

# From Passion to Pay Check: The Cyclical Practices of Influencer Brand Building

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**Abstract:** The escalating influence of social media influencers on consumer behaviour continues to captivate the interest of marketing professionals and academic scholars alike. Current literature examines mainly source characteristics, psychological dynamics, and content attributes that explain influencer marketing but there is scanty understanding the mechanisms by which influencers ascend to prominence. This qualitative study introduces the *Four E Framework of Influencer Brand Building*, explaining the cyclical practices by which social media users transform into person-brands within social media ecosystem. The framework comprises four pivotal practices: Exploration, where influencers identify and refine marketable personas; Exploitation, involving the acquisition of tangible and intangible compensation for their digital labour; Evaluation, a critical assessment of brand sustainability and content success; and Extension, during which influencers expand their brand presence across various platforms, adopt alternative personas, or venture into consumer goods to enhance profitability and reduce risks. This model challenges conventional perceptions of influencers as mere marketing tools by repositioning them as central figures in branding literature. The research draws on data collected from influencers and talent managers, providing robust insights into the strategic and operational aspects of influencer brand building. This not only bridges a significant gap in existing academic discourse but also furnishes influencers and marketing professionals with actionable strategies to enhance their brand-building endeavours.

**Keywords:** Social media, Influencer marketing, Influencers, Self branding

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## 1. Introduction

Social media influencers are one of the driving forces of the spread of social media (Lorenz, 2023), which has fundamentally changed the way individuals obtain and share information (Kietzmann et al., 2011). They are individuals who have amassed a significant following on platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, and leverage their online presence to shape opinions, inspire trends, and influence consumer behaviour (Jin and Muqaddam, 2019; Jun and Yi, 2020). Influencers demonstrate remarkable proficiency in targeting niche audiences (Vrontis et al., 2021), a critical aspect for achieving effectiveness in digital marketing amidst the saturation of online advertising spaces (Hou, 2018). Consumers voluntarily seek their advice for decision making and utilise influencers' content for their own identity projects (Scholz, 2021). While the influencer economy exceeded \$20B in 2023 (Dencheva, 2024), being an influencer is increasingly coming to the fore as a lucrative and legitimate career path, especially for generation Z and millennials (Liu, 2023). However -to the best of the authors' knowledge- there is no academic understanding on how this "highly branded social media stars" (Abidin 2018, p. 71) are branded on social media. This study aims to fill this gap by contributing social media marketing and individual branding literature by examining influencers as person-brands (Fournier and Eckhardt, 2019) and attempting to reveal their brand building strategies.

## 2. Literature Review

The importance of internet technologies in individual branding efforts has been recognized since the first debate in this field (Peters, 1997). Today, the emergence of social media platforms has revolutionized individual branding by providing a cost-effective and efficient means to promote individual brands to a wide audience (Gorbatov, Khapova and Lysova, 2018). This growing trend of branding practices of individuals has also attracted academic attention, leading to an increase in scholarly publications on individual brands, particularly in the fields of marketing, communication, and business administration (Levesque and Pons, 2020). While some studies contribute to a generic understanding of individual brands by defining concepts such as personal brand (Gorbatov et al., 2021), human brand (Thomson, 2006), and person-brand (Fournier and Eckhardt, 2019), other research streams examine individual branding within specialized professions, including politicians (e.g., French and Smith, 2010), CEOs (e.g., Cottan-Nir, 2019), athletes (e.g., Park et al., 2019), and even academics (e.g., Close et al., 2014).

Unlike other individual brands, influencers exist free of gatekeepers and initial financial investment as they are originally ordinary internet users (Abidin, 2015). Thus, they represent a new and unique domain in the field of individual branding which has been extensively studied based on the ground-breaking conceptualizations of Keller (1993) and Aaker (1996). Although these conceptualizations provide a useful framework for many individual brands (Osorio, Centeno, & Cambra-Fierro, 2020), the understanding centres on the one-way

communication model of the pre-internet era. However, influencers go beyond using social media as a merely marketing tool, they build and manage their brands purely on social media platforms. Therefore, a study that aims to explore new methods for understanding the branding processes of influencers is timely and rewarding. In fact, Keller (2002) emphasizes developing internet technologies and communication methods and indicates "as branding is applied in more and more different settings, brand theory and best practice guidelines need to be refined to reflect the unique realities of those settings" (p. 171).

Consequently, this research strives to understand how influencers build their individual brands. The study considers influencers as person brands (Fournier and Eckhardt, 2019) and defines the influencer as *a person brand embedded physical or virtual persona that has revealed on digital platform(s) and acquired a sizable audience, regularly produces contents with the aim of shaping their audience perceptions and receives through brand collaborations, licencing and/or subscriptions/views compensation through these contents*. This conceptualisation pioneers to understanding of influencers as brands. Based on the definition, the current study attempts to contribute to the understanding on social media and branding by revealing influencers' branding strategies and practices, while offering a useful framework for (potential) influencers and social media and marketing professionals.

### 3. Research Method

This study draws on qualitative paradigm and utilises semi-structured interviews to understand brand building practices of influencers. Through theoretical sampling, data from interviews with 16 influencers with audiences ranging from 5000 to 1.5 million and 11 talent managers who provide management and consultancy services to influencers were analysed through reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Due to the subjective nature of the qualitative paradigm, this study does not claim that its result is only and definitive representation of reality and truth, but that it is one of the multiple.

### 4. Results

The key finding from the analytical review of data reveals a cyclical practice, here referred to as *Four E Framework of Influencer Brand Building*. This framework depicts the transformation of social media users into person brands, marking the beginning of the person-brand continuum (Osorio, Centeno, & Cambra-Fierro, 2020) for influencers. In the *exploration* process, influencers try to attract the attention of target audiences and stand out in the intensifying social media environment by discovering their marketable identities and the algorithmic functioning of social media platforms through consistent and continuous content production. Subsequently, through the *exploitation* process, influencers receive compensation (tangible or otherwise) for their digital efforts, fostering symbiotic relationships between platforms, marketing professionals and audiences. The increasing reach, commercial relationships, and potential risks of influencers necessitate examining the impact of their social media practices on their brands. During the *evaluation* process, influencers regularly assess both the immediate and enduring success of their brands, while also trying to identify trends and potential opportunities with the data they obtain from platforms and online sources. *Extension* is the fourth process by which influencers seek to diversify their brand presence across various platforms and/or through alternative identities and even consumer products, thus reducing risks and increasing profitability. The extension process results in a return to the exploration process, where the new identity or platform begins to be discovered, thus continuing the brand-building cycle. In rare cases, some influencers choose not to pursue the final process of brand extension, while others continually adapt and evolve their content production to align with new platforms and identities, reinvesting in the cyclical nature of the process. Figure 1 provides the illustration of the cyclical framework.

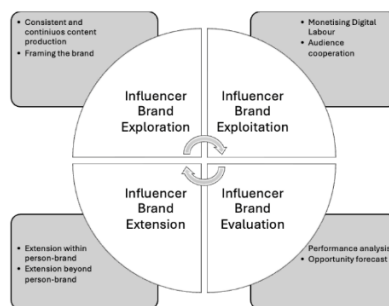


Figure 1: Four E Framework of Influencer Brand Building

#### 4.1 Influencer Brand Exploration

Influencers begin the brand-building process by discovering the value of their online identities to audiences, digital platforms, and marketing professionals. This process consists of two components: consistent and continuous content production and framing the brand. These interconnected steps facilitate the initial shaping of the person brand, a process characterized by learning, experimentation, and amateur collaboration.

Content production is the cornerstone of the influencer brand building process that influencers devote to developing their audience, expanding their reach, building a loyal community. They start creating content without the explicit intention of becoming an influencer, to express their creativity, for enjoyment, or to connect with people who share similar interests. Deliberate focus on a specific niche marks the birth of the journey from being ordinary social media users to emerging as influential figures in their specific niche. Consistency not only builds trust among their audiences, but also synergizes with the algorithms of social media platforms. These platforms increase influencer visibility among users with similar interests by categorizing and promoting their content within the niche through 'explore' or 'for you' pages. Continuity in content production solidifies the influencer's niche position as platforms prioritize and reward continuous content, thus giving influencers a competitive advantage in their field. Participant 7's experiences illustrate the relationship between influencers' motivation and consistency and continuity in content production:

*"It actually didn't start with the agenda that I have to become an influencer; it just happened. I began by taking pictures with my parents' phone, as I didn't have my own at that time. I'm a very creative person and wanted a medium that could allow my creativity to flow that's the first driver. As I started growing, there were followers, who motivated me to put more and more content out there because they liked it so much. So, the interaction and the kind of reach I got became another driver for me to work even better. And later on, I've collaborated with brands and monetized my content, which is now another driver too, but I never thought about it initially."*

Framing the brand represents the second component of the influencer brand exploration process. Once they reach nano-influencer status, influencers are faced with strategic decisions necessary for their brand-building efforts. In this step, critical decisions are made as they try to establish a balance between their online and offline identities by determining the primary platform for creating content, which aspects of their social identity to include in their content and to what extent. While the primary platform is often determined to be the platform influencers enjoy most as users, the erosion of anonymity in the Web 2.0 era forces influencers to carefully navigate their digital identities. This careful management of identities allows them to navigate audience expectations and protect themselves from personality conflicts. Additionally, this frame serves as the primary defence against online threats such as bullying or trolling. Participant 4 explains:

*"I run the account, but really, it's all about my dog. I just wanted to connect with other dog lovers, but it turned into something bigger. Now, you'll see me in videos too but I only share stuff about my dog. None of my followers know my personal biz. Sharing my whole life could probably get me more followers – I've seen others do it, sharing all sorts of personal stuff, and it works. That's not for me. I don't want people talk about me, I like keeping things on the down-low, just me and my dog's adventures for anyone who's into it. It is safe."*

Influencer brand exploration process unfolds the strategic essence and inherent motivations behind influencers' initial forays into building their person-brand within social media ecosystem. This process is characterized by a shift from intrinsic motivations to acknowledging the potential for professional growth and financial sustainability. The transition from passion-driven content creation to strategic brand positioning represents a culmination of the influencer's journey through the exploration process. During this process, influencers truly grasp the significance of their digital labour, not just as a medium for personal expression but as a potential value within the social media economy. Realisation of their value leads them to second process, influencer brand exploitation.

#### 4.2 Influencer Brand Exploitation

Influencer brand exploitation process marks a pivotal stage in the influencer brand building process, transitioning influencers from mere content creators to commercially minded digital entrepreneurs. During this phase, influencers navigate the delicate balance between maintaining their authentic, amateur spirit and adopting strategic business acumen; and their digital labour starts to yield tangible rewards in the form of financial compensation and enhanced social recognition. Influencer brand exploitation process consists of two intertwined components: first influencers engage in brand and audience collaborations, and leverage platform

mechanisms to generate income; and second a deepened audience cooperation, transforming followers into active participants in the content creation process. This process demonstrates how influencers cultivate a sustainable digital presence that resonates with audiences and attracts the attention of marketing professionals.

Monetising digital labour signifies the culmination of the influencer brand exploration process. With widened reach and solidified engagement with followers, influencers begin to recognize the value of branded identities. This realization often comes as platforms, audiences, or marketing professionals initiate collaborations, signalling the influencers' valuable position within the digital ecosystem. At this stage, influencers start receiving not only direct financial rewards but also gifts or trial products as compensation for their digital efforts. Although they are initially uncertain about fairness of the compensation, this stage symbolizes a material acknowledgment of their brand's worth and prompts influencers to contemplate a career as content producers legitimately. This step thus serves as a pivotal point, empowering influencers to redefine their digital endeavours as viable careers, grounded in a community that values their contributions, platforms that acknowledges their digital assets and marketing professionals accept them as a partner brand. Participant 11 describes the moment when their digital labour first became monetized as:

*"When I hit about 5000 followers, a brand reached out to me. I'd been gifted things before, but this was the first time anyone said, 'what do you charge for a post?' And I was like 'I have no idea'. I thought only celebrities, got paid to post. I had no clue that was a genuine career that someone like me could have. So, I just did a quick Google and there was this sort of 10 pounds per 1,000 followers. I was like '50 pounds', and they said 'yes'. I was like, 'what!'"*

A distinctive feature of influencer brands is the active and decisive role that the audience plays in brand creations. Audience cooperation represents the second component of the influencer branding building process and is a key element in influencer branding efforts, encompassing both audience-collaborated content production and audience advocacy. These two components highlight the dynamic interaction between influencers and their followers, where content is not only produced by the influencer but is also deeply influenced by audience interactions, feedback, and demands. Audience collaborative content production emphasises to a shift towards a more participatory form of content creation, where messages, comments, and other forms of audience engagement directly shape the content, allowing it to resonate more deeply with the audience's expectations and interests. At the same time, audience advocacy emerges as a critical protection mechanism that mobilizes community support to counter online negativity, from bullying and trolling to combating fake accounts. Participant 11 states:

*"I ask them regularly what they want to see. They always ask for tutorials. So, they're looking for instruction and guidance from me. If I get a lot of questions or DMs of the same kind of things, I create a content bank of questions that I create content around."*

Participant 11's another anecdote exemplifies audience advocacy:

*"When someone is criticizing my skill or my knowledge that I really struggle. That's when my audience do tend to sort of jump in on my behalf because they know me. They've watched all my content. They know that I am capable, yeah, that's when the audience have my back and keep me motivated to create more."*

In the influencer brand exploitation process, influencers navigate the intricate balance between authenticity and commercialization, embodying a transition from content creators to digital entrepreneurs. By harmoniously blending their unique identities with strategic business practices, influencers utilise diverse monetisation opportunities while increasing the likelihood of engagement by benefiting from their sizeable audience. Therefore, influencer brand exploitation marks a critical juncture in the influencer brand-building journey, delineating a path where strategic acumen and genuine engagement converge to realize the full potential of influencer brands. While this process makes performance measurements of influencer brands mandatory with their expanding audience and increasing collaborations, it also initiates the search for new opportunities for sustainable growing efforts.

### **4.3 Influencer Brand Evaluation**

To evaluate their brand, influencers need some quantitative and qualitative investigations to improve the direction of their brands and capture new opportunities. This process consists of two components: performance analysis and opportunity forecast.

Performance analysis provides influencers with practical insights to shape their content strategies, audience engagement, and collaborations. As platforms reward accounts that produce regular content, influencers find that they experience increases in views and engagement once they get into a certain content-producing routine. Here, the first metric that stands out is the number of views. Participant 22 shares:

*"Story views are key for me. Honestly, the number of followers doesn't really matter, not like story views do. You might have tons of followers who hit 'follow' five years ago and aren't active anymore. So, in reality, the number of followers doesn't contribute to either my earnings or my engagement."*

Next, engagement is when your audience interact with the content you share and starts talking about it. This may mean going beyond just seeing the shared content, commenting on it, or sending messages to the influencer and asking questions about the content. When influencers discover the ones that provide the most interaction among these strategies, these strategies emerge as their way of engaging. A pet influencer, Participant 2 shares:

*"People really follow us because we produce content that's both easy to understand and educational... But we truly hit our stride when I stepped back and let my dog to the 'talking'... Because when I'm the one talking, people still watch the stories, but when it seems like my dog is the one 'narrating', not only do the views spike, but the real engagement explodes..."*

Beside performance analysis, it is also important to examine qualitative metrics for opportunity forecast. By taking advantage of the analytical tools provided by social media platforms, influencers quickly update their content in line with prevailing trends and innovative features, thus being ready to take advantage of opportunities that may arise in the future. Here, social media listening is vital for influencers. Participant 19 explains:

*"Stepping out to see what the wider world beyond my followers likes always brings something new to the table... Whether it's joining forums, checking out different hashtags, or just seeing what's buzzing outside my usual space, I'm all about soaking up what's out there... Keeping tabs on what other influencers are doing, especially those in different niches or with varied audiences, is super eye-opening too..."*

Trend tracking is stated as another qualitative metric, which includes the use of digital tools, identifying trends and making content stand out in search engines. With data from platforms, creators examine the tastes of their audiences in detail and shape their content accordingly. Participant 23 describes the effective use of these tools:

*"There's Google Trends, my go-to for catching the vibe on the latest searches... BuzzSumo is another gem for figuring out what content's firing up on social and the web... Tools like Brandwatch and Mention are my eyes and ears in the digital sphere, perfect for eavesdropping on what folks are chatting about or how my brand's stacking up against the competition..."*

It is also important that to be compatible with search intent of audiences. Adapting to search intent requires constant research and content renewal. Creators align their content with consumer trends and provide variety to strength the relevance of the content and their position in the market. Participant 10 explains:

*"The magic word in our content creation process is what we call search intent. If someone's Googling protein powder, they're probably looking to buy, and that's why Google shows you products straight up. AI gets this, it figures out what people really want from their searches... We're constantly digging into this, aiming to match our content with what people are searching for in a way that satisfies them."*

#### **4.4 Influencer Brand Extension**

At the culmination of the influencer branding process, influencer brand extension represents the final practices that signifies the strategic diversification of the influencer brand and marks the transition from established brand presence to expansive growth opportunities. Two basic paths emerge in this process: extension within and beyond the person brand. The first involves a push into new identities and/or platforms, allowing influencers to broaden their reach and engage with their audiences in multifaceted ways. This may include revealing new social identities that complement the influencer's brand core or expanding their online identity across social media platforms to capture broader audiences. The second path, extending beyond the person brand, delves into consumer goods and translates brand equity into physical products. This not only serves to solidify the influencer's brand in the physical world, but also opens up new revenue streams.

Extension within person- brand embodies influencers' strategic endeavours to enhance and utilise their brand through new social identities and the transition of their existing audiences to new platforms. By transcending

the confines of their previously established brand boundaries, influencers not only deepen their rapport with audiences by presenting new facets of their social identity but also amplify their online visibility. This extension into new platforms is not merely about broadening reach; it's a calculated move to harness unique engagement opportunities and tap into distinct community cultures. Simultaneously, the venture into new identities allows influencers to introduce their audience to diverse aspects of their persona, adding new attributes to their brand and reaching new audience segments. Participant 10 describes:

*"I decide to start my new YouTube channel because people interested in fitness generally want to change their lives. It's not about being more muscular but feeling better. I observed a significant demand from the youth, not just in fitness but also in other areas of life, leading me to start the project aimed at young people and entrepreneurs who are dissatisfied with their current situation and seek improvement. This initiative proved successful, creating its own unique perception. I produce content with guests on this channel, enriching my personal brand significantly. It fostered a deeper emotional connection with people who see fitness as a tool for personal transformation."*

Extension beyond the person brand represents a decisive shift for influencers as they venture into the broader ecosystem of product offerings, transcending the frontier of social media. The significance of this phase lies not only in its potential to diversify income streams but also in its potential to set the influencer brand in the physical marketplace. Engaging in product extension, influencers create consumer goods that resonate with their branded identity and audience's lifestyle, offering a physical connection to their digital narratives. While some influencers opt for self-production, leveraging their brand's uniqueness, others resort to contract manufacturing practices, minimizing upfront investment and focusing on marketing practices. Participant 14's experience expanding their brand into consumer products reveals the process:

*"I launched my own merchandise related to my videos. It is not going as expected but it's OK. I partnered with a company that didn't require an upfront investment, like a great opportunity to test the waters. While the financial outcome was not as I hoped, the venture taught me about experimentation and resilience in business. It's all about embracing the journey of trial and error, understanding that extending into consumer goods opens up new possibilities."*

The culmination of these extension strategies illustrates a comprehensive brand evolution from digital content to a multifaceted brand presence across both digital and physical domains. Despite the potential risks and initial setbacks, extension into consumer goods opens up new avenues for success and audience connection. This blend of digital presence and tangible product offerings serves to reinforce the influencer brand, making it more robust against the volatile nature of social media platforms and digital trends. By extending within person brand, influencers adeptly navigate the digital landscape to unveil new facets of their identity and venture into new platforms. Influencers who extend to new platforms and/or identities recommence the *Four E Framework of Influencer Brand Building* cycle by entering the exploration process again, producing regular content in their new areas, positioning their brands, seizing collaboration opportunities, and measuring their performance.

## **5. Discussion and Conclusion**

The Four E Framework, comprising *exploration*, *exploitation*, *evaluation*, and *extension* practices embodies a cyclical process foundational to the influencer brand building efforts. Unlike linear models, this framework acknowledges the fluidity and ongoing nature of brand building on social media platforms, where influencers continuously cycle through these practices, adapting and evolving in response to the dynamic digital ecosystem. Each component is interlinked, with insights and outcomes from one practice informing and shaping the strategies applied in others. This cyclical process ensures that influencers can remain agile, responsive to changes in audience preferences, platform algorithms, and market trends.

The Four E Framework introduces a novel perspective to the existing literature on individual branding, particularly within the context of social media and influencer marketing. Grounded in empirical findings of experiences shared by influencers and talent managers, this framework illuminates the intricacies of the influencer marketing ecosystem. In doing so, the Four E Framework significantly contributes to a deeper understanding of digital marketing, enriching the body of knowledge with robust insights into the complexities and strategies of social media branding.

The Four E Framework also serves as a versatile tool for a broad spectrum of stakeholders within social media ecosystem. For emerging influencers, it provides a structured approach to navigating the complexities of brand development, offering a roadmap that emphasizes adaptability and strategic growth. Marketing professionals can leverage the framework to better understand the influencer branding process, facilitating more effective

collaboration and partnership strategies that align with each practice of brand building. By catering to the unique needs and perspectives of each group, the Four E Framework stands as a promising source in the evolving domain of social media and influencer marketing.

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