

## **THE PRODUCTION OF DIGITAL POPULAR CULTURE AFTER THE PANDEMIC THROUGH INFLUENCERS AND SOCIAL MEDIA WITH AN INSIGHT ON THE THEME OF INCLUSIVITY.**

### **ABSTRACT**

The paper aims to describe how the COVID-19 pandemic significantly reshaped the landscape of pop culture production and consumption, with social media and influencers playing a central role.

As lockdowns and social distancing measures were implemented, traditional forms of entertainment like theaters, concerts, and live events came to a halt. This led to a surge in online entertainment, with creators, influencers, and established entertainment industry players turning to social media platforms, streaming services, and video-sharing platforms like TikTok, YouTube and Instagram to reach their audience.

Influencers, individuals with social media relevance, gained more prominence during the pandemic. They provided relatable content, entertainment, and information to their followers, creating new opportunities for brands to connect with their target audiences. Moreover, some content creators began to focus on promoting inclusivity in their content.

Social media platforms became more than ever powerful tools for sharing diverse perspectives, promoting social change, and connecting with a broad and engaged audience. The lessons learned during this time continue to influence pop culture production, emphasizing the importance of inclusivity and representation in the post-pandemic world.

### **1.A BRIEF INTRODUCTION: DIGITAL POPULAR CULTURE.**

In the age of digital convergence, popular culture has undergone a profound transformation, ushering in new phenomena in society. In general terms, popular culture refers to various forms of entertainment, fashion, music, art, literature, technology, sports, and other elements that capture the interests and tastes of a large and diverse audience. It is dynamic and can change rapidly, reflecting the collective preferences and values of a society, as well as the influence of mass media and social trends. It is a key aspect of modern society and plays a significant role in shaping how people express themselves and connect with the world around.<sup>1</sup> The proliferation of social media has redefined the dynamics of social interaction, leading to the disintermediation from traditional stakeholders and enabling direct participation in the public arena of cultural, political, and social activities. Virtually everyone with access to these platforms can now express opinions, creativity, and engage through texts, images, audiovisual material, or others. Cultures created by the people for themselves gather communities with similar interests and can transform into mass phenomena, often irrespective of the involvement of mass media. The construction of meanings, identities, and the exploration of otherness are central themes within this evolving popular culture landscape, reflecting the diversity and complexity of the digital age.<sup>2</sup>

### **2.THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: POPULAR CULTURE ON SOCIAL MEDIA WITH THE AIM OF SHARING SOLIDARITY.**

It's a matter of fact that the COVID-19 pandemic, that swept across the world in early 2020, had a profound impact on various aspects of society. I thought it might be an interesting starting point to explore the role of social media and influencers figures within the realm of popular culture

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<sup>1</sup> Grazian, David (2017), *Mix It Up. Popular Culture, Mass Media, and Society*. Second edition. New York, W.W.Norton & Co.Minardi.

<sup>2</sup> Enrico and Paoplo Desogus, *The Last Forty Years of Italian Pop Culture (Chapter Two: Popular Culture in the Digital Age – Emanuela Patti)*

production. For sure, it was a moment never experienced before and it had radically changed our way to experience real life, but also life on social media and cultural production through digital platforms. The country's experience with the pandemic was characterized by severe lockdowns, overwhelmed healthcare systems, and widespread social and economic disruptions. The nation was suddenly thrust into an era of uncertainty, isolation, and confinement. Public gatherings, events, and traditional avenues of cultural expression were put on hold, leaving people in search of new ways to connect, entertain themselves, and find meaning amidst the chaos.

The pandemic forced people to turn to digital platforms for social interaction, entertainment, and information. In this context, social media emerged as a lifeline for many, providing not only a means to stay connected with loved ones but also an avenue for discovering and consuming cultural content. The various platforms, including TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, became essential tools to face the difficulties of the tragedy we were living.

From a quantitative analysis point of view, we can refer to the main findings of the *Debate on online social networks at the time of COVID-19, An Italian case study*'s research paper by Trevisan and Vassio. Specifically, the research involved collecting a dataset of over a million comments on more than a thousand social media posts, primarily focusing on Italian public figures during the period surrounding the lockdown. The text discusses the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on human behavior and society, particularly in Italy. The research focused on the reactions of people to this historic event, and social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook were used to gather data for this study. The study observed a rise in social media activity during the lockdown, with a significant increase in the volume of posts, comments, and reactions. Italian users became more active on social media during the morning and on Friday and Saturday evenings due to the lockdown's restrictions on in-person social activities. Additionally, there was an increase in comments expressing negative emotions like anxiety and inhibition during the lockdown.

Popular culture is shaped and influenced by the social, political, historical, and legal contexts in which it is produced. There are several examples to illustrate the various ways in which these factors affect popular culture. For instance, in the first half of the 20th century, the music industry created discrete genre categories based on the racial segregation of African American and white audiences. This segregation led to different classification, advertising, and marketing of music styles.

Another example is the physical and social infrastructure of cities and towns, like suburbanization and the rise of home entertainment (e.g., television), can influence the popularity and accessibility of certain forms of popular culture. Furthermore, government and state agencies play a significant role in cultural production.<sup>3</sup>

We have seen above how the spread of the pandemic has changed our daily lives. Multiple factors as health, legal restrictions and politics contributes to define a precise historical moment. We can for sure affirm that the context of the pandemic was crucial for the use of social media and the arise of figures such as influencers.

Furthermore, in the study of the matter in question, the functionalist approach can be applied to analyze how popular culture fulfills certain roles or functions within a society. The functionalist approach discusses how popular culture, including professional sports, celebrity magazines, and mass entertainment, serves to create social cohesion and unity among individuals within larger communities. It draws on Emile Durkheim's ideas about religion, emphasizing the role of shared symbols, the distinction between sacred and profane elements, and the generation of collective effervescence in binding societies together. Special events and rituals associated with popular culture, like religious ceremonies, provide a space for generating a sense of togetherness fostering patriotism and a shared national identity.

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<sup>3</sup> Grazian, David (2017), *Mix It Up. Popular Culture, Mass Media, and Society*. Second edition. New York, W.W.Norton & Co.Minardi.

In this sense, in the context of the pandemic, the production of contents of different genres on social media had the power to bring people together during a difficult time.

Italian users will for sure remember the #iorestoacasa hashtag predominating the first days of the pandemic. Giulia Giorgi and Alessandro Gandin on *#iorestoacasa: un'analisi visuale del primo lockdown attraverso Instagram e TikTok* discusses the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown measures on social interactions using the hashtags #iorestoacasa on platforms like Instagram and TikTok, which represents a merging of different forms of online community interaction.

While the primary purpose of the hashtag was to promote staying at home and following lockdown measures, people also incorporated elements of culture into their posts. For example, Italian musicians and bands used the hashtag to share performances from their home's balconies. People used the hashtag to share interest on movies, books, sports, and arts. This has been a phenomenon which raised popularity among social media, not only in Italy but all over the planet, becoming a symbolic representation of how people were trying to react during such a tragedy.

Moreover, "contingent communities" have emerged as a product of online interactions during the pandemic. These communities are formed due to the possibility and necessity of experiencing and rationalizing significant but temporary historical events through online means. The authors of the #iorestoacasa study discusses a shift from the perception of being "together but alone" in online interactions, to a state of "alone but together" during the pandemic. This shift is evident during the emergency restrictions, which bring people together even as they remain physically separated. Additionally, the article highlights that digital media's role during the pandemic goes beyond merely mediating social interactions, emphasizing the dynamic nature of online communication, reflecting both community building and the adaptation of digital platforms to accommodate these interactions and the emergence of positive activism in the form of virtue signaling within this context.

In this sense, popular culture, being coherent with the functionalist approach, can contribute to social stability by offering predictable forms of entertainment and ways to release tension. It provides an outlet for individuals to cope with stress and anxiety, reducing the likelihood of social disruption.

### **3. INFLUENCERS AS SOCIO-TECHNICAL ACTORS AND CULTURAL COMMENTORS.**

As discussed previously, the general definition of popular culture sticks on the fact that it refers to the cultural elements and expressions that are widely accepted, enjoyed, and recognized by many people. These cultural elements are created by individuals, groups, or institutions, such as artists, musicians, filmmakers, and content creators. The process of creating popular culture is often influenced by the values, beliefs, and preferences of both the creators and the society in which they live.<sup>4</sup>

A premise on the impact of influencers on various fields, including sociology and marketing is offered from the paper *Influencers as socio-technical actors: mapping the paths of influence and the traces of the digital influencers' system in Italy*. *Journal of Sociocybernetics* by Locatelli.

The study takes an ecological approach, viewing the influencer system as an environment with its own rules and subjects. It emphasizes the idea of conceptualizing influencers as socio-technical actors who operate within technological platforms. The role of influencers in social media is examined with a focus on the factors that contribute to their influence. Individuals who are considered "influencers" on social media gain their ability to impact others, their influence is not just about having many followers, it's something influenced by a combination of factors.

First, social aspects, which refers to how influencers interact with their followers and other users on the platform. They strategically engage with their audience, which helps them maintain or enhance their status.

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<sup>4</sup> Grazian, David (2017), *Mix It Up. Popular Culture, Mass Media, and Society*.

The text also mentions the idea of "professionalization", the expression means that influencers transition from casual or amateur activities on social media to a more structured and professional approach. During this process, they develop unique traits and characteristics that make them stand out. As they gain recognition and authority in their niche, they become more appealing to both their followers and brands. This professionalization process is a key step in their journey to becoming influential figures in the world of social media.

Moreover, influencers are seen as socio-technical actors also because they operate at the intersection of social and technical elements in the digital world. They are not just individuals creating content, they are active agents who navigate the digital landscape strategically, besides, their roles extend beyond content creation to include self-presentation, community building, and engagement with digital platforms and their affordances. They basically have a dual role: they are both users of the platforms and content creators, which allows them to influence and be influenced by the platform's features and policies. In fact, influencers play a significant role in shaping how social media platforms are used: they introduce new content formats, trends, and engagement practices that affect how other users interact with the platforms.

The relationship between influencers and popular culture is closely intertwined with the dynamics discussed above. For instance, they introduce and popularize fashion styles, beauty standards, lifestyles, and even social and political ideologies. As influencers gain followers and build communities, their preferences and choices become influential in the broader culture. They tap into current events, societal issues, and cultural shifts, effectively mirroring and addressing the concerns and interests of their audience. By doing so, influencers become not just trendsetters but also cultural commentators, providing their perspective on contemporary issues, which can influence public discourse and understanding.

#### **4. RAISSA AND MOMO'S CASE STUDY: FROM MICRO-INFLUENCERS TO MAJOR POP CULTURE EVENTS.**

As a matter of fact, according to one of the latest surveys conducted by Morning Consult, as many as 14% of Gen Z uses TikTok as their primary search engine, and the number is only destined to grow. TikTok is currently worth over \$65 billion and has over 1 billion active users every month, of which 34% belong to Gen Z. According to Nielsen surveys, as many as 64% of users believe they can freely be themselves on the app, and 56% believe they can post videos that they wouldn't post on other social channels. Precisely for these reasons, TikTok has made inclusivity, an essential element to allow self-expression. Inclusiveness is also a relevant hot topic as a key to understanding the Gen Z target better: according to the recent Edelman Trust Barometer survey, as many as 84% of consumers between 14 and 17 years old buys from brands in line with their values, while already from the 2020 edition of Microsoft's Global Diversity & Inclusion Report we know how as many as 70% of Gen Z tend to trust more "brands that represent diversity in their communication".<sup>5</sup>

TikTok has proven its influence in various industries, including music, fashion, food and so on. It has evolved into a space that welcomes everyone, from individuals to brands and businesses, creating a dynamic and inclusive atmosphere that celebrates trends and embraces diversity. In essence, TikTok has become a culture unto itself, transcending boundaries as a creative and diverse content hub.

Related to this, I would like to introduce an Italian case study on the theme of inclusiveness propagated by two micro-influencers and their recent link with popular culture as content creators:

Momo, who is of Moroccan origin and a Muslim, and Raissa, who is a Christian from Italy have gained popularity on TikTok during quarantine in Italy by using humor and self-irony to combat prejudices and stereotypes related to their cultural differences. They have over 500,000 followers and

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<sup>5</sup> Pulse Advertising. (2023). Influencer Marketing and Inclusivity in 2023. Pulse Advertising. Retrieved from <https://www.pulse-advertising.com/it/influencer-ed-inclusivita-2023/>

have been sharing their daily social media for the past four years. Plus, they've published a book "*Di mondi diversi e anime affini*" edited by DeAgostini, which is an history of education.

Mohamed's narrative revolves around a child who acquires an early understanding of confronting firsthand the animosity driven by ignorance, the malevolence of the crowd, and the duplicity of grown-ups. A child with wide-eyed innocence and grand aspirations, yearning to find that sense of belonging and warmth that envelops us in a feeling of "home," and to construct a brighter future for himself and his family.

Raissa's account, on the other hand, revolves around a young girl ensconced in a protective cocoon of love, shielded from all that is "other," as she ventures into the world with an insatiable curiosity and a thirst for knowledge, eager to take her first steps independently. A little girl with a whirlwind of inner thoughts, seeking a way to channel her talent for a purpose and bring her future into focus. These are two parallel paths that gradually bend towards each other, brushing against one another until they intermingle, becoming one.<sup>6</sup>

*"Do you have to wear the veil? Are you going to Ramadan now? Are you trying to convince Italians that you're happy with a street vendor?"<sup>7</sup>*

In response to this criticism, Raissa and Momo decided to use their platform to discuss these issues openly. They share their love story and the challenges they've faced with humor and self-irony. Through their content, which regards especially comedy videos on TikTok, they not only entertain but also inspire their audience by celebrating diversity and breaking down stereotypes. Their approach encourages tolerance and raises social awareness about the importance of inclusivity and acceptance. This kind of content creation is not just entertainment but also a source of inspiration, moreover, it highlights the power of social media influencers in shaping public perception and promoting positive values. For even if you hail from divergent realms, you can still share the same emotions: apprehensions, insecurities, the battle for self-acceptance, the longing to succeed, the ability to wear a smile, and the yearning to love. The story of Mohamed and Raissa represents two young individuals who fall in love and confront all the challenges that young couples encounter. They discover common passions as well as those subtle distinctions that render each of us unique. But they also gain an understanding of what it means to combat hatred and prejudice on a daily basis. They choose not to remain silent but instead use self-deprecating humor as their sole weapon, transforming hardships into opportunities for personal development, turning their story into a guiding light for many young people like them.<sup>8</sup>

As we discussed in the introduction on digital popular culture, Raissa and Momo's case study is coherent with the production of digital popular culture because it involves the creation and interpretation of various forms of media, including memes, videos, and social media content. These forms of media allow people to construct and convey meanings, whether through humor, satire, or other forms of expression. The internet and digital platforms, as TikTok, have provided new avenues for people to create, share, and engage with content, giving rise to a more decentralized and participatory culture. Furthermore, social media allowed for the exploration and expression of personal identities in new and diverse ways. Individuals can curate their online personas and connect with like-minded people across the globe. This has led to a more fluid and complex understanding of identity, with people freely expressing their various facets, such as gender identity, sexual orientation, cultural background, and interests. Moreover, content creators facilitated the exploration of different cultures, perspectives, and experiences. People can engage with and learn from individuals who may be very different from themselves. This exploration of "otherness" can lead to increased empathy,

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<sup>6</sup> Mohamed Ismail Bayed, Raissa Russi, *Di mondi diversi e anime affini*, Raissa e Momo, *portavoce della rivoluzione gentile nata da TikTok*, DeAgostini. (2021)

<sup>7</sup> Vanity Fair (2021, May 21). Raissa e Momo: "Non ci sono coppie miste, solo coppie". Vanity Fair. Retrieved from <https://www.vanityfair.it/news/diritti/2021/05/21/raissa-e-momo-non-ci-sono-coppie-miste-solo-coppie>

<sup>8</sup> Ivi.

cross-cultural understanding, and the breaking down of stereotypes and prejudices. There are countless online communities, subcultures, and niches, each with its own unique values and norms. This diversity reflects the multitude of voices and perspectives that can now be heard and shared on a global scale. These elements contribute to the richness and complexity of popular culture in our contemporary world.

Plus, the pervasive presence of influencers around pop culture major events has been broadly discussed in the last few years. We assist to a massive involvement of content creators and various editorial and commercial collaborations that have seen them as protagonists. Referencing pop culture in marketing is not a novel concept, it has been employed for decades, in fact utilizing allusions to connect with trends and engage the audience remains a powerful strategy. In today's digitally advanced world, even unexpected elements can evolve into iconic facets of pop culture. To remain culturally relevant brands must continuously identify and create pop culture references that align with their values. This alignment is crucial, ensuring that the chosen references resonate with both the brand and its audience. For instance, the collaboration with social magazines gave life to editorial schedules which involved several creators in a personal comment during the various evenings of the 73rd edition of the Italian Song Festival, established the now very close link between enjoyment of the Festival on TV and enjoyment via social media to interact, comment and share.

Raissa Russi and Momo Bayed were guests at the viewing party event organized in Milan by *Tuorlo Magazine* for live commentary on some of the festival evenings. Furthermore, they were also guests for their first time, on the red carpet of the 80th Venice International Film Festival, another symbolic event in Italy for what concerns popular culture.

It is obvious that social media, during the days of the festival, became a strategic instrument for brands to promote their products through influencer marketing, but besides the business aspect, since Raissa and Momo can be defined as cultural disseminators thorough their contents, their presence on such events is noteworthy. Events such as these are remarkable in terms of collective memory and more importantly create discourses among social networks, which plays an important role in understanding how pop culture trends, fads, and fashions become popular. Word of mouth, including opinions and reviews, is a significant factor in this process. The success of word of mouth can be influenced by several factors: such as the total number of conversations in which a cultural artifact is discussed among networks. Market mavens possess extensive knowledge about various products, giving them significant influence over consumer decisions and cultural tastes.<sup>9</sup>

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, we've seen that the digital age has fundamentally reshaped popular culture, making it more dynamic and accessible. Social media has democratized cultural participation, allowing people to share their creativity and opinions directly. This has led to the formation of diverse communities and the exploration of new identities.

We then delved in how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted popular culture in Italy, particularly through the lens of social media and influencers. Social media played a pivotal role during the pandemic, becoming a lifeline for connection and cultural consumption.

The #iorestoacasa hashtag on platforms like Instagram and TikTok promoted staying at home and served as a platform for cultural expressions, like musicians performing from balconies.

The pandemic gave rise to "contingent communities" through online interactions, bringing people "alone but together." This highlights the adaptability of digital platforms in fostering community and positive activism. In summary, the COVID-19 pandemic reshaped popular culture in Italy, with social media and influencers playing a central role. It also demonstrated popular culture's ability to provide stability and stress relief during challenging times, following a functionalist approach to social cohesion.

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<sup>9</sup> Grazian, David (2017), *Mix It Up. Popular Culture, Mass Media, and Society*.

We have learn how the intersection of popular culture and influencers works, as seen in Locatelli's study.

The study defines influencers as socio-technical actors operating within a digital environment. Influencer impact goes beyond follower count and is shaped by factors like social interactions and professionalization. Influencers operate at the intersection of social and technical elements in the digital world, introducing new content formats and trends, shaping platform usage. Locatelli underlines the close relationship between influencers and popular culture, such figures have the power to introduce and popularize various cultural aspects, becoming cultural commentators that influence public discourse.

Furthermore, we have discussed the role of TikTok and influencers in shaping popular culture, focusing on inclusivity and its impact on Gen Z. It introduces an Italian case study with Raissa and Momo, micro-influencers who challenge cultural stereotypes on TikTok.

They promote tolerance, inclusivity, and diversity, challenging prejudices through humor and self-irony. This content creation goes beyond entertainment, inspiring positive values, and social awareness. In this way, digital platforms have led to more diverse and empathetic understandings of identity and experiences even with the aim of entertain.

In marketing, influencers like Raissa and Momo have a significant influence on pop culture trends and discussions, particularly during major events of popular culture.

In closing, the digital age has not only transformed popular culture but also redefined how we interact with, shape, and interpret it. It has evolved into a space that is more diverse, inclusive, and dynamic, reflecting the multifaceted world in which we live.

In the end, I want to acknowledge that this topic is obviously susceptible to criticism, which may necessitate a different approach and deeper analysis. The purpose of this analysis is to emphasize the positive aspects of the topic, shedding light on a phenomenon that is an integral part of our reality, and encouraging thoughtful consideration and acceptance of it.

*«My daughter is eleven years old: I don't need to explain the fundamentals of anti-racism to her, because she follows Raissa and Momo on TikTok who show off all the prejudices about mixed couples. And they do it while having fun: they are two young boys, who evidently love each other, and have fun together.»*

*Sandro Veronesi*

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