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THE RISE OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS: HOW THEY ARE RESHAPING SOCIETY AND YOUTH CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

The rise of social media influencers has dramatically reshaped society and youth culture, transforming both how individuals interact with brands and the way they perceive self-identity and success. Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have given rise to a new form of celebrity, where individuals build massive followings through their relatability, authenticity, and niche expertise. Influencers wield significant power in shaping trends, from fashion and beauty to lifestyle and politics, impacting their audiences' choices and behaviours. This paper explores the role of influencers in shaping youth culture, examining both positive and negative consequences.

Keywords: social media influencers, society, youth culture, positive effect, negative effect

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of the internet and social media has given effect to the way decision-making is made by consumers in purchasing goods and services. Businesses are also aware of the importance of social media as marketing and promotional tools and the changing trend to purchase where marketing activities are now delivered at our fingertips. The social networking sites such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, Tik Tok and others are platforms used by businesses as their promotional tools. Such sites enable users to create and share information in their social networking groups.

To engage with consumers via online platforms, there exists a need to connect with social media influencers and as time goes by, these social media influencers have become powerful players in shaping opinions, driving trends, and influencing consumer behavior especially among younger generations. These digital personalities, with their content and massive followings, hold sway over everything from fashion choices to political views. For marketers, understanding who influencers are, what they do, and how they impact audiences is essential to tapping into this modern phenomenon. In this article, we will look into the world of social media influencers and how they shape society and the youth culture.

WHO ARE SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS?

Social media influencers are individuals who have built a loyal following online. They are known for sharing content that resonates with their audience. Their influence comes from trust, relatability, and expertise in specific niches. An influencer is an individual who uses his or her social media platforms to impact opinions, behaviours, or purchasing decisions. They are often seen as relatable, compared to traditional celebrities. What sets them apart is their ability to connect directly with followers through engaging and authentic content. They post regularly, interact with their audience, and often specialize in topics such as beauty, fitness, gaming, or lifestyle. Their success depends on two key factors: their follower count and their engagement rate (likes, comments, and shares).

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS ON YOUTH AND SOCIETY

Social media has become a crucial part in modern marketing, with over 91% of US companies using it to “inform, shape, engage, and influence consumer behavior” (Mulcahy et al., 2023). It has grown into a tool used by millions of people every day and as younger generations are now born in this digital world; they are used to having access to social media whenever they want to. Thus, due to the increase usage of social media, social media influencers have become significant figures in contemporary society, particularly in the lives of younger generations. Their power to shape perceptions, drive consumer behaviour, and influence social trends is profound, affecting everything from self-esteem and identity formation to purchasing decisions and social activism. This impact is felt across platforms like Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and increasingly on other social networks, where influencers shape the digital landscape and broader culture.

SHAPING IDENTITY AND SELF-ESTEEM

One of the most profound impacts of social media influencers on youth is the shaping of identity and self-esteem. Influencers often project aspirational lifestyles, promoting beauty, fashion, fitness, and lifestyle trends that young people often strive to emulate. While this could be a source of inspiration, it also contributes to the rise of unattainable standards that can negatively affect self-image. Research suggests that frequent exposure to influencers' content especially in beauty and fashion can lead to increase body dissatisfaction and lower self-esteem, particularly among adolescent girls (Fardouly et al., 2015). Youth, especially Generation Z, are highly impressionable and are heavily influenced by the online personas they follow. The prevalence of filtered images, heavily curated content, and "perfect" portrayals of life can lead to unhealthy comparisons, where young people feel inadequate unless they match these ideals. A study by Tiggemann and Slater (2014) highlights how social media use correlates with body dissatisfaction and eating disorders, particularly in the context of following beauty influencers. However, not all effects are negative. Many influencers also promote body positivity, mental health awareness, and self-love, which can help counterbalance some of the harmful impacts. Influencers like Lizzo and Jameela Jamil have used their platforms to advocate for diversity and self-acceptance, presenting more inclusive standards of beauty that resonate with youth (Fardouly et al., 2015; Diedrichs et al., 2015).

INFLUENCE ON CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR

Social media influencers play a central role in shaping the purchasing decisions of youth. As digital natives, young people are more likely to trust influencers than traditional forms of advertising. Influencers' product recommendations, reviews, and endorsements significantly impact youth's consumer behaviour. Studies have shown that 49% of Gen Z consumers are more likely to make a purchase after seeing a product recommended by an influencer (McKinsey & Company, 2021). This shift toward influencer-driven consumerism is evident across various industries, including fashion, beauty, tech, and gaming. Influencers often act as brand ambassadors, creating a sense of authenticity and relatability that traditional advertisements cannot replicate. In turn, this drives brand loyalty among younger audiences. However, there are concerns about the commercial exploitation of influencer platforms, with accusations of promoting materialism and superficial values, leading to a desire to keep up with trends at the cost of financial stability or personal well-being (Freberg et al., 2011).

INFLUENCERS AND SOCIAL NORMS

Beyond consumerism, influencers also have the power to shape social norms. They often set the tone for trends in fashion, language, and behaviour. Platforms like TikTok are particularly influential in creating viral trends, whether related to dance challenges, fashion styles, or even political movements. The viral nature of TikTok has allowed influencers to engage youth in conversations about race, gender equality, and environmental sustainability (Abidin, 2016). Influencers could also reinforce or challenge societal expectations around beauty, success, and gender roles.

SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACTS

While influencers have been celebrated for promoting positive social change, their impact on youth and society is not entirely without controversy. The constant need to post, the pressure to maintain a "perfect" online presence, and the desire for validation through likes and comments can lead to mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and loneliness among young people. A study by the Royal Society for Public Health (2017) found that Instagram was the most detrimental platform for mental health, particularly among teenagers, due to its focus on appearance and comparison.

Additionally, influencers' portrayal of an idealized lifestyle can contribute to the phenomenon of FOMO (fear of missing out), which may lead to social isolation or dissatisfaction with one's own life. Influencers often create a curated version of reality that overlooks the challenges and imperfections of their lives, creating an unrealistic portrayal of success (Chua & Chang, 2016). However, influencers are also playing a crucial role in destigmatizing mental health struggles, advocating for open discussions about mental well-being, and helping to combat the negative impact of social comparison.

CONCLUSION

The impact of social media influencers on youth and society is complex and multifaceted. On one hand, influencers can inspire positive change, promote social causes, and shape purchasing behaviour. On the other hand, they also contribute to the perpetuation of unrealistic beauty standards, social comparison, and consumerism. For youth, the key is to develop critical thinking skills and media literacy to navigate the influencer-driven landscape.

while recognizing both the positive and negative aspects of influencer culture. As social media continues to evolve, the role of influencers will undoubtedly expand, and it will be important to monitor their influence on youth mental health and societal norms. Moving forward, influencers who promote authenticity, diversity, and mental well-being will likely have a lasting positive impact on society.

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