

# DIGITAL ACTIVIST INFLUENCERS: TOWARD A CONCEPTUAL PROPOSITION

INFLUENCIADORES ATIVISTAS DIGITAIS:  
RUMO A UMA PROPOSIÇÃO CONCEITUAL

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## ABSTRACT

This article proposes the concept of digital activist influencers, exploring their role in promoting public causes on social media. This proposition emerges from the intersection of the phenomena of digital influencers and digital activism, examining the similarities and differences between these practices. Digital activist influencers are presented as hybrid figures who promote public causes by mobilizing audiences through perceived authentic narratives and engaging practices. The concept addresses a gap in understanding their role as cultural and political mediators, offering a framework to analyze the convergence of digital influence and activism in consumer culture. This approach contributes to a holistic understanding of digital influence by incorporating ethical, social, and political dimensions into consumer analysis. The article discusses practical implications for various stakeholders and suggests future research directions. This perspective aims to offer new insights into the intersection of consumption, activism, and digital technologies.

Keywords: digital activist influencers, public causes, social media, digital influencers, digital activism.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the rise of digital platforms has transformed the circulation of information, behaviors, and cultural narratives on a global scale. One of the most significant phenomena emerging from this context is the rise of digital influencers – individuals capable of building symbolic and social capital through authentic performances and personal narratives. Defined as cultural mediators, influencers play a central role in shaping contemporary lifestyles and consumption practices (Drenten et al., 2024; Gurrieri et al., 2023). Their impact is amplified by the algorithmic logic governing digital platforms, a situation in which visibility and engagement become strategic resources. This algorithmic structure prioritizes content with higher interaction potential, accelerating the virality of messages while conditioning influencers to continuously optimize their online presence (Pan et al., 2024; Wies et al., 2023).

In this process, digital influencers have consolidated as new forms of celebrity within the digital sphere, both due to their ability to engage large audiences and the transformation of personal narratives into public performances that emotionally resonate with their followers (Bentley et al., 2024; Colucci & Pedroni, 2024). Unlike traditional celebrities, digital influencers build their popularity on perceived proximity to their audience, fostering parasocial relationships marked by an illusion of intimacy and reciprocity. These relationships are pivotal to audience engagement, as they create emotional bonds where followers perceive influencers as trustworthy and authentic figures (Chen, 2024; Tian et al., 2024).

Furthermore, influencers hold a strategic position in marketing campaigns, acting as mediators between brands and consumers. Their ability to translate corporate messages into accessible and emotionally resonant narratives makes them valuable tools for organizations aiming to align brand values with audience experiences (Tian et al., 2024; Wies et al., 2023). This mediation is particularly effective in campaigns reliant on perceived authenticity, as influencers can adapt messages to specific contexts, enhancing emotional connections with the audience (Leung et al., 2022; Zhang, 2024). Accordingly, influencers become personal brands, a process involving both the creation of a distinctive visual style and the curation of stories that balance authenticity with professionalism – essential components for maintaining audience trust and relevance within the competitive digital ecosystem (Gurrieri et al., 2023; Schmitt et al., 2022).

Parallely, digital activism has emerged as a phenomenon leveraging digital technologies to promote ethical, social, political, and cultural change. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter facilitate the articulation of activist narratives, enabling the formation of global movements around causes such as racial justice, gender equality, and environmental sustainability (George & Leidner, 2019; Kozinets & Jenkins, 2022). Digital activism is characterized by flexibility and adaptability, using multimodal elements – images, videos, and hashtags – to reach diverse audiences and amplify collective engagement (Kaun & Treré, 2020; Matich et al., 2019).

A core strength of digital activism lies in its capacity for intersectional articulation, connecting diverse causes around shared values (Baer, 2016; Horton & Street, 2021; Kaun & Treré, 2020). The flexibility of social media allows activists to build decentralized engagement networks where narratives are amplified by global audiences while being adapted to local contexts. Digital activism operates in horizontal structures where multiple agents contribute to the dissemination and reinterpretation of messages, fostering a more inclusive and participatory form of engagement that extends the reach of causes that might otherwise remain marginalized (Matich et al., 2019; Wellman, 2022).

Digital activism signifies a profound transformation in forms of political and social engagement, reconfiguring public space by shifting activist practices from the physical world to digital environments, thus expanding the reach of activist practices beyond traditional geographic boundaries (Baer, 2016; Discetti & Anderson, 2023; Matich et al., 2019). However, this transformation also establishes a critical dependence on digital platforms as both technical and cultural mediators. On the one hand, platforms offer unique opportunities for the dissemination of activist narratives, enabling messages to reach millions in real time (Discetti & Anderson, 2023; Nøjgaard, 2023; Zanette, 2023). On the other hand, the algorithmic logic of these platforms presents significant challenges, such as the prioritization of polarizing content and the censorship of critical voices (Kaun & Uldam, 2018; Vrikki & Lekakis, 2024).

Despite operational differences between digital influencers and digital activists, the intersection between both phenomena is evident. They share a central objective of audience engagement, using emotionally resonant narratives to mobilize followers around specific issues (Discetti & Anderson, 2023; Wies et al., 2023; Zanette, 2023; Zhang et al., 2024). Both operate under the algorithmic logic of digital platforms, employing visibility and engagement strategies to maximize the reach of their messages (Kozinets & Jenkins, 2022; Pan et al., 2024; Wies et al., 2023). It is increasingly common to observe digital influencers adopting activist practices, using their platforms and audiences to promote public causes (Colucci & Pedroni, 2024; Gurrieri et al., 2023; Schouten et al., 2020). Likewise, digital activists have incorporated influencer strategies to expand the visibility of their messages, acknowledging the power of digital platforms to mobilize audiences (George & Leidner, 2019; Kaun & Tréré, 2020; Kozinets & Jenkins, 2022).

It is within this hybrid context that we propose the figure of digital activist influencers, agents who merge characteristics and practices from both fields, articulating narratives that promote public causes in order to mobilize audiences through dynamic and intersectional strategies. We define digital activist influencers as cultural and political mediators who, operating within the logics of consumer culture and digital platforms, advocate and promote public causes (ethical, social, political, and environmental) by engaging audiences through authentic and compelling narratives. The promotion of public causes occurs within an increasingly complex and dynamic digital ecosystem, shaped by the interdependence of influencers, platforms, and audiences.

This conceptual proposal reflects a contemporary scenario where digital influence extends beyond consumer practices and aligns with social and political engagement, presenting both challenges and tensions. On the one hand, digital activist influencers face the need to balance authenticity and performativity – elements essential for maintaining credibility with their audiences (Colucci & Pedroni, 2024; Bentley et al., 2024). On the other hand, the algorithmic logic of digital platforms presents both opportunities and barriers to the dissemination of these causes, often privileging polarizing content while, in some cases, suppressing activist narratives (Kaun & Uldam, 2018; Vrikki & Lekakis, 2024). Thus, the emergence of digital activist influencers as agents committed to public causes reveals a new sociocultural configuration in which the boundaries between consumption, identity, and activism become increasingly fluid, what requires deeper academic investigation.

The objective of this article, therefore, is to propose the concept of digital activist influencers, offering a theoretical framework to understand their role as cultural and political mediators in the contemporary digital ecosystem. This goal responds to the need for a deeper theorization of how consumption practices, digital influence, and activism intersect in the era of social media. Furthermore, the concept contributes to understanding how digital activist influencers represent a new type of cultural agent who shapes both consumption preferences and political values. Finally, the proposal advances the understanding of how digital platforms mediate consumption and activism, by examining how digital activist influencers navigate algorithmic logics and platform policies, providing valuable insights into how technological infrastructures shape and are shaped by cultural consumption and activism practices.

## 2 DIGITAL INFLUENCERS

In recent years, digital influencers have played a crucial role in shaping the economy, culture, and communication, directing behaviors and fostering communities based on shared interests. Their significance stems from the rise of social media platforms, a fertile ground for the creation of narratives and the establishment of interactive connections (Drenten et al., 2024; Schmitt et al., 2022). Defined as individuals who promote products, lifestyles, and ideologies, digital influencers engage audiences through personal performances and narratives that establish emotional bonds while connecting market values to cultural symbolism (Drenten et al., 2024; Gurrieri et al., 2023).

The phenomenon of digital influencers emerged alongside the evolution of social media platforms, where algorithms prioritize high-engagement content, expanding reach and reshaping consumption patterns (Pan et al., 2024; Wies et al., 2023). These platforms play a fundamental role in the visibility and impact of digital influencers, favoring those already established and adaptable to algorithmic demands, while challenging the growth of emerging profiles. This interdependent ecosystem reflects a complex digital dynamic, evidencing the symbiosis between platforms and influencers (Drenten et al., 2024; Pan et al., 2024; Rosenthal & Airoidi, 2024).

The platformization process amplifies the visibility of popular influencers, particularly by determining which profiles best meet the needs of marketing campaigns. Audience elasticity is central in this process, highlighting the influence of platforms in shaping the selection of influencers (Pan et al., 2024; Tian et al., 2024). However, this dependence on algorithms often requires influencers to optimize their content continuously, sometimes compromising authenticity to meet visibility and audience retention demands (Gurrieri et al., 2023). Furthermore, algorithmic prioritization of sensationalist or controversial content can limit the diversity of perspectives, concentrating visibility among a few top influencers while reducing opportunities for smaller or niche profiles (Rosenthal & Airoidi, 2024).

Digital influencers has become so significant that they now represent a new form of celebrity, marked by their ability to generate engagement, proximity, and cultural impact while blending commercial objectives with personal values (Bentley et al., 2024; Colucci & Pedroni, 2024; Yoo et al., 2024). Digital fame is constructed within a platform-driven ecosystem that prioritizes immediate interactions, allowing influencers to adapt messages to specific audiences (Zhang, 2024). In this context, the formation of parasocial relationships – marked by perceived intimacy and reciprocity – becomes fundamental. These bonds, reinforced through personal storytelling and consistent engagement, position digital influencers as both cultural and commercial mediators (Wies et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2024).

Such relationships serve as the foundation for establishing credibility (Bentley et al., 2024; Chen, 2024), which also depends on how influencers sustain audience engagement and strategically use both visual and textual layers in their content (Chen, 2024; Tian et al., 2024). Authenticity becomes a central element in this dynamic, as it directly shapes follower perception (Bentley et al., 2024; Schmitt et al., 2022; Yoo et al., 2024). Balancing authenticity and commercial demands are critical issues to sustaining audience trust in an increasingly competitive and dynamic ecosystem (Gurrieri et al., 2023; Yoo et al., 2024).

Through the sharing of personal and cultural narratives, influencers connect with their followers while legitimizing commercial practices through ideologies of consumption and cultural symbolism. However, algorithmic logic can sometimes prioritize visibility over message consistency, posing challenges to influencer authenticity (Colucci & Pedroni, 2024; Gurrieri et al., 2023). Ethical issues, such as emotional exploitation and contradictions between commercial partnerships and personal narratives, can undermine these connections' sustainability (Tian et al., 2024; Yoo et al., 2024). The dependence on algorithmic visibility may push influencers toward performance patterns perceived as excessive commercialization, potentially eroding audience trust (Gurrieri et al., 2023; Heřmanová, 2024).

The rising prominence of digital influencers has also made them prime targets for marketing campaigns. Although measuring the exact impact of influencer marketing remains complex, it has increasingly proven to be a powerful strategy in influencing consumer behavior and driving advertising success (Leung et al., 2022; Tian et al., 2024). Digital influencers effectively bridge brands and audiences by crafting personalized content and emotionally resonant narratives that promote perceived authenticity and engagement (Tian et al., 2024; Yoo et al., 2024). When influencers align brand values with personal experiences, retention and emotional impact tend to increase, while transparency in commercial partnerships reinforces audience trust (Chen, 2024; Zhang, 2024). Additionally, the congruence between influencer identity, product, and audience further strengthens emotional connections and credibility, positively shaping consumption decisions (Leung et al., 2022; Wies et al., 2023).

### 3 DIGITAL ACTIVISM

Among the many impacts brought about by the advent of digital technologies and social media, one particularly noteworthy transformation has been the expansion of possibilities for political and social engagement. (Kozinets & Seraj-Aksit, 2024; Minocher, 2019). Within this context digital activism arises, which amplifies the articulation of voices and social causes often marginalized in traditional media channels (Dumitrica & Felt, 2020; George & Leidner, 2019; Kaun & Uldam, 2018). Digital activism represents an intersection of technology, consumption, and political action, mobilizing digital tools to promote social, cultural, or political change (George & Leidner, 2019; Kozinets & Jenkins, 2022), as evidenced by widespread movements like #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo.

Social media platforms play a central role in digital activism, functioning as spaces for message dissemination, event organization, and the strengthening of activist communities (Kozinets & Jenkins, 2022; Kozinets & Seraj-Aksit, 2024). The strategies and mobilization practices employed are marked by diversity and flexibility, adapting to the characteristics of digital platforms and participant engagement dynamics (George & Leidner, 2019; Hutchinson, 2021; Vrikki & Lekakis, 2024). Multimodal elements such as videos, images, and hashtags are commonly used to overcome linguistic and cultural barriers, making them effective formats for maximizing impact (Kaun & Treré, 2020; Matich et al., 2019; Minocher, 2019; Vrikki & Lekakis, 2024).

Platforms like Twitter, TikTok, and Instagram may function as democratic spaces that enable the construction of alternative narratives, often challenging power structures and cultural hegemones (Dumitrica & Felt, 2020; George & Leidner, 2019; Hutchinson, 2021; Vrikki & Lekakis,

2024), enabling consumers to articulate their identities dynamically and multifacetedly (George & Leidner, 2019; Kozinets & Seraj-Aksit, 2024; Weijo et al., 2018). This environment allows for the creation of intersectional identities, where multiple dimensions such as gender, race, class, and sexuality can be expressed simultaneously. This capacity for intersectional expression strengthens diversity while challenging dominant narratives that often marginalize minority groups (Baer, 2016; Horton & Street, 2021; Kaun & Treré, 2020; Matich et al., 2019). Furthermore, digital platforms facilitate the formation of virtual communities, reinforcing a sense of belonging while providing emotional, strategic, and symbolic support to participants (Discetti & Anderson, 2023; Gollnhofer & Weijo, 2021; Nøjgaard, 2023; Zanette, 2023).

However, one of the primary challenges of digital activism involves fragmentation and polarization within online communities, which can create echo chambers where opposing ideas are dismissed or marginalized (Do et al., 2024; George & Leidner, 2019; Kaun & Uldam, 2018; Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022). Algorithmic-driven polarization can further intensify ideological conflicts, hindering collaborative solutions to complex social issues (George & Leidner, 2019; Kaun & Uldam, 2018). These challenges intersect with digital exclusion, as limited internet access, technological resources, and digital literacy can hinder vulnerable communities from effectively participating in activist movements (Kaun & Uldam, 2018; Kaun & Treré, 2020; Schradie, 2018).

Another significant challenge is the risk of superficial engagement, commonly referred to as slacktivism. This practice involves low-effort symbolic actions such as liking, sharing, or signing online petitions, which demand minimal commitment from participants (George & Leidner, 2019; Horton & Street, 2021; Kaun & Uldam, 2018; Schradie, 2018). This behavior raises questions about the authenticity of digital activism, suggesting that for some, such actions may be motivated more by self-promotion than a genuine desire for social change (Baer, 2016; Horton & Street, 2021; Kaun & Uldam, 2018; Kozinets & Jenkins, 2022).

On the other hand, while digital platforms act as intermediaries in digital activism by offering spaces for expression, mobilization, and identity articulation opportunities (Discetti & Anderson, 2023; Nøjgaard, 2023; Weijo et al., 2018; Zanette, 2023), their algorithms and engagement rules can prioritize certain identities and narratives over others. This dynamic poses a risk of essentialization, often reducing complex identities into simplified or stereotypical representations to conform to platform norms and formats (Horton & Street, 2021; Kaun & Uldam, 2018; Kaun & Treré, 2020; Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022). Additionally, platform algorithms often allow the proliferation of misinformation and hate speech, tools frequently weaponized against activist movements (Kaun & Treré, 2020; Smit & Broersma, 2018). Content moderation and removal policies also tend to reflect corporate or political interests, raising concerns about censorship and neutrality (Gollnhofer & Weijo, 2021; Kaun & Uldam, 2018; Kaun & Treré, 2020; Vrikki & Lekakis, 2024).

These dynamics reveal how the governance of digital platforms imposes power asymmetries (Kaun & Uldam, 2018; Kaun & Treré, 2020) that impact the autonomy of activist movements, influencing content formats and the conditions for fundraising or event organization (Kozinets et al., 2021; Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022; Vrikki & Lekakis, 2024). Power struggles within digital activism also involve disputes over visibility and narrative control. Activist movements frequently compete with counter-narratives promoted by corporations, governments, or conflicting interest groups, including astroturfing, which involves fabricated movements designed to create confusion and undermine legitimate campaigns (Do et al., 2024; George & Leidner, 2019; Kaun & Uldam, 2018; Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022). This competition is further intensified by the algorithmic logic of digital

platforms, which often prioritize polarizing and sensationalist content (George & Leidner, 2019; Kaun & Uldam, 2018). Moreover, corporate co-optation of digital activism is increasingly prevalent, where activist narratives are appropriated as marketing strategies – such as greenwashing and socialwashing – diluting the political and social impact of genuine movements (Kampf, 2018; Kozinets & Jenkins, 2022; Vrikki & Lekakis, 2024).

## 4 SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN DIGITAL INFLUENCERS AND DIGITAL ACTIVISM

To propose the concept of digital activist influencers based on the discussions surrounding digital influencers and digital activism, we assess the similarities and differences between these concepts. While the similarities contribute to the points of connection necessary for developing the concept, the differences should highlight the possible tensions that emerge when these agents articulate originally distinct practices. Table 1 summarizes these aspects.

Table 1 – Summary of similarities and differences between digital influencers and digital activism

<b>Similarities</b>	Reliance on social media platforms	Digital influencers and digital activists rely on social media platforms as technological mediators for visibility, engagement, community building, and algorithmically governed content circulation.	Digital influencers pursue market-oriented goals of branding and monetization, whereas digital activists seek collective social, political, or environmental change.	Objectives and motivations	<b>Differences</b>
	Use of emotional and authentic narratives	Both digital influencers and digital activists employ emotional and authentic narratives to build trust, credibility, and affective engagement through personal storytelling.	Digital influencers collaborate with brands and institutions for monetization and visibility, while digital activists often challenge dominant institutions and power structures.	Relationship with brands and institutions	
	Focus on audience engagement and the construction of virtual communities	Digital influencers and digital activists prioritize audience engagement and the cultivation of virtual communities through sustained interactions and shared senses of belonging.	Digital influencers produce lighter, consumption-oriented content, whereas digital activists create focused, critical, and urgent communications aimed at mobilization.	Content and communicative approaches	

Source: elaborated by the author.

### 4.1 Reliance on social media platforms

A fundamental similarity between digital influencers and digital activists is the reliance on social media platforms for their operations. Both depend heavily on these virtual spaces to disseminate their messages, engage audiences, and build communities around their narratives, as digital platforms act as essential technological mediators, providing the environment and

tools necessary for amplifying voices and mobilizing diverse publics (Drenten et al., 2024; Pan et al., 2024; Kozinets & Jenkins, 2022; George & Leidner, 2019). Moreover, both must adapt their strategies to the algorithmic logics that govern social media platforms to optimize the visibility and reach of their content (Kaun & Uldam, 2018; Kozinets & Seraj-Aksit, 2024; Pan et al., 2024; Wies et al., 2023).

For digital influencers, social media platforms serve as the primary stage for their performances, where they construct their public identities and establish connections with their followers (Schmitt et al., 2022; Yoo et al., 2024; Tian et al., 2024; Wies et al., 2023). These platforms enable them to create and share content regularly, maintaining a constant flow of interactions that sustains their social and symbolic capital (Colucci & Pedroni, 2024; Gurrieri et al., 2023; Tian et al., 2024; Wies et al., 2023). In the same way, digital activism thrives in these spaces, using social media for articulating causes and mobilizing supporters (Kaun & Uldam, 2018; Kozinets & Seraj-Aksit, 2024; Minocher, 2019; Vrikki & Lekakis, 2024). Platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok have become spaces for constructing alternative narratives that frequently challenge power structures and cultural hegemonies (Dumitrica & Felt, 2020; George & Leidner, 2019; Hutchinson, 2021; Vrikki & Lekakis, 2024).

## 4.2 Use of emotional and authentic narratives

Another significant point of convergence between digital influencers and digital activists is the use of emotional and authentic narratives as central elements of their practices (Bentley et al., 2024; Chen, 2024; Do et al., 2024; Horton & Street, 2021), as both recognize the power of personal stories and emotional connections in audience engagement and mobilization (Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022; Schradie, 2018; Weijo et al., 2018; Zanelle, 2023).

Digital influencers often base much of their appeal on the construction of an authentic and relatable persona, sharing aspects of their personal lives and everyday experiences with their audience (Gambetti & Kozinets, 2024; Heřmanová, 2024; Miyake, 2023; Zhang, 2024). This approach aims to create a sense of intimacy and closeness with their followers, establishing parasocial relationships marked by the perception of reciprocity and direct emotional connection (Bentley et al., 2024; Chen, 2024; Tian et al., 2024; Yoo et al., 2024). Similarly, digital activism often relies on personal testimonies and storytelling to humanize causes and garner public support (Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022; Schradie, 2018; Weijo et al., 2018; Zanelle, 2023). Authenticity is also crucial in digital activism, as activist credibility and legitimacy are frequently questioned (Baer, 2016; Discetti & Anderson, 2023; Matich et al., 2019; Nøjgaard, 2023). The ability to present a consistent and genuine narrative is fundamental for building trust with the public and resisting accusations of opportunism or superficiality (Gollnhofer & Weijo, 2021; Kampf, 2018; Kim et al., 2024; Pfeuffer et al., 2024).

## 4.3 Focus on audience engagement and the construction of virtual communities

A third shared characteristic is the focus on audience engagement and the construction of virtual communities, as both phenomena rely not only on capturing attention but also on cultivating meaningful and lasting interactions with their audiences (Discetti & Anderson, 2023; Gollnhofer & Weijo, 2021; Nøjgaard, 2023; Zanelle, 2023).

For digital influencers, engagement is a key success parameter, often measured in likes, comments, shares, and other verifiable forms of interaction (Pan et al., 2024; Tian et al., 2024; Wies et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2024). Beyond its intrinsic value, these engagement metrics also function as a social currency and evidence of influence for potential commercial partnerships, especially in campaigns related to brand endorsements (Drenten et al., 2024; Gurrieri et al., 2023; Leung et al., 2022; Yoo et al., 2024). In the context of digital activism, audience engagement takes on a more action-oriented dimension (George & Leidner, 2019; Kaun & Treré, 2020; Kozinets & Jenkins, 2022; Matich et al., 2019), where the goal extends beyond online interactions to mobilize individuals toward direct practices, whether virtual (e.g., signing online petitions) or physical (e.g., participating in protests) (Baer, 2016; Horton & Street, 2021; Kaun & Uldam, 2018; Schradie, 2018).

#### 4.4 Objectives and motivations

Regarding differences, one of the most fundamental distinctions between digital influencers and digital activists lies in their objectives and motivations. While both aim to influence and engage audiences, the ultimate goals of their actions differ significantly (Drenten et al., 2024; George & Leidner, 2019; Gurrieri et al., 2023; Kozinets & Jenkins, 2022).

Digital influencers primarily operate within a market-driven logic, where the primary objective is personal brand building and the monetization of influence (Chen, 2024; Gurrieri et al., 2023; Tian et al., 2024; Wies et al., 2023). Their activities often focus on revenue generation through brand partnerships, sponsorships, and collaborations (Leung et al., 2022; Schmitt et al., 2022; Yoo et al., 2024; Zhang, 2024). In contrast, digital activism is fundamentally motivated to promote social, political, or environmental change (George & Leidner, 2019; Kaun & Uldam, 2018; Kozinets & Jenkins, 2022; Vrikki & Lekakis, 2024). Digital activists' objectives transcend personal gain, focusing on collective mobilization around specific causes (Baer, 2016; Horton & Street, 2021; Kaun & Treré, 2020; Matich et al., 2019).

#### 4.5 Relationship with brands and institutions

Another significant contrast between digital influencers and digital activism lies in their relationship with brands and institutions, reflecting not only operational strategies but also ideological stances toward power structures (Chen, 2024; Leung et al., 2022; Vrikki & Lekakis, 2024; Wies et al., 2023).

Digital influencers often seek and cultivate collaborative relationships with brands and established institutions (Chen, 2024; Tian et al., 2024; Wies et al., 2023; Yoo et al., 2024). These partnerships are central to many influencers' business models, offering monetization opportunities and visibility amplification (Drenten et al., 2024; Gurrieri et al., 2023; Leung et al., 2022; Zhang, 2024). Conversely, digital activism often positions itself in direct opposition to dominant institutions and power structures (George & Leidner, 2019; Kaun & Uldam, 2018; Kozinets & Jenkins, 2022; Vrikki & Lekakis, 2024). Digital activists frequently perceive their mission as challenging the status quo, exposing injustices, and pushing for systemic change (Baer, 2016; Horton & Street, 2021; Kaun & Treré, 2020; Matich et al., 2019).

## 4.6 Content and communicative approaches

The nature of produced content and communicative approaches represents another critical distinction between digital influencers and digital activists, reflecting not only their divergent goals but also the differing expectations of their respective audiences (Colucci & Pedroni, 2024; Drenten et al., 2024; Gambetti & Kozinets, 2024; Vrikki & Lekakis, 2024).

Digital influencers often create more diverse content, frequently lighter in tone and theme (Drenten et al., 2024; Gambetti & Kozinets, 2024; Gurrieri et al., 2023; Rosenthal & Airoldi, 2024). Their focus is typically on lifestyle, products, personal experiences, and cultural trends (Colucci & Pedroni, 2024; Heřmanová, 2024; Schmitt et al., 2022; Yoo et al., 2024). This content is often designed to be visually appealing, aspirational, and easily consumable, aligning with entertainment and consumption preferences (Bentley et al., 2024; Chen, 2024; Tian et al., 2024; Zhang, 2024). By contrast, content produced in the context of digital activism tends to be more focused and often more critical in nature (George & Leidner, 2019; Kozinets & Jenkins, 2022; Minocher, 2019; Vrikki & Lekakis, 2024). Digital activists concentrate on specific causes, creating content aimed at educating, mobilizing, and often challenging established perceptions (Baer, 2016; Horton & Street, 2021; Kaun & Treré, 2020; Matich et al., 2019). The tone is frequently more urgent and confrontational, reflecting the gravity of the issues and the perceived need for immediate action (Do et al., 2024; Kaun & Uldam, 2018; Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022; Schradie, 2018).

## 5 DIGITAL ACTIVIST INFLUENCERS

The intersection of digital influence and activism becomes evident in hybrid cases where influencers integrate social causes into their content strategies. These hybrid figures challenge the boundaries between the two phenomena, creating both new opportunities and tensions, such as the risk of message dilution through commercialization (Gurrieri et al., 2023; Heřmanová, 2024). Influencers who promote causes like sustainability, social justice, or gender equality can amplify the visibility of these issues but often face tensions between authenticity and monetization (Hutchinson, 2021; Kaun & Uldam, 2018; Kozinets & Seraj-Aksit, 2024).

Scholars from various fields have begun to explore digital influencers who promote social, environmental, or political causes. Although a universally accepted term has yet to be established, several labels have emerged to describe specific practices. Among those dedicated to sustainability and ecological advocacy, the terms “greenfluencers” and “eco-influencers” have gained prominence. The former generally refers to influencers promoting accessible, practical sustainability solutions (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2024; Knupfer et al., 2023), while the latter covers broader environmental concerns, often linking them to lifestyle narratives (Huber et al., 2022; San Cornelio et al., 2021). In the realm of social justice and political engagement, terms like “social media activists” and “political influencers” have emerged. The former describes broader, cross-sectional actions covering a wide range of social issues (Noland, 2017), while the latter focuses specifically on civic mobilization and direct participation in political discourse (Riedl et al., 2021). Finally, some terms highlight more targeted approaches. “Performative allyship” refers to influencers who publicly support social movements while amplifying marginalized voices

(Wellman, 2022). Meanwhile, “zero waste influencers” focus on promoting conscious consumption practices and waste reduction (Lu, 2024).

To refer more broadly to digital influencers engaging in some form of digital activism, we propose the term digital activist influencers, defined as cultural and political mediators who, operating through the logics of consumer culture and digital platforms, advocate for and promote public causes, mobilizing audiences through perceived authentic narratives and engaging practices aimed at transforming behaviors, identities, and market dynamics related to specific causes.

By public causes, we refer to multiple fronts, including ethical, social, political, and environmental issues. This conceptualization of public causes encompasses both initiatives aimed at social and environmental transformations and those that mobilize ethical and political values, always considering their collective relevance and societal impact. Such a conception allows for an organized analysis of the practices of digital activist influencers across different domains while preserving the idea of their interconnection as part of an interdependent cultural and political ecosystem. Furthermore, it reinforces the public and engagement-driven nature of these actions, highlighting their contributions to cultural mediation, behavioral transformation, and the reinterpretation of consumption practices in alignment with contemporary demands.

However, this conceptual proposal does not seek to establish a rigid classification but rather to suggest some structuring elements. First, the promotion of public causes must define the activities of these influencers, excluding those whose activism is peripheral. Second, the pursuit of transformative impact should be evident, particularly as these activities often occur in polarized markets and social contexts where cultural identities are under debate. It is in this sense that digital activist influencers must play a central role as cultural and political mediators, articulating social practices, political engagement, and cultural consumption with social movements. A fourth fundamental element is their ability to develop authentic and credible narratives capable of mobilizing audiences by connecting global issues to local contexts. Finally, the actions of digital activist influencers are inseparable from the dynamics of digital platforms, which, while expanding their reach, can also suppress their claims, posing a significant challenge to the visibility of their causes.

While the proposed concept offers a comprehensive analytical framework, it also reveals tensions and challenges that reflect the complexity of the digital activist influencer role. One of the primary challenges involves balancing authenticity and performativity. As discussed, the demand for authenticity often conflicts with the commercial imperatives imposed by digital platforms. Another challenge lies in the potential need to align locally rooted issues with broader, global audiences, requiring navigation between cultural differences. Finally, monetization emerges as a critical point, as digital activist influencers must balance financial sustainability with ethical integrity – an essential aspect for maintaining their credibility and trustworthiness as reliable disseminators of values and ideals.

This conceptual proposition aims to contribute by presenting both theoretical opportunities and filling gaps in social media research, particularly by connecting digital activism, consumer cultures, and new forms of cultural mediation in contemporary digital environments. The first contribution relates to expanding the understanding of ethical consumption and resistance practices. Digital activist influencers play a central role by articulating demands for social and environmental justice through consumption narratives, reframing everyday practices and products as political acts. Another contribution lies in their role as cultural and political mediators,

introducing a new layer to the understanding of consumer practices by demonstrating how influencers translate complex global issues into accessible, actionable messages for diverse audiences. Furthermore, the concept addresses the performative and authentic dynamics of digital activism, since balancing these dimensions is critical to influencers' effectiveness in promoting public causes. Finally, the concept also responds to persistent gaps in the analysis of social movements and politicized consumption.

## 6 CHALLENGES IN THE STUDY OF DIGITAL ACTIVIST INFLUENCERS

The emergence of digital activist influencers as hybrid agents operating at the intersection of consumption and digital activism presents a series of challenges for academic research. These challenges reflect the complexity of the phenomenon and the tensions inherent to its dual nature. Therefore, we propose an initial assessment of the main challenges that may arise when investigating this phenomenon, while also reflecting on potential research directions.

### 6.1 Tension between authenticity and performativity

One of the primary challenges in the study of digital activist influencers is understanding and analyzing the tension between authenticity and performativity in their practices. On the one hand, authenticity is fundamental for establishing credibility and trust with audiences, essential elements for both digital influencers and activists (Bentley et al., 2024; Chen, 2024; Tian et al., 2024; Yoo et al., 2024). On the other hand, the nature of digital platforms and audience expectations requires a degree of performativity that can sometimes conflict with perceived authenticity (Colucci & Pedroni, 2024; Gurrieri et al., 2023; Wies et al., 2023; Zhang, 2024).

Investigating how digital activist influencers navigate this delicate balance is crucial for understanding the effectiveness of their messaging and the impact of their actions. This involves examining how they construct narratives that are both personal and politically engaged, as well as how these narratives are received and interpreted by their audiences.

### 6.2 Impact of digital platforms on the promotion of public causes

Another significant challenge is understanding the impact of digital platforms on the promotion of public causes by digital activist influencers. Platforms are not neutral channels of communication but active agents shaping visibility and reach through algorithms and content policies (Kaun & Uldam, 2018; Kozinets & Seraj-Aksit, 2024; Pan et al., 2024; Wies et al., 2023).

Researchers should explore how digital activist influencers adapt their strategies to platform logics and how such adaptations affect the integrity and impact of their activist messaging. This also includes examining how the prioritization of engaging content affects the depth and nuance of discussions about complex causes. Additionally, it would be valuable to assess how influencers attempt to maximize their messaging impact despite platform constraints and content moderation policies.

### 6.3 Ethical implications of monetization

The ethical implications of monetization pose another significant challenge for digital activist influencers. While digital influencers traditionally seek to monetize their influence through brand partnerships and sponsorships (Gurrieri et al., 2023; Leung et al., 2022; Tian et al., 2024; Wies et al., 2023), digital activists often operate outside such commercial logics, focusing instead on social and political change (George & Leidner, 2019; Kozinets & Jenkins, 2022; Vrikki & Lekakis, 2024).

Investigating how digital activist influencers navigate these conflicting expectations is crucial. This involves examining how they maintain their integrity and credibility while seeking financial sustainability, as well as how they communicate their commercial partnerships, when they exist, and how such partnerships influence audience perceptions of authenticity and trustworthiness.

### 6.4 Cultural and political mediation

Understanding the role of digital activist influencers as cultural and political mediators presents yet another significant challenge. These agents act as bridges between different audiences and causes, translating complex issues into accessible and engaging narratives (Drenten et al., 2024; Horton & Street, 2021; Kozinets & Jenkins, 2022; Matich et al., 2019).

Researchers could explore how this mediation occurs, focusing on the narrative and visual strategies employed by digital activist influencers to connect their audiences with public causes. This includes investigating how they balance the need to simplify messages for broader reach while preserving the integrity and complexity of the causes they promote.

### 6.5 Intersectionality of causes

An additional challenge in the study of digital activist influencers involves understanding how they approach and articulate the intersectionality of causes. The multidimensional nature of many social, environmental, and political issues demands that these influencers navigate a complex terrain where multiple causes overlap and interact (Baer, 2016; Horton & Street, 2021; Kaun & Treré, 2020; Matich et al., 2019).

Researchers could examine how digital activist influencers balance the promotion of specific causes with a broader, interconnected understanding of social justice. This also includes analyzing how they represent intersectionality in their narratives and how audiences respond to messages that link multiple dimensions of activism.

## 7 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The proposed concept of digital activist influencers offers a new lens for understanding the intersection of consumption, activism, and digital culture. This concept emerges as a response to the increasing complexity of the digital ecosystem, where the boundaries between commercial influence and social activism are becoming increasingly fluid. By articulating elements

from both spheres, digital activist influencers represent a hybrid phenomenon that challenges traditional categorizations and offers new perspectives on how consumption can be mobilized for social transformation.

The concept of digital activist influencers fills important gaps in social media research by providing a theoretical framework to analyze how consumption practices are redefined and politicized in the digital context. Firstly, it expands the understanding of digital influencers beyond their commercial function, acknowledging their capacity to act as agents of social change. This contributes to a more holistic view of digital influence by incorporating ethical, social, and political dimensions into consumption analysis. Moreover, the proposed concept offers a new perspective on the formation of consumption identities in digital environments. By examining how digital activist influencers negotiate authenticity, performativity, and political engagement, the framework sheds light on the complex processes through which consumers construct and express identities aligned with public causes.

A key direction highlighted by this conceptual proposal is the understanding of digital spaces as sites of cultural and political contestation, mediated through consumption practices. By emphasizing how digital activist influencers navigate tensions between authenticity and performativity, the concept provides a valuable lens to examine how digital activism materializes through everyday consumption practices and content production. Another significant direction is the recognition of digital platforms not merely as communication channels but as active agents in shaping digital activism. Analyzing how platform algorithms and content policies shape the visibility and reach of activist messages offers a critical perspective on the technological infrastructures underpinning these practices.

Considering practical implications, the concept of digital activist influencers provides for digital activist influencers a way of critically reflecting on their practices, emphasizing the balance between authenticity and effective public causes promotion, and the ethical challenges involved in this process. For marketing professionals, the concept offers a framework to authentically integrate public causes into marketing strategies, warning of risks in superficially co-opting causes, and encouraging careful and ethical collaboration with influencers. For non-governmental organizations and social movements, the concept provides a new perspective on digital mobilization, highlighting the role of digital activist influencers as cause amplifiers and community builders, and emphasizing platform dynamics in communication strategies. Finally, the concept of digital activist influencers may impact public policy by highlighting the need for regulations that protect digital activism while addressing transparency and misinformation, informing digital literacy initiatives to foster critical understanding of influencers' roles in shaping public opinion.

Despite its contributions, the concept of digital activist influencers presents certain limitations that warrant consideration. Firstly, the dynamic and rapidly evolving nature of the digital ecosystem may challenge the long-term stability of the concept. Digital influence and activism practices are constantly transforming, which may require continuous revisions and updates to keep the concept relevant. Another potential limitation is the risk of overgeneralization. While the proposed concept aims to capture a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, it may not fully encompass all nuances and variations of digital activist practices across different cultural contexts and platforms. Applying the concept to empirical studies may require adaptations and refinements to ensure contextual accuracy.

Additionally, it is essential to recognize that focusing on the practices of individual influencers should not obscure the role of collective movements and broader activist networks. Although the concept acknowledges the importance of communities and audiences, there is a risk of overestimating the impact of individual figures at the expense of more complex collective dynamics. Finally, it is crucial to consider potential biases in such conceptualization, particularly regarding the emphasis on dominant platforms and digital practices. The concept may inadvertently marginalize forms of activism and influence occurring outside mainstream social media platforms or through less visible and measurable approaches.

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