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TRENDING RESISTANCE: A STUDY OF THE TIKTOK #DEINFLUENCING PHENOMENON.

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Starting from January 2023 a new TikTok trend has become popular: #deinfluencing. If searching TikTok for this hashtag (which counts over 264 million views), one can see videos aimed at challenging the hype about specific products (especially fashion and make-up products) and criticising the large number of consumer goods purchased as a result of influencers' recommendations and TikTok trends. All these videos share similar aesthetics and the emphasis on transparency and authenticity, which emerges from the very beginning of almost every TikTok, with the content creators staring at the camera, stating: "let me deinfluence you!".

Some commentators have considered this phenomenon as a crucial milestone that will change influencer culture from within. As Faithfull (2023) writes, "The revolution will, it appears, be streamed after all". If defining such a phenomenon as a revolution could be excessive, it is however worth critically investigating the #deinfluencing trend on TikTok to analyse to what extent it represents a form of resistance to issues of overconsumption and consumerism, or whether it represents yet the latest version of what it means to be an influencer. In this contribution, I argue that the deinfluencing phenomenon is an example of how forms of resistance are becoming "trending", that is, not only 'fashionable', popular, or widely discussed online, but also increasingly intertwined with the affordances and algorithmic nature of TikTok. It is exactly in the trending nature of these forms of resistance that lies the highly controversial nature of the deinfluencing trend.

The emergence of the deinfluencing trend is not a new phenomenon, as it represents an iteration of already existing critiques concerning content creators and the influencer industry. From being the target of networked harassment (Duffy, Miltner & Wahlstedt, 2022) to the risk of getting "cancelled" (Lee & Abidin, 2021; Lewis & Christin, 2022), content creators have long felt the pressure of being scrutinised, exposed as "fake", or held accountable online. Differently from other manifestations of dissatisfaction, however, the #deinfluencing trend does not focus exclusively on the critique towards

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some specific content creators, and it is not related to some specific anti-fandom spaces (Duffy, Miltner & Wahlstedt, 2022) or ironic Instagram pages.

On the contrary, it represents a broader critique of the influencer economy and its functioning, in particular its reliance on consumerism and the display of overconsumption, fuelled by platforms' economies of visibility (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Research shows that influencers' practices are deeply rooted in consumption (Abidin, 2016; Abidin & Gwynne, 2017) and that the display of consumer goods represents a way to gain micro-celebrity (Marwick, 2015) and social status (Bainotti, 2023). Against this backdrop, the deinfluencing trend has emerged as a venue where isolated voices can converge to express their discontent not only about content creators and the influencer industry but also about the ongoing cost of living crisis, exacerbated by the current political and economic situation.

The deinfluencing trend is also characterised by a metacritique of the overconsumption practices facilitated by TikTok content and fuelled by the socio-technical characteristics of the platform. TikTok contributes to promoting forms of ephemeral consumption (Caliandro et al., forthcoming), meaning consumption practices that last for the duration of the latest trend and are then immediately supplanted by the next, popular challenge to replicate. These forms of consumption are enhanced by the fast-paced nature of the platform and by its tendency towards creating imitative publics (Zulli & Zulli, 2022) that gather around shared sounds, templates, hashtags, as well as lifestyles and consumer products (Caliandro et al., forthcoming). The fact that the deinfluencing phenomenon is a TikTok trend makes its understanding even more compelling. As such, the content and critiques it promotes are influenced by memetic practices (Zulli & Zulli, 2020), editability affordances (Hautea et al., 2021), as well as the algorithmic visibility prompted by TikTok's architecture (Bhandari & Bimo, 2021). As a trend, deinfluencing content can be considered a way to get visibility, outsmart the algorithm, and join imitative publics, and, because of these practices, its potential for resistance can be diluted.

Given these specificities, it is relevant to study the deinfluencing phenomenon to understand changes in the perception of content creators, the influencer industry and issues of overconsumption and consumerism - topics which have so far been rarely studied jointly. This contribution aims at providing an interdisciplinary perspective which blends literature on content creators and influencers pertaining to communication and media studies, with ideas rooted in consumer research. I believe that such an interdisciplinary approach offers the possibility to enrich the analytical toolkit of Internet research, particularly in a time when consumerism, overconsumption, and environmentalism are compelling and urgent topics to address in relation to the Internet.

To understand how the deinfluencing trend represents a form of resistance to issues of overconsumption and consumerism, the research is based on a digital methods approach (Rogers, 2019), and qualitative data analysis techniques (Caliandro & Gandini, 2017). After collecting the videos shared with the most popular hashtags associated with the deinfluencing trend (“#deinfluencing”, “#deinfluencer”, “#antihaul”), the analysis focuses on the categories of content emerging from the trend, as well as

how the debates around consumption and overconsumption are articulated by means of TikTok-specific affordances, in particular, “Stitches” and “Duets”.

The results show that the deinfluencing trend is composed of three main categories of content: resistance; consumerist reappropriation; and trend-surfing. In the first category, users express their refusal of the aspirational lifestyle promoted by both the influencer industry and TikTok, as well as the need for new ways of self-expression that go beyond the mere adherence to a pre-defined lifestyle rooted in consumption. This content expresses users’ resistance towards consumerism, and it is the most genuinely connected to active practices against overconsumption. On the contrary, the potential for resistance is diluted with videos that show a consumerist reappropriation of the trend. With this content, the trend is used not as an opportunity to spread awareness of overconsumption, but as yet another way of promoting consumer goods. The difference here lies in the emphasis on the authenticity of these promotions, which only aim at selling “cheap products” from the “brands that won’t disappoint you”, as some videos in this category mention. Lastly, in the case of trend-surfing content, users take advantage of the trend, and its critique of overconsumption, as a way of promoting the most important product of the attention economy, the self-brand, and to maximise visibility by replicating the trending and possibly viral content on TikTok.

Although some genuine forms of resistance can be found, the analysis of the deinfluencing trend shows the different ways in which resistance becomes “trending”, meaning intertwined and progressively mitigated by the logic and architecture of TikTok. The concept of trending resistance is suitable to highlight the contradictory nature of deinfluencing: a trend which proposes a critique of consumption which still largely relies on consumption practices; a criticism of the influencer industry via crafting and boosting a personal brand; and an opposition to the logic of TikTok by using that same logic for personal gains. Besides this specific case study, the concept of trending resistance is useful to enrich the understanding of those TikTok trends and content which address contemporary issues, such as climate change, environmentalism, human rights, and inequalities, among others.

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