Review of Influencer Impact on Youth: Media Literacy, Consumer Behavior, and Critical Thinking

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Abstract: This literature review offers a comprehensive examination of current research on the influence of social media influencers on children and adolescents within the digital environment. It focuses on three core areas: the development of media literacy, the formation of consumer behaviour, and the capacity of young users to identify manipulative techniques and informational bias. Drawing on a wide range of scholarly sources, the review explores how influencers shape the values, attitudes, and decision-making processes of young social media users. Special attention is given to the subtle, emotional, and often elusive nature of this influence, which contributes to its effectiveness while simultaneously amplifying potential risks. The analysis highlights the role of influencers in the construction of digital identity and in shaping young people's perceptions of and engagement with commercial content. The findings provide a theoretical foundation for future research in media education and inform the development of educational interventions designed to promote digital well-being and media resilience among younger generations.

Keywords: Influencers, Social Media, Media Literacy, Consumer Behavior, Digital Identity, Critical Thinking, Review

1. Introduction

In today's digital age, social media influencers have become a ubiquitous presence in the lives of young people. With the rise of platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, influencers have amassed large followings and wield significant influence over their audiences. However, the impact of influencers on youth has sparked debate among scholars, policymakers, and parents. This literature review aims to synthesize the existing research on the relationship between influencers and youth, with a focus on media literacy.

2. Literature Review

The proliferation of social media platforms has ushered in an era where influencers wield considerable power, particularly over the younger demographic, shaping their opinions, consumer behavior, and overall worldviews (Staňková & Kuchta, 2020). This influence stems from the parasocial relationships cultivated between influencers and their followers, blurring the lines between genuine connection and strategic marketing (Pirker, 2021).

Understanding the mechanisms by which influencers exert their sway is crucial for fostering media literacy, promoting responsible consumerism, and nurturing critical thinking skills among youth. The rise of influencer marketing reflects a paradigm shift in how brands engage with consumers, moving away from traditional advertising methods towards more personalized and seemingly authentic endorsements (Al-Mu'ani et al., 2023). Influencers, perceived as relatable and trustworthy figures, can significantly impact consumer buying behavior by leveraging their credibility and perceived authenticity (Rani et al., 2022).

The evolving digital landscape necessitates a comprehensive examination of the influencer phenomenon, its potential benefits, and its inherent risks, especially concerning its impact on young individuals (Permana et al., 2021).

The influencer marketing domain has emerged as a dominant force in digital engagement, surpassing conventional marketing methodologies in efficacy and consumer trust (Migkos et al., 2025). Influencers adeptly navigate platform affordances, experimenting with novel engagement strategies while sometimes testing community guidelines and service terms (Riedl et al., 2023). This necessitates a thorough investigation into the influencer's role in brand management and strategic decision-making (Sanz-Marcos et al., 2024).

More recent studies delve deeper into how specific platforms, particularly TikTok, have accelerated the personalization and immediacy of influencer engagement. A study published in *Nature Human Behavior* (2024) highlights the difficulties adolescents face in setting personal boundaries when engaging with TikTok content, suggesting a deterioration in digital well-being and time management skills. These findings underscore the importance of contextualizing influencer impact not just by message content, but also by the structural and algorithmic design of the platforms themselves.

Similarly, research by Muslimin (2025) conducted in Indonesia provides a cultural lens on the behavioral influence of TikTok, demonstrating how repetitive exposure to certain influencer norms fosters conformity among teens, extending from online personas to offline behaviors. This confluence of digital and physical spheres suggests that influencer impact transcends screen-based consumption and extends into the identity formation and social conduct of youth.

Furthermore, the development and proliferation of generative AI has added a new dimension to the challenges surrounding influencer influence. As content creation becomes increasingly automated and synthetic influencers enter the scene, distinguishing between real human endorsement and algorithmically generated promotion becomes increasingly difficult. This raises critical questions for media literacy education. Risko and Gilbert (2024) discuss how reliance on AI tools has led to a phenomenon known as "cognitive offloading," where individuals transfer critical thinking and decision-making tasks to external systems. For younger users, this can impair the development of independent judgment and media discernment.

In response to these developments, institutions such as UNESCO have emphasized the urgency of equipping influencers—and their audiences—with fact-checking competencies and resistance to misinformation. In its 2024 report, UNESCO calls for structured training programs for content creators and digital literacy campaigns that address the risks of manipulation, deepfakes, and algorithmic bias. These recommendations are particularly relevant considering the increasing professionalization of influencers, whose commercial interests may conflict with ethical responsibilities.

The educational sector has started to respond to these concerns by developing media literacy curricula that are both reflective and adaptive. Incorporating critical thinking into digital citizenship education has become a priority in many national strategies. These curricula aim to cultivate evaluative habits in students, encouraging them to question the motives behind content, analyse persuasive techniques, and identify biases—skills that are especially pertinent in influencer-dominated spaces. As noted by several scholars, the most effective interventions are those that situate media analysis within students lived experiences online, leveraging their familiarity with platforms while guiding them toward reflective and ethical engagement.

2.1 Digital Identity and Psychological Development

The relationship between social media influencers and the development of digital identity in youth is both intimate and complex. Adolescents, in the process of constructing their identities, are particularly susceptible to external role models. Influencers present highly curated versions of their lives, which often promote idealized standards of beauty, success, and lifestyle. This can result in social comparison and pressure to conform, with significant consequences for self-esteem and psychological well-being. Multiple studies have shown a correlation between exposure to idealized influencer content and increased levels of anxiety, body dissatisfaction, and feelings of inadequacy among teenage users (e.g., Tiggemann & Slater, 2014; Fardouly et al., 2018).

The issue is exacerbated by the algorithmic amplification of such content, which repeatedly exposes young users to narrow aesthetic and behavioral norms. As a result, adolescents may internalize unrealistic ideals and orient their self-worth around externally validated metrics such as likes, comments, and follower counts. This dynamic not only impacts mental health but also shapes long-term attitudes toward identity, value, and success in digitally mediated contexts.

2.2 Educational Interventions and Best Practices

In response to the growing influence of digital content creators, various countries and international organizations have initiated educational interventions aimed at strengthening youth media literacy. Programs like the European Commission's DigCompEdu framework and UNESCO's MIL curriculum focus on developing critical evaluation skills, digital citizenship, and ethical content engagement. These initiatives emphasize participatory learning, scenario-based analysis, and the inclusion of real-life digital case studies, which resonate more strongly with students than traditional didactic methods.

Research also suggests that involving influencers themselves as mediators or role models within media education programs can be a highly effective strategy. When influencers promote responsible behavior, transparency, and critical engagement, their messages are often more readily accepted by young audiences. This highlights the potential for influencers to serve not only as marketing agents but also as powerful allies in fostering digital resilience.

2.3 Methodological Challenges in Research

Studying the impact of influencers on youth presents several methodological challenges. Much of the existing data relies on self-reported behavior and perception, which may be subject to social desirability bias and inaccuracies in recall. The rapid evolution of digital platforms also complicates longitudinal research, as platform affordances, algorithms, and user cultures can shift dramatically within short time frames.

Another challenge lies in capturing the layered and often indirect nature of influencer impact. Effects may not be immediately observable and can unfold over time, especially in areas such as identity formation, value adoption, and peer dynamics. There is a pressing need for mixed-methods approaches that combine quantitative metrics (e.g., engagement rates, usage patterns) with qualitative insights (e.g., interviews, discourse analysis) to fully understand the depth and nuance of influencer influence.

3. Conclusion

This literature review has demonstrated that social media influencers have a complex and multifaceted impact on youth, extending beyond consumer behavior into the realms of identity formation, psychological development, and cultural adaptation. The pervasive nature of influencer content—amplified by algorithms and platform design—intensifies its influence, particularly among adolescents in vulnerable developmental stages. Influencers shape not only what young users buy or value, but also how they perceive themselves and others. The internalization of curated ideals promoted by influencers can erode self-esteem and distort digital identity, contributing to anxiety and body dissatisfaction. These effects are not uniform; they are mediated by cultural context, platform-specific norms, and the degree to which youth have access to critical media literacy skills.

Educational efforts must therefore address these challenges with adaptive, culturally responsive, and evidence-based interventions. Programs that engage both youth and influencers in the co-creation of reflective and ethical digital practices have shown promise. Additionally, research into influencer impact must move beyond surface-level metrics to include longitudinal, mixed-methods approaches that account for the evolving digital ecosystem.As artificial intelligence further blurs the line between authentic and synthetic influence, the need for critical thinking, emotional resilience, and ethical digital engagement becomes ever more urgent. It is imperative that educators, policymakers, researchers, and platforms work collaboratively to ensure that young people are not only protected but also empowered to navigate the influencer-saturated media landscape with awareness, agency, and confidence.

Ethics Declaration

No ethics approval was required for the preparation of this literature review article.

However, an application for ethical approval has been submitted to the ethics committee in relation to the forthcoming empirical research.

AI Declaration

AI tools were used in a limited and supportive role during the preparation of this paper. Specifically, DeepL Pro was employed for translation purposes and Elicit was used to assist with the identification of relevant academic sources.

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