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# The Psychological Strategies of Influencers



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## **Understanding the psychology behind why influencer marketing works.**

Nathalie made a living promoting fashion brands and products on social media. Initially, she found her work as an influencer liberating as it allowed her to express herself. However, over time, the responsibility and pressure that came with having her whole life displayed online took a toll on her physical and mental health. The constant need to churn out fresh, digital material for mass consumption, often by sharing intimate details of her life, had a significant psychological impact.

As Nathalie accumulated a large following on her platform, she began to feel constrained by the types of posts she should create. She believed she had to portray a fictionalised version of her life that became increasingly inauthentic, leaving her torn between the need to produce beautiful content for social media and the desire to be true to herself.

Moreover, Nathalie faced the challenge of dealing with constant scrutiny and criticism. This included abuse in the form of violent threats and verbal

cruelty from some of her followers, which had a detrimental effect on her self-esteem.

Despite her success, Nathalie often questioned why her followers were inclined to buy the products she recommended. What made her work, or influencer marketing in general, so special? Platforms like hers have transformed the way potential consumers access content in the same way technology has revolutionised the way people interact with one another.

## **The psychology of influencing**

In her efforts to get close to her audience, Nathalie recognised that she had become a role model to many of her followers. But what subtle psychological forces were at work to make her influencing activities so effective?

### **1. Expert power**

To establish a strong connection with their audience and make a real impact, influencers must showcase genuine knowledge and expertise in the subjects they engage with. Establishing credibility becomes an indispensable requirement for being an effective influencer. Nathalie had developed a deep understanding of fashion, was authoritative in the matters she discussed and, as a result, her followers trusted her recommendations. This is because people are conditioned to follow individuals they view as authority figures, believing them to possess reliable and accurate information.

### **2. Pseudo-intimacy**

Influencers build personal connections with their audiences, almost bordering on a kind of “pseudo-intimacy”. Nathalie utilised every aspect of her personality to connect directly with her followers, inviting them in with strong eye contact, sharing personal photos and videos and promptly responding to their reactions and comments. By relating to her audience in this way, Nathalie presented herself as more relatable and approachable than celebrity influencers. The advantage of this seemingly personal emotional connection was that her followers trusted her like they would real friends, as she was willing to share life experiences and private moments. With this perceived lack of distance, her followers engaged more with the brands or products that she was endorsing.

### **3. Trust through repeated exposure**

From a psychological standpoint, the frequency of exposure has a direct impact on the loyalty towards an influencer. Through her posts, Nathalie established herself as a constant presence in her followers' lives. The more she exposed her followers to specific content, the greater their acceptance and trust in the information she presented. Over time, her followers started internalising her perspectives, aligning their beliefs and preferences with hers. As a result, they were more inclined to make purchasing decisions based on her advice and endorsements.

#### **4. Overcoming information overload**

When it comes to making a decision about buying a specific product, people often suffer from information overload during the research process. Many find it difficult to sift through all the information needed to make an informed decision and following the suggestions of others becomes a way to navigate through this. In this way, Nathalie acted as a "filter" of sorts, using her perceived authority, expertise and trustworthiness to streamline the information for her followers. Her display of knowledge gave credibility to her advice and helped her followers shape their decisions.

#### **5. The sheeple effect**

Nearly all human beings are prone to acting in a similar, collective fashion, often referred to as **behaving like "sheeple"**. Influencer marketing plays directly into the innate human desire to belong and be part of a group. Influencers take advantage of this herd mentality. Much like animals in a herd, followers feel more secure making choices that align with popular opinion. A sizeable audience serves as validation of an influencer's expertise and trustworthiness, simply because so many others approved of what they are doing. Consequently, Nathalie found that the more her follower count grew, the more credible she appeared.

#### **6. The illusion of control**

In contrast to the more subtle influence of traditional advertisements, people actively choose to subscribe to channels or follow influencers they are interested in. Unlike intrusive, irritating advertisements that pop up on websites and social networks, influencer promotions are not imposed but rather selected by consumers. This plays into another basic human characteristic: People prefer to be active rather than passive recipients and desire some base level of power and control. Followers believe they have

control over the decision to follow certain influencers and the content they engage with.

## **7.The attractiveness bias**

The attractiveness bias is a pervasive social phenomenon that influences various aspects of society, including who becomes famous and who gets hired. Humans have a tendency to trust people who are physically attractive, perceiving them as more intelligent, competent and sociable. Marketers readily capitalise on this cognitive bias through influencer marketing. When an attractive person works with a particular brand, it creates an association that the brand itself is also attractive.

## **8. The halo effect**

Positive sentiments towards a person, brand or product in one domain can positively influence people's perceptions of them in other domains. For instance, when a person is regarded as an expert in one field, these feelings easily extend to another. Nathalie found that people followed her advice on matters she didn't have any expertise in solely because of the trust they had already established with her.

## **Dangers and drawbacks**

Many social media platforms are intentionally designed to be addictive. They activate the brain's reward centre by releasing dopamine, a "feel-good chemical" associated with pleasurable activities such as sex, food and social interaction. Without regular exposure to these stimuli, people may experience withdrawal symptoms. It is no wonder that heavy use of social media increases the likelihood of **anxiety, depression and feelings of loneliness**. Both influencers and followers should also be aware of these risk factors.

Influencing has become a popular and, for some, lucrative activity that clearly has a role to play in contemporary society. However, it also has its drawbacks for both influencers and followers. The disconnect between social media portrayals and reality can be unsettling, and it is easier said than done to remember that social media does not reflect "real life".

While influencing can inspire meaningful connections, it can also lead to serious harm, such as cyberbullying, spreading rumours and exposure to the unrealistic depictions of others' lives. The pressure put on influencers could

lead them to mask serious health concerns, even as they continue to promote lifestyles that aren't sustainable for anyone. In such cases, both influencers and followers bear the consequences.

Identifying, or at least being aware of, these potentially toxic dynamics can benefit both influencers and followers. By understanding the psychological and physiological implications of influencing, as well as the factors that make it effective, we can all be more mindful about the way information is presented and consumed online.

#### **Find article at**

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/career/psychological-strategies-influencers>

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#### **About the research**

["The Influencers' World of 'Make-Believe'"](#) is a working paper.