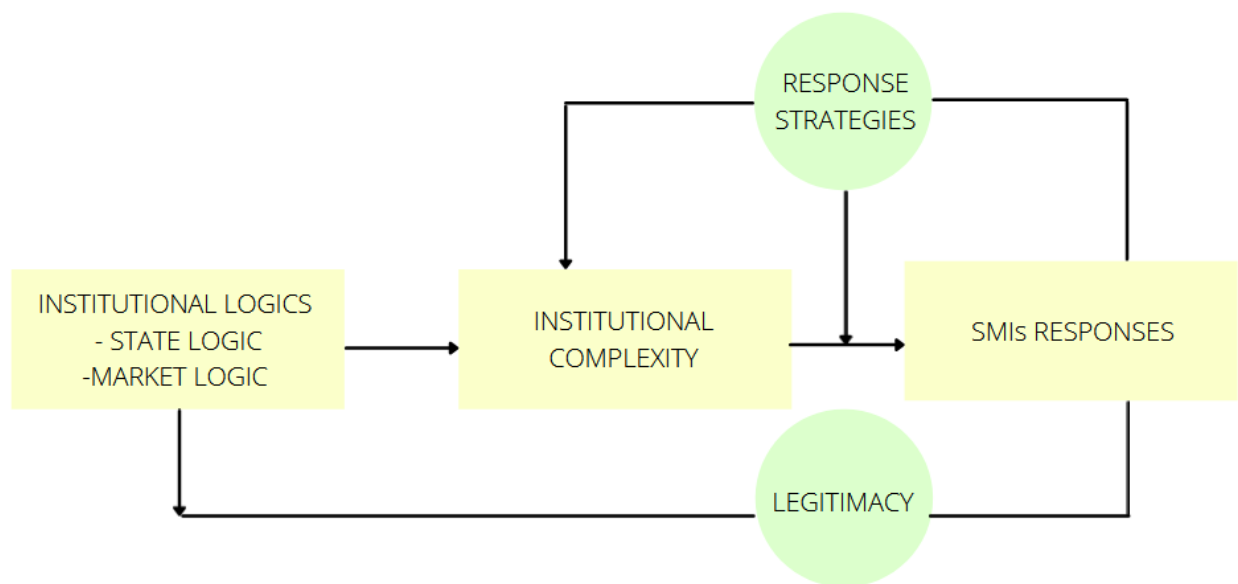
Figure 1: Explorative research model

Methodology

The case study

To understand how hybrid influencers balance their marketing and activism activities an exploratory case study with various types of influencers has been conducted.

This section will show in detail: the different approaches adopted to collect the data, what are the different types of influencers involved, the platform they focus their activity on, and the way data have been collected, coded and analyzed.

The platforms considered were both Instagram and YouTube because hybrid influencers focus their activity on generating content on both platforms to increase their audience. Indeed, both platforms are related to the share of UGC and offer many opportunities to influencers.

The research participants involved are SMIs who carry on both marketing and activism activities both on Instagram and YouTube. Moreover, the respondents selected will and will not share the same values of the organization they collaborate with.

Data collection

The data collection includes an interview-based study as the primary source of the research and a document analysis. Since we intend to explore how hybrid influencers balance their marketing and activism activities in the natural setting of social media a qualitative approach has been chosen. Indeed, we do not have the possibility of submitting a questionnaire with predetermined questions because the topic needs to be explored. For this reason, we decided to base the study on semi-structured interviews that are assumed to be capable of providing a strong contribution at the level of exploratory research by giving space for interpretation of the interviewee since the questions will not be too limited. We used a semi-structured format asking the hybrid influencers about (1) their decision to work on social media, (2) the activities they carry out on social media and (3) their experiences in collaborating with brands and companies. Conducting a credible study based on semi-structured interviews is a real challenge because the research process must be valid and reliable, and each step of the process could influence the research output (Brink, 1989). Furthermore, we will also add a secondary source of information: the document analysis of SMIs profile on the social media platforms that are the subject of our study. Considering the purpose of the study the use of these two approaches will gather more information to properly answer the research question.

First source: Interviews

The interviews were of two types. The first one will include hybrid SMIs that can align different logics, while the second type will include those who are not able to align them. As already mentioned SMIs were selected based on the platform they work on thus, we focused on those hybrid SMIs that work predominantly on YouTube and Instagram at the same time, the kind of activity they carry on, which must be both marketing and activism related, and on the share or not of values with brands they collaborate with. The choice of different types of respondents, i.e. hybrid SMIs, has been made to understand the strategy that those who align different activities, drawing upon different logics, use, to comprehend in which way these strategies are successful and how the other type of respondent could draw upon their strategies to conduct their activities most successfully.

The interviews were collected and transcribed starting from May 2021 when interviewees were contacted directly through the two platforms covered by the study. Moreover, the interviews were conducted through Skype due to the COVID-19 restrictions on social interaction but also due to the real distance between the interviewees and the interviewer. The study has been conducted under the privacy regulations guaranteeing anonymity in the results to prevent any effect on their working life. The interviewees have been informed in advance of the purpose of the research and under their consent they have been recorded during the interviews. In addition, the transcripts of the interviews have been e sent to them to have their consent to use their data in the research and guarantee the reliability of the data. The researcher selected more than 20 respondents that performed both on Instagram and YouTube and at the same time carried out both marketing and activism activities but only 13 decided to participate in the study. The interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes, with the 13 interviews totalling around 10 h.

Second source: Document analysis

As anticipated, the second source of information was a document analysis based on the social media profile of the interviewees. The researchers have personally observed their accounts to understand how the shift from normal influencers to hybrid ones has affected their online life. This was necessary to understand if they changed through time and if yes in which way. Moreover, observing those profiles before the interview has been useful to ask more detailed questions to the interviewees and to understand if they already applied or not a strategy to align

their different interests. The study of the platforms and hybrid SMIs' profiles, combined with videos and articles should let us understand how they operate.

Operationalization of the variables

In order to translate the theoretical concepts into a measurable instrument, i.e. questions, that will allow the interviewees to talk about these concepts we implemented the operationalization of the variables by assigning a useful code and a brief description of each concept.

The first category is based on basic concepts which will be useful for implementing generic questions about the respondents' experience in being an influencer. The goal of these questions is to let the respondents feel comfortable in order to deepen the interview with further questions regarding their job on social media.

The categories are identified and coded as follows:

➢ Social media (SM) → Social media are web 2.0 applications characterized by user-generated content (Obar and Wildman, 2015).

   Sample questions "On which social media do you work? How do you manage to work across multiple platforms?"

➢ Social media influencer (SMI) → SMIs are individuals who appear authentic, have connections with a big audience and have gained huge credibility on the platform engaging the opportunity to emerge as mediators between companies and consumers (Van Driel and Dumitrica, 2020).

   Sample questions "Do you like your work as an influencer? How does your work affect your real life? "

The second category of operationalized variables is related to the kind of activities the interviewee carries out as a hybrid social media influencer.

➢ Hybrid social media influencer (H_SMI)→ Hybrid SMIs are influencers who have decided to use the power they have gained through their marketing activity to be able to express their opinion regarding social issues.

   Sample questions "What kind of activities do you carry out on your accounts? Can you give examples? How do you manage those activities? "

The sub-categories are identified and coded as follows:

- ➢ Influencer marketing (SMI_mrk) → Influencer marketing focuses on using influencers as means to do advertising, driving the brand's message to a larger market (Van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020).

  Sample questions "How do you evaluate potential collaboration? To what extent do you think remuneration influences the choice of your collaborations? Did you ever close a collaboration because it no longer met your values?"

- ➢ Slacktivism (SMI_sl) → Slacktivism is characterized by expressing opinions, fundraising and increasing awareness for a variety of causes by little effort online (Cohen, 2016).

  Sample questions "Do you identify yourself as an activist on social media? What are the main interests you stand up for?"

The last category of operationalized variables is related to analyzing the deeper aspects of social structure through institutional logics (Thornton et al., 2012), i.e. institutional theory. We choose to use this theory to answer the research question and of which, we deepened the knowledge in the literature review section. It will be operationalized based on the main aspect in which it is composed, and they are defined and coded as follows:

- ➢ Institutional logics (Inst_Log) → Institutional logics are an ideal type representation of norms, values, and identities that individuals draw on to comprehend and evaluate their everyday activities (Thornton et al., 2012).

  Sample questions "What are your driving values? What goals are you trying to achieve?"

- ➢ Institutional complexity (Inst_Compl) → Institutional complexity is characterized by a clash between logics.

  Sample questions "As a SMI are you using any strategy to not face a tension between your activities on social media? How are you balancing both activities?"

The interviews will be analyzed to understand in which way hybrid influencers manage or not to balance marketing and activism activities and if this has any drawback, i.e. institutional complexity.

Data analysis

The analysis of the interviews to create theoretical and practical contributions comprised different phases. First, the researcher transcribed all interviews. 10h of interviews led to about

45h of transcribing that resulted in almost 100 pages of text. Once transcribed, the second part included codifying the transcripts through the software program ATLAS.ti. Then we relied on an approach formulated by Hsieh and Shannon (2005), i.e. the Directed Content Analysis. The reason is that, according to Hsieh and Shannon (2015), this approach can be used when an already existing theory needs to be analyzed further and this is exactly what happens in this study. The codes were determined ante-interview, meaning that a *deductive coding approach* was used, and they were based on the theoretical framework argued in the corresponding section, i.e. tensions arising of combining different social media activities. After transcribing and reading the interviews, the coding process started. Fragments of texts were codified using descriptive codes. We grouped all codes into 4 categories and various sub-codes related to the activity hybrid SMIs carry on and the theoretical concepts they unconsciously applied. The next step was to link SMIs' activities with the theoretical concepts. During this process, the researcher applied the codes presented in the previous section. However, the use of a deductive coding approach, i.e. predetermined code schemes has its limitations. Indeed, it can bias the whole process because the researcher is already focused on finding evidence that supports the theory and reduces objectivity. Moreover, if the researcher will rely only on the theory the attention from the purpose of the study may be deflected, increasing biases. According to what argued so far, in this study the strategy given by Hsieh and Shannon (2015) will be adopted and the study will be submitted to an audit review process to increase the trustworthiness of the research and decrease the possibility of biases.

Results

In this section, the researcher will present the results collected from the interviews. First, findings regarding the different kinds of activities hybrid influencers carry out will be discussed. Subsequently, findings regarding the balance between the profit and non-profit activities hybrid influencers carry out will be discussed to understand if it creates institutional complexity or not, and if so how they deal with it. To deepen the discussion each finding will be presented with evidence from the interviews in the form of quotes.

Hybrid influencers' activities: between marketing and activism

The researcher managed to interview two different categories of social media influencers who can be identified as hybrid influencers. Specifically, these are green influencers, i.e. SMIs who use their account to raise awareness about topics linked to environmental and animal protection[9], and LGBTQ+ influencers, i.e. SMIs who use their account to spread awareness and raise acceptance about gender issues and sexual minorities[10]. During the interviews, it has been clear that they can be defined as hybrid because they carry on both marketing activities, in order to ensure the achievement of their *market logic*, thus increasing their profit, and non-profit activities, i.e. activist activities, which are related to their field of interest, to reinforce their *state logic* fighting for equality and community goods.

> *"I definitely want to make people aware of the possibility of being themselves from the point of view of sexuality, gender identity [...] I try to make people understand that there's nothing wrong with trying to enjoy and have a sexual attraction to one sex, to another sex, to both sexes, any person whose gender identity you are not interested in and at the same time that there is nothing wrong in living your sexuality freely [...] I would like to grow every day, to have bigger and bigger numbers, both for personal satisfaction and for what are my social goals. The more people I reach, the greater my desire to have a strong, united community and then, of course, I would work even more, if we want to talk selfishly, money is important" (SMI4)*

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[9] Retrieved from https://www.sos-uk.org/project/green-influencers
[10] Retrieved from https://influencermatchmaker.co.uk/blog/lgbt-influencers-are-taking-social-media-world-storm

"I spread awareness regarding the environment and the protection of animals... Being a green influencer is not easy to find collaborations with brands that share the same values, but till now I was lucky enough to collaborate with brands that are environmentally friendly and thus I gained enough money to continue this adventure online and live my life" (SMI11)

It is interesting to note that from the quotes above, the interviewees clearly do activism in the form of spreading awareness regarding sexuality and sustainability. Acting this way, the interviewees reinforce the *state logic* by fighting for community goods such as the environment in order to improve the quality of life of everyone. Therefore, the success of hybrid influencers is due to their commitment to trying something new, in a certain way revolutionary. They are using the power of communication to spread and raise awareness about contents that can positively enrich people's lives and see things differently. Drawing upon the *state logic*, they spread awareness about topics that are important to them such as sexuality, minorities and the environment. Moreover, the same interviewees draw upon the *market logic* in everyday activities by collaborating with brands, companies and other people, in exchange for money, to earn something from their online work. Even if they accept those collaborations to gain from their digital work, in order to make profits, they prefer to do only few ADVs which are more linked to their non-profit activity in order to reinforce the *state logic* through the *market* one. Therefore, they act as picky, preferring ADVs that may reinforce their fight for community goods, by opting for collaborations that can also increase their profits.

"I have often been afraid that my profile might become a showcase, so I have limited my collaborations. I said no to so many collaborations for this, because I don't want my profile to become a showcase or at least something aimed only at sponsorship." (SMI8)

"I always say no to many collaborations and many messages that arrive because I don't feel like making content just for the sake of getting something free or any form of compensation and I like the idea of providing a collaboration that if I was a follower I would like to see, in the sense that I also identify with those who must see these contents and expect a certain degree of transparency and substance. [...] It is clear that it is nice

to be rewarded for your work and it would be a lie to deny it, but in my case, I first see if
it is something that interests me, if it is a good fit with what I am and what I propose, then
you can talk about compensation eventually, But in my case, it's not relevant." (SMI6)

Since they seem to have created an account to spread awareness on important topics and not to do ADVs, they do ADVs only if they like the brand and the collaboration, then they usually accept it. This also happens with small brands or companies who cannot pay them or, if they can, they pay them little compared to what they are used to.

"Obviously, the remuneration is important, because anyway it's my job and I have to get
home with a salary at the end of the month, but I collaborated with brands that had no
budget because I liked them as well as I collaborated with brands that had a high budget
and anyway, I liked them." (SMI4)

By being paid less or not being paid at all, there is somehow a rejection of the *market logic* because their main goal is not increasing their profit. However, influencers choose the field they want to operate in and as a result, they tend to increase their reputation and be targeted as experts in the field. Indeed, they also draw upon the *profession logic.*

"Performing this kind of job is a chance to constantly learn and improve the knowledge
on different topics. The best part is being able to speak to others while having clear in
mind your ideas and through this process of constantly learning I feel more confident to
speak and to say my point of view regarding, for example, the freedom of living freely my
life being a LGBTQ+ member [...] Over the past year my popularity on Instagram has
increased a lot, my reputation has increased and people more often ask me practical
questions and I feel very satisfied and happy to be able to help them" (SMI1)

By drawing upon both the *profession* and the *market logic,* they can face *institutional complexity* because by being professional they cannot accept all the collaboration with brands but they have to choose. By being picky, they adopt a response strategy and subsequently prefer the *profession logic* over the *market* one. Indeed, they only reject the *market logic* in case it goes against the

profession logic. Consequently, they only work on assignments that bring a fit between these two logics: if there is an assignment that brings money and links well with their reputation then they will do it and will most likely reject the assignments which create tension between the logics. Moreover, hybrid influencers' online activities are anchored in the *profession logic.* Indeed, their activity is driven by the credibility and reputation they built by sticking to their core values. They put their face as the cover of a bigger purpose, thus they will not risk losing their credibility for some money.

> *"Transparency and sincerity... These are the values that generally reflect me the most. Sincerity, transparency, truth and respect are important to me and to those who follow me." (SMI8)*

By being transparent and true to their followers and drawing upon the *profession logic,* hybrid influencers built a strong reputation. Acting this way, they conquered the respect of people and built a strong community. It is interesting to know how they actually decided to engage in slacktivism. The majority of the interviewees did that because they felt the desire to spread awareness on topics that may lead to a general improvement in the life of human beings, reinforcing the *state logic.* Therefore, it is clear that they did not decide to perform this job for money, thus they are not trying to reinforce the *market logic.*

> *"I decided to do this online activity because I believe that the example of each of us can be fundamental to act like a stain of oil. So, without the pretence of reaching large numbers me and my colleagues can act in our own small circle that is around us and then slowly this circle can expand and lead to a real change." (SMI7)*

Hybrid influencers facing and dealing with institutional complexity

As stated above, when hybrid influencers accept to do ADVs in exchange for lower pay they downplay the *market logic*.

> *"I always say no to many collaborations and many messages that arrive [...] I first see if*

it is something that interests me, if it is a good fit with what I am and what I propose, then
you can talk about compensation eventually" (SMI6)

However, acting as picky could lead hybrid SMIs to adopt a response strategy by downplaying the *market logic* because influencers tend to refuse different kinds of collaborations. Moreover, it might also reinforce their *profession logic* because by sticking to their values and pointing out their main interests they could reinforce their status as experts.

As already stated, the main goal of hybrid influencers is to spread awareness about topics linked to, for example, fighting for minorities and common goods. Moreover, by downplaying the *market logic* they may cause a clash with the *state logic*. In fact, an interviewee stated that:

"Money is important because this is my job and I have to live with its earnings, but at the
same time I'm not here to be a showcase. My account has certain values, I have certain
values, my community too, thus if you ask me to promote a brand that collides with those
values my answer will always be no, even if this means having no income for a long
period..." (SMI1)

In this fragment, one of the interviewees points to the fact that her values remain a striking factor throughout her marketing activity. Acting this way, it is clear that the interviewee is reinforcing the *state logic*, that is somehow clashing with the *market logic* because by saying that values are more important than money, it is clear that the inner core of the *market logic,* i.e. increasing profits, clashes with the aim of the *state logic*. It is interesting to analyse how hybrid influencers deal with this complexity. In fact, the majority of the interviewees agreed on the fact that:

"This tension is definitely created by a conflict of interest between what you are
communicating on social media and what you would like to get from such a stressful job,
which can therefore create tension" (SMI4)

However, in order to deal with this intrinsic clash between who you are, what you want to communicate and what you also want to earn from your job, the interviewees try to find a way to deal with this complexity.

"When I don't feel like it, I try to say no. I always try to do what I want to do because, in the end, I don't have to do anything. [...] the purpose of my profile is not to promote products or anything so if I don't want to, I just don't." (SMI3)

Moreover, hybrid influencers see themselves to be strongly rooted in the *state logic* so that they are perfectly allowed to spread awareness on topics that touch for example equality, while others see them as lazy persons who like to make money easily without doing anything, thus anchored in the *market logic*. This is a typical example of how they face the tension between the *logics*, which leads to *institutional complexity*.

"Sometimes I receive negative messages saying "Wow, you don't do anything and you make so much"... Well, this kind of people, they're really the worst because they're not really going to do anything, but they're fishing for the online activist, the person who's doing something and trying to make a change and they insult her and they find the slightest thing wrong and they discredit her, but that's frustration. So I deal with people who discredit you because they have nothing to do, but this in my opinion always reflects how they feel inside because there is really so much frustration." (SMI12)

"Receiving hate while doing this kind of activity is pretty normal but sometimes the messages hurt… Messages like "You just want to make money" or "You don't really care about these topics, you just want more followers" are tough… Performing this activity is not easy and receiving those messages makes everything harder… I prefer to block them and don't speak with them… If you send me hate then I'll just report you" (SMI1)

In these fragments, the interviewees reflect on their relationship with their haters, i.e. people who are negative and discourage them. In both fragments, it is clear that the so-called haters see hybrid influencers as persons who do not do a specific job and however earn a lot from their activity. Therefore, haters see hybrid influencers as strongly anchored in the *market logic*, whilst hybrid influencers state the opposite. Indeed, hybrid influencers refer to their figure and work as "the person who's doing something", this is because to position themselves as hybrid they draw

upon the *state logic* and thus, fight for common goals like equality. From the last fragment mentioned above, it is clear that the easier way for influencers to deal with those haters is blocking them because they do not think that speaking with them will lead to any different scenario. Acting this way, hybrid influencers ignore the *market logic.* Indeed, by reporting the haters hybrid influencers still experience a clash between the *market* and the *state logic* but they do not let this *institutional complexity* get in their way. In fact, even if the *institutional complexity* is still there they try to distance themselves from that in order to not be too much affected by it. Moreover, this way of dealing with the tension can be considered as a response strategy since hybrid SMIs select one of the two competing logics, in this case, the *state logic*.

Therefore, on the one hand, some people see influencers as individuals who are only interested in raising the number of followers and collaborations in order to earn more from the activity online. On the other hand, hybrid influencers use their account to deepen their knowledge and continuously be informed in order to continue to be considered as experts.

> *"This job influences my life more than anything else at the personal level in the sense of organization of time, energy but it certainly allows me to learn what is new. This is something that I'm still happy about despite I've been doing it for a few years now, because in addition to the talk of time and energy there is also something that goes back to me, because I always have the way to learn something new, to know new brands, new profiles, concepts, ideas, new things... So this is definitely a positive way of how this work affects my life." (SMI6)*

> *"Thanks to this online activity I always have the possibility to constantly improve… I can improve my knowledge, I can discover new things, I can learn a lot… I'm young and thus learning constantly through something I do and about topics that I care about gives me the opportunity to grow and talk more consciously to my community." (SMI13)*

Hybrid influencers care a lot about their reputation because it is due to the hard work that they reached the point to be recognized as influencers. By collecting information from other people on social media and increasing their knowledge every day, they also increase their reputation on the platform they are using. Indeed, they draw upon *profession logic*.

"This work on the one hand takes me a lot of time for work but on the other, I see all the people who follow me, that actually operate a change in their lives and how my words can be of help to them... Working through Instagram live and stories have led me to increase my reputation both online and offline... Lately, I have started to give lessons regarding sustainability both online and offline and this leads me to see the change and it's nice... I'm not a doctoral student, but being able to raise awareness through what I learn both on my own and through social media is rewarding..." (SMI5)

In this fragment, the respondent reflects on her experience as an expert, highlighting that it is due to her online activity that she can act as one. Through the hard work on the social media platform, drawing upon the *profession logic,* she had the opportunity to increase her credibility and the right to be named as an expert. Although the respondent does introduce reputation and credibility as success factors, haters seem to see influencers to be more focused on the number of followers and collaborations they achieve. Haters draw upon the *market logic* and therefore, position influencers as individuals who are only interested in increasing their community in order to increase their salary. Therefore, they experience a clash between those logics. However, in this particular case, influencers tend to ignore the hate received and focus their attention on their community and the different activities they are able to perform thanks to their increasing reputation.

"... I'm not interested in hearing the opinion of those who can only judge from behind a screen, maybe even with fake accounts. I'm not interested in becoming famous or a walking commercial. I'm talking about responsibility, responsible consumption, and if I do a thousand ads, it's all meaningless, don't you think? I prefer to focus on more challenging activities and encourage others to act rather than waste time..." (SMI10)

Despite the interviewees are influencers that carry out activities linked to social rights it is important to understand that on one hand, they downplay the *state logic* because they do not like to be called 'activist' because they think that:

"I think the term activist is a bit vague. When I think of activism, I think of people who go out and fight for something, for animals, etc. I may be talking about it on social media,

but there are people outside who might be saving animals from slaughterhouses, doing things. Maybe I can call myself an activist but not in the true sense of the word... I would feel bad about those people who are out fighting." (SMI3)

"More than social activism I do private activism... I work more on the person and the impact of people, because it's what I needed when I was younger, and I was 13-14 years old, and I didn't understand my sexuality and I didn't see anything around that could help me develop personally. So, what I'm trying to do is help each person in the individual personally develop their own identity to try to understand what it is and what it isn't, to have the courage to be themselves... And then it will be those same people who slowly will realize it... Working on a single individual will improve society in general. So, let's just say I don't call myself an activist." (SMI4)

On the other hand, since part of their community is referring to them as activists they started to identify themselves as activists, but not 'real' ones, due to the way they carry out their activity...

"I never thought I'd call myself that but then someone did it. Surely, I'm a person who tries to send little positive messages with her work, so I'm not trying to create an audience that just consumes but, a bold, contemptuous audience that questions some things. However, I do not consider myself a true activist because it is more related to those who fight for minorities or in any case of discriminated groups." (SMI5)

"I would call it more disclosure, that is, more giving information, awareness-raising, rather than activism, because for me activism is really something much more concrete. Surely there is also a difference between online and offline activism, but certainly in the true sense of the word yes, I would be an activist but at a lower level." (SMI3)

This may be associated with the fact that activists actually protest in person and usually do that as a community. Indeed, they are strongly anchored in *community logic,* in order to help other people and fight for their ideology. Whereas, slacktivists usually act as one single individual because social media influencing is a solitary act. Therefore, they may not feel comfortable in

being identified into a different logic. They do not want to reinforce the *community logic* of activists because they are acting on their own and thus they do not want to delegitimize the work of those who really draw on the *community logic* and do activist acts. Acting this way, hybrid influencers prevent the facing of institutional complexity because they do not claim to be called activists and thus they do something but on their own so they do not think to make a big difference and dare to call it activism. Moreover, in terms of logics, hybrid influencers reinforce the *state logic*, i.e. fighting for common goods like equality, but they try to pursue these common goods in a different way than people who actually stand up for their values on the street, i.e. activists. Indeed, hybrid influencers do not reject the *state logic* but by comparing and undermining the way they carry on their activity as slacktivists, i.e. through social media and not fighting on the streets, they weaken it to some extent.

Discussion

In contrast to previous literature on SMIs, this study proposed a new theoretical approach that considers SMIs as hybrid influencers interested in both marketing and activism activities which need to be balanced and may clash, leading to institutional complexity. Through an exploratory case study with different categories of hybrid SMIs, we showed how they, as hybrid influencers who actively draw upon different institutional logics, can face a tension between the logics and deepen how they deal with this tension. Indeed, the goal of the current study was to determine if carrying on both kinds of activities could create institutional complexity and understand how hybrid influencers dealt with it. In this section, the findings will be interpreted with the intention of answering the research question.

Theoretical and practical implications

Even if our data tend to confirm that hybrid influencers face different clashes between the logics they draw upon, this study contributes to academia by providing new insights based on other logics from which influencers draw upon that are new and unrelated to previous studies.

Before conducting the case study we expected hybrid influencers to draw upon two main logics: the *market* and the *state logic*. In fact, also previous studies such as the one of Van Driel and Dumitrica (2020) stated that SMIs are strongly oriented towards profit, thus they draw upon the *market logic*. As already stated, SMIs need some resources to survive including the income and followers that may result from their marketing activity. Those resources are pivotal for them in order to be legitimated. However, hybrid influencers do have different interests since they draw upon two logics such as the *market* and the *state logic* which have different aims. Therefore, we also expected these logics to clash due to the difficulties that hybrid influencers may face in balancing them. Consistent with what we expected, hybrid influencers do draw upon these logics and face a clash between them. However, during the research, we found that hybrid influencers face difficulties in balancing their profit and non-profit activities due to different types of institutional complexity. Consequently, not only the *market* and the *state logic* clash but also other logics may clash.

For example, the *profession* and the *market logic* clash when hybrid influencers have to choose to not accept all collaborations in order to not affect their reputation. In this case, they adopt a strategy to prevent the face of institutional complexity, by preferring the *profession logic*

over the *market* one. The choice to not work on the assignments that create tension between the two logics highlights an important difference between the job of hybrid influencers and regular jobs. Indeed, in regular jobs, it is much harder to have the opportunity to choose because regular workers have a manager that does it for them, while hybrid influencers can be recognized as independent contractors who do it themselves.

However, hybrid influencers can reinforce the *market logic* through the *profession* one because if they strengthen their reputation they will increase the possibility to work with more brands and thus increase their profits. Therefore, they will gain social acceptance, i.e. legitimacy. This means that the *profession* and *market logic* can be tightly linked so that there is no institutional complexity. The same goes for the *state logic* because the better the reputation hybrid influencers have as activists, the more they can fight for a good cause. Although the *profession logic* has never been considered in studies concerning influencers, from our study it is clear that it does not necessarily create institutional complexity. Indeed, *profession logic* appears to be very important in the context of how hybrid influencers balance their activities because it helps them to reinforce both the *market* and the *state logic*. In this regard, there is something new in the theoretical implications because, by using the *profession logic* hybrid SMIs overcome the complexity between the *state* and the *market logic* and therefore the *profession logic* itself can be recognized as a response strategy. For example, green influencers are pickier than LGBTQ+ influencers because they have to stand to the limit of sustainability and therefore are constrained in the number of brands they could collaborate with. This is related to their reputation and thus to the *profession logic* that, in this case, downplays the *market logic*. On the other hand, from the perspective of LGBTQ+ influencers, it is easier to collaborate with brands thus, the *market logic* is reinforced by the *profession* one. Moreover, it is interesting to point out that hybrid influencers tend to reinforce one logic through another one as in the case of the choice to do fewer advertisements that are more linked to their non-profit activity in order to reinforce the *state logic* through the *market* one. However, the opposite may also happen: they tend to weaken a logic such as the *state logic* when they undermine the way they carry on their activity related to activism. They also tend to reject other logics as in the case of opting for collaborations that are not paid or that are paid less than their usual tariff, rejecting the *market logic*.

The implications of this case study are not only on a theoretical level but also on a practical one. As mentioned above, the job of hybrid influencers is flexible because they are

independent contractors, thus the experience of the interviewees could be helpful and easier to let others understand how this job works. In the fragments of the interviews, it is possible to understand how to balance both activities and how to deal with possible complexity.

Moreover, the research shows that, since hybrid influencers are recognized as experts in their field and care a lot about their reputation, they draw upon the *profession logic*. Indeed, in order to gain social acceptance, the reputation is one of the key resources an hybrid influencer needs to increase the audience and thus the number of potential collaborations with brands. However, the *profession logic* may clash with the *market* one due to the fact that other people, i.e. haters, do not recognize hybrid influencers as experts but drawing upon the *market logic* see them as individuals interested in increasing their profits. In this case, for example, hybrid SMIs tend to block haters through a technological feature that is linked to the autonomy that characterizes hybrid SMIs' work and the way technology allows them to address the institutional complexity. This feature can be identified as a technological feature that the platform is offering to influencers in order to not address the institutional complexity by means of institutional complexity, i.e. choose one logic over the other, and it can be labelled as a response strategy that reflects the *profession* logic. Indeed, this technological feature is offered to help them shulter the complexity by means of technology, meaning that both logics just stay, they tend to clash but do not experience the complexity. Therefore, the study provides the basis for future research on the possible role that technology plays in addressing institutional complexity.

A final consideration concerns the theoretical perspective chosen for the study that highlighted interesting results. Although other researchers have dealt with similar topics concerning influencers, there are no studies that analyze hybrid influencers under the institutional theory perspective. In the light of this study, it can be affirmed that this theoretical lens has been demonstrated to be very useful in the analysis of hybrid influencers because it helped to highlight different aspects which are key for their online activity. An example is the importance of reputation and how it is anchored in *profession logic* because it influences substantially many aspects of the way hybrid influencers carry on their activity on social media platforms. Therefore, deepening the use of this theoretical lens on influencers could lead to other considerations for new research.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has its limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, since it is based on a qualitative case study, the number of respondents should be between 10 and 15 (Crouch and McKenzie, 2006). In this case, 13 people took part in the interview process and since the group is homogenous, saturation has been reached (Guest et al., 2006). However, a logical next step should be enlarging the variety of the group and the number of respondents in order to increase the validity of the study. Another limitation is represented by COVID-19 which did not allow us to conduct in-person interviews, therefore the study could be biased by the fact that physical interaction was missing therefore, interviewees did not always feel at ease. A third limitation is represented by the variety of hybrid influencers that were interviewed. In this study only two categories, namely green and LGBTQ+ influencers, were involved, therefore the results may be constrained to only these categories. Future studies could analyze the same phenomenon by increasing the number of the sample and the variety of influencers that will be involved in order to better interpret the results.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have examined the relationship between hybrid influencers and institutional complexity and how they deal with the complexity by adopting different kinds of strategies. On the whole, it can be affirmed that influencers who carry on both marketing and activism activities do face institutional complexity and by drawing upon different institutional logics they deal with it in different ways. Overall, the effect of institutional complexity is not completely faced by hybrid influencers because by adopting strategies such as blocking haters, they prevent or circumvent the possibility to face the complexity. However, the study has its limitations thus, in order to increase the reliability of the results, we call for future studies to embrace the same topic and study it under different samples and through different theoretical lenses. To conclude, through this exploratory case study, the researcher tried to provide enough light on hybrid influencers, an unexplored category of influencers, which is full of interesting phenomena that should be analysed.

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APPENDIX 1 - OPERATIONALIZATION OF THE VARIABLES

Category	Subcategory	Code	Definition	Interview Questions
Social Media		SM	Social media are web 2.0 applications characterized by user-generated content (Obar & Wildman, 2015).	1. On which social media do you work? 2. How did you choose it? Did you use any criteria? 3. How do you manage to work across multiple platforms? 4. Which role did your family and friends play in deciding to work online?
Social Media Influencers		SMI	Social media influencers are individuals who appear authentic, have connections with a big audience and have gained huge credibility on the platform engaging the opportunity to emerge as mediators between companies and consumers (Van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020).	1. Do you like your work as an influencer? 2. How does your work affect your real life? 3. How many hours do you work per week? 4. Are you satisfied with your job? 5. What kind of relationship do you have with your audience? 6. What made you choose to pursue an influencer career?
Hybrid Social Media Influencer	Hybrid Social Media Influencer	H_SMI	Hybrid SMIs are influencers who have decided to use the power they have gained through their marketing activity to be able to express their opinion regarding social issues.	1. What kind of activities do you carry out on your accounts? Can you give examples? 2. How do you manage those activities?
	Influencer marketing	SMI_mrk	Influencer marketing focuses on using	1. How do you evaluate potential collaboration?

			influencers as means to do advertising, driving the brand's message to a larger market (Van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020).	2. To what extent do you think remuneration influences the choice of your collaborations? 3. In your view, is the income generated through your work sufficient to meet your financial needs? 4. Do you regret any collaboration? If yes, why? 5. Did you ever close a collaboration because it no longer met your values?
	Slacktivism	SMI_sl	Slacktivism is characterized by expressing opinions, fundraising and increasing awareness for a variety of causes with little effort online (Cohen,2016).	1. Do you identify yourself as an activist on social media? 2. What made you choose to act as one? 3. Did you feel the need to try something new or the need to use your voice to speak up about important issues? 4. Did someone else influence you in this decision? 5. What are the main interests you stand up for? 6. Are you afraid of any drawback from performing this kind of activity online? 7. Did you decide to stand up for professional development or because you really care about it?
Institutional theory	Institutional Logics	Inst_Log	Institutional logics are an ideal type representation of norms, values, and identities that individuals draw on to comprehend and evaluate their	1. What are your driving values? 2. As a SMI what values do you find important?

			everyday activities (Thornton et al., 2012).	3. What do you think are acceptable/legitimate goals for an influencer? 4. What goals are you trying to achieve?
	Institutional Complexity	Inst_Compl	Institutional complexity is characterized by a clash between logics.	1. As a SMI are you using any strategy to not face a tension between your activities on social media? 2. How are you balancing both activities? 3. Are you experiencing any drawbacks from balancing them? 4. What do you think is driving the tension? 5. How do you deal with this tension? 6. Have you ever tried to overcome the tension? If yes, in which way?