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What Is a Political Influencer? A Social Field Theory Approach

¿Qué es un influencer *político? Una aproximación desde la teoría de los campos sociales*

Ignacio Lezica Cabrera

Key words

Social Field
- Political Communication
- Attention Economy
- Political Influencer
- Social Media
- Sociology of Emotions

Abstract

Political social media influencers (PSMIs) are a growing object of study in sociology, although they remain ambiguously defined. This paper analyses their practices to differentiate them from professional politicians active on social media. Drawing on Bourdieu and Lordon's theoretical framework, it examines how PSMIs accumulate "metric visibility" as a form of capital within a social field characterised by a specific affective regime. Based on twenty interviews with Spanish PSMIs, three types of dynamics were identified: engaging in "metric euphoria", which generates *illusio* (commitment to the play of the field) and the aspiration to transform visibility into political influence; prioritising creative autonomy, by resisting integration into formal organisations; and relying on their visibility capital to secure opportunities in media or within political structures, unlike politicians.

Palabras clave

Campo social
- Comunicación política
- Economía de la atención
- *Influencer* político
- Redes sociales
- Sociología de las emociones

Resumen

Los *influencers* políticos en redes (PSMI, por sus siglas en inglés) son un objeto creciente de estudio en sociología, pero de ambigua definición. Este estudio analiza sus prácticas para diferenciarlos de políticos profesionales activos en redes sociales. Desde el marco teórico de Bourdieu y Lordon se examina cómo acumulan «visibilidad métrica» como capital en un campo social con régimen afectivo específico. Con veinte entrevistas a PSMI españoles se identifican tres dinámicas: la «euforia métrica» genera *illusio* (compromiso con el juego del campo) y la aspiración de transformar visibilidad en influencia política; priorizan la autonomía creativa, resistiendo la integración en organizaciones formales; y, a diferencia de políticos, dependen de su capital de visibilidad para alcanzar oportunidades en medios o estructuras políticas.

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Ignacio Lezica Cabrera: Universitat de València | joigleca@uv.es

Introduction. Influencers: the emergence of a new object of sociological study

The study of digital content creators in social media or social media influencers (SMIs) is a topic of growing interest within the scholarly community. In recent years, the number of social science studies that have addressed SMIs has grown exponentially, reflecting their increasing importance in the digital platform industry (Fernández-Prados *et al*., 2021). There is a sociological consensus that conceives of influencers as agents operating on platforms as attractors of attention (Villegas, 2022) within an economic environment characterised by scarcity, a regime conceptualised as the "attention economy" (Marwick, 2015). They engage in this "visibility labour" (Abidin, 2016) by creating social media content that captures the attention of their followers. When users interact with posts, the platform records the interactions between audiences and content, and encodes them into various types of metrics: number of likes, followers and views, among others. This "metric visibility" (expressed through metrics) underpins the platform's algorithmic content curation and can also be converted by SMIs into different kinds of economic opportunities (Cotter, 2019).

Central to the visibility labour of content creators is the set of "micro-celebrity" techniques used by them (Marwick, 2015). These practices include the implementation of modes of self-presentation aimed at the construction of a fan base, a number of followers that enable the influencer to accumulate visibility on social media. This specific effort devoted to the construction of a personal brand has been conceptualised as "self-branding" (Gandini, 2016). This also requires engaging in various forms of "relational work" and "emotional work" to strengthen the relationship with their *followers* (Villegas, 2022). Some authors have also observed influencers' readiness to apply techniques drawn from corporate marketing to build their self-image. This self-made conception characteristic of "entrepreneurialism" (Cotter, 2019) has led some authors to note the presence of a strong neoliberal ethos in the activities of influencers (Duffy *et al*., 2021). Social media offer content creators the means to earn income by engaging in self-promotional, self-productive and self-perfecting individual practices (Hearn, 2010), where the raw material for the creation of value is in the unfolding of subjectivity (Gandini, 2016).

While the analysis of how influencers engage in the creation of political content is a relatively new object of study, it has garnered increasing academic interest in recent years. The prevailing theoretical framework informing the most recent body of research on political social media influencers (PSMIs) has drawn on Paul Lazarsfeld and Elihu Katz's classic theory of opinion leadership, together with the two-step flow model of communication (Riedl *et al*., 2021; Bause, 2021). From this perspective, political influencers operate as mediators for their followers by discursively simplifying political complexity in order to reduce the effort required to remain informed (Schmuck *et al.*, 2022). As was the case with opinion leaders as theorised by Lazarsfeld and Katz, the effectiveness of their role depends on the relationship of closeness, intimacy and trust they maintain with those who turn to them for information. The relationships that PSMIs establish with their followers through performances of micro-celebrity and authenticity serve as substitutes for the intimacy and closeness previously generated through face-to-face interaction (Harff and Schmuck, 2023). Summarising these ob-

servations, Bause (2021) attempted a definition of political influencers as:

> Users who become known on social media through the creation of personal brands, and regularly distribute self-produced political content that reaches and influences their audiences[1].

The study of “political influencers” in Spain has included digital opinion leaders from a variety of political, media and business fields (Casero-Ripollés, 2020). However, there have been a paucity of studies that have focused on the concept of the “native political influencer” (Palacios and Bonete, 2024). This refers to those influencers whose social media visibility comes primarily from the production of political content. However, the wide range of actors capable of taking on the role of digital opinion leaders is problematic for providing an accurate definition of PSMIs as an object of study (Riedl, Lukito and Woolley, 2023). This explains why the category of “political influencer” has been applied both to creators of digital political content and to politicians such as Pablo Iglesias and Albert Rivera (Suau-Gomila, Pont-Sorribes and Pedraza-Jiménez, 2020), Ada Colau (Sintes-Olivella, Casero-Ripollés and Yeste-Piquer, 2020) and Santiago Abascal (Pérez Curiel, 2020). The problem of narrowing the definition of political influencer to avoid ambiguities with other concepts has been recurrently mentioned in the literature (Harff and Schmuck, 2023; Palacios and Bonete, 2024) and will be addressed in this paper.

This study explores the differences between the notion of the native political influencer and the professional politician who is active on social media. The paper first argues the theoretical pertinence of applying field theory and affective structuralism to the case of political influencers. Next, the content of twenty in-depth interviews with native Spanish political influencers will be analysed in order to interpret their practices as social field dynamics. Finally, the paper will assess the extent to which politicians active on social media participate in or distance themselves from these field dynamics, in order to address the relevant differences between these politicians and political influencers.

Theoretical framework. The social field of political influencers as a socio-affective regime

Following Bourdieu, it can be said that the existence of any social field entails a dual movement between theory and praxis. On the one hand is the theoretical construction of the triad of field, habitus and capital (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2008) which is suitable for the object of research. On the other hand is the empirical finding that this conceptual triad is consistent with the observations made. The term “social field” refers to a relatively autonomous, objective social space constituted by a system of positions that are hierarchically structured. These positions result from the asymmetric distribution of the field’s capital among the agents who compete for it. The asymmetric distribution of capital has the effect of determining the differential access to resources desired by agents. Resource scarcity and struggles over capital generate tensions within every social field, which are articulated as relations of alliance and antagonism. This competitive logic follows customs, norms, conventions and institutions specific to the field that are relatively stable over time; however, the acceptable and unacceptable forms of competition within the field remain the object of ongoing struggle and debate among agents.

[1] This definition is an English rendering of the author’s Spanish translation from the original German article.

Metric visibility as influencers' field's capital

The literature on influencers has interpreted the visibility accumulated on social media and expressed in platform metrics as a type of social capital (Hearn, 2010; Marwick, 2015; Gandini, 2016). Social capital is, according to Bourdieu, "a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2008). In the case under discussion here, it is a network of social relationships woven by each PSMI with their own followers, whose various interactions (followings, likes, comments, etc.) record the influencer's metrics on the platforms. The platform, in its capacity as a corporate institution, also shapes the institutionalised and lasting character of the medium. It ultimately determines the content of its social media outlet, while simultaneously operating as a sociotechnical space (Bucher, 2012) that both hosts and influences the interactions unfolding within it.

In light of the concept of capital, the visibility game that Cotter (2019) attributes to influencers can be understood as a game for the accumulation of capital characteristic of every field. In this way, the visibility game can be thought of as that which turns the social field into a "field of play"—*champ de jeu*—(Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2008). This involves conceiving of metric visibility as capital, which helps to understand other practices observed in influencers as field dynamics. For example, the mobilisation of metric visibility to gain advantages in other fields, as a phenomenon of transmutation or conversion of capital (Duffy *et al*., 2021; Villegas, 2022). In this sense, field theory becomes a particularly interesting theoretical approach for analysing the visibility game that particularly affects political influencers.

The *illusio* of the field as a socio-affective phenomenon

For a social field to persist over time, the agents who participate in it must be motivated to reproduce the game that takes place there. This interest in the play of the field, the agents' engagement in it, is what Bourdieu conceptualised as *illusio* (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2008). *Illusio* is not a self-determined individual interest, but an effect of the field on subjects who are sensitive to its influence and therefore become agents of the field. Moreover, contributions from Frédéric Lordon's affective structuralism, an approach explicitly aligned with Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical work (Lordon, 2018), can enrich the concept of *illusio* by developing the affective dynamics that underpin its production.

Frédéric Lordon's work focuses on the processes through which institutions succeed in shaping the motivations and desires of individuals. Affects are thus conceptualised as a mediating element between structure and agency. According to Lordon, social structures have the capacity to generate affect in agents, which gives rise to their motivations and desires. Drawing on Spinoza's philosophy, Lordon interprets social institutions as regimes of motions of bodies that have been stabilised by a specific affective map. The study of any institution requires analysing its particular socio-affective regime, that is, the set of affective dynamics that influence the subjects who participate in it and which, in turn, explain their motivation to continue participating.

In applying this perspective, *illusio* should emerge as an affective outcome in an agent sensitive to events in the field. A crucial element of agents in any field is thus the common affect that explains the reproduction of motivations to per-

form agent practices, i.e. the "desire to keep playing". Based on this, two tasks can be recognised that are essential for the analysis in this paper. Firstly, specifically defining the common affect behind the production of *illusio* in the case of political influencers. This entails specifying the joys and sorrows that constitute it, followed by explaining why these particular joys and sorrows are associated with the continuation of the play of the field, that is, with the pursuit of metric visibility by posting political content on social media. And, secondly, identifying the objective field mechanisms that explain the systematic emergence of the common affect. This involves noting the process—to which all political influencers are subjected—that explains the recurrent production of the common affect that sustains *illusio*.

Micro-celebrities and political opinion leaders. The habitus of the political influencer

Habitus can be understood as a matrix that generates field practices embedded in the body of agents in the field (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2008). It is therefore used as a creative disposition of agents that pre-reflexively orients their strategies within the field towards the accumulation of capital. The concept of *habitus* therefore includes core elements of influencers' dispositions and techniques such as self-branding (Gandini, 2016), micro-celebrity practices and all self-made dispositions framed in influencer entrepreneurialism. This understanding is grounded in their recurrence within the practical dispositions of influencers, but above all, in their role as pre-reflexive orientations towards the efficient accumulation of metric visibility.

Other authors have identified dispositions in political influencers that have also been attributed to influencers in general, such as the tendency towards relational and affective investment (Harris, Foxman and Martin, 2023; Harff and Schmuck, 2023), self-presentation as micro-celebrities and the desire to accumulate metric visibility (Bause, 2021). These dispositions are assumed to be important elements of the *habitus* of the field of the political influencers under discussion here.

An additional element is proposed as a working hypothesis for the configuration of PSMIs' *habitus*: the fundamental desire to influence the political opinions of their followers. This is the minimum social fact defining the political influencer, the pervasive assumption in the abundant literature adhering to Lazarsfeld's theory of opinion leadership. This points to a crucial difference with the *habitus* of other influencers, who are more cautious in addressing political issues in their content for fear of being rejected by their audiences (Lehto and Mannevuo, 2023).

The type of political influence to which PSMIs aspire is, fundamentally, the structuring of public opinion among their audiences. Studies on their actual ability to produce this effect are still exploratory (Riedl, Lukito and Woolley, 2023). However, Arnesson (2022) has suggested that the mechanism that influences audience consumption decisions underpinning the business model of commercial influencers may operate similarly on the political attitudes of PSMIs' followers. They have also been attributed increasing importance as a source of political information among younger people to the detriment of traditional media (Beers, 2023). Regardless of their actual ability to influence the opinion of their followers, the quest for political influence has been identified as a "strong motivator" for the creation of political content (Bause, 2021).

In order to conceptualise the relationship between metric visibility and political influence, it is useful to conceive of the former as a field's capital and the latter as an asset (Joignant, 2022). A field's capital follows slow logics of amassing, which can be explained by an agent's cumulative motions within the field over time. An asset, by contrast, is a resource possessed by the agent which entails minimising the lag between its use and effects. For Joignant, it is common for agents to stake claims on the conversion of assets into capital with varying degrees of success, in order to secure advantageous positions within a field. This is the case, for example, when wealthy businesspeople mobilise their money (an asset) to carve out a place for themselves within the field of professional politicians (political capital). The reverse also occurs in cases when political capital (being the visible leader of a national party) is converted into assets (travelling with a personal chauffeur or having access to VIP areas in some establishments, for example). Following this line of reasoning, the accumulation of visibility on social media (capital) may prove desirable for PSMIs insofar as it is associated with the expectation of converting it into political influence (an asset); that is, the ability to shape their followers' opinions through the posting of digital content.

METHODOLOGICAL DESIGN

This paper seeks to narrow and refine the scope of concept of "political influencer" by removing the ambiguities that persist in the literature. To this end, a research question was posed:

What are the main differences between native political influencers and professional politicians with respect to their dispositions and strategies in the social media attention economy?

Both actors were hypothesised to be agents whose practices and dispositions can be analysed in terms of social field dynamics. While the professional political field has been extensively studied (Joignant, 2022), the notion of field has been less frequently applied to political influencers than to non-political influencers. This requires empirically justifying the relevance of the analysis of their social space as a field. A number of secondary questions can be derived from this premise, aimed at clarifying the content of the *triad of field, habitus and capital*:

- How does metric visibility operate as a form of capital in the field of political influencers?
- How do the dispositions of influencer entrepreneurialism shape the *habitus* of these actors?
- What role do aspirations for political influence play in their motivations?
- What socio-affective mechanisms underpin the *illusio* in this field?

These questions guide the general objective of this paper: to analyse the structural and practical differences between native political influencers and professional politicians active on social media. Three specific objectives can be derived from this: 1) to examine metric visibility as a form of capital; 2) to analyse the *habitus* of political influencers, considering the impact of entrepreneurialism and their autonomy from formal organisations; 3) to explore political influence as a driver of *illusio* and the socio-affective mechanisms underlying it.

To address these objectives, twenty in-depth interviews were conducted with some Spanish native political influencers. The sample inclusion criteria were as follows: 1) Being the holder of a Twitter, Instagram or YouTube account which posted original political content, rather than mere reposts. 2) Having a stable audience of

around or above 10 000 followers, a minimum threshold widely agreed upon for considering someone to be an influencer (Bishop, 2019; Bause, 2021). Some cases with fewer than 10 000 followers were also included where content using micro-celebrity and self-branding techniques was regularly posted, due to their value as aspirants seeking entry into the field. And 3) Ensuring structural representativeness in terms of gender and follower volume, in line with the literature (Villegas, 2022).

The sample structure was intended to capture regularities in field positions and relationships, as well as significant internal differences. The analysis of these variations identified the structural logic that organised the field of political influencers, by observing how the *habitus*, the accumulation of metric visibility and the socio-affective dynamics were expressed or changed. This analysis provided interpretative insights into how the field operates in Spain.

The sample was composed as follows: [see Table A1 in Annexes].

The interviews had an average duration of ninety minutes and were conducted by video call between September and December 2023. Participants were informed that their responses were anonymous. Zoom recording required that interviewees used the interface to give and confirm their consent.

The interviews used a semi-structured script to address the trajectories of the interviewees as creators of political content; their links to the professional institutional political field (Joignant, 2022) and the traditional media field; and perceptions of phenomena related to platform dependency, including monetisation, moderation of political discourse and algorithmic content curation. The interviews were transcribed and coded using the Atlas.ti software.

The analysis was conducted in accordance with the principles of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2008), following an initial open coding phase and subsequent axial coding, all of which was aimed at integrating the initial categories into broader theoretical elements. The saturation criterion—the point at which new units cease to bring relevant categories—was applied to reinforce internal validity, as this ensured that the emerging categories reflected patterns that were recurrent in the corpus. The central categories that emerged (Valles, 2015: 633) were PSMIs' "search for metric visibility", which consisted of excerpts referring to both their interest in visibility and the strategies deployed to accumulate it; and "influencer entrepreneurialism", which collected excerpts related to a disposition to work individually, a strong commitment to remain independent from organisations, and the use of self-presentation techniques such as self-branding or micro-celebrity. These findings were triangulated by notes and captures collected in a netnographic research diary (Kozinets, 2019).

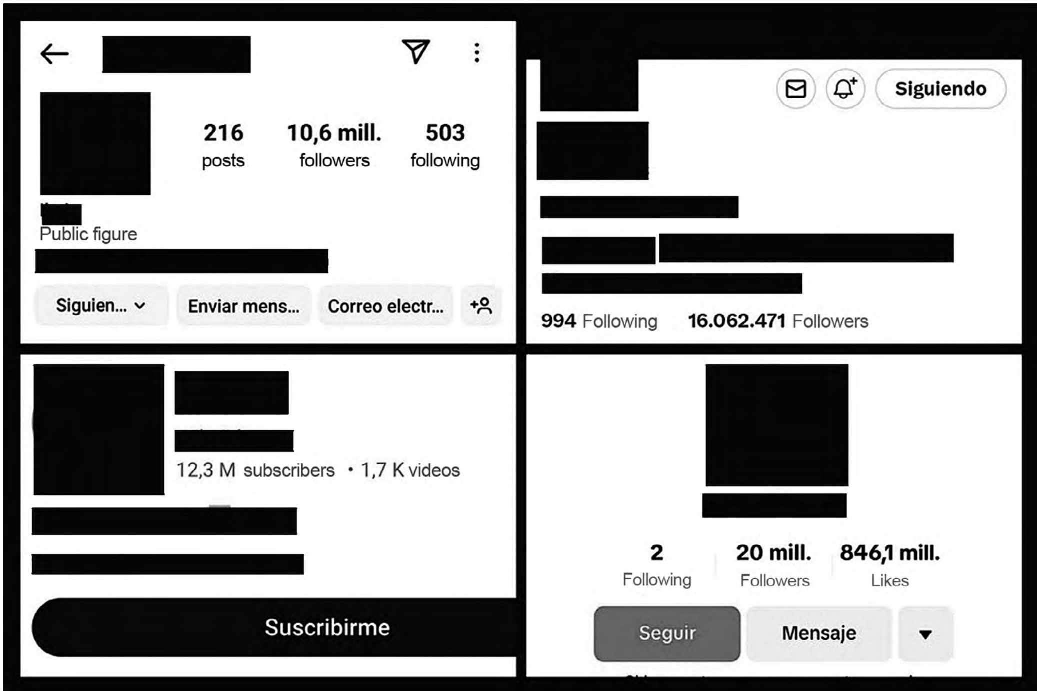
Results

The "hypervisibility" of metric visibility as a field's capital

The visibility of each influencer as expressed through metrics was ranked as a leading feature in the interface of any social media platform account. This particular arrangement of data is not random, but rather facilitates a distinctive association with each creator. Each post also usually displays metrics indicating the success of visibility and impact (engagement): likes, views, reposts, etc.

The public display of visibility metrics, deliberately positioned to make it impossible to ignore, is essential for the field

IMAGE 1. *Screenshots of the interface of the accounts on Instagram, Twitter, YouTube and TikTok (anonymized). Metrics related to the number of followers dominate the visual space in all of them*



Source: Prepared by the author.

dynamics built around their accumulation as capital to emerge. By placing metrics in the most visually prominent spaces in each account's interface, each user's identity is linked to their performance in terms of their ability to gain visibility. It is significant that visibility metrics are displayed alongside other elements used to identify each agent in the field, such as their profile image and their username.

The interface therefore renders each creator's field trajectory public. In this way, the field's positions are made publicly visible, enabling the hierarchical classification of creators and their content according to their success in attracting attention. This fulfils key functions in orienting agents' strategies, as it determines who serves as a model to emulate and which collaborations may prove beneficial or detrimental in terms of access to new audiences. It also enables the identification of which types of one's own content, as well as that produced by others, "are working" (succeed in accumulating visibility), and which are not. This information makes it possible for them to employ and correct strategies to accumulate more capital and compete for advantageous positions in the field.

Participants also showed unanimous interest in obtaining good visibility metrics. Attracting the attention of social media users was described by agents as the primary purpose of their practices. In this vein, the creative act behind the posts involved a reflexive and conscious disposition aimed at maximising their engagement on social media. This aspiration conditioned both the content of their posts and their posting strategies:

In the end, the important thing is that the content you are making is interesting and that people end up seeing it [...] you try to upload it in such a way that it can be more visible, it can be more interesting (participant 3).

Achieving the highest possible metric performance was not merely an ancillary reward for participants. On the contrary, it was the key driving force for them to produce content: “it’s intended to ensure that my message reaches the greatest number of people, otherwise I wouldn’t be launching it” (participant 11). Thus, the “pressure to get likes and have a lot of followers” (participant 3) was seen to permeate the creative practices of political influencers. This pressure was shared by all the PSMIs interviewed and took a mixed form, as it operated both as a primary motivation and as a “demand”: a “circle of likes and followers” (participant 19) that drove an inertia which was difficult for them to circumvent. These discourses may point to the generic desire of every agent in the field to accumulate capital. The “pressure” or the labyrinthine “circle” of likes would thus express the subjective perception of *illusio* that prevented the participating political influencers from remaining indifferent to the play of the field, and compelled them to commit to it.

Metric euphoria, the production of *illusio* and the search for political influence

For the participants interviewed, even those with smaller numbers of followers, the viewing figures associated with a successful post were remarkably substantial. They had audiences of tens of thousands of people, even over a million for content that had gone viral. This degree of attention on themselves (given that they were the micro-celebrity protagonists of their posts) was notably greater than that which could be obtained through pre-digital media. It is therefore understandable that, for many of them, content going viral was highly eventful and had profound emotional consequences. Several participants remembered their first viral content as a milestone, a turning point in their career in the field. When talking about these “metric milestones”, they repeated the same discursive pattern: the memory of a specific metric and its association with feelings of overflowing intense joy. There were interviewees who talked about the “fascination, the dopamine rush” they felt when one of their posts achieved “30 000 likes” (participant 11). Another recalled “100 000 likes and I don’t know if there were eight million views” and described it as “crazy, the best tweet I’ve ever written” (participant 10).

This recurrent experience of intense joy linked to the attainment of high metrics, described as “metric euphoria”, appeared to be a crucial factor in the socio-affective stabilisation of the field. Metric euphoria acted as a “common affect” within the field, which fulfilled the two criteria necessary for the production of *illusio* outlined above:

a) Sensitivity to metric euphoria constitutes the minimum ability necessary to be engaged in the visibility game that organises the field. All political influencers, to have such status, must have good metrics. But they must also experience a positive affect when they obtain those metrics, and feel them with sufficient intensity to turn the recurrent search for those metrics into a habit.
b) The representation (as metrics) of any interaction aimed at attracting attention, together with the “hypervisibility” of these metrics in the platform interface, are key socio-technical mechanisms. These mechanisms provide the necessary means to recurrently induce

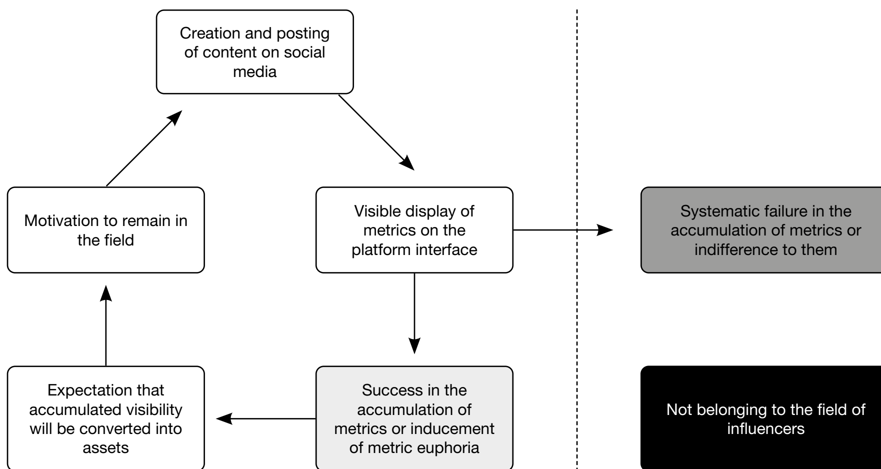
metric euphoria in agents that achieve successful practices within the field.

Euphoria over the achievement of good metrics therefore explains the motivation of agents to participate in the play of the field, and also illuminates the objective mechanisms that facilitate the satisfaction of this desire. These mechanisms, constituted by the formal institutions of the field itself (such as platform design), enable a fuller understanding of the field's socio-affective regime and the conditions underpinning the production of *illusio*.

This abstract model can serve as an analytical tool for the study of the field of influencers in general, although it requires specific adaptations for each content creation niche. These adaptations must take into account the particular ways in which metric visibility is converted into specific assets within each field. The analysis here also suggests that, while "good metrics" have intrinsic value in the play of the field, their motivating force lies in the expectation that these metrics can be converted into tangible assets. For example, content monetisation turns metrics into money. In the specific case of political influencers, the interpretation made by agents of the link between the accumulation of attention on social media (the field's capital) and political influence (an asset) is reconstructed below.

When participants were asked about this issue, their understanding was that the accumulation of visibility was a fundamental tactical objective for achieving a subsequent strategic goal: influencing their audiences' political opinions. This conception of metrics as a mere means to a higher end was often qualified by their intrinsic power of attraction: "There comes a point when you get so caught up in the circle of likes and followers that you forget that this was all supposed to be a bridge" (participant 19). An instrumental political conception of metrics predominated among the interviewees. The underlying belief was that there is a strong and direct relationship between having "good numbers" and influencing the political opinions of audiences: "the political impact, not only economic but also political,

IMAGE 2. *Diagram showing the production of* illusio *for the SMIs' social field*



Source: Prepared by the author.

depends on how many people your message reaches" (participant 7).

This mental association between the ability to shape others' political opinions and metric visibility is not arbitrary. It is a reasonable assumption to have from the perspective of political influencers for at least three reasons. Firstly, because of their tendency to draw analogies between attending political events in person and their online content views. Once this idea has taken hold of them, it is understandable that they perceive themselves as being notably influential in comparison with their own position prior to entering the field of political influencers. One of the participants recalled his efforts during their university activism to organise the kind of events where "at the end fifty people would come to talk about a reformulation of the wound through Lacan [laughs]" (participant 2). This participant's decision to begin producing political content on social media was a reaction to his limited capacity for mobilisation when compared with the attention that could be obtained on social media.

Secondly, the viral nature of their posts very often involved attracting the attention of notable spaces in the political system, such as party leaders or traditional media outlets, such as radio or television. Being recognised by central agents within the professional institutional political field who shared or reproduced their discourse was perceived by participants as a demonstration of genuine political influence derived from the accumulation of metric visibility.

Finally, it was common for the interviewed PSMIs with larger numbers of followers to have joined the staff of television programmes, radio shows or the technical teams of political parties as communicators or advisers. The conversion of political influencer capital into advantageous positions in media and political parties is a complex issue that is beyond the research objective of this paper. Nevertheless, it is understandable that actors conceive their involvement in positions within the professional institutional political field as an extension of their political influence. Although this pathway lies outside the field of political influencers, as it follows the operating logics of other fields, it ultimately results in the accumulation of political assets, which is why it has been included here.

PSMIs as the new digital political entrepreneurs

The concept of "influencer entrepreneurialism" as a self-made disposition characteristic of influencers may lead to the view that PSMIs perceive themselves as political agents accountable only to themselves, as being "their own boss" in the pursuit of political influence. Unlike what occurs in the professional institutional political field, political influencers take actions without the need to be part of any formal organisation. The "institutional" dimension in the professional institutional political field refers to its agents' inescapable membership of collective bodies (state institutions, political parties, traditional media, trade unions, social movements, etc.). By contrast, for PSMIs the "institutional" dimension refers to their relationship with the platform, where they perform work that is strongly dependent on their individual initiative, without belonging to formal organisations (Villegas, 2022).

In this specific sense, political influencers can be considered to be political actors "playing in single-player mode". This explains their common self-perception as "narcissistic" subjects (participant 11), who are "highly egocentric" (partici-

pant 3) or "someone who considers that they deserve to be heard by thousands of people" (participant 11). All the participants believed that their single-handed production of political content was liberating in political terms. This is due to the fact that they considered that negotiating or agreeing with others on the content they posted online would limit their overriding desire to have "the freedom to say what I want" (participant 10), to be able to convey "their own stuff" (participant 2), to have "a voice of their own " (participant 1) or to "find their own space" (participant 14). The resonance of this discourse with narratives associated with entrepreneurialism was recognised by some of the interviewed agents themselves, who caricatured themselves by aligning with the discourse of a "garage start-up" (participant 2).

> It is also a question of ego, of "I want to say it on my own" [...] which also, basically, has the virtue of being able to say it on your own without anyone interfering with how you are going to say it. You have total control of the message, total control of how it's going to be shared (participant 2).

This conception of organisations as threats to the autonomy of the agent was very often voiced against political parties, media and social organisations. The sense of distance with which influencers related to other organisations in the professional institutional political field was also expressed in their desire to influence them. This influence was said not to be exercised through membership and integration, but "from the outside", through mechanisms that allowed them to retain creative freedom and avoid formal commitment. For example, this was reported to occur during training sessions in digital political communication delivered to party cadres or social movements; informal conversations with party leaders that influencers took advantage of "to lobby for my positions [...] so that they adopt my discourse" (participant 11); or publicly, by making their own discursive content go viral, which was subsequently taken up and replicated by prominent agents within the professional institutional political field.

The suspicion towards organisations in the professional institutional political field can be interpreted as a demonstration of "influencer entrepreneurialism" in the particular case of political influencers. This trait not only forms a central part of their *habitus*, but also guarantees the continuity of their performance as micro-celebrities, a necessary condition for the accumulation of metric visibility. Moreover, this disposition serves the purposes of the desire to influence political opinion, an element that underpins the *illusio* of the field. In this sense, PSMIs tend to interact with political parties more as external influencers than as subordinate actors. Although the actual effectiveness of these practices is difficult to measure, what matters for the purposes of this study is their value as beliefs that motivate participation in the field and guide activities in accordance with its norms and conventions. If this "entrepreneurial" disposition does indeed succeed in (albeit partially) influencing political parties, social movements or the media, it could justify considering political influencers to be "peripheral agents of the political field" (Joignant, 2022).

Competition and struggle in an algorithmised field

If metric visibility operates as capital among political influencers, as has been noted, then its asymmetrical distribution produces a space of hierarchical positions, an essential feature in any field. The resulting scarcity of attention thus becomes the necessary driving force behind the emer-

gence of a competitive logic among the various agents involved, from which different degrees of success (and, therefore, of domination within the field) would follow. In the words of one of the interviewees: "You see some numbers and if the numbers are good, then you are doing a good job on social media. On the contrary, if you see bad numbers, you are doing a bad job" (participant 17). As has been seen, this hierarchical structure is publicly displayed in the metrics of each agent, shown in each platform's interface. However, the display of these metrics is not sufficient by itself to establish that they are part of a competitive logic. It is also necessary for agents to interpret and use them to that end. In this sense, the political influencers interviewed were indeed inclined to understand this unequal metric distribution in terms of hierarchy and power as a source of status differences: "my opinion is worth more than yours because I have more visits" (participant 13).

In turn, the platform's algorithm is at the heart of this competitive regime because of its role in the automated selection of content displayed and, therefore, in determining how visibility is distributed. The information on the exact functioning of the algorithm is protected as a trade secret by platforms, which generates what the literature has called "algorithmic opacity" (Villegas, 2022). This is a common source of uncertainty among political influencers, who often refer to the algorithm as a kind of "God Almighty who sometimes beats the hell out of you" (participant 2). What the algorithm wants is never fully understood, but it always demands submission to avoid failure in the accumulation of visibility.

Discussion and conclusions

The results obtained in this study are a preliminary approach to an understanding of the social field of political influencers. Given the complexity of the field, these findings do not pretend to be exhaustive, nor do they claim to definitively resolve its existence as an autonomous field. Nevertheless, they provide a basis for the application of social field theory and affective structuralism to analyse the dynamics engaged in by these agents. In particular, the definition of the *triad of field, habitus and capital* in connection with political influencers led to the identification of the specificities of their practices and dispositions. Contrasting the dynamics of the PSMIs' field with those of professional politicians active on social media shows the most relevant differences between the two concepts more clearly.

Differences according to the ways in which visibility is obtained

What defines the native political influencer is the creation of digital political content as the main way to gain visibility. Some of the interviewees have diversified their modes of gaining visibility through appearances on television or radio, primarily on panel discussions and political satire programmes. This diversification is confined to political influencers with the largest numbers of *followers*, who mobilise their accumulated visibility as a form of capital in order to secure these opportunities. Nevertheless, these PSMIs see appearances in traditional media as "occasional dabbing" because of their sporadic nature and uncertain continuity. This could explain why none of them have stopped producing political content on their social media accounts, and why, for some of them, the importance of "being on TV" lies in the impact these appearances have on their social media metrics. This reinforces the pertinence of the notion that their activity on platforms is their "main stake".

The professional politician active on social media, on the other hand, plays a more diversified role in gaining visibility. The advantageous position of the professional institutional political field in the general field of power guarantees popularity even to those agents with less capital. This explains why a speech in parliament may be circumstantially featured in prime time media slots dedicated to commenting on current political events, even if the politician who speaks is a fourth- or fifth-row member of parliament[2]. This “hybrid form” (Suau-Gomila, Pont-Sorribes and Pedraza-Jiménez, 2020) of gaining visibility allows professional politicians to attract attention through both traditional media and social media. This is not widespread within the field of political influencers, as discussed in this paper, but reserved only for a few, those who are the most successful.

Differences according to the ways in which political influence is obtained and exercised

Political influencers aim to expand their political influence by posting digital content. This has been argued here based on two assumptions. On the one hand, that the exercise of PSMIs’ political influence is confined to political communication, understood as the shaping of audiences’ political opinion. On the other hand, it has been proposed here that PSMIs’ search for political influence depends on the mental association made between this influence and platforms metrics, notwithstanding the fact that they can have real political influence in some cases.

Professional politicians exhibit greater diversification in how they acquire political influence and how this influence is exercised. For professional politicians, being active on social media is one of the many ways they exert political influence. It is true that politicians can exercise the same type of communicative persuasion on social media (and in traditional media) to which political influencers aspire. However, given the preeminent position of the professional institutional political field, it can be asserted that its fundamental political asset is not having garnered large audiences on social media, but rather holding an institutional post within the State structure or the organisational leadership of a political party. This means that they are much less reliant on gaining visibility on social media for the exercise of political influence, and that there are more ways of exercising such influence available to them. Some of these are entirely beyond the reach of native political influencers; these avenues for exercising influence include drafting laws and regulations, holding executive office, participating in collegiate decision-making bodies, having a right to speak and vote in appointment of relevant positions, and other forms of exercising power that are characteristic of professional politicians (Joignant, 2022).

Differences according to dispositions *vis-à-vis* formal organisations

“Influencer entrepreneurialism” is a fundamental part of the *habitus* of political influencers. This involves rejecting collective mediation in the creative act and posting strategies, for fear of losing autonomy *vis-à-vis* formal organisations. In contrast, in the field of professional politicians, membership of formal organisations is a necessary condition for entry into the field and must be performed skilfully and frequently (Joignant, 2022), which requires that professional politicians adapt their dispositions to the social ecosystem of

[2] The position of State institutions is so preeminent that even security, cleaning or printing staff at Parliament may gain visibility in national-circulation newspapers through their tangential contact with the political field (Martín and Junquera, 2016).

political parties. This difference limits politicians' ability to fully adopt conventions that are characteristic of the influencer field, such as micro-celebrity forms of self-presentation that actively promote individual visibility or the unrestricted spectacularisation of content. This contradiction between "influencer practices" and belonging to the professional institutional political field could explain the scarcity of interactions between politicians and their followers, especially during electoral campaigns (Suau-Gomila, Pont-Sorribes and Pedraza-Jiménez, 2020; Pérez Curiel, 2020). While interacting with *followers* is part of the basic relational and emotional work required to increase *engagement* for any influencer (Baym, 2018), it entails a risk of conflict that can threaten the image of themselves that politicians seek to construct during campaign periods.

On the other hand, the existence of specialised teams responsible for managing social media accounts that assist professional politicians place an intermediary layer between them and the platform, which distances them from political influencers. As noted above, some tension may arise between the practices used by influencers to capture visibility on social media and the imperatives of the professional institutional political field. This tension can lead to failure to attract attention on social media due to excessive conservatism. It may even lead to a loss of political capital. The sensitivity of these operations explains the need for management teams to assist the politician where the political influencer works alone.

Below is a comparative table which summarises the main differences between the political influencer and the politician active on social media with regard to their strategies and motivations as agents seeking to accumulate digital visibility within the attention economy: (see Table A2, in the Annex section).

Future avenues of research

This paper has presented two ideal types representing two extremes. However, there are politicians active on social media who limit themselves to reposting party content or only sporadically post their own content. Although they are active on social media, they are not political influencers, because they are disengaged from influencer practices aimed at gaining visibility. Moreover, it may be assumed that in such cases there will be indifference towards metrics, an attitude that immediately excludes them from the field of political influencers.

Nevertheless, there are case studies that point to the use of self-presentation and spectacularisation techniques among professional politicians (Suau-Gomila, Pont-Sorribes and Pedraza-Jiménez, 2020; Pérez Curiel, 2020) that match some practices observed among influencers. There is a need to delve deeper into the process experienced by some politicians on social media whereby they are "becoming influencers". A more profound analysis would lead to an understanding of the conditions of production, where examining the composition and practices of social media management teams may be key; and to an assessment of its broader impact on the modes of political representation.

On the other hand, this paper has not addressed the role played by ideologies in the field of political influencers, but has focused on the practices they have in common as agents in the same social field. According to Joignant's (2022) thesis for the professional institutional political field, the importance of political ideas is associated with their use as tools for struggles in the field. In this sense, ideologies matter not only because they are the raw material in the production of the content that enables capital accumula-

tion, but also because they channel the interactions between agents, conditioning the regime of possible alliances and rivalries. Some political influencers interviewed tend to create content together with those who are "more or less within the same ideological coordinates" (participant 5), and to avoid collaborations with PSMIs of adverse ideologies in order "not to give visibility to the enemy". This suggests the crucial role of ideologies in the distribution of capital within the field and in the design of competitive strategies, issues that warrant more in-depth examination in future research.

It would also be appropriate for future research to complement the qualitative approach adopted in this study with quantitative analyses aimed at mapping the socio-demographic space of political influencers in Spain and identifying the statistical distribution of the dispositions and practices considered relevant in this analysis. This would allow for an even more accurate mapping of the field of political influencers. Furthermore, a more detailed reflection on the implicit biases in the sample design, such as the under-representation of certain audience tiers or the exclusion of specific platforms, would enable a deeper problematisation of the conditions of access, recognition and hierarchisation within the field of political influencers.

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ANNEXES

TABLE A1. *Sampling design of the in-depth interviews conducted*

Identification number	Social media outlet(s)	Number of followers	Gender
Participant 1	Instagram	18,200	Male
Participant 2	Twitter, Instagram	Instagram: 255,000, Twitter: 185,000	Male
Participant 3	YouTube, Instagram	YouTube: 10,000, Instagram: 4,800	Female
Participant 4	Twitter	94,400	Male
Participant 5	Twitter, Instagram	Instagram: 34,500, Twitter: 20,000	Female
Participant 6	TikTok, Instagram	TikTok: 280,000, Instagram: 74,000	Female
Participant 7	YouTube, Twitter, Twitch	YouTube: 48,300, Twitter: 19,500, Twitch: 9,000	Male
Participant 8	YouTube, Twitter	YouTube: 132,000, Twitter: 37,500	Male
Participant 9	Twitter, Instagram	Instagram: 79,700, Twitter: 44,300	Male
Participant 10	Twitter	116,500	Female
Participant 11	Twitter, Instagram	Twitter: 25,000, Instagram: 14,000	Male
Participant 12	Instagram	9,000	Female
Participant 13	Instagram	12,000	Female
Participant 14	Twitter	69,000	Female
Participant 15	Twitter	30,400	Female
Participant 16	TikTok	15,000	Female
Participant 17	Instagram	7,200	Male
Participant 18	Instagram	10,000	Female
Participant 19	Instagram	6,500	Female
Participant 20	YouTube, Twitter	YouTube: 358,000, Twitter: 59,000	Female

Source: Prepared by the author.

TABLE A2. *Comparative table between native political influencers and professional politicians active on social media according to the dynamics of the social field*

	NATIVE POLITICAL INFLUENCERS	PROFESSIONAL POLITICIANS ACTIVE ON SOCIAL MEDIA
Ways of attaining visibility	Creating political content on social media is their main stake.	Presence on social media, but also on traditional media, as they are part of the professional institutional political field.
Ways of obtaining political influence	Visibility success on social media.	Membership of the professional institutional political field. Visibility on social media is only one of several ways to exercise political influence.
Disposition *vis-à-vis* formal organisations	Independent, solitary disposition, reluctant to join formal organisations for fear of losing individual autonomy.	Appropriate disposition for the political party ecosystem and integration into formal organisations.

Source: Prepared by the author.