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Rhetoric Of Play as Power in The Online Hyperspectacle: The Emergence of Deontic Authorities

Abstract: This paper explores the intriguing convergence of the rhetoric of play as power in the online hyperspectacle, with a particular emphasis on the rise of social media influencers as deontic authorities. Our aim is to provide a refined definition of social media influencers by a thorough literature review using a multidisciplinary approach. As old offline power structures lose ground in the modern digital context, influencer guidance permeates the online public discourse. In this paper we look at how power dynamics in the digital environment led to the birth of the social media influencers phenomena and how these entities have since then impacted the digital setting. A more complex definition is crucial in order to clarify the multiple function influencers play in the online hyperspectacle in light of the rapidly changing digital ecosystem. We suggest that an influencer is defined as a digital user who possesses emerging deontic authority, drawing on Bocheński (1974) and Sălăvăstru (2010) works in support of this claim. According to the authors, this deontic authority refers to a person's normative authority within a specific social context. The objective analysis in this paper not only improves our understanding of social media influencers but also sheds light on the power dynamics at play in the hyperspectacle of the digital age.

Keywords: Social media influencers, Para-social relationship, Online play, Deontic authority.

Introduction

In a society where trust in power systems is waning, influencer advice reigns supreme. This phenomenon is encountered more and more often in the era governed by information technologies: “celebrities exert a significant influence on our lives, on how we see ourselves and who we aspire to be” (Baker and Rojek 2020, 11). In the book *Lifestyle Gurus Constructing Authority and Influence Online*, Stephanie Baker and Chris Rojek (2020, 11-12) point out that “celebrities shape consumer concerns and feed on their insecurities by endorsing the products and services of the weight loss and anti-aging industries”. Influencers are often accused of promoting products that they themselves do not use, are expensive, or may even be harmful. The focus of this paper is the analysis on how the power game unfolds in the digital

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environment, considering the transformation of celebrity culture and the emergence of the social media phenomenon of influencers that subsequently transformed the digital hyperspectacle. The title of the article is suggestive in this regard: discussions of power in the digital environment can be related to the activities of social media influencers, which are increasingly present in the century of digital influence. The rules invented and followed by these authorities should be better understood in order to make sense of the online power games that have consequences in the offline society.

The analysis of the activity of influencers from a playful perspective is motivated by the intent to advance the theory according to which the games that led to the evolution of society are also transposed in the digital world. Even if they appear in a different form, power games in the online environment are characterized by the same principles as games based on seduction and persuasion in the offline environment. Moreover, we see that online user' behaviour in new media is closely tied to the idea of hyperspectacle, which comes from Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality from 1994. The author of *Simulacra and Simulations* explores what happens to a person who lives in a world where reality is finally denied access and only simulacra and simulations remain. The concept of "hyperreality" describes a situation in which the simulacra, or duplicates of reality, outweigh the real thing. When the line separating a depiction of reality and its picture blurs, hyperreality results. As a consequence of this theory, the term "hyperspectacle" alludes to the simulated form of entertainment on social media. Incidentally to digital hyperspectacle, users of social media may become lost in the life that has been created in the online environment, similar to how people find it difficult to tell the difference between reality and a duplicate of the original in the case of hyperreality. People's creation of selected self-presentations of themselves as well as how they interact with power dynamics in the online setting are both examples of hyperspectacles and simulacra. Through social media, communications can be swiftly analysed and disseminated to other users, increasing the chance that the truth being transmitted is misunderstood. In this way, the hyperspectacle that is currently present within social media can be viewed via the prism of a simulation of real-world reality.

Power dynamics play out in the centre of this digital hyperspectacle with a complexity that reflects the complicated patterns of the spectacle itself. The idea of power has long been a key concern in the history of philosophy. It can take on many different manifestations, from the subtle influence of ideology to the coercive force of the authorities. However, power dynamics assume new dimensions in the digital era, fusing with the rhetoric of play to create the phenomenon known as social media influencers. According to Sutton-Smith (2001), power is seen as an essential playful concept in games

where participants are guided by winning. The assertion of power in competitive forms is the central idea in Sutton-Smith's work. Gaining power can be motivated both intrinsically and extrinsically, with the author presenting cases where players prepare to assert their power in front of others. In this article, the examples presented in Sutton-Smith's paper will not be elaborated, but the focus will move on the concept of competition within the social media environment and the struggle for power in the digital age. The playful element identified in the structure of the online environment facilitates the development of power games that characterize the influence activity of different types of celebrities. The particularities of stars in the digital environment will be analysed extensively, because the power of influence they have cannot be ignored. The phenomenon of influencers is a controversial topic of which effects are not fully known. The title of the article refers to the discussions related to the real, but also symbolic, power of influential players in New Media. Thus, in the following sections I will present the type of power encapsulated by the activities of the influencers and how the digital environment has made available to its users' novel ways of gaining and displaying deontic authority.

Para-social relationships in the attention economy

Throughout history, information has meant power (Castells 2007, 257). Therefore, the way in which information is communicated and the tools used in this regard have, in turn, played an important role in holding power. But what exactly is this fundamental power struggle for? What power are we talking about? Regardless of whether the political, social, economic or even the playful domain is taken into account, the fundamental battle waged in society is over the minds of others. The way people's thoughts influence actions that dictate the fate of the rules and values that underlie society becomes that resource used by politicians, businessmen, or any other combatants entering the battle for power. Fear and coercion were used to forcefully impose the will of rulers, but repression proved futile in the long run. After all, torture is less effective than mind shaping. According to Fairchild (2007, 359), we live in a world saturated with media and information, which has given rise to a marketing perspective prevalent today, which the author defined as the attention economy.

Human attention is the most important resource of the 21st century, according to *Focus* author, Daniel Goleman (2013, 20). This resource has become the prize much coveted by social media producers, marketers and politicians. By making technology available to capture the attention of users, the distributors of computational technologies have transformed the way in which information is transmitted, consequently affecting the way in which power relations are constituted. But "people are not built to be connected

all the time” (Newport 2019, 111), and attention directed to digital platforms has become an expensive resource that is increasingly difficult to earn. The power relations that stay at the foundation of the evolution of society, but also the processes that challenge power, are shaped and decided more and more in the field of communication. “What does not exist in the media does not exist in the public mind, even though it may have a fragmented presence in the individual mind,” argues Castells (2007, 241). Even if the media does not hold the power, it is largely the space in which power is decided. In contemporary society, the conduct of the political field depends on the politics presented in the media. However, the concept of power transcends the boundaries of the political domain, and in this paper, the intent is to present how the meaning of the term has changed with the transformation of old media into new media. The power mentioned in this report refers to the weapons of influence possessed by the players in the digital environment (social media influencers) and their specific traits. The characteristics that I will discuss next are responsible for the degree of success in online celebrity influencer activity and underlie the attention economy that Goleman (2013) also discusses.

The discussion of online play as power cannot begin without looking at how early forms of New Media changed the way people relate to celebrities and opinion leaders. Celebrity studies (Horton and Wohl 1956, Turner 2014, Levin 2020) look at the influence that opinion leaders have had on the evolution of society, from rulers, heroes and prophets who left their mark on history and whose personal lives were of great interest, so that numerous chronicles and writings have been compiled in the name of their fame. Where fame is found, economic potential is found, and opinion leaders have best understood the power they can use to gain not just status, but money as well. Social media influencers have been able to understand the economy of attention and use the large degree of *followers* to their advantage.

In *Influencer Marketing for Brands: What YouTube and Instagram Can Teach You about the Future of Digital Advertising*, Aron Levin (2020, 4-5) illustrates the business of influencer marketing by describing the work of a visionary who used the fame of the Queen of England to market their tea sets to the British public eager to live like royalty. Since then, the game for power has evolved on an unimaginable scale, with contemporary society witnessing the increasingly frequent encounter of the *Paris Hilton effect*, as Joseph Henrich (2016, 170) called it, according to which few fame can generate a lot of notoriety thanks to the amplifying power of social media. The *Paris Hilton effect* explains the feedback loop that occurs with the fame of celebrities entering the media spotlight. Paris Hilton initially became famous thanks to the legacy brand – the Hilton hotel chain – after which a video tape with indecent sequences drew the media attention. Although she already had a grain of fame thanks to her last name, Paris continued to capitalize on her

prestige, reaching a net worth of \$300 million, selling perfumes, handbags, pet clothing in stores around the world and they are still working to expand their empire (Davison, 2020). Although the celebrity was considered because of the wealth at her disposal in the beginning, Paris Hilton has become a point of reference in discussions about the power of influence. Henrich (2016, 171) explains the reason why the *Paris Hilton effect* is encountered more and more nowadays: human attention is naturally directed towards interesting subjects from the point of view of their evolution. People often do not realize that they end up imitating and showing interest and respect for “cultural leaders”. And because prestige cues inevitably draw a community’s attention to a particular topic of interest, contemporary media pay even more attention to that topic. Thus, the tracking effect appears, as Will Storr mentions in the book *Selfie: How We Became So Self-Obsessed and What It’s Doing to Us*: “the status of an essentially insignificant person takes on insane proportions” (2018, 109). Paris Hilton and her peers have broken new ground in the influencer industry, sparking a movement among celebrities around the world: If Paris Hilton and other “ordinary” people can become so famous, then anyone can. However, how exactly do people achieve celebrity status?

Power practices in the online environment

Contemporary influencers use a mixture of selective scientific knowledge, folk words, or personal experience to provide alternative advice and guidance on medical, psychological, and social issues that affect their followers. In addition to the expertise they show, influencers make sure that they also show a certain degree of authenticity by presenting a friendly communication style, genuine feelings and embarrassing stories (Caulfield 2015, 8). It is the para-social relationship (Horton and Wohl 1956) that results from the “normality” of influencers that helps them to create a virtual identity based on authenticity, even if their strategy is often counterfeited. The concept of para-social relationship was coined at the dawn of the television era, and it refers to the affective and imaginary relationships that audiences form with the figures conveyed to them through film and television (Horton and Wohl 1956). The characters on the screen have the role of significant affective resources for changing the behaviour of the viewer. Furthermore, influencers’ power to connect with the cognitive, affective and behavioural side of their followers is amplified by the digital platform used. Through the high frequency of interactions available in the digital environment, influencers strengthen their para-social relationship with fans around the world.

Nowadays, influencers are hired by managers to create emotional relationships with consumers through digital marketing (Khandual and

Pradhan 2019). Individuals live in a consumer culture where socio-cultural factors play an important role in their choices regarding everyday purchases (Askegaard 2015). Since the information technology revolution from marketing 1.0 to 5.0, consumers have been able to collaborate and form secondary communities (Pongsakornrunsilp and Schroeder, 2011) by sharing and interacting through social media and other online platforms. Van Dijk (2013, 203) claims that in order to gain prominence in the attention economy, people must transform themselves into personal brands. Similar to the process of building commercial brands, people need to present a unique selling proposition that differentiates them from other fame-seeking users. Some authors in the field argue that without the creation of a personal brand that makes them stand out, content creators end up “dying” in terms of digital validation (Khamis, Ang and Welling 2017, 194). That’s why influencers are advised to invest the same energy they devote to promoting other brands in building their personal brand.

Managing a personal brand is not very different from managing a commercial brand: in both situations one needs to define a target audience, a unique selling proposition and a story that will persuade the target audience. According to Khamis and colleagues (2017, 198), the largest problem for influencers is to create and keep a particular type of audience that will be interested in the messages they deliver over the long run. Creating a digital identity that engages a particular audience through a narrative is the foundation of personal branding on social media. For this reason, personal brand management is “essentially an attention-grabbing device to gain competitive advantage in a crowded marketplace” (Shepherd 2005, 597). According to Khamis et al. (2017, 199), the main components required to achieve and sustain long-term public recognition include: presenting the “right” persona (considering the skills to tell a story and induce the idea of authenticity), offering content that is distinct from what has been said on the same topic, becoming a credible authentic voice in a specific field and relevant to the interests of the target audience, gathering a community of followers and generating a significant engagement from the fans.

Starting with the description of the key factors above, we can transpose the discussion on a rhetorical level. Influencers use the tools of rhetoric to seduce and influence their community of subscribers. Thus, we are dealing with the sources of Aristotelian persuasion applied in the online environment. Sălăvăstru (2010, 68-69) presents “the relationship of discursive influence of the oratorical type” which is organized on the *ethos*-*pathos*-*logos* triptych. Adapting these concepts to the daily activity of influencers, one can observe the same oratorical dimensions present in the digital environment. The *ethos* that refers to the personality of the speaker is encountered in the work of influencers through the characteristics related to

authority and authenticity. *Pathos* considers the emotional involvement of the speaker of a speech, but also the reaction of the audience and is encountered online in the way they build their community of fans and interact with them to turn their base of followers into devoted adepts. The dimension that considers the *logos*, the rational content of the information presented in a speech, is found in the effective speeches presented by influencers, but also in the way they play with the organization of the information distributed, so as to show sympathy and to build the para-social relationship essential for the act of influence.

Thus, we can observe how influencers are able to harness their power through social media. Depending on the number of followers that influencers can “own” on a certain platform, they are divided as follows: nano-influencers, micro-influencers, macro-influencers, mega-influencers and celebrity influencers (Campbell and Farrell 2020, 471-472). Regardless of their popularity, it is important to note that influencers have gained influence in various areas of life due to users seeking their opinions, advice and guidance as a result of the popular content they share online. Their content deals with the mundane, ordinary aspects of everyday life, and their knowledge and advice are backed by lived experience rather than professional training. While the development of the phenomenon of celebrity led to the transformation of the individual into a commodity to be marketed by various industries to the general public, the media also gave that star access to a new kind of power. In direct proportion to the evolution of stars on digital platforms, they could build a relationship with their audience that was independent of the vehicles in which they appeared. With this change, the individual star has had a personal and professional interest in promoting himself through social media. Thus begins the game of power in the online environment.

Even if the role of opinion leaders in the digital age is different from the role of writers in the pre-Internet era, the principles of influence remain the same. In the volume dedicated to social media influencers, Balaban (2021, 18) mentions that the term influencer can be theoretically connected to the studies of Cialdini and Goldstein (2004) regarding social influence. The authors claim that influencers are “those remarkable and persuasive people, true professionals of the power of persuasion”. From this point of view, traditional influencers could be seen as opinion leaders from the media or politics. However, the power of amplifying social influence that the virtual space makes available differentiates social media influencers from stars or traditional authorities. From the theory of social influence described by Cialdini, we can extract the principles that contribute to the success of influencers in persuading the community of followers. According to Cialdini, the six principles pursued with or without intention are: consistency, reciprocity, authority, likability, rarity and social proof (Cialdini,

2014). Balaban (2021, 18-20) transposes these principles into the online environment and notes that they are often put to work in the work of influencers. Therefore, the influencing activity initiated in the digital environment by online celebrities is guided by principles already known by researchers in the field. But how can one ordinary social media user become an influencer? The next section is dedicated to answering this question, by taking a closer look at two of the characteristics of users who reach influencer status: expertise and authenticity.

Characteristics of emerging influencers: expertise and authenticity

As mentioned above, influencers are seen as authorities in their field. This particularity can be discussed by referring to the charisma of the orators. Sălăvăstru (2010, 70) claims that “a perfect orator can influence thanks to the charisma he has by virtue of great authority”. In the book entitled *An analysis of authority*, Bocheński (1974) illustrates the difference between two types of authorities: “We propose to call the first one *the authority of science*, in Greek, *epistemic authority*. The other one, which has directives in its field, we will call it *the authority of the superior*, in Greek, *deontic authority*”. Based on this idea, in *Mic Tratat de Oratorie*, Sălăvăstru (2010, 70) suggests that the distinction of types of authority is very relevant to the analysis of individual power. Moreover, the distinction is relevant here in the case of digital influencers, since their success in influencing their audience of loyal followers is guaranteed by the position from which they are seen.

Although influencers establish themselves as people who know (have the necessary knowledge) and are not appointed by anyone in a position of influence, they cannot be recognized as epistemic authorities, not having in most cases the necessary qualifications to be called scholars, professionals or experts in the field in which they give their opinion in the digital environment. Thus, they have an emerging deontic authority to persuade the community of followers, being endowed with what is assumed to be “native experience” (Baker and Rojek 2020, 4). Their authority stands out through the impressive number of users who have been persuaded by their stories and decided to pay attention to them by subscribing to that digital channel. Celebrities are the most appropriate example to illustrate the influencing power of deontic authority. Through the advertising technique of endorsement, influencers use their power to create awareness or fulfil other marketing objectives for the brand they collaborate with. “Celebrities attract attention and help the ad make its way between the other spots. [...] Advertising specialists hope that admiration for one celebrity or another will be transferred to the brand. [...] People are fascinated by the personal lives

of celebrities. [...] They are perceived as experts in their field”, suggest Drewniana and Jewler (2008, 36-37).

Due to the convergence of several aspects in the digital sphere, an influencer can be identified by emergent deontic authority. Their perceived role, perceived superiority within a particular online social setting, and the sizable following they retain all contribute to their authority status. The influencer’s ability to shape the social and normative framework inside their digital community, thereby taking on a role similar to a trustworthy advisor or arbiter of societal norms, gives rise to the emergent deontic authority. In order to effectively navigate the hyperspectacle and influence the attitudes, behaviours, and beliefs of their followers, the influencer is required to participate in a complex interplay of persuasive speech, performative play, and power dynamics. The influencer’s standing as a prevailing deontic authority within the online social sphere is cemented by the size of the influencer’s following, which increases the reach and impact of this deontic authority. In this way, its authoritative status is linked to the number of followers that trust its online narratives.

However, the trust that digital citizens have in influential online identities today is not only related to the position held. Baker and Rojek (2020, 11-12) mention “lifestyle gurus” influencers by which they refer to native, unlicensed awareness-raising agents, positioned in social media to offer emotional support and/or various practices for self-discovery and well-being. By the term “unlicensed native” the authors aim to highlight the fact that such influencers are ordinary members of society, possessing limited qualifications or no certified experience at all, and therefore have no capacity to claim expertise in the areas they fearlessly discuss in the digital sphere. Lifestyle influencers draw on a mix of selectively invoked scientific knowledge, folktales, or personal experience to provide alternative advice and guidance on medical, psychological, and social issues affecting their followers. It is this characteristic resulting from the *normality* of influencers that helps them create a virtual identity based on emerging denoting authority and authenticity, even if authenticity is often counterfeited.

Social media users decide to follow the profiles of influencers because they have been attracted to them from a certain point of view. Whether it’s the entertainment they provide or their expertise in a certain field, influencers show authenticity. It has to do with the degree of originality, truth and reality. However, the authenticity found among influencers takes on symbolic definitions. Audrezet et al. (2018) discuss two types of authenticity of influencers, depending on their motivation in relation to the promoted messages. Thus, if the motivation is extrinsic, supported by financial considerations and forms of promotion of certain products or services for purely commercial purposes, then the authenticity of influencers is transparent. But if influencers are driven by intrinsic

motivations, then they denote a type of passionate authenticity. In addition to the degree of authenticity they demonstrate when exercising their expertise, influencers use various ways to create a *real* experience for their followers.

Depending on the platforms predominantly used, influencers take advantage of the technological possibilities available and show a high degree of creativity in the production of frequent messages. Chiriță (2021, 124) analyses the performance of influencers on various types of digital platforms, emphasizing how advertisers can use influencer-based marketing to deliver advertising messages to various audiences. Starting from the premise that social media platforms “represent Internet-based interpersonal communication channels that facilitate interaction between individuals, using in particular content generated by creators” (Carr and Hayes 2015, 50), Chiriță presents the specifics of the platforms used especially by influencers: Instagram, YouTube and TikTok. The author claims that these platforms “give any user the chance to become someone famous, to become a digital celebrity, a social media influencer”. Considering that each digital platform is characterized by specific functionalities on the basis of which various types of content can be produced, it is not surprising that most influencers are active on more than one platform. Chiriță (2021, 125) notes that the use of various platforms implies “content diversification for each individual platform”. In this way, online celebrity users have to show creativity and innovation when designing the various materials.

But in the age of perfection-oriented influencers who have so far dominated the digital platform economy, authenticity has become “less static and more a performative ecology and para-social strategy with its own kind of bona fides and elements of self-presentation”, argues digital anthropologist Crystal Abidin (2017). The researcher studied the development of performative authenticity and called the phenomenon *calibrated amateurism*. According to Abidin (2017), calibrated amateurism is “a practice and aesthetic in which actors in an attention economy work specifically to create an artificial authenticity that portrays the raw aesthetic of an amateur, whether or not they are truly amateurs by statute or practice, drawing on the performance ecology of appropriate platforms, means, tools, cultural language and social capital”. The concept is useful in presenting forms of authenticity created specifically to attract the attention of users of platforms that are already overloaded with information.

In light of these ideas about authority and authenticity, it seems that a more comprehensive overview is required to clarify the part that influencers play in the digital environment. Consequently, the following definition was developed: an influencer is a user of digital technology characterized by emergent deontic authority, followed on digital platforms by a considerable number of fans, who presents their life in a controlled manner on social

networks, taking advantage of counterfeit authority and authenticity to obtain financial benefits. In addition to the expertise they display, influencers make sure they also invest in creating and maintaining parasocial relationships with their audience, in order to solidify their online status.

Influencers have an advantage in the online world when power is analysed as a form of play. They picked up the game's tricks and made swift progress. In accordance with this viewpoint, only individuals who are willing to modify their moral compass in order to comply with the rules of the online power play can become influencers. For political organizations that seek to navigate the digital domain, redefining the term "influencer" with an explanation that takes into account the dynamic nature of digital influence might be a useful tool for controlling these persons' persuasive behaviour. Additionally, it can aid in the digital education of everyday individuals who are inexperienced with the power play.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the complex power relations inside the digital hyperspectacle, concentrating in particular on the rise of deontic authority as a defining quality of influencers. A comprehensive definition of influencers was developed through a multidisciplinary investigation, characterizing them as digital users differentiated by their expanding deontic authority and devoted following. This power enables individuals to curate their lives within the boundaries of social media, skilfully using an appearance of authenticity to generate profit. Influencers, as opposed to traditional experts, who rely on qualifications and experience, are compelling forces inside digital communities because they exemplify relatability and inspire admiration through their carefully maintained online personas.

Designed around the pursuit of metric-based status, social media influence is measured by the number of followers a user attracts, but also by the number of comments, shares, and likes their posted content receives. Unlike experts who may have credentials and years of experience, influencers are far more persuasive among digital communities because they demonstrate authenticity and inspire admiration. Influencers strategically leverage a facade of authenticity while simultaneously capitalizing on counterfeit authority to reap financial benefits. Thus, the rhetoric of play as power is observed in the online interactions of these emerging deontic authorities.

While the new definition captures the core of influencers in the modern digital landscape, it is important to recognize that continual research is necessary due to the hyperspectacle's dynamic nature. Future studies should

use a methodological framework that combines qualitative insights with quantitative data from a variety of stakeholders, including influencers themselves, social media users, cooperating brands, and marketing agencies, to determine the robustness and applicability of this definition. Such thorough study projects will give a fuller knowledge of the complicated function and power possessed by these digital figures within the dynamics of the online hyperspectacle.

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