

Social Media Influencer: Past, Present, and Future

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Introduction

A social media influencer is a person—or, increasingly, a digitally created persona—who can shape an audience’s attention, attitudes, or purchasing decisions through content and an ongoing relationship with followers. The profession sits at the intersection of advertising, entertainment, entrepreneurship, and community participation. It developed from older forms of endorsement, but social platforms changed who could become influential, how influence could be measured, and how quickly commercial messages could travel.

The original discussion identified several important themes: the long history of celebrity endorsement, the role of technology, the cultural reach of influencer content, gender representation, and the importance of authenticity. A fuller account must also examine labor, platform dependence, disclosure law, data analytics, parasocial relationships, misinformation, and artificial intelligence. Influencer marketing is neither automatically manipulative nor automatically democratic. Its effects depend on how creators, brands, platforms, regulators, and audiences use the medium.

From Royal Endorsement to Networked Influence

Influencer marketing did not begin with Instagram or YouTube. Businesses have long borrowed the reputation of respected or famous figures. Josiah Wedgwood’s eighteenth-century use of Queen Charlotte’s patronage is frequently cited as an early example of prestige endorsement. In later periods, actors, athletes, fictional characters, radio personalities, and television hosts helped connect products with recognizable identities. These arrangements were generally controlled by established media and advertising institutions.

Social media altered this model by lowering the cost of publication and enabling creators to build audiences without first entering film, television, or print journalism. Early bloggers developed influence through expertise and personal storytelling. YouTube made video creators into recognizable personalities. Instagram strengthened visual lifestyle marketing, while TikTok accelerated short-form discovery through recommendation algorithms. Livestreaming and social commerce brought product demonstration, entertainment, and purchasing into the same experience.

The term “influencer” can conceal substantial differences. A celebrity with millions of followers, a physician discussing public health, a gaming streamer, a beauty reviewer, and a local food creator do

not perform the same work or possess the same type of authority. Some influence comes from fame, some from expertise, some from perceived similarity, and some from belonging to a tightly connected niche community. Audience size is therefore only one dimension of influence.

Influencing as Work

Professional influencing involves more than posting an attractive image. Creators may research topics, write scripts, record and edit media, negotiate contracts, manage taxes, answer followers, analyze performance, protect intellectual property, and comply with advertising rules. Many work without stable income, benefits, or predictable platform access. A creator's visibility can change when an algorithm is modified, a platform is restricted, or an account is suspended.

Income may come from sponsored posts, affiliate links, advertising revenue, subscriptions, live gifts, merchandise, consulting, appearances, or licensing. This diversification can make a creator more independent, but it also creates blurred boundaries between personal expression and paid promotion. Followers may encounter a family story, health claim, and product recommendation in the same post. The intimacy that makes influencer communication persuasive can make commercial intent harder to recognize.

Brands increasingly work with micro- and nano-influencers because smaller communities may show stronger topic relevance or interaction. However, engagement can be purchased or manipulated, and visible metrics do not reveal whether an audience trusts the creator or takes meaningful action. Responsible selection therefore examines audience fit, content quality, past conduct, disclosure practices, and the creator's ability to communicate accurately—not merely follower count.

Technology and the Measurement of Influence

Platforms provide creators with editing tools, live broadcasting, automatic captions, recommendation systems, shopping links, and analytics. Brands use data to compare reach, views, watch time, clicks, conversions, audience demographics, and sentiment. Machine-learning systems may identify potential partners, detect suspicious followers, predict brand safety risks, or optimize campaign timing.

These tools can improve efficiency, but they also create problems. Metrics encourage creators to design content for algorithmic reward. Outrage, surprise, appearance-based comparison, and simplified claims can attract attention even when they reduce accuracy. A post's visibility may be determined by systems that neither creators nor audiences fully understand. The profession is therefore shaped by platform governance as much as by individual creativity.

Artificial intelligence is changing production. Creators can use AI to generate captions, translate videos, remove backgrounds, develop storyboards, or analyze large sets of comments. Brands can

create virtual influencers whose images and personalities are designed rather than embodied by one human performer. These practices raise questions about transparency, consent, employment, cultural appropriation, and realism. An audience should not be misled about whether a person, voice, testimonial, or experience is authentic.

Authenticity and Parasocial Relationships

Influencers often succeed because followers feel that they know them. Regular videos, direct address, behind-the-scenes material, and replies to comments can produce a parasocial relationship: a one-sided sense of familiarity with a media figure. This relationship is not inherently harmful. It can provide entertainment, information, motivation, and a feeling of community. It can also make endorsements more persuasive because the recommendation feels like advice from a familiar person.

Authenticity in this setting does not mean that every post is spontaneous or private. Professional content is often planned, edited, and strategically scheduled. A more useful definition is consistency between a creator's stated values, observed behavior, commercial relationships, and treatment of the audience. Trust weakens when creators hide sponsorships, promote products they do not use, make reckless claims, or present heavily edited content as an ordinary reality.

The demand to appear constantly "real" can itself become labor. Creators may feel pressure to disclose relationships, health struggles, parenting decisions, or emotional crises because intimate content attracts engagement. Ethical practice requires boundaries. Audiences are not entitled to unlimited access, and creators should consider the privacy of family members—especially children—who may appear in monetized content without meaningful consent.

Cultural Influence and Representation

Social media allows ideas, styles, music, language, and political messages to cross borders rapidly. Creators can introduce audiences to communities that receive little attention in traditional media, challenge stereotypes, teach minority languages, and mobilize support for social causes. They can also remove cultural practices from context, reproduce racial stereotypes, or turn another community's identity into a marketable aesthetic.

Influencer culture affects expectations about appearance, consumption, travel, relationships, and success. Curated feeds can make expensive lifestyles look ordinary and present constant productivity as a moral virtue. At the same time, creators who discuss disability, body diversity, mental health, class, or nontraditional careers can broaden public representation. The medium contains competing cultural forces rather than one uniform effect.

Gender remains important, but claims that women naturally create more engagement than men oversimplify both research and society. Hudders and De Jans (2022) found that gender matching and

parasocial interaction can shape responses in particular endorsement settings, but the findings should not be turned into a universal hierarchy. Platform, product type, audience identity, perceived expertise, and creative execution all matter. Gender portrayals can reinforce norms, but creators can also question them and create space for identities excluded from traditional advertising.

Disclosure, Consumer Protection, and Responsibility

Influencer marketing is advertising when a material relationship affects an endorsement. The U.S. Federal Trade Commission states that connections such as payment, free products, employment, family relationships, or other benefits should be disclosed when they may not be obvious to the audience. The disclosure should be clear and difficult to miss, placed with the endorsement, and understandable in the format being used. Hiding “#ad” among many hashtags or relying only on a profile biography may not adequately inform viewers.

Responsibility is shared. Influencers must disclose relationships and avoid false claims. Brands should provide accurate instructions, monitor sponsored content, and avoid pressuring creators to conceal commercial arrangements. Platforms can design disclosure tools, but use of a platform label does not necessarily excuse a confusing message. Regulators protect consumers, while audiences also benefit from learning how advertising operates in personalized media.

Higher standards are necessary for health, finance, children’s products, and other sensitive subjects. Personal experience does not establish scientific effectiveness. A creator should distinguish testimony from evidence, avoid diagnosing followers, and direct people to qualified sources when a claim exceeds the creator’s expertise. Brands should not use an influencer’s warmth or popularity to bypass rules that would apply to conventional advertising.

Risks to Creators and Audiences

The profession exposes creators to harassment, stalking, doxxing, copyright disputes, burnout, and unstable income. Continuous performance metrics can make personal worth feel tied to views and comments. Creators from marginalized groups may receive disproportionate abuse while also being expected to educate audiences without compensation. Professional support, contracts, moderation tools, and realistic boundaries are therefore important parts of sustainable work.

Audiences face risks from deceptive advertising, idealized comparison, misinformation, excessive consumption, and hidden data collection. Young users may have difficulty distinguishing friendship-like communication from persuasion. Media literacy should not merely tell audiences to distrust everything. It should teach them to ask who created the message, what relationship exists, what evidence supports the claim, which emotions are being activated, and what action the post is

designed to produce.

The Future of the Profession

The future of influencing is likely to be more regulated, more automated, and more fragmented. Creators will continue to build communities across multiple platforms while developing newsletters, podcasts, memberships, and direct-to-consumer businesses that reduce dependence on a single algorithm. Brands will demand stronger measurement, but they will also need to recognize that trust cannot be reduced to a dashboard.

AI-generated personalities and synthetic media will become more common, making disclosure of digital creation increasingly important. At the same time, audiences may place greater value on verifiable expertise, local relevance, and slower community-building. Influencers who can explain complex subjects responsibly, acknowledge uncertainty, and maintain clear commercial boundaries may become more valuable than creators who generate temporary reach through controversy.

Authenticity will remain important, but the term must mature. It should not mean unedited access to a creator's private life. It should mean honest disclosure, fair representation of products, consistency of values, correction of errors, and respect for the audience's ability to make informed decisions.

Conclusion

Social media influencing grew from older endorsement practices but became a distinct profession through networked publishing, algorithmic distribution, and direct audience relationships. Technology has created opportunities for independent creators and culturally diverse voices, while also producing dependence on platforms, pressure to perform intimacy, and new forms of deceptive advertising.

The profession's future will not be determined by authenticity alone. It will depend on transparent sponsorship, responsible use of AI, protection of creators and children, evidence-based communication in sensitive fields, and stronger media literacy. Influencer marketing can support useful communities and creative careers, but only when commercial persuasion is visible and trust is treated as a responsibility rather than a resource to exploit.

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