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Leadership in the Age of Content Creators and Influencers: A New Paradigm of Influence and Authority

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ABSTRACT

In today's digitally connected world, social media influencers have emerged as significant agents of social change by leveraging their platforms to mobilize support for various social movements. As a result, the definition of leadership is undergoing a profound transformation. With their ability to communicate directly and at any time with a vast audience of followers, social media influencers utilize their platforms not only to share content but also to raise awareness, foster communities, and drive social change. On this basis, this article aims to examine the role of influencers in shaping contemporary activism, with a focus on the transition from online discourse, particularly through hashtags, to offline action and tangible societal impact. Drawing on theories of digital activism and leadership and through an analysis of case studies from the Moroccan scene, this article argues that influencers have redefined traditional models of leadership, offering new pathways for grassroots mobilization and democratic engagement. Additionally, the article explores how influencers use their reach to amplify marginalized voices, disseminate information, and catalyze collective action. The study further investigates the dynamics of influence, including the ethical challenges influencers face, such as navigating backlash, maintaining authenticity, and balancing advocacy with commercial interests. By critically assessing both the potential and limitations of influencer-driven movements, this work contributes to the understanding of social media's role in shaping social change in the 21st century, especially in the Moroccan context.

KEYWORDS

Activism

Influencers

Leadership

Online Discourse

Social Media

Introduction

The phenomenon of digital leadership, as embodied by Moroccan content creators and influencers, can be situated within a growing body of scholarship that explores how social media reshapes power, authority, and civic engagement globally and regionally. In the 20th century, leadership was primarily studied within the frameworks of political, military, and corporate institutions. However, the emergence of social media platforms in the 21st century has disrupted these traditional paradigms, which gave rise to a new kind of leadership embodied by digital content creators and influencers. These individuals do not necessarily possess formal authority, yet they wield considerable power in shaping public opinion, consumer behavior, and and cultural norms. As Khamis Susie, et al. argue, this shift marks a move from institutional to personal branding, where leadership is measured by engagement and trust rather than formal authority (191). Therefore, this shift demands a reassessment of what constitutes leadership in the digital era.

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In light of this, social media has become a central platform for activism in recent years, offering new possibilities for mobilization, awareness, and engagement. Hashtags, in particular, have emerged as powerful tools in the digital activism landscape, facilitating the organization of social movements and fostering global conversations around pressing social issues. As online platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok continue to dominate the digital sphere, their influence on leadership and social change has grown significantly. This shift in the nature of leadership, one that operates beyond traditional hierarchies and institutions, has given rise to a new breed of leaders, social media influencers. These individuals, often with substantial online followings, use their platforms not only to promote personal brands but also to advocate for social justice, challenge systemic inequalities, and drive collective action.

Globally, the concept of "affective publics" refers to networked communities that coalesce around shared emotions and values expressed through social media (Papacharissi 2). This conceptualization helps us understand how influencers and content creators mobilize affective ties to challenge entrenched gender norms and cultivate feminist solidarity. Papacharissi's work highlights that leadership in digital spaces frequently relies on emotional resonance and performative authenticity rather than traditional institutional authority.

Complementing this, Alice Marwick frames social media influencers as micro-celebrities who leverage self-presentation and audience engagement to cultivate visibility and influence (114). This lens is especially relevant for understanding the extent to which Moroccan content creators negotiate the tension between personal branding and social responsibility. Thus, content creators' ability to command attention while maintaining perceived authenticity parallels Marwick's analysis of the precarious dynamics of online influence.

From a political communication perspective, according to David Karpf and Philip N. Howard, digital tools have transformed political communication by democratizing advocacy and knowledge dissemination (Karpf 23; Howard 45). In this sense, content creators' role as a mediator of political content fits within this framework. This demonstrates how influencers serve as knowledge brokers who translate complex political discourses for broader audiences, fostering informed civic participation in a region where mainstream media may be constrained.

In the context of leadership theory, scholars such as Barbara Kellerman challenge traditional, top-down notions of leadership by emphasizing the growing power of followers and the co-constructed nature of leadership relationships. This is evident in the interactive dynamics of Instagram, where Moroccan influencers' authority emerges relationally through audience engagement rather than institutional mandate. Similarly, Joseph Rost and Keith Grint highlight leadership as a process of social influence that is fluid and context-dependent, which aligns with the decentralized, participatory forms of leadership observed in the digital realm (Rost 102; Grint 15).

Turning to regional perspectives, scholars such as Lina Khatib and Fatima Sadiqi provide important cultural and socio-political frameworks for interpreting the content and impact of Moroccan influencers. In this context, Khatib's analysis of visual politics in the Arab world helps situate Fasiki's feminist illustrations as part of a broader struggle over representation and identity in postcolonial societies (33). Additionally, according to Sadiqi, gendered language use in Morocco reveals deep cultural negotiations around power, tradition, and modernity, which are echoed in women's digital activism (88).

Finally, the scholarship of Nagla Rizk on digital rights and internet governance in MENA underscores the political significance of online spaces as arenas of contestation and empowerment (Rizk 4). Consequently, Moroccan influencers operating within these digital landscapes are not only cultural actors but also participants in a broader movement toward digital citizenship and rights advocacy.

Together, these scholarly perspectives deepen our understanding of Moroccan digital leadership as a multifaceted phenomenon that integrates cultural expression, political mediation,

technological education, and community engagement. They highlight that leadership in digital spaces is less about formal authority and more about the ability to influence meaning, mobilize affect, and foster participatory dialogue. This signals a shift, which is particularly pronounced in regions like Morocco, where social media often supplements or challenges traditional public spheres.

Hashtags as a Form of Digital Activism

The phenomenon of hashtag activism is a relatively recent development that has witnessed profound growth in the study of social movements. Hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, #ClimateStrike, and #TimesUp have become rallying cries for social movements that transcend national borders and local communities, which has paved the way for a platform where marginalized groups can amplify their voices. According to Tufekci, these digital mobilizations bypass traditional media channels, enabling a more direct, participatory form of political activism (4). In this sense, scholars have argued that hashtags create a form of "networked protest" that enables the rapid dissemination of information, coordination of collective actions, and the ability to shift the focus of public discourse quickly (Bennett and Segerberg 750). However, while hashtag activism has demonstrated its ability to mobilize large numbers of people, critics like Morozov have questioned whether it represents meaningful social change or merely a form of "slacktivism," a surface-level engagement that lacks the depth and sustainability of traditional activism (45).

Leadership in the Digital Age

The emergence of social media as a platform for activism has fundamentally altered our understanding of leadership in social movements. Traditional models of leadership have emphasized formal structures, authority, and established hierarchies, with recognized figures at the forefront of change. However, in the digital era, leadership is increasingly decentralized, and anyone with access to an online platform can assume a leadership role. Social media influencers, individuals who build substantial followings through their digital presence, have become pivotal figures in shaping public opinion and driving social change. Studies have highlighted the way influencers and content creators can steer public conversations, influence political discourse, and galvanize social movements through personal branding, engagement with followers, and strategic use of social media (Loader et al. 120; van Dijk 98). This demonstrates the manner through which influencers challenge the traditional model of leadership which is operated via creating informal, decentralized networks of influence that prioritize authenticity, relatability, and direct engagement with followers (Marwick 114).

Social Media, Social Movements, and Social Change

Social movements have historically relied on physical gatherings, print media, and face-to-face communication to advocate for change. However, in the digital age, social media has expanded the tools available for organizing and mobilizing around social causes. The connection between social media and social movements is multifaceted, with platforms serving as both venues for protest and spaces for ongoing political engagement (Castells 23). Nonetheless, Fuchs argues that while social media enables rapid dissemination of ideas and facilitates global solidarity, it also creates challenges, such as the risk of fragmentation, digital surveillance, and the commercialization of activism (102). Moreover, scholars such as Juris argue that digital platforms offer new opportunities for cross-border collaboration, while others, like Fuchs,

emphasize that digital activism may be co-opted for commercial or political interests, thereby diluting its potential for genuine social change (Juris 13; Fuchs 106).

Furthermore, social movements in the digital era are not limited to large-scale global protests but include smaller, more localized initiatives that leverage digital tools for awareness-raising, advocacy, and policy change. From climate justice movements to feminist campaigns, social media has empowered individuals and collectives to challenge entrenched systems of power and advocate for structural change. However, the intersection of leadership, social media, and social movements remains complex. Influencers who advocate for social justice often navigate tensions between their activism and commercial interests, raising questions about the ethical responsibilities of influencers in shaping public opinion and the potential for the commodification of social change (Banet-Weiser 89).

Methodology

This article employs a qualitative, interpretive research design to examine how content creators and influencers embody new forms of leadership on Instagram, with a particular focus on the Moroccan context. The methodological approach draws on digital ethnography and case study analysis, combining observational data from social media with contextual insights from academic literature and media sources.

The research was guided by purposive sampling, which was designed to capture a diverse range of Moroccan influencers and content creators who demonstrate visible leadership qualities in the digital sphere. Four influencers and content creators were selected. The chosen participants represent various thematic domains, including gender, politics, education, creative arts, and activism. The selection was not random, but it was based on a number of criteria such as their Moroccan nationality or residence, their active presence on Instagram, with a consistent posting (at least once per week), A minimum followers' list of 100,000 that ensures public reach and engagement, and content reflecting leadership-related traits such as authenticity, social responsibility, and vision.

Instagram posts, stories, and engagement metrics (likes, comments, shares) from selected Moroccan influencers and content creators were analyzed to identify patterns of communication, audience interaction, and expressions of leadership traits, including authenticity, vision, and social engagement. This method allows for an understanding of how digital leadership is performed and perceived in an organic, real-time environment. In this sense, several Moroccan content creators, such as lifestyle influencers, educators, and activists, were observed to provide real-life examples of the new leadership paradigm. Their digital presence and content themes were used to ground theoretical discussions in localized, practical illustrations.

By drawing from principles of constructivist grounded theory, data analysis was conducted through thematic coding. Content was analyzed along the following three key dimensions:

1. Communication strategies: narrative style, visual aesthetics, and tone.
2. Audience interaction: the nature and depth of engagement with followers.
3. Leadership performance: the way content creators/influencers express values, authenticity, community engagement, and social advocacy.

Last but not least, codes were developed inductively from the data and then interpreted in light of leadership theory, particularly frameworks on transformational and participatory leadership. The emphasis was on understanding how influencers negotiate cultural expectations, personal identity, and public influence through their digital personas. This multi-source, interpretive approach enables a rich understanding of how digital leadership is shaped and signified in the Moroccan social media landscape.

Results and Analysis

With the emergence of social media, the rise of content creators as digital leaders signals a shift in the global understanding of authority and influence, and Morocco is no exception to this trend. Within the Moroccan context, where traditional leadership is often associated with politics, academia, or religious authority, social media has opened a parallel space for informal leadership. To explain, young Moroccan influencers, including lifestyle bloggers, social activists, gender activists, and educators, have carved out niches of influence that challenge the exclusivity of conventional leadership roles. Consequently, this digital space enables more grassroots leadership, particularly among young people and women, who often face structural barriers in traditional settings.

Like their global counterparts, Moroccan content creators build influence through audience engagement rather than formal power. Creators such as Zainab Fasiki, Amine Aouni, Loubna El Jaouhari, and Merouane attract large followings by connecting with their audiences in Darija (Moroccan Arabic), sharing culturally relevant content, and addressing issues that resonate with everyday experiences, including gender, education, mental health, and social justice. As a result, content creators' ability to engage authentically gives them credibility and a form of digital leadership that is built through connective action.

This article's findings reveal the important role Instagram plays in promoting Moroccan identity and culture. For example, creators use visual storytelling to highlight Moroccan fashion, cuisine, music, and traditions while also engaging with global trends. Furthermore, this balance between local and global content boosts the visibility of Moroccan culture and fosters the emergence of cultural ambassadors online. By doing so, these creators assume leadership roles in cultural diplomacy, shaping how Morocco is perceived both domestically and internationally.

Throughout the sample, whether participants identify as "influencers" or "content creators," there is a collective recognition of the vital social role they play in contemporary Moroccan society. Participants consistently expressed awareness of their increasing visibility, influence, and responsibility, and many acknowledged that they are increasingly seen by their audiences not just as entertainers or educators but also as leaders in their respective fields.

This leadership takes multiple forms. For instance, Fasiki, an illustrator and activist, uses her digital platform to challenge gender norms and promote body positivity and women's rights. Her work actively contributes to public discourse around feminism and gender equality in Morocco, positioning her as a leader in a broader socio-cultural movement aimed at transforming how women are viewed and treated in public and private life. As Marwick and Papacharissi argue, digital leadership is often affective and performative (Marwick 114; Papacharissi 15). Fasiki cultivates emotional resonance with followers who see their own experiences, frustrations, or aspirations reflected in her work. This fosters a sense of digital solidarity, empowering audiences to challenge internalized norms. Leadership here lies in the capacity to foster critical consciousness and collective identity.

Moreover, to use Bourdieu's terms, Fasiki acts as a "cultural intermediary" (365), translating feminist and rights-based frameworks into locally resonant visual and narrative forms. Through comics, illustrations, and storytelling, she reclaims representations of the female body, critiques patriarchy, and resists censorship. This positions her as a symbolic leader in the cultural production, where she aims to represent marginalized voices and reshape symbolic boundaries around gender and visibility.

As discussed by theorists like Joanne Ciulla and Ronald Heifetz, a key trait in theories of ethical leadership is civic courage (Ciulla 20; Heifetz 177). This is exemplified in Fassiki's persistence in the face of backlash. Hence, in societies where challenging social norms,

particularly around gender and sexuality, can result in harassment, threats, or censorship, the willingness to speak out becomes a form of moral leadership.

In the political domain, figures like Aouni serve as knowledge brokers, translating complex political texts, policies, and current events into accessible and engaging content for a broader public. His efforts to mediate political information and foster civic understanding reflect a form of informational leadership that bridges the gap between formal institutions and the digital public sphere. By decoding complex political language, laws, and governmental decisions into accessible formats, Aouni enhances political literacy, particularly among young people and marginalized digital publics who might otherwise be excluded from formal political discourse.

This role positions him as a civic educator and mediator who aims at enhancing participatory engagement in public life, a trait associated with what Kellerman would describe as non-positional leadership, where influence is exercised without holding formal authority (Kellerman 6). This type of leadership is characterized by influence that does not stem from institutional authority, but rather from discursive power, digital credibility, and public trust.

Aouni's platform fosters relational credibility, which is considered a cornerstone of contemporary leadership models (Grint 25). By offering reliable, transparent, and audience-responsive content, Aouni cultivates a form of horizontal leadership, where legitimacy is co-produced with followers through affective engagement, civic relevance, and consistency.

El Jehouari's leadership is embodied through her creation and curation of the "Je Suis Une Femme" movement, which provides a digital platform for Moroccan women to speak out about experiences of rape, harassment, marginalization, and systemic inequality. In doing so, she fulfills the role of a movement catalyst where she does not merely aim at amplifying individual testimonies, but weaves them into a shared narrative of resistance and social transformation.

The "Je Suis Une Femme" movement, founded by El Jehouari, exemplifies a powerful form of grassroots digital leadership in Morocco. By being more than just a hashtag or campaign, the movement has become a collective platform for testimony, solidarity, and resistance. It has become a safe place where women are encouraged to publicly share their experiences of rape, harassment, and systemic gender-based oppression.

Through this platform, El Jehouari acts as a transformational leader who inspires followers not by authority but through mobilizing shared values, emotional resonance, and a vision for social justice. As a result, the movement has cultivated a growing digital following that interacts with, supports, and amplifies the message, indicating a shift from passive spectatorship to active engagement.

Another notable example is Merouane Lamharzi, a Moroccan content creator who has carved out a distinct niche by producing educational content on artificial intelligence (AI) and emerging technologies. His work emphasizes a commitment to demystifying complex technological concepts and making them accessible to a broader, often non-specialist audience. Through engaging visuals, simplified explanations, and contextualized examples, Lamharzi plays a critical role in bridging the knowledge gap between technical developments and public understanding.

Lamharzi's digital presence embodies a form of educational and epistemic leadership, where he assumes the responsibility of translating abstract global discussions about AI into content that resonates with Moroccan youth. By doing this, he contributes to digital literacy, stimulates public curiosity, and provides his audience with the conceptual tools needed to engage in future-oriented debates about automation, data ethics, and innovation.

In the rapidly evolving field of artificial intelligence, Merouane assumes the role of a public educator and digital translator of specialized knowledge. By creating accessible and engaging content that demystifies AI, including its functions, risks, societal implications, and future trajectories, Lamharzi fosters technological literacy among his followers. This act of simplifying expert knowledge and grounding it in local and ethical concerns aligns with what

scholars like Henry Jenkins et al. term participatory knowledge leadership (45). This is where audiences are not just passive recipients but co-navigators of complex information landscapes. His efforts demonstrate how content creators can influence not only cultural or political dialogue but also technological awareness and future preparedness, reaffirming the argument that digital leadership today encompasses knowledge dissemination and the democratization of expertise.

These cases illustrate how Moroccan content creators are redefining leadership in the digital age, transcending commercial influence to adopt civic, cultural, and ideological roles. Their work not only shapes public opinion but also fosters dialogue, raises awareness, and mobilizes communities around critical issues. This form of digital leadership is particularly significant in contexts where traditional forms of authority are being challenged and social media has become a powerful platform for participatory engagement and grassroots transformation.

Many Moroccan content creators have leveraged their platforms for social impact, aligning with a broader global shift toward purpose-driven content. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, influencers led health awareness campaigns. Additionally, during the 2023 Al Haouz earthquake, several content creators led movements and mobilized support and donations for the affected communities. These actions demonstrate that digital leadership in Morocco can extend beyond entertainment and make a meaningful contribution to civic engagement.

Despite their growing influence, Moroccan creators face unique challenges. Access to monetization tools is more limited due to regional restrictions, and algorithmic biases often disadvantage content in non-Western languages, such as Arabic or Tamazight. Additionally, the lack of regulatory frameworks around digital influence in Morocco raises concerns about misinformation, content ethics, and accountability. Therefore, the sustainability of this new leadership model depends on digital literacy, platform accessibility, and institutional support.

As social media continues to evolve, it is increasingly evident that leadership in social movements is no longer confined to institutional or hierarchical structures. Influencers and everyday individuals now can lead, inspire, and enact change through the use of digital platforms. The role of these influencers in social movements raises important questions about the nature of leadership in the 21st century, including the balance between personal branding and activism, the ethics of influencer-driven campaigns, and the long-term sustainability of digital activism. This article will examine how social media influencers are driving social movements, the challenges they encounter in maintaining authenticity while advocating for change, and the broader implications of digital activism for the future of leadership and social change.

This study intervenes in the evolving discourse on leadership by examining the role of digital content creators and influencers through the lens of contemporary leadership theory. While a substantial body of literature has explored the marketing, communicative, and cultural dimensions of influencer activity (Abidin 42; Boerman et al. 103), comparatively little attention has been directed toward positioning influencers as actors within leadership frameworks. This article seeks to fill that gap by offering an analytical synthesis of leadership theory and digital media practices, thereby reconceptualizing the influencer as a novel form of leader shaped by the dynamics of the platform economy.

The article also introduces the conceptual figure of the hybrid leader: a person who navigates both the symbolic economy of influence and the formal structures of enterprise, governance, or public intellectualism. This emergent leadership archetype highlights the convergence of digital fluency with traditional forms of authority, suggesting a paradigmatic shift in the way leadership is conceptualized and practiced across various sectors. Notably, the hybrid leader encapsulates both performative and strategic dimensions of leadership, employing the aesthetics of authenticity and relatability while engaging in long-term brand-building, strategic communication, and often formal institutional leadership.

Conclusion

The rise of content creators and influencers signals a paradigm shift in the way leadership is defined, enacted, and perceived. This type of leadership is characterized by the fact that it surpasses organizational charts or titles. Hence, with their ability to emerge from bedrooms, studios, or coffee shops, today's most influential leaders are armed not with degrees or mandates but with authenticity, creativity, and the ability to mobilize communities at scale. As the boundaries between entertainment, education, and enterprise continue to blur, scholars, practitioners, and policymakers must recognize and study these new forms of leadership. The influencer is not a passing trend, but a reflection of more profound shifts in authority, trust, and engagement in the digital age.

This article aims to reconceptualize leadership in the digital age by centering on content creators and influencers as emergent leaders operating outside traditional organizational structures. Drawing on leadership theory, digital media studies, and platform analysis, it has been argued that influencer leadership is not merely an epiphenomenon of celebrity culture, but a substantive and evolving form of authority that has been established through the content creator's followers and the kind of impact they have.

By offering a localized, empirically grounded analysis of Moroccan content creators as civic actors, this study contributes to the growing literature on digital leadership in the Moroccan context. Through a qualitative, interpretive lens, the article illustrates how digital figures mobilize their platforms to educate, inspire, and challenge dominant narratives. It has traced how influencers such as Fasiki, Aouni, and Merouane leverage social media affordances to challenge normative discourses around gender, politics, and technology. These cases demonstrate that leadership in the digital sphere is not rooted in institutional authority, but rather in the capacity to cultivate trust, mobilize emotions, and engage the public in meaningful dialogue. The research shows that digital leadership is neither monolithic nor apolitical. Instead, it is situated, intersectional, and performative, shaped by the socio-political landscape, cultural expectations, and platform affordances.

By foregrounding the situated and performative nature of digital leadership, this article contributes to broader debates in media and cultural studies that increasingly view leadership as relational, networked, and contingent (Marwick 45; Papacharissi 78; Rost 199). At the same time, it engages with regional scholarship that recognizes digital platforms as contested political terrains in postcolonial and transitional societies (Khatib 22; Sadiqi 53; Rizk 78). Moroccan influencers do not merely reflect societal change; they actively contribute to it. In fact, they participate in its articulation by often negotiating the boundaries of visibility, censorship, and audience expectation.

However, a critical analysis must also acknowledge the ambiguities that shape this form of digital influence. While content creators can spark civic awareness and social debate, they are also embedded within platform economies that monetize visibility, reward algorithmic conformity, and blur the distinction between authenticity and branding. The neoliberal conditions under which influencers operate often pressure them to conform to market logic, potentially undermining their political effectiveness or limiting their ability to dissent. Furthermore, the influence they wield is unevenly distributed, influenced by factors such as gender, class, linguistic capital, and access to digital infrastructures.

The added value of this study lies in its theoretical synthesis and its challenge to the institutional bias in leadership studies. By situating influencer activity within the broader discourse on charismatic, distributed, and entrepreneurial leadership, this article lays the groundwork for further empirical and conceptual inquiry into the modalities of digital leadership. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of critically examining the structural and

ethical aspects of influencer leadership, particularly in relation to sustainability, accountability, and labor precarity. As digital infrastructures continue to mediate public life and leadership itself, understanding the dynamics of influence, trust, and authority on these platforms becomes an urgent interdisciplinary task.

The findings open several avenues for future research. First, longitudinal studies could track how content creators evolve in response to platform changes, algorithmic pressures, or shifts in the political landscape. Second, comparative studies between Moroccan influencers and those from other Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) countries could shed light on regional patterns of digital civic engagement. Ultimately, greater attention should be devoted to audience reception and participation, examining how followers interpret, internalize, or resist the leadership exhibited by these figures.

More importantly, this study lays the groundwork for a deeper examination of how leadership and civic participation are being reshaped in digital Morocco. However, its reliance on observable content and publicly available data limits it. Therefore, future research could adopt audience-centered approaches to better understand how followers interpret and engage with these expressions of leadership. Furthermore, conducting comparative studies across North Africa or the larger Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region would be beneficial in evaluating how cultural and political contexts influence the capabilities of digital platforms. Other researchers could investigate these dynamics through empirical case studies, cross-cultural comparisons, and longitudinal analyses, with a particular focus on the gendered, racialized, and geopolitical aspects of influencer leadership. By doing so, scholars can more effectively account for how leadership in the 21st century is not just conveyed but fundamentally constructed within digital environments.

All in all, in an era where traditional forms of authority are increasingly distrusted and where civic participation is both constrained and reimagined through digital media, Moroccan influencers exemplify a shifting paradigm where leadership emerges not from formal position but through discursive resonance, digital visibility, and relational credibility. This evolving model invites scholars, educators, and policymakers alike to reconsider how leadership is cultivated and contested in contemporary networked societies. It also raises critical questions about the sustainability and ethics of influence in algorithm-driven environments, where visibility is the platform's logic shapes contingent and public discourse. As digital publics become key sites of political socialization and cultural negotiation, understanding the dynamics of influencer-led leadership is no longer peripheral but relatively central to grasping the future of civic life and participation in Morocco and beyond.

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