

Social Media Influencers: Creators, Celebrity, Content, Audiences, Brands

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The rise of the 'social media influencer' as a cultural creation and practice has emerged due to a confluence of economic, technological, and social shifts in recent years. I wish to focus on the economic basis for this rise, as there are a wealth of institutions and larger socioeconomic policies that have indicated not just broad directions in creating 'influencers' but encouraged and codified particular strategies they must undertake. What's more these systems have long-ranging consequences beyond just the specific social media influencer industries they nominally support, but into the way larger corporations brand themselves online, individuals create viable professional personas, and even activist groups generating social media followings. Ultimately I like to consider this system as an *influence economy*, one in which 'social influence' is the primary source of economic value. As such, it is useful for us to consider how 'social influence' is discursively constructed as something economically valuable by those in that industry and commenting upon it.

There is of course a basis for this in the celebrity industry. Most easily understood as a loose configuration of various institutions engaged in the creation, promotion, and exploitation of well-known public figures, the celebrity industry represents a concentrated media system with particular agents and structures we can usefully discuss and understand (and there is plenty of research done in this vein). However, I put forth the idea that we can take those same theoretical understanding to the study of the 'social media influencer' industry. As such, I believe a perfect place to start that discussion is with the digital management firms and multi-channel networks that undergird this system like "multi-channel publisher of social content" theAudience or the Disney-owned multi-channel network Maker Studios. Both these companies function as evolved forms of talent agencies and publicity firms common to the celebrity industry yet working in new ways tailored to the social media environment.

theAudience promotes its services like "social consulting," "social publishing," and "influencer activation" in a way that indicates the growing concern with "content creation" over more traditional marketing. In fact the discourse of this company and others like it point out the nature of these buzzwords like 'engagement,' 'influence,' and 'online publishing.' These terms serve a dual purpose of making the system seem cutting edge by reformatting older conceptions of these ideas while dismissing those seen as ineffective in targeting the highly desirable millennial class. This discourse is matched by looking at the corporate structure of theAudience, which was co-founded by people with ties to marketing (Oliver Lockett), talent management (Ari Emanuel), and digital technologies (Sean Parker). We can usefully consider social media influencers and the economy upon which they are built as a convergence of these three systems.

Lastly, I mentioned how this *influence economy's* impact goes well beyond the realm of just social media influencers. In fact we can explore the ways the very *concept* of social media influence has infiltrated other aspects of branding culture. Consider the ways corporate social media accounts have utilized celebrity co-branding opportunities or even created their own 'personalized voices' in order to follow the strategies of social media influencers

despite promoting an entire corporation. Reflect on the ways activist groups and movements on social media adhere to the politics of branding and personification more broadly, perhaps even as a detriment to their ultimate ideological goals. Social media influence as a *belief* moreso than just a new form of celebrity means a reinforcement of neoliberal economic policies and ideologies of individualism over collectivism. These are the larger stakes at play that we should also be mindful of during any discussion of social media influencers, as they are more than just an interesting cultural phenomenon.

In all this we must never forget that the social media influencer system is one that is inherently advertising-based. Indeed just like television, the true product being produced is not really the individual social media stars themselves – it is the *audiences* that they generate. This is the product that is then sold back to advertisers. In the end we can best understand social media influencers as a new intermediary in this relationship between advertisers and potential consumers, one that is pitched as being particularly attuned to social media-savvy millennials and as a remedy to those audiences being lost from more ‘traditional’ media outlets.