Evidence: Influencer Culture

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My name is Dr Stephanie Alice Baker. I am a Senior Lecturer in Sociology at City, University of London. I research influencer culture and misinformation in the context of health and wellness. My recent work explores how influencers have contributed to the spread of false and misleading advice about COVID-19 (Baker, 2020a, 2020b, 2021b). I have also examined the capacity for influencers to help their followers cope with government lockdowns and comply with public health measures during the pandemic (Baker, 2020b, 2021a). I have published multiple articles and media reports on these topics as well as a book on influencer culture, *Lifestyle Gurus: constructing authority and influence online* (2020).

How would you define 'influencers' and 'influencer culture'?

Influencers are individuals who pursue fame online as a vocation for profit (Baker and Rojek, 2020). They have been able to self-brand as a public persona by building an online audience that they use for social and economic gain.

Most influencers are micro-celebrities who achieve celebrity status through self-broadcasting online to a niche community of followers. This idea of finding your niche or your "tribe" is a key characteristic of influencer culture. Part of the appeal of micro-celebrities is that social media provides the impression of intimate exchange (Baker and Rojek, 2019). Influencers employ micro-celebrity practices of authenticity, accessibility and autonomy to facilitate trust and intimacy with their followers. Micro-celebrities achieve fame using a variety of social media. They include 'Bloggers', 'YouTubers', 'Instagrammers' and 'TikTokers' and are commonly referred to as influencers when they profit from this visibility and status.

Is this a new phenomenon?

The term influencer is generally used to describe social media influencers. Influencers

are often considered to be a by-product of social media, however, the ability for individuals to use the media to achieve influence and celebrity status pre-dates social media. For example, Baker and Rojek (2020) demonstrate how many of the techniques used by lifestyle and wellness influencers to achieve influence online were used by influential figures and celebrities in self-help manuals, books, radio, film and television in the nineteenth and twentieth century. What is new is that social media is widely accessible to the public and has lowered the barriers to entry by enabling internet users to self-broadcast online to a public audience. While there is no guarantee that a user will be seen or heard online, the potential is there to be viewed, recognised and listened to by others. Digital technologies also enable content to be disseminated at an unprecedented speed and scale, and make it possible for influencers to target specific groups online by cross-pollinating ideas to like-minded communities. Much of my recent work has explored these affordances in relation to public trust and health misinformation during the pandemic (Baker, 2020a, 2020b, 2021a, 2021b).

Has 'influencing' impacted popular culture? If so, how has society and/or culture changed because of this side of social media?

Influencers have both emerged from, and shaped, popular culture. The rise of influencers in popular culture is a result of internet culture and the proliferation of smartphones, social media and mobile broadband in the twenty-first century, which are both easy to use and widely accessible to the public. The techniques used by influencers to create and sustain an online following has also altered trust relations and the ways in which people seek information online. These changing interpersonal relations can be a positive thing when influencers encourage public awareness about certain issues, but influencers can also facilitate mis-and disinformation when those distrusting of public authorities turn to influencers to inform them. An example of the role of influencers in facilitating misinformation was the viral spread of the conspiracy theory film, *Plandemic*, which was amplified by influencers online, particularly in the lifestyle and wellness space (Baker, 2020b).

Is it right that influencers are predominantly associated with advertising and consumerism, and if not, what other roles do influencers fulfil online?

Influencers tend to occupy large followings across multiple digital platforms, which they use for social and commercial gain. Most influencers monetise their followings by integrating affiliate links and advertorials in their blog and social media posts. This conception of influencers as those who pursue fame online as a vocation for profit distinguishes them from initial conceptions of micro-celebrities as internet celebrities uninterested in commerce. Today, micro-celebrities are part of a commercial system. They have more in common with mainstream media personalities than they do with the first generation of internet celebrities.

While most influencers monetise their brand through advertising, products and services, influencers also pursue fame to achieve social status. For example, during the pandemic there have been numerous examples of influencers who seek to influence public discourse and trust relations rather than selling a specific product or service (see Baker, 2021b).

How are tech companies encouraging or disrupting the activities of influencing?

Tech companies have a significant impact on the ways in which influencers interact with their followers online. First, the affordances of social media platforms shape the ways in which influencers engage with their followers. Platform features, such as top posts, hashtags and stories, encourage certain types of interactions to take place on these platforms. For example, the introduction of Instagram 'stories' has encouraged influencers to post content more frequently on the platform. Conversely, the labels and warning messages introduced by Twitter during the pandemic to identify disputed or misleading information related to COVID-19 encourage friction by slowing down the speed with which information is shared online and limiting the capacity for mis-and disinformation to be amplified on the site (see Baker et. al, 2020).

Content moderation policies also shape the content that influencers share online. Tech companies have introduced more stringent rules and harm policies during the pandemic to combat the spread of misinformation online (Baker et. al, 2020). These policies are intended to limit the capacity for influencers to promote fraudulent products and share false and misleading claims with their followers.

How aware are users of the arrangements between influencers and advertisers? Should policymakers, tech companies and influencers and advertisers themselves do more to ensure these arrangements are transparent?

The Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) has clear rules which state that influencers must declare when their posts are ads and that 'ads must be obviously identifiable'. Despite these requirements, many influencers do not comply with these rules and strategically conceal advertisements from their followers. For example, in a study of health and wellness influencers on Instagram, Baker and Walsh (2018) found that the majority of top posts contained native advertising, a subtle form of advertising where the ad experience follows the natural form and function of the user experience in the context in which it is placed. The authors found that 55 per cent of top posts were ads for weight loss programmes, supplements and food products. While over half of the posts analysed were used to promote health-related products and services, only a minority of these were clearly labelled as ads. The majority of commercial disclosures were buried in captions and hashtags or absent altogether making it difficult for consumers to recognise that these posts were paid for.

The self-presentation techniques of influencers make it more difficult for consumers to identify advertising online as influencers are generally perceived to be authentic and trustworthy by their followers. The ASA provides guidance on how to make brand owned and paid ads recognisable, however, there is still a high degree of variability in how influencers disclose ads. A more transparent approach to influencer advertising would ensure that ads are consistently marked and easily recognised. This could take the form of a particular label and placement of this label that influencers must adhere to when advertising a product or service online in order to

ensure consistency and transparency in online advertising. For example, requiring that the hashtag #ad be placed at the start of a caption accompanying an advertorial or branded post to ensure that ads are clearly recognisable. Media literacy about these regulations would also benefit consumers who have less experience identifying influencer advertising.

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