

# **The Rosy World of Influencer Marketing? Its Bright and Dark Sides, and Future Research Recommendations**

Liselot Hudders<sup>a\*</sup> and Chen Lou<sup>b</sup>

*<sup>a</sup>Department of Communication Sciences, Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium; <sup>b</sup>Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information (WKWSCI), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore*

## **Corresponding author:**

Liselot Hudders, Ghent University, Sint-Pietersnieuwstraat 41, 9000 Ghent,

Liselot.Hudders@Ugent.be, Mobile: +32 486 17 61 20

**Liselot Hudders**, Ph.D. Ghent University, is an Associate Professor of Marketing Communication and Consumer Behavior at the Dept. of Communication Sciences and Marketing of Ghent University and director of the Center of Persuasive Communication. She focuses her research on how minors cope with embedded advertising, with a focus on influencer marketing. She published in a wide range of academic journals and she already received several distinctions for her work.

**Chen Lou** (Ph.D., Michigan State University) is an Assistant Professor of Integrated Marketing Communication in the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information (WKWSCI) at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. Her research focuses on consumer psychology and innovative brand communications (e.g., influencer marketing and content marketing). Her work has appeared in top-tier journals in both advertising and communication, including the *Journal of Advertising*, *International Journal of Advertising*, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, among others. She was awarded the 2021 Mary Alice Shaver Promising Professor Award by the American Academy of Advertising (AAA).

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# **The Rosy World of Influencer Marketing? Its Bright and Dark Sides, and Future Research Recommendations**

This review article offers insights into the current issues in influencer marketing. We first provide a historical overview of extant research that mainly focuses on its bright side, and then highlight the dark side of influencer marketing, from the perspectives of both followers and influencers. Such as, influencers may harm followers' physical health and psychological well-being by flaunting idealized images, glamorous lifestyles, and unhealthy food choices. However, despite their fancy lifestyles, influencers may suffer from a continuous search for likes and followers, as well as giving up much of their privacy in return for commercial success. Some of these dark sides (influencer perspective) are currently underexposed in the literature. This article paves the path for more nuanced future research that focuses on the bright and dark sides of influencer marketing.

**Keywords:** influencer marketing; marketing ethics; advertising disclosure; (un)healthy food endorsement; privacy; social comparison

## **Introduction**

The fascinating story of social media influencers unfolds like a fairytale. Social media influencers seem to live in a rosy world filled with exciting adventures, fun activities, and countless free products and surprises from coveted and prestigious brands. They constantly receive tons of love and praises from their followers when flaunting their perfect lives. They are therefore the optimal partners for advertisers who are searching for new ways to reach their audiences and break through the advertising clutter (Campbell and Farrell 2020). Influencers have the talent to include those sponsorships seamlessly in their editorial content and engage their audience to interact with those contents. Accordingly, influencer marketing has been shown to be a very effective marketing tool and has attracted steadily growing advertising budgets over the past few years (Ye et al. 2021). However, as in every fairytale, villains are lurking, and the fairytale princess can prick herself with the thorns of the beautiful roses surrounding her.

While most past research focuses on the bright side of influencer marketing for advertisers, this paper also highlights its dark side. As influencer marketing has become such a popular marketing tool, it is time to shed light on the ethicalities of the involved tactics to ensure a further professionalization and properly protect all parties involved (Wellman et al. 2020). As influencer marketing often involves young (and vulnerable) audiences, it is important to be extremely careful when implementing those tactics. This paper will thus not only shed light on the vulnerabilities of the audience but will also dwell on the hazards that may arise for influencers themselves when endorsing brands and products.

## **Mirror, Mirror on the Wall, Why Are Influencers the Finest Advertisers of Them All?**

In the early days, bloggers, who share their opinions and provide relevant information, tips and advice in domains like fashion, food or fitness in blogs, have started to attract a large

audience (Halvorsen et al. 2013). The huge popularity of this new form of user-generated content got quickly noticed by marketers and incited them to use those bloggers as a new marketing tool. The bloggers from the early studies are now referred to as ‘social media influencers’ (hereafter influencers) as the practice of sponsored blogging has expanded to influencer marketing and now appears on a wide range of social media platforms. Influencer marketing refers to the use of popular social media users who endorse products, brands, services or ideas on their accounts in exchange for commercial compensation (Campbell and Farrell 2020).

Influencers build close relationships with their followers, also termed as a trans-parasocial relation (Lou 2022). This refers to a more interactive, reciprocal, and co-created relationship that followers have with influencers, compared to the traditional parasocial relation between audiences and media characters (Horton and Wohl 1956). Influencers try to build an intimate bond with their followers by exposing their private lives, inducing interactivity by engaging their followers and even responding to their followers’ comments. As influencers are often considered to be friends by fervid followers, followers tend to have a positive bias toward their endorsements and believe in the “benign intent” that influencers have when sharing sponsored content (Lou 2022, p. 12). Accordingly, influencers are considered as a source of inspiration informing them about the newest trends, products, and brands (Lou 2022). As influencers often specialize in a particular domain, they are considered as experts and trustworthy sources of advice. This credibility leads to a greater acceptance of sponsored content (Lou and Yuan 2019).

### **A Historical Perspective on Influencer Marketing**

Ye et al. (2021) recently conducted a bibliometric analysis of academic literature on influencer marketing to map the field. Their search resulted in 387 articles that focus on

influencer marketing, with the first one being published in 2003. The *International Journal of Advertising (IJA)* was ranked the sixth most prolific journal contributing to influencer marketing research with seven publications that reached a total of 74 citations by the time of publication (Ye et al. 2021). An analysis of these publications revealed five themes that are prevalent in influencer marketing research: 1) the persuasiveness of influencer marketing, 2) stakeholders' perspectives on influencer marketing, 3) influencer marketing for specific product categories and sectors, 4) identification, selection and activation of influencers, and 5) ethical issues and disclosure effects in influencer marketing.

Many of those studies aimed to unravel the success of social media influencers and tried to identify the psychological mechanisms explaining its efficacy (Hudders, De Jans, and De Veirman 2021). The studies use a range of qualitative (in-depth interviews, ethnographic research and discourse analysis) and quantitative methods (survey and experiments) (Hudders, De Jans, and De Veirman 2021). Experimental research may offer valuable insights into the effects of influencer messages, however, it may be challenging to strike a balance between external and internal validity as experimentalists often manipulate fictitious influencer profiles or messages in experiments (e.g., Evans et al. 2017; Pittman and Abell 2021; Thomas and Fowler 2021). For instance, if researchers select fictitious profiles (to limit previous exposure effects), it might be difficult to simulate parasocial relation between influencers and followers, which is a critical factor in influencers' effectiveness. Content analyses may pose difficulties as it is time consuming to analyze social media posts and it might be difficult to select a representative sample of the posts (Pilgrim and Bohnet-Joschko 2019). Automated content analysis may make it possible to include a larger number of posts and can provide valuable insights into the message strategies used in influencer marketing (Feng, Chen, and Kong 2021). However, studies adopting this approach may pose new ethical questions regarding data scraping and potential privacy violations. Much of influencer literature use

parasocial interaction, source credibility, social influence and social learning theories to explain the impact of influencers (Hudders, De Jans, and De Veirman 2021). Also feminist theories have been used to explain momfluencers' impact on the decision-making of mothers (Jorge et al. 2021; Germic, Eckert, and Vultee 2021) and social comparison theories have been used to examine followers' responses to influencers (Chae 2018).

Research on the negative aspects of influencer marketing is largely limited to addressing its lack of transparency and exploring the role of advertising disclosures (Karagür et al. 2022). Meanwhile, research on the bright side of influencer marketing is largely focused on the commercial success of influencers, whereas research on the potential of influencer marketing in improving public welfare is scarce (Hudders, De Jans, and De Veirman 2021).

### **The Bright Side of Influencer Marketing**

The strong impact of social media influencers on their followers' decision-making makes them a desirable propagator of behavioral change for the good as well. As such, social media influencers can be used to change people's behaviors for their own benefit or for the benefit of society and raise awareness on social issues (i.e. social activist influencer). Current studies – although scarce – mainly focus on the promotion of healthy and sustainable lifestyles (Yıldırım 2021; Folkvord, Roes, and Bevelander 2020). In particular, influencers may be used to promote a healthy lifestyle, with the endorsement of healthy food recipes or fitness routines (Pilgrim and Bohnet-Joschko 2019). Folkvord, Roes, and Bevelander (2020), for instance, found that the promotion of healthy food products by a real (versus fictitious) fit influencer on Instagram led to more positive healthy food brand attitudes and purchase intents due to perceived stronger parasocial interactions with the real influencer. Sustainable influencers in turn promote zero waste lifestyles and give their followers advice concerning sustainable consumption patterns (e.g., travel, food, or fashion) (Yıldırım 2021). Especially

micro-influencers appear to be effective in endorsing sustainable products (Pittman and Abell 2021). Future research should further examine the strategies used in influencers' social activism and how it contributes to awareness raising and behavioral change for the good. In table 1, we provide a more detailed insight into the research questions that can be addressed in future research and methodologies that can be used to answer those research questions.

Insert Table 1 about here

## **The dark side of influencer marketing (audience perspective)**

### ***Negative effects of influencer marketing on consumers***

Food promotions are very common among social media influencers. As such, a content analysis of endorsements of two YouTube influencers ( $N = 380$  YouTube videos) who are popular among children has shown that more than 90% of their videos contained a food or beverage cue and these food cues were more often unhealthy than healthy (Coates et al. 2019a). These less healthy foods were also more often branded, positively depicted and part of a marketing campaign. With regard to the impact of those unhealthy food items, Coates et al. (2019b) found that a YouTuber who was endorsing unhealthy snacks (compared to a non-food promotion) led to a higher overall intake and a higher intake of unhealthy snacks among children (aged 9 to 11 years). No effects were found for a healthy snack promotion.

Next to the problems associated with unhealthy food promotions, ethical issues may arise with fitpiration influencers who often share their fitness and sports routines thereby flaunting their idealized thin, but muscled bodies. An analysis of the content posted by influencers communicating about nutrition and exercise (Pilgrim and Bohnet-Joschko 2019), revealed that those influencers often propagate an idealized, muscled body image that can be achieved by proper training. These fitness influencers often emphasize physical appearance



over well-being. Exposure to such idealized images may however negatively impact followers' mental health and lead to ill-being (e.g., envy, stress, self-harm, (Valkenburg 2022). Tiggemann et al. (2018), for instance, found that women who were exposed to the thin ideal showed higher body and facial dissatisfaction, which contributes to body image concerns among women.

Furthermore, exposure to influencers may evoke envy among followers as they often flaunt a lavish and luxurious lifestyle (Jin and Ryu 2019). These feelings of envy may be evoked by social comparison processes whereby people compare their own lives with those of the influencers (Chae 2018). More specifically, Chae (2018) showed in a two-wave survey study that upward comparison at time one predicted evoked envy one month after. People who compared their lives with that of an influencer more often in the past 30 days felt more envy towards that influencer. Further, these upward social comparisons may lead to higher ill-being. It is important that future research examines the impact of influencers on people's values (e.g., stereotypical thinking or materialism) and well-being and ill-being (e.g., self-esteem, life satisfaction, or depressive feelings), and especially among children and adolescent samples.

### ***The potential and shortcomings of advertising disclosures***

Much of the research elaborating on the dark side of influencer marketing concerns the lack of transparency and improper disclosure of sponsored content. In practice, influencers are hesitant to disclose their sponsored content as it may evoke resistance and irritation among followers (Karagür et al. 2022). Followers are expecting authentic and genuine content from influencers. When they notice that the influencer-generated content is being sponsored, it may arouse skepticisms among followers and lead to lower credibility perceptions of the influencers (De Veirman and Hudders 2020). Accordingly, many studies focused on the impact of adding advertising disclosures on increasing advertising recognition. These studies

show that it is important to use a clear language to improve advertising recognition (Evans et al. 2017), and either an influencer- or platform- generated disclosure can improve this recognition, although platform-generated disclosures exert the strongest effects (Karagür et al. 2022).

Although many studies show that such disclosures may harm influencers and brand evaluations, the study of Naderer, Matthes, and Schäfer (2021) shows that a disclosure may increase influencer trustworthiness when followers feel highly similar to the influencer. Some qualitative research also shows that followers actually don't mind that influencer-generated content is being sponsored, as long as there is a good balance between sponsored and non-sponsored content (Van Dam and Van Reijmersdal 2019). Future research should further elaborate on the impact of sponsorship disclosures and examine how it improves the transparency of the influencer tactics and people's understanding of the commercial deals behind those sponsored posts.

### ***Risks involving a young target audience***

Influencer marketing appeared to be a very lucrative tactic to reach a young and engaged audience (Boerman and van Reijmersdal 2020; Van Dam and Van Reijmersdal 2019). These young audiences may be especially vulnerable to adverse advertising effects as their ability to critically reflect on this content is still limited. As such, children have not yet fully developed advertising literacy, which refers to the knowledge and skills related to recognizing advertising and that can help them to critically reflect on those persuasive attempt and resist temptations (Rozendaal et al. 2011).

Research on how those young children respond to influencer marketing is however quite scarce (De Veirman, Hudders, and Nelson 2019). Influencers are considered as close friends and are often peers (other young children being influencers, also known as kidfluencers), which makes it very likely that children will follow their advices (De Veirman,

Hudders, and Nelson 2019). In addition, the hidden nature of influencer marketing hinders the activation of the – albeit limited – advertising literacy and makes it more difficult for children to recognize the content as advertising, which is a precondition to resist the temptation (Rozendaal et al. 2011). Future research should elaborate on how young children are affected by influencer marketing and how they can be more empowered to critically cope with the tactic.

### **The dark side of influencer marketing (influencer perspective)**

When asking children (aged 8 to 12 years) about their future dream jobs, Lego found that about one third of the children living in the US, UK and China indicated that they want to become a YouTuber (Taylor 2019). It was even the number one job aspiration for kids in the UK and US. Examples of famous kid vloggers include Ryan Kaji, who is among the highest paid YouTubers, appeal to children's imaginations (Berg 2020). People often only see the shiny, bright side of an influencer's life, which consists of exciting activities, loads of free products, many friends, and successes.

However, the life of a vlogger or famous Instagrammer may be harder than it looks. As such, influencers can suffer from a continuous search for likes and popularity. Social media have been the ideal tools to compare one's life to that of others (Chae 2018). This also relates to social media influencers who compare their successes with those of other influencers which may lead to depression and pressure. It requires great hard work for influencers to keep up with their peers in making exciting content that receives large views. Advertisers often have strong demands in their contracts with influencers, and labor protection is low, especially with regard to child labor (van der Hof, Verdoodt, and Leiser 2019). Many influencers may not even receive financial compensations (pay) for their work, but only free products or event invitations. Accordingly, much of the labor conducted by

influencers can be considered as underpaid labor. Research on these dark side of being an influencer is however very limited.

Influencers not only need to satisfy the demands of advertisers, but also those of followers. Research has shown that they make compromises in their management of authenticity and try to adjust their content to include what their followers want (Audrezet, de Kerviler, and Guidry Moulard 2020; Wellman et al. 2020). Influencers are also giving up a lot of private information and lose control over the spreading of this information to gain following and trust. However, it is unclear how these matters will unfold in the long run. Interviews with parents of kidfluencers, for instance, revealed that it is often the parents who manage the profile and create online identities for their children. How will this affect children's identity development when they get older? Future research on the impact of these privacy violations among children influencers is also needed.

In sum, this paper aimed to reflect on the bright and dark sides of influencer marketing. Most past research until now focus on the benefits of using social media influencers to promote brands or highlight the dangers associated with the lack of transparency of this tactic. Other dark sides remain hidden, as well as the potential to use social media influencers for the public good. Bringing these aspects under attention may pave the path for new research on the perils and gains of influencer marketing. Debunking the big bad wolves and envious stepmothers can lead to a more ethical and transparent use of influencer marketing.

### **Conflict of interest**

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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