

How to be the Best Influencer: The Impact of Personality, Audience Perceptions, and Narcissism on Social Media Influencing

Japkaran Saroya

Abstract

Social media influencers (influencers) are individuals who have built followings on social media platforms by sharing content with their audience and can be paid to do so through promotional posts and partnerships with brands and businesses. Social media influencing has grown into a lucrative career for people worldwide. But which factors are essential to optimize your social media growth online? This paper reviews how specific personality characteristics, audience perceptions, and narcissism play a role in the success of social media influencers and how to utilize social media to create success in social media influencing.

Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram are the most popular social media platforms in 2022, with 2.9, 2.56, and 1.47 billion monthly active users (Statista, 2022). Social media is seemingly inescapable in present-day society. 90% of American teens have reported using social media, 75% have at least one social media profile, and 51% report that they visit a social media site at least once a day (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2018). More social media platforms are being created and gaining popularity. Individuals are finding ways to generate not only revenue from social media but also fame from posting videos, photos, or personal updates. Social media influencers (influencers) are individuals who have amassed a large and engaged following that consumes their content while being paid by brands to promote or endorse their products and share reviews with their followers. There are no qualifications to become an influencer. Thus, anyone can become one if they build an audience that is interested enough in them and the content they post. Certain factors can lead to increased success on social media, such as the platform the influencer posts on, the personality traits of the influencer and follower, the content that they post, and the viewer's perception of the influencer.

Historically, influencers have always existed, but society has developed a new culturally relevant definition of an influencer today. The earliest influencer can be dated back to the 1760s. Josiah Wedgwood, the first known person to brand themselves and tap into their marketing power, was a potter who used his stamp of approval from King George III to begin selling his work to other people (Peker, 2022). In the 20th century, with the development of print media (e.g., newspapers, magazines, posters) and the birth of popular culture, a snowball effect of advertisements and trends began. An example is Coco Chanel's creation of the "Little Black Dress," a versatile dress that could be used for multiple occasions, and their female pantsuits, which were innovations in women's fashion in the 1920s (Find Your Influence, 2021). Advertisements with models or notable figures began running not too soon after with the accessibility of television and the production of mainstream TV shows, movies, and televised sports. Advertisers and brands began working with celebrities and athletes to create and sell

products (e.g., Michael Jordan's collaboration with Nike to create the Air Jordan shoe in 1985 and "Got Milk?" ads featuring prominent celebrities such as Britney Spears) (Find Your Influence, 2021).

Moving into the 21st century with the creation and development of the internet, individuals were able to share aspects of their lives online for anyone to see on blog-type platforms and chat rooms and eventually on platforms such as Instagram and Facebook (Find Your Influence, 2021). Now, with the emergence of new social media platforms and increased accessibility to these platforms, countless influencers from across the world exist on each one. Individuals can share and showcase aspects of their lives with millions of people around the world. Through posting photos, videos, and personal updates about their lives, influencers have been able to build large followings on various platforms that brands and companies see as easy markets to push their products on.

It is important to understand how young adults' perceptions towards influencers have changed over time, as this is likely the most active demographic of people online due to having grown up around social media. Consequently, social media influencing and content creation is now a serious career interest (Chae, 2018). Freberg et al. (2011) compared young adults' perception of influencers to CEOs and found that undergraduate students perceived influencers as verbal, smart, ambitious, productive, and poised. Participants did not see influencers and CEOs to be self-pitying, easily frustrated, self-defeating, submissive, anxious, or lacking meaning in life. Celebrity endorsements have been used to make an influential person synonymous with a brand or product (e.g., Pepsi using famous pop stars such as Beyoncé in numerous commercials for a duration of time). Similarly, with the rise of social media influencers, they are now becoming the faces of the products they endorse on their social media pages. Uzunoğlu & Kip (2014) found that individuals follow social media personalities due to a sense of admiration and connection to them. More recent research has also found that people follow influencers for inspiration and escapism (Malik et al., 2022; Ki et al., 2022). Influencers are also seen as glamorous, funny, relatable, and connective, which all contribute to their followers' positive perception of them (Malik et al., 2022).

One vital factor for longevity on social media is keeping the audience engaged. Influencers can optimize content engagement by understanding their audience and their personality, as well as being mindful of which platform they are posting to.

To know the audience, influencers must engage and communicate with them, which Ki et al. (2022) found to be one of the most important things influencers can do with their followers. This can be through the comments on their posts, the direct message system on the platform, or conducting regular live video streams. As such, the influencer develops a mutual connection with their audience that can build likability, trust, credibility, and viewer-perceived competence (Malik et al., 2022; Schouten et al. 2020; Mete, 2021; Hassanzadeh et al., 2021). In a way, this connection humanizes the influencer and makes them more relatable, as if they are a friend or someone they personally know. Ki et al. (2022) investigated the way consumers are inspired by influencers and adopt their exemplars as their personal social defaults. Influencers inspire their followers with innovative ideas that they may not have thought of before. Thus, the more their

followers are inspired by these ideas, the greater the likelihood of them implementing their tips, styles, or recommendations. Connecting with followers fuels this inspiration, which, in turn, can correlate to increased engagement and sales for products that brands are using the influencer to push. Influencers can tap into their full potential using the findings from Ki et al. (2022), as they understand the power of their influence and content. Influencers can have a significant impact on popular culture and the lives of people across the globe by dictating which styles, mannerisms, sayings, and trends are socially desirable at that time for people to imitate. The key takeaway from Ki et al. (2022) is to ensure influencers are engaging with their audience in a meaningful way and trying to become an inspiration for them. Influencers can do so by being friendly and interactive and posting content that is authentic, unique, and aesthetically pleasing to their followers.

Influencers should also be mindful of the different ways their audience's personality may impact content engagement across platforms. Audiences who are higher in psychoticism may utilize platforms like Twitter as a space for free speech and public commentary, while highly neurotic individuals have reported using social media websites for escapism purposes (e.g., a highly neurotic individual may go on a deep dive of entertaining animal videos to distract themselves from anxieties in their life currently) (Orchard et al., 2014). Extraversion and openness to new experiences are key personality traits that an influencer should utilize to maximize success on photo-sharing platforms such as Instagram and Pinterest (i.e., not being afraid to take photos in public, travelling to new countries, or experiencing new cultures) (Hassanzadeh et al., 2021; Argyris et al., 2021). To build a deeper connection between influencer and audience, the levels of such personality traits should be matched between the two parties (Hassanzadeh et al., 2021; Argyris et al., 2021).

The content an influencer posts is incredibly important to their success, as it is the only way that their followers can see them. The content should be tailored to fit the platform that it is being posted to (i.e., photos on photo-sharing platforms such as Instagram and videos on video-sharing platforms such as YouTube). The reason for this is to provide consistency on the platform and because, as previously mentioned, audiences engage with content differently on different platforms for various purposes. Since numerous influencers exist on the many different social media platforms that operate today, they have fanbases within their own niche communities (e.g., beauty, fashion, lifestyle, gaming, travel). Zhao et al. (2019) focused on Twitch.com, a popular live-streaming platform for the gaming community, and found the personality traits of popular streamers on the platform. Through an analysis of one random video on a streamer's page and a transcript of their last 200 tweets, researchers found that popular streamers were high in neuroticism and low in openness and conscientiousness. Neuroticism might be better on video-sharing platforms like Twitch or YouTube since the audience is watching these videos for a purpose, whether it is for entertainment or distraction. Depending on the niche, some audiences may be looking for specific actions or reactions from their favourite content creators (e.g., a violent, negative outburst in reaction to losing early while playing a video game).

As new social media apps are created, platforms engage in competition for the general public's attention. With its rising popularity, TikTok has begun adding features that were unique

to other platforms to keep their users on TikTok for the same purpose they would go to other platforms for (e.g., TikTok Now versus BeReal, TikTok Story posts versus Snapchat stories, three-minute or longer videos to rival YouTube, and carousel image posts with the ability to add sound or music to rival Instagram). This competition is mutual, as these platforms have begun to introduce their own versions of short-form video content to rival TikTok (i.e., YouTube Shorts, Instagram Reels, continuous-scrolling on Twitter videos). For influencers, this means that they are now able to cross-post to multiple social media platforms using the same content to increase their exposure and continue building their following across different platforms. However, now, the influencer must learn the tricks to success on a new platform using a new medium for their content (e.g., an Instagram influencer who is used to only posting photos may struggle with creating a TikTok where they need to edit the video, find an appropriate sound to use in the background).

A significant component of how an influencer achieves a large following is through how they market themselves and the brand they create for themselves. Influencers who want to secure collaborations and sponsorships with well-known brands should ensure that it fits the personal brand that they have created, which in turn increases purchase likelihood. Schouten et al. (2020) looked at celebrity and influencer endorsements and their impact on attitudes towards the advertisement, the product, and purchase intentions. Their study had four conditions in which the celebrity and influencer were paired with either a good or poor fit (e.g., a travel blogger posting an ad for a new video game console is a poor fit, whereas a celebrity makeup artist posting about their new eyeshadow palette being sold at a major makeup company is a good fit). Influencers were perceived to be more like the participants and more trustworthy than celebrities. Due to this perceived similarity, participants were more inclined to purchase from an influencer. One reason for this is that participants see influencers as “everyday people,” and thus, it is easier for the viewer to picture themselves in the photo with the advertised product. Followers are more likely to buy from the Fenty makeup line when they see influencers who resemble their skin tone talk about how the makeup line perfectly matches the colour of their skin. Whereas, if the same influencer was promoting a new protein powder, the viewer might perceive the post as disingenuous and a chance to make a quick dollar since the advertised product does not fit the brand that the influencer has created or the niche that the influencer belongs to.

To consider influencing as a realistic career, one would think all that is required is a large following. Recent research has found that the number of followers an influencer has is not the most important factor to the viewer; instead, it is their overall professionalism (Kolo et al., 2019). Unprofessional attitudes and content can lead to vast dislike among followers and reduce engagement and the possibilities for future brand deals and sponsorships. Humblebragging is an example of an unprofessional attitude, in which an individual uses humility or complaints to hide their bragging. Individuals humblebrag when they are motivated to elicit sympathy and impress others (Sezer et al., 2018). An example of a complaint-based humblebrag would be if an influencer were to post about how they woke up and went to lunch with no makeup on and found it annoying that they were still receiving attention from attractive people at the restaurant.

Humblebragging reduces liking, perceived competence, and compliance with requests and is seen as insincere (Sezer et al., 2018).

The effectiveness of humblebragging has been investigated while comparing influencers' and celebrities' brand endorsements. Paramita & Septianto (2021) found that humblebragging increased favourable attitudes towards products when a celebrity posted a brand endorsement on social media and decreased favourable attitudes towards products when an influencer did the same. Participants were told they were going to read a social media post by either a fashion model or a fashion influencer. One version of the post reads:

“After an exhausting long flight for a fashion event, I needed this hotel to sweep away my fatigue. I am tired of receiving room upgrades all the time – who NEEDS a sea view on the top floor? They sent a luxury gift box of Knipschildt Chocolatier’s signature truffle chocolates to my room, while I just want to stay fit. Overall, I would say my experience at Hotel M was not bad and I would recommend this hotel to everyone I know (p. 1302).”

The other version said:

“After an exhausting long flight for a fashion event in Paris, I needed this hotel to sweep away my fatigue. I received a room upgrade, which was a sea view room on the top floor. They sent a luxury gift box of Knipschildt Chocolatier’s signature truffle chocolates to my room. Overall, I would say my experience at Hotel M was not bad and I would recommend this hotel to everyone I know (p. 1302).”

This difference in endorser attitude could be explained by the fact that individuals see the job of an influencer as something anyone could easily do and might see this endorsement as disingenuous. Another difference that the researchers found was that the effects of humblebragging for celebrities were driven by amusement, and the effects for influencers were driven by irritation. There could also be a relation to jealousy and benign envy, in which the viewer does not believe the influencer is deserving of the sponsorship or endorsement (Chen et al., 2020; Chae, 2018; Mete, 2021). In contrast, celebrities (e.g., actors) are people that individuals believe worked hard for their platform and success. Thus, they admire these personalities and see these endorsements as genuine (Illicic & Webster, 2016). Research has not yet investigated whether this content engagement is supportive or negative (Horan, 2021). One probable explanation could be that viewers with average-to-high levels of neuroticism are using the influencer as an avenue of escape and thus might picture themselves in the post and show appreciation for their successes in landing a brand deal, or individuals who are high in psychoticism may be in the comments of the post expressing displaced anger, envy, and frustration towards the influencer (Malik et al., 2022; Orchard et al., 2014; Mete, 2021; Chen et al., 2020; Chae, 2018).

As previously mentioned, the premise of being an influencer requires individuals to share most, if not all, aspects of their lives, including their daily activities and regular updates. This could mean that there is a sub-group of people who may be better influencers than others.

Narcissism is characterized by a self-centred, dominant, and arrogant personality orientation that can come off as attractive, energetic, and entertaining at first, but an individual's narcissistic self-presentation style will eventually come to the forefront (Steinmetz et al., 2017). Pertaining to the realm of social media use, Singh et al. (2018) found that narcissism was correlated with posting and sending selfies more frequently, rating their selfies as more attractive, and narcissistic individuals are more active on social media and spend more time on different platforms.

Considering these findings, one could say that narcissists may be better influencers since they would be spending more time online on different platforms and would be consistently posting content. Followers may eventually begin to pick up on the individual's narcissistic personality and see the influencer as ingenuine, resulting in disengagement with their content. Narcissists' time spent on social media could be explained by their possible motivation to be on these platforms to show off to others and receive admiration (self-interest motivation) as opposed to keeping their followers updated (information-communication motivation) (Singh et al., 2018). Frederick & Zhang (2019) found a link between narcissism and self-consciousness, which supports this theory, as narcissists may be hyperaware of their body image and presentation and feel the need to share how they look with their followers due to their self-interest motivation. Therefore, instead of an influencer keeping their followers up to date on their lives, sharing tips, and providing reviews and recommendations, more narcissistic influencers might post more self-oriented content consistently, which might not match the purpose of posting (e.g., the influencer posts a series of selfies barely showing the product they have been asked to promote).

As well, audiences must be careful when trying to identify if certain influencers are truly narcissistic. Recent literature searches on the topic of narcissism and social media use found that grandiose narcissism was positively related to time spent on social media, frequency of social media posts, friend and follower counts, and the number of selfies on social media (McCain & Campbell, 2016). Bretman Rock, a Hawaiian native who rose to fame in 2015 through posting 6-second videos on the social media app Vine, has amassed over 50 million followers across Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. His content originally consisted of daily makeup looks and tutorials but then turned into comedic skits, attempting viral challenges with his family members, and personal story-telling videos. According to McCain and Campbell (2016), Bretman Rock could be labelled a narcissist due to the primary focus of his content being him and his life and the large amount of time he spends recording, editing, and posting content for his different social media platforms where millions of people can see. But this judgement is difficult to make without knowing him personally, outside of what he posts on social media.

One tool to differentiate narcissistic individuals from non-narcissistic individuals lies in their reason for posting. Influencers may not all be driven by self-interest motivation to post on social media, as posting this content may bring joy, satisfaction, and wholesome feelings within themselves rather than being used to fuel their ego. However, there may be other cues that followers could use to help infer if the influencer is a narcissist, such as the influencer's use of humblebragging, identifying if the brag is humility- or complaint-based, and the frequency of its

use (Sezer et al., 2018). Sezer et al. (2018) found that complaint-based humblebragging is the most common form of bragging and is the least effective form of self-presentation compared to humility-based and regular bragging.

Social media platforms continue to push their peaks of popularity and usage as more people join social networking sites each year. With increasing popularity comes the availability of creating an audience that is interested and engaged with content that is shared on a personal profile. Individuals who want to branch into the career of influencing must ensure that they engage and communicate with their audience, keep in mind the personality of their audience and how to showcase specific traits of their own personality within their content, consider how their content will be perceived, and keep their content consistent with the brand that they have created. Potential and current influencers should also make a note about how their content may come off as possibly narcissistic and introduce some creative ways to present themselves and their content in contrast to traditional methods.

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