BEYOND LOVE IS LOVE: INVESTIGATING LGBTQIA+ PARENT-INFLUENCERS' ADVOCACY WORK ON INSTAGRAM

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Introduction

The paper focuses on Instagram LGBTQIA+ parent-influencers in the Italian context, where traditional gender stereotypes are still predominant and where LGBTQIA+ individuals' rights are well-below EU standards (ILGA-Europe 2024).

Through a three-month digital ethnography of the two largest profiles of Italian LGBTQIA+ parent-influencers on Instagram, the contribution provides insights into: 1) how these subjectivities utilize digital platforms to negotiate identity-based stigma, providing alternative models of gender, sexuality, and family; and 2) the political potential of this form of advocacy-work.

Theoretical framework

Literature on LGBTQIA+ influencers (Abidin 2019; Lovelock 2017; Raun and Christensen-Strynø 2022) has focused both on their role as ambassadors of queer issues and on neoliberal models of authenticity. Concepts such as 'homonormativity' (Duggan 2002) emphasize the predominance of self-branding practices and entrepreneurship through the construction of gay 'role-models,' channeling one's non-normative sexuality into a celebrity brand. On Instagram, where the attention economy is supported by business models based on engagement (Banet-Weiser et al. 2020), influencers seek visibility through performances of authenticity (Marwick 2013), a process further accentuated when creators choose to monetize their online activity, producing neo-liberal subjects through performativity (Scharff 2024).

With platform logics that encourage attention (whether positive or negative), authenticity and visibility can make queer creators (Homant and Sender 2019) vulnerable to

"networked antagonism" (Duffy et al. 2024). As a result, LGBTQIA+ parent-influencers might feel inclined to anchor gay cultures to domesticity and consumption, until leading to their depoliticization. Additionally, in an effort to see their own identities and families accepted and deflect networked antagonism, LGBTQIA+ parent-influencers might portray family and parenthood only in light of what is socially acceptable, with limited potential to challenge the established status quo. This conflict adds to the already existing pressure lived by parent-influencers to negotiate between embodying idealized versions of parenthood and representing one's authentic self (D'Amelio 2024).

This tension deserves particular attention in Italy, where issues of sexual politics have been at the forefront of political and societal debates. Despite the growing visibility of LGBTQIA+ civil rights and an increasing "pluralization of arrangements of intimacies and family lives" (Monaco and Nothdurfter 2023: 476), the country has witnessed an antagonistic conservative backlash to changes in family structures and roles. The status of LGBTQIA+ rights falls well-below EU standards (ILGA-Europe 2024) and both conservative organizations and right-wing populist parties have been gathering increasing consensus from the public (Scandurra et al. 2020). Italian media's ambivalence in updating conservative notions of family and kinship further contributes to fostering narratives that sustain exclusion (Benozzo 2013; Franchi 2015), either framing those outside of expected conformity as 'other' through stereotypical representations or imposing silence through a lack thereof (Franchi and Selmi 2018).

In this context, it is useful to turn our attention to digital media, which can offer additional environments for expanding the definition of contemporary families and parenthood by affording LGBTQIA+ subjectivities a space to forge their own narratives and challenge stereotypes (Callahan and Loscocco, 2021).

Methods

This contribution is part of a larger research project, involving 10 accounts of Italian LGBTQIA+ parent-influencers. It zooms-in on digital practices and negotiations enacted by two of the largest accounts of LGBTQIA+ parent-influencers in Italy: *duemammetrefigli* ('two moms, three children') and *papaperscelta* ('dads by choice'). They were chosen for their magnitude (both have a following of more than 150k, which is significant in Italy), visibility, posting-frequency, and for their being centered around the influencers' LGBTQIA+ families. The accounts are led by both mothers and fathers, enabling investigation of self-representations of queer motherhood and fatherhood.

First, the author carried out a three-month digital ethnography (Pink et al. 2016) of the profiles. Second, visual and verbal data were coded deductively and inductively, through a circular and iterative coding process towards thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2022; Guest et al. 2011). Such qualitative methodology values individuals' agency in defining themselves in digital spaces while at the same time allowing for a critical analysis of advantages and contradictions that might arise in the context of influencer culture and platform capitalism. The paper thus focuses on users' sense-makings connected with digital environments and observes cultures, sociability, and shared identities emerging from such practices.

Findings

While results' analysis is still ongoing, preliminary findings highlight how the identified-profiles contend with integration and social advocacy. On the one hand, they seek to dismantle stereotypes that see queer parenthood as 'other' and selfish through relatable portrayals of family life; on the other, they engage with questions of politics and advocacy work, often due to a perceived duty to educate audiences. This effort highlights the profiles' tension to challenge the 'love is love' trope of social inclusion, which often has the result of depoliticizing queer struggles.

In smaller accounts, the act of portraying one's life as relatable and desirable often resolves into an adherence to normative portrayals of family, relying on conventional representations of Instagram parenthood (see D'Amelio 2024). Such practice is closely connected to the old parent-influencer tension between embodying an idealized version of parenthood and the need to represent one's authentic self. While the two accounts analyzed in the scope of this paper partially adhere to such practices, they are also known to engage in humorous/provocative posts that challenge traditional portrayals of parenthood, potentially granting Italians access to alternative models of gender, sexuality, and family. Indeed, the accounts often take episodes of their day-to-day family life as a chance to engage in advocacy-work and produce educational content, arguing against gender stereotypes connected to fatherhood and motherhood and making fun of political figures. Such weaponization of traditional parenthood can help prevent and address harassment and oppression, highlighting the challenges queer Italian families face.

From an analysis of comments, networked antagonism seems to be a marginal phenomenon despite the accounts' magnitude (perhaps indicative of practices of comment moderation or curation). While this could be the result of careful content moderation or curation processes, it could also be due to the queer microcelebrity status of these subjectivities, which might limit their algorithmic visibility within a specific content niche. It is interesting to note, however, that audiences seem to perceive every post (regardless of its content being political or not) as a form of advocacy work, thanking the influencers for 'educating' people and giving concrete examples of 'how love is still love.'

On the one hand, this echoes the tokenization of marginalized people, often loaded with the epistemic labor to enlighten their privileged peers about civil rights and the structural causes of homophobia. Notably, it is when the parent-influencers fail to comply with these expectations that they receive backlash and are perceived as disingenuous, suggesting interesting implications for these subjectivities in terms of digital labor. On the other hand, reading these profiles through the lens of the 'love is love' adagio depoliticizes LGBTQIA+ parent-influencers narratives, failing to understand the unique struggles queer parents and families have to contend with on a day-to-day basis. This essentially flattens their social media content as 'in service' of a pedagogical effort to benefit a dominant heterosexual public. The tug-o-war between relatable-ness, acceptance, and activism underscores questions regarding the potential for social change of these subjectivities and how it can be reconciled with the logics of platform capitalism and a heteronormative matrix.

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