

The Dark Side Of Social Media And Influencer Marketing

18 November 2022



Bora Qesja, Senior Lecturer, Australian Institute of Business

Samaneh Soleimani, Lecturer, Australian Institute of Business

Tareq Rasul, Senior Lecturer, Australian Institute of Business

Influencer marketing has become an increasingly popular marketing tool for brands over the past few years. As a form of social media marketing, influencer marketing involves direct communication of people with their audience without any intermediaries, through online platforms such as Instagram, YouTube and TikTok. Previously, traditional celebrities were mainly used to endorse products and brands. However, online platforms provide an opportunity for ordinary people to connect with millions of people around the world, get their attention and attract them to follow their content. Hence, popularity and fame could be achieved by anyone, not only by movies or sports celebrities.

Influencer marketing has grown significantly over the years and is estimated to [reach \\$24 billion by 2025](#). Because influencers have the [power to affect the behaviours](#) of their followers, brands started to invest in this domain to grow their customers through influencers. For instance, one study indicates that 40% of respondents have purchased an item after seeing it used by an influencer on Instagram, YouTube etc ([Swant, 2016](#)). While this appears advantageous to both brands and consumers (as influencers are seen as more trustworthy when compared to traditional celebrities), [recent backlash against some of the most popular social media influencers](#) has raised ethical concerns among marketers about the practices of influencer marketing (Russon, 2018).

YouTube: Family Influencers

One stream of influencers is family influencers on YouTube. Family influencers can attract large audiences as followers can relate to them, trust them, and be entertained by documentaries of their personal lives. The videos of family influencers get more views specially when a [newborn or a young kid is featured in the video](#). Taking videos of the children from early ages and sharing them online for millions of viewers reminds us of "The Truman Show" movie, where the character lives in a reality TV show without knowing it. The dangers of posting children to create content in these videos include but are not limited to, [losing their privacy](#), [compromising the legal rights of child labour](#), and [risking their](#)

[general safety](#) as millions of strangers know the faces and all the information surrounding their lives. Moreover, evidence showcases that [families puts pressure](#) on children to act in front of the cameras to produce content, especially since the number of family influencers has increased leading to [more competition to attract audiences](#). Therefore, the [well-being of children](#) is also at risk.

TikTok: Emergence and issues

Another stream of popular influencers includes TikTok influencers. TikTok, which is also called Douyin in China, is a social media app that has more than [500 million users across 150 countries](#). It lets users create and share short videos with music, special filters, emojis, and other effects. TikTok is one of numerous apps that have led the "[short-form video revolution](#)," which has caused a significant decline in viewership of long-form content such as TV shows and even online articles. Like other social media apps, TikTok lets you build a virtual identity, connect with other users, and share your thoughts, experiences, and creative expression with a worldwide audience. TikTok users can create short videos with [music, special filters, emojis, and other effects](#).

While companies can use TikTok influencers to promote their products or services, customers need to be aware that there can be fake TikTok influencers. As with any social media platform, there are some other potential pitfalls of TikTok. The app has recently come under fire for allegedly facilitating [cyber-bullying](#), [hate speech](#), and the [sexualization of minors](#). The platform has been criticized for being too easy for minors to access, given that there's no age verification system. While the app does have some moderation procedures for removing inappropriate content, it's not uncommon for inappropriate, profane, and sexually explicit posts to go viral. TikTok hosts a lot of "bad advice" provided by influencers on health, beauty, and fitness topics, and promotes a "fitspiration" culture that some experts criticize as unhealthy. Moreover, the platform's algorithm often creates a "bubble" that promotes posts from like-minded users and gives users less exposure to different viewpoints.

TikTok presents a number of pertinent privacy issues in addition to the above concerns. The first category pertains to the privacy policies and procedures that are implemented by TikTok within its mobile application. This app is designed in such a way as to nudge people into sharing more data than they otherwise would if they were provided with additional information. Secondly, it has been alleged that TikTok's parent company, ByteDance, plays a role in sharing users' data with other third parties. In the United States, [a member of the Federal Communications Commission \(FCC\)](#) has advocated for the elimination of the TikTok app from app stores operated by Google and Apple. The privacy of children and adolescents is a third category of concern related to the topic of privacy. Overall, both businesses and users need to be cautious when using this app to avoid any problems.

Instagram: The pursuit of the everchanging ideal beauty standards

With over 1 billion monthly active users and 40 billion photos shared on the platform, Instagram is the second most used social networking site (Instagram, [2020](#)). These days, the platform may be doing more damage than good with young women and men becoming more vulnerable and insecure due to unrealistic beauty ideals. In an attempt to achieve these unattainable ideals, many have developed mental health issues and body dysmorphia. Instagram influencers use the platform to promote themselves by creating an image of perfection via documenting their lifestyles, eating habits, their workout routines, their perfectly toned bodies and sculpted faces. However, more often than not, this portrayal is fake. The visuals are often achieved via a combination of retouching ([#beforeafter](#) exposing the retouching has gained popularity) and plastic surgery.

Primack et al. ([2017](#)) have found that the extent to which individuals are exposed to images of others, might negatively affect their wellbeing by diminishing self-esteem and increasing anxiety. The negative effects on perceptions of ones' body, body dissatisfaction and drive for thinness, particularly on women, were also highlighted in other studies conducted on the matter (Engeln et al., [2020](#); Fardouly & Vartanian, [2015](#); Hendrickse et al., [2017](#)). In line with this evidence, in [2021](#), Carnaghi et al. found that appearance-related comparisons on Instagram mediated the relationship between women's photo-activity on Instagram and concerns regarding their bodies. More importantly, they found that female participants who partook in a greater level of photo-activity on Instagram, also compared their appearance more to others as well as exhibited higher levels of internalization of beauty standards and as a result, reported greater concerns about their bodies.

In an interview conducted by Forbes, psychiatrist Helen Egger discussed how the '[Instagram Face](#)' has become a beauty standard. The latter is characterized by "high cheekbones, poreless skin, cat-like eyes, and plump lips." Egger further stated that this standard "doesn't support individuality; it supports conformity with the standard of beauty". It is indeed the pursuit of this idealized face seen in most beauty influencers that has led to a boom of a now trendy procedure titled the '[ponytail lift](#)'. The latter isn't a precise medical name, but rather a marketing term given to the procedure due to the outcome resembling the lifted look one obtains when pulling the hair back into a tight updo.

Differently from the traditional face lifts, undertaken by an older demographic, "the ponytail lifts may only be appropriate for a subset of younger patients who have more minimal signs of aging with little-to-no skin laxity" Dr. Tepper says. Another [popularized procedure](#) that came as a direct impact of the unattainable beauty standards set by celebrities and influencers is the Brazilian Butt Lift (BBL), considered to be the [deadliest of all cosmetic procedures](#). BBLs have been listed as [a trending cosmetic procedure in](#) the ASPS annual reports from 2013-2020. The amount of BBL surgeries in 2020 (22,000 procedures) was more than double the amount in 2013 (about 10,000 procedures). However, in 2022, a

shift can be seen in the ideal beauty standards, with the era of [BBL being declared as over](#) (with [Kim Kardashian's body change](#) supporting the shift). With beauty standards now lasting the duration of a fashion cycle, the question of how this will impact an impressionable generation arises.

Highlighting the potential for misrepresentation, miseducation, or deceptive marketing as well as the negative impact and ethical concerns of some of the main social media platforms and practices of influencer marketing is only the first step. The second step is progressing this discussion on how this impact should be mediated by increasing regulations as well as educating and providing support to the parties involved.



Bora Qesja

Senior Lecturer, Australian Institute of Business

Bora has over ten years of experience working in academia and industry. Bora obtained her PhD from the University of Adelaide, Australia (where she taught for five years) funded by the ARC Training Centre for Innovative Wine Production, graduated with honours from a MSc in Luxury Goods and Services from the International University of Monaco (Monaco), and has a BS in Bioinformatics from Jacobs University (Germany) which equipped her with strong analytical skills. Dr. Qesja continues her engagement with the industry as a consultant, with the latest project ('Riverland on the Verge') resulting in a permanent Virtual Reality fixture (for promoting the tourism of the Riverland Wine Region) in both the National Wine Centre (Adelaide) and Riverland Wine Centre.



Dr. Samaneh Soleimani

Lecturer, Australian Institute of Business

Samaneh is a self-motivated researcher with a multi-disciplinary background in marketing and tourism management fields. She has a solid experience in applying qualitative, quantitative, and mixed research methods. Samaneh holds a PhD in Business and Management from University of South Australia.



Dr Tareq Rasul

Senior Lecturer, Australian Institute of Business

Tareq holds a doctorate in marketing from the University of South Australia, Australia and an MBA from the University of East London, United Kingdom. To date, he has published around 55 peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers and book chapters. His research has been published in high-ranked journals such as Australasian Journal of Information Systems, Finance Research Letters, International Journal of Bank Marketing, Journal of Business Research, Journal of Islamic Marketing, Journal of Knowledge Management, Journal of Strategic Marketing, and Tourism Recreation Research, among others. He is also a Certified Practising Marketer (CPM) and a member of the Australian Marketing Institute (AMI).