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Instagram influencers: when a special relationship with fans turns dark

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Ask a child or teenager “what do you want to be?” and you might get the response, a “YouTuber. Instagrammer”. That’s perhaps not surprising given how attractive the world of social media influencing seems to be. It looks hassle-free, with freebies, travel and endless opportunities.

Social media influencers publish videos, images and motivational stories on social media channels such as Instagram and YouTube. But their presence is different to the average user. An influencer has a solid base of fans who follow the content for entertainment or inspiration. In return, these followers indicate their enjoyment

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and appreciation by liking, sharing and commenting on photos, links and videos, while influencers get paid through advertising.

The number of people following and the number of likes and comments is currency in the social media world. It enables influencers to build a reputation and stand out from all of us who use social media to interact with friends. Most social media influencers have their own specialist expertise areas which they are passionate about or develop as a hobby. One of the UK's top earning influencers Zoella – better known as Huda Beauty – started off publishing cosmetics tutorial videos but ended up documenting every minute of her life via videos and pictures.



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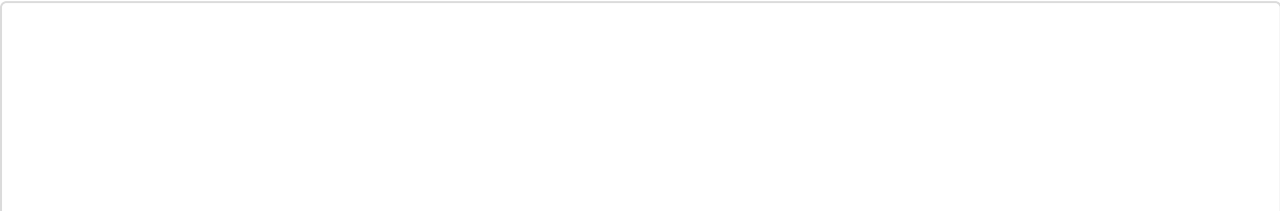
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This is a key element of the phenomenon. It sets social media stars apart from traditional celebrities. Followers value the ability to get a close look at the personal lives of influencers. They like following “real” and relatable people. Influencers are effectively collaborating with their followers, building a network that helps them to establish a reputation from recommendations and referrals. That in turn, enables them to generate income through advertising deals.

The Instagram influencer market has grown exponentially in recent years. It’s now a billion dollar industry, with a value projected to double by 2019. Social media influencers are seen as being able to drive the attitudes and behaviour of their followers by pushing content at them, from healthy budget recipes to workout routines. But the relationship also involves interacting with them by asking for their views and recommendations as well as, crucially, thanking them and publishing content they ask to be posted.

But our study of a micro-influencing group called **Bournemouth Bloggers** revealed that this relationship can also have repercussions for influencers. Micro-influencers are those whose follower count is below 10,000. We talked to 12 such micro-influencers who mainly post content about their lifestyles.





It's common for micro-influencers to start with their own interests and hobbies to generate a number of likes and followers, which leads to a boost in self-confidence. Ultimately it's this confidence that moti-

vates micro-influencers to carry on posting. However, as with any euphoria-linked activity, such as gaming, there are also negative outcomes. We found that micro-influencers are empowered through their increased confidence but that anxiety, social media fear and insecurity are common traits too.

Some of the micro-influencers we interviewed revealed that they felt afraid their followers would perceive them as being too image conscious or that they would see them as being too focused on their brand image rather than their community of fans. They also face anxiety through constant comparison with other social media users. One influencer said:

On Instagram I started comparing myself to others and wondering why my pictures weren't getting as many likes or why it didn't look a certain way.

We found that mental health issues were also triggered by the followers themselves. When the influencer first sets up an account, they have their own ideas about what they want to achieve. They want to share pictures of their travels or recipes. But as they attract more followers, the topics and content posted starts to be determined by what the online audience wants to see, sometimes totally changing the creative direction. This causes conflict in an influencer's mind. They no longer act in an authentic manner by posting videos and images they genuinely like but attempt to post images that might be more popular.

One of the influencers who took part in our study admitted:



I do feel ... when I post something and it doesn't get many likes I do think about it, get frustrated and run around to get ideas. I check other influencers' content and then think-rethink what if my followers will not like it or think I am not funny. Some comments I get are so hurtful. It is like in relationship. There are good and bad days I have with my followers.

Pressures from followers are also combined with the issue of **trolling**. Take the recent story of Sophie Gradon, one of **Love Island's** previous contestants. Before her death, Gradon had openly shared her experience of **negative comments on social media**, claiming that it contributed to her depression and anxiety.

When we talk about **responsible social media use**, we so often focus on **fake news** and **cyberbullying**, but as more of us take an interest in producing social media content, we need to start thinking about the anxieties and insecurities we ourselves can create by piling the pressure on ourselves or the people we admire.

Young people are attracted to the world of social media influencing because it can make you rich and famous. But they soon find themselves dependent on the number of likes and opinions their followers

post, which can lead to low self-esteem, depression and other mental health issues. Perhaps we, as followers, need to think more about what part we play in that cycle.

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