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The rosy world of influencer marketing? Its bright and dark sides, and future research recommendations

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ABSTRACT

This review article offers insights into the current issues in influencer marketing. We first provide a historical overview of extant research that mainly focuses on its bright side, and then highlight the dark side of influencer marketing, from the perspectives of both followers and influencers. Such as, influencers may harm followers' physical health and psychological well-being by flaunting idealized images, glamorous lifestyles, and unhealthy food choices. However, despite their fancy lifestyles, influencers may suffer from a continuous search for likes and followers, as well as giving up much of their privacy in return for commercial success. Some of these dark sides (influencer perspective) are currently underexposed in the literature. This article paves the path for more nuanced future research that focuses on the bright and dark sides of influencer marketing.

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Introduction

The fascinating story of social media influencers unfolds like a fairytale. Social media influencers seem to live in a rosy world filled with exciting adventures, fun activities, and countless free products and surprises from coveted and prestigious brands. They constantly receive tons of love and praises from their followers when flaunting their perfect lives. They are therefore the optimal partners for advertisers who are searching for new ways to reach their audiences and break through the advertising clutter (Campbell and Farrell 2020). Influencers have the talent to include those sponsorships seamlessly in their editorial content and engage their audience to interact with those contents. Accordingly, influencer marketing has been shown to be a very effective marketing tool and has attracted steadily growing advertising budgets over the past few years (Ye et al. 2021). However, as in every fairytale, villains are lurking, and the fairytale princess can prick herself with the thorns of the beautiful roses surrounding her.

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While most past research focuses on the bright side of influencer marketing for advertisers, this paper also highlights its dark side. As influencer marketing has become such a popular marketing tool, it is time to shed light on the ethicalities of the involved tactics to ensure a further professionalization and properly protect all parties involved (Wellman et al. 2020). As influencer marketing often involves young (and vulnerable) audiences, it is important to be extremely careful when implementing those tactics. This paper will thus not only shed light on the vulnerabilities of the audience but will also dwell on the hazards that may arise for influencers themselves when endorsing brands and products.

Mirror, mirror on the wall, why are influencers the finest advertisers of them all?

In the early days, bloggers, who share their opinions and provide relevant information, tips and advice in domains like fashion, food or fitness in blogs, have started to attract a large audience (Halvorsen et al. 2013). The huge popularity of this new form of user-generated content got quickly noticed by marketers and incited them to use those bloggers as a new marketing tool. The bloggers from the early studies are now referred to as 'social media influencers' (hereafter influencers) as the practice of sponsored blogging has expanded to influencer marketing and now appears on a wide range of social media platforms. Influencer marketing refers to the use of popular social media users who endorse products, brands, services or ideas on their accounts in exchange for commercial compensation (Campbell and Farrell 2020).

Influencers build close relationships with their followers, also termed as a trans-parasocial relation (Lou 2022). This refers to a more interactive, reciprocal, and co-created relationship that followers have with influencers, compared to the traditional parasocial relation between audiences and media characters (Horton and Wohl 1956). Influencers try to build an intimate bond with their followers by exposing their private lives, inducing interactivity by engaging their followers and even responding to their followers' comments. As influencers are often considered to be friends by fervid followers, followers tend to have a positive bias toward their endorsements and believe in the 'benign intent' that influencers have when sharing sponsored content (Lou 2022, 12). Accordingly, influencers are considered as a source of inspiration informing them about the newest trends, products, and brands (Lou 2022). As influencers often specialize in a particular domain, they are considered as experts and trustworthy sources of advice. This credibility leads to a greater acceptance of sponsored content (Lou and Yuan 2019).

A historical perspective on influencer marketing

Ye et al. (2021) conducted a bibliometric analysis of academic literature on influencer marketing to map the field. Their search resulted in 387 articles that focus on influencer marketing, with the first one being published in 2003. The *International Journal of Advertising* was ranked the sixth most prolific journal contributing to influencer marketing research with seven publications that reached a total of 74 citations by

the time of publication (Ye et al. 2021). An analysis of these publications revealed five themes that are prevalent in influencer marketing research: 1) the persuasiveness of influencer marketing, 2) stakeholders' perspectives on influencer marketing, 3) influencer marketing for specific product categories and sectors, 4) identification, selection and activation of influencers, and 5) ethical issues and disclosure effects in influencer marketing.

Many of those studies aimed to unravel the success of social media influencers and tried to identify the psychological mechanisms explaining its efficacy (Hudders, De Jans, and De Veirman 2021). The studies use a range of qualitative (in-depth interviews, ethnographic research and discourse analysis) and quantitative methods (survey and experiments) (Hudders, De Jans, and De Veirman 2021). Experimental research may offer valuable insights into the effects of influencer messages, however, it may be challenging to strike a balance between external and internal validity as experimentalists often manipulate fictitious influencer profiles or messages in experiments (e.g., Evans et al. 2017; Pittman and Abell 2021). For instance, if researchers select fictitious profiles (to limit previous exposure effects), it might be difficult to simulate parasocial relation between influencers and followers, which is a critical factor in influencers' effectiveness. Content analyses may pose difficulties as it is time consuming to analyze social media posts and it might be difficult to select a representative sample of the posts (Pilgrim and Bohnet-Joschko 2019). Automated content analysis may make it possible to include a larger number of posts and can provide valuable insights into the message strategies used in influencer marketing (Feng, Chen, and Kong 2021). However, studies adopting this approach may pose new ethical questions regarding data scraping and potential privacy violations. Much of influencer literature use parasocial interaction, source credibility, social influence and social learning theories to explain the impact of influencers (Hudders, De Jans, and De Veirman 2021). Also feminist theories have been used to explain momfluencers' impact on the decision-making of mothers (Jorge et al. 2022; Germic, Eckert, and Vultee 2021) and social comparison theories have been used to examine followers' responses to influencers (Chae 2018).

Research on the negative aspects of influencer marketing is largely limited to addressing its lack of transparency and exploring the role of advertising disclosures (Karagür et al. 2022). Meanwhile, research on the bright side of influencer marketing is largely focused on the commercial success of influencers, whereas research on the potential of influencer marketing in improving public welfare is scarce (Hudders, De Jans, and De Veirman 2021).

The bright side of influencer marketing

The strong impact of social media influencers on their followers' decision-making makes them a desirable propagator of behavioral change for the good as well. As such, social media influencers can be used to change people's behaviors for their own benefit or for the benefit of society and raise awareness on social issues (i.e. social activist influencer). Current studies – although scarce – mainly focus on the promotion of healthy and sustainable lifestyles (Yıldırım 2021; Folkvord, Roes, and Bevelander 2020). In particular, influencers may be used to promote a healthy lifestyle,

with the endorsement of healthy food recipes or fitness routines (Pilgrim and Bohnet-Joschko 2019). Folkvord, Roes, and Bevelander (2020), for instance, found that the promotion of healthy food products by a real (versus fictitious) fit influencer on Instagram led to more positive healthy food brand attitudes and purchase intents due to perceived stronger parasocial interactions with the real influencer. Sustainable influencers in turn promote zero waste lifestyles and give their followers advice concerning sustainable consumption patterns (e.g., travel, food, or fashion) (Yıldırım 2021). Especially micro-influencers appear to be effective in endorsing sustainable products (Pittman and Abell 2021). Future research should further examine the strategies used in influencers' social activism and how it contributes to awareness raising and behavioral change for the good. In Table 1, we provide a more detailed insight into the research questions that can be addressed in future research and methodologies that can be used to answer those research questions.

The dark side of influencer marketing (audience perspective)

Negative effects of influencer marketing on consumers

Food promotions are very common among social media influencers. As such, a content analysis of endorsements of two YouTube influencers ($N=380$ YouTube videos) who are popular among children has shown that more than 90% of their videos contained a food or beverage cue and these food cues were more often unhealthy than healthy (Coates et al. 2019a). These less healthy foods were also more often branded, positively depicted and part of a marketing campaign. With regard to the impact of those unhealthy food items, Coates et al. (2019b) found that a YouTuber who was endorsing unhealthy snacks (compared to a non-food promotion) led to a higher overall intake and a higher intake of unhealthy snacks among children (aged 9 to 11 years). No effects were found for a healthy snack promotion.

Next to the problems associated with unhealthy food promotions, ethical issues may arise with fitspiration influencers who often share their fitness and sports routines thereby flaunting their idealized thin, but muscled bodies. An analysis of the content posted by influencers communicating about nutrition and exercise (Pilgrim and Bohnet-Joschko 2019), revealed that those influencers often propagate an idealized, muscled body image that can be achieved by proper training. These fitness influencers often emphasize physical appearance over well-being. Exposure to such idealized images may however negatively impact followers' mental health and lead to ill-being (e.g., envy, stress, self-harm (Valkenburg 2022). Tiggemann et al. (2018), for instance, found that women who were exposed to the thin ideal showed higher body and facial dissatisfaction, which contributes to body image concerns among women.

Furthermore, exposure to influencers may evoke envy among followers as they often flaunt a lavish and luxurious lifestyle (Jin and Ryu 2019). These feelings of envy may be evoked by social comparison processes whereby people compare their own lives with those of the influencers (Chae 2018). More specifically, Chae (2018) showed in a two-wave survey study that upward comparison at time one predicted evoked envy one month after. People who compared their lives with that of an influencer more often in the past 30 days felt more envy towards that influencer. Further, these upward social comparisons may lead to higher ill-being. It is important that future research examines the impact of influencers on people's values (e.g., stereotypical

Table 1. Overview of future research recommendations.

Topics and theme	Research Questions	Potential Theories/ Framework/Paradigms	Research methods
The Bright Sides of Influencer Marketing			
Which, and how can different types of influencers be used to foster public welfare ?	<p>Given the fact that much of the past research shows that a match with the expertise of the influencer is an important indicator predicting the success of sponsorships (Belanche et al. 2021), we suggest that future studies should examine whether...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Greeninfluencers can support sustainable lifestyles? Finfluencers can strengthen financial literacy, especially among vulnerable groups? Sexfluencers can break stereotypes/stigmas about sexuality? Foodinfluencers can endorse healthy eating? Fitfluencers can stimulate physical exercise? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Social Comparison Theory Human Brand Theory Source Credibility Construal Level Theory Psychological Reactance Theory Parasocial Interaction/Relationship Uses and Gratifications Cultivation Theory Social Cognitive Theory The Masspersonal Communication Model 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Case studies, qualitative research and (Automated) content analyses can be used to examine which values are endorsed, which strategies are used to foster behavioral changes, which engagement they incite, etc. In-depth interviews with influencers, non-profit organizations and (social) marketing agencies can provide insight into the specifics of partnering for the common good and how such partnerships are different from commercial sponsorships tactics. Survey and experimental research can be used to assess the impact of those partnerships.
The dark side of influencer marketing (audience perspective)			
<i>Negative effects of influencer marketing on consumer health, psychological wellbeing, & other</i>			
To what extent, and how are social media influencers reinforcing unhealthy eating habits ?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent are unhealthy foods endorsed in posts of food influencers (versus other influencer categories)? What is the impact of restrictions with regard to unhealthy food sponsorships on social media? What strategies are used to endorse unhealthy foods? How does exposure to unhealthy food endorsements affect unhealthy food habits and eating disorders? How is this different for different categories of consumers (e.g., children, restrained eaters, etc.)? How can followers be empowered to resist unhealthy food endorsements? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Persuasion Knowledge Model Advertising Literacy Optimistic Bias Narrative Persuasion Role Modeling Cultivation Theory Social Cognitive Theory 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (Automated) content analyses can shed light on the (sponsored) food endorsements and the strategies used. Diary research can provide insight into the exposure to such endorsements. Momentary measurement (e.g., experience sampling) or behavioral measures (e.g., eye tracking, digital traces) can also be used to complement current research designs. Experimental research can assess the impact of these endorsements and test intervention strategies to empower followers.

(continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Topics and theme	Research Questions	Potential Theories/ Framework/Paradigms	Research methods
How are social media influencers impacting the psychological wellbeing of followers?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is exposure to influencer content related to illbeing (e.g., envy, stress, self-harm)? • To what extent are materialistic values promoted among influencers? Does exposure to influencer content incite materialistic values among followers? • To what extent and how are (fitness) influencers setting a beauty ideal? Are influencers endorsing stereotypical content? How are social comparison processes playing a role here? • How are #bodypositivity or #honestmotherhood influencers countering stereotypes and beauty ideals? What impact do these influencers have on the psychological well-being? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social Comparison Theory • Psychological Reactance Theory • Uses and Gratifications (Brand) Authenticity (Body) Objectification Theory • Cultivation Theory 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Longitudinal survey research can be used to assess the relation between exposure to influencer contents and illbeing, as well as the development of materialistic values. • Content analyses can examine how materialistic (and other) values are endorsed by social media influencers. • Experimental studies can examine the impact of exposure to influencer contents on psychological wellbeing. • A causal heterogeneity paradigm can be used to assess how different types of followers are differently affected by their exposure to influencer contents.
What is the role of social activism influencers?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent are influencers responding to sociopolitical topics? • How much engagement do these posts evoke? How are followers responding to those contents? • What is the impact of these communications on public opinion? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-categorization Theory • Collective Action Framing • Cultivation Theory 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (Automated) content analyses can shed light on the societal topics that are discussed by influencers and how it is related to the engagement that these posts evoke. • Experimental and survey research can examine the impact of these communications on public opinion.
To what extent and how is influencer marketing affecting young audiences?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What role do kidfluencers play in the lives of children and adolescents? How are they being used as sources of inspiration and role model? How are they being used to shape one's identity? • To what extent are children vulnerable to kidfluencers' contents? • What are the mechanisms underlying the efficacy of sponsored kidfluencer contents? • How can children be empowered to cope more critically with influencer contents? Which interventions (e.g., parental mediation, social media interventions, educational training, serious games) are most effective in decreasing children's vulnerability to kidfluencer contents? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parental Mediation • Social Identity Theory • Human Brand Theory • Persuasion Knowledge Model 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-depth interviews and focus groups can be used to examine the importance of kidfluencers in the lives of children and adolescents. • Experimental research can examine the impact of (sponsored) kidfluencer content and the success of different types of interventions to empower children and youngsters.

(continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Topics and theme	Research Questions	Potential Theories/ Framework/Paradigms	Research methods
The potential and shortcomings of advertising disclosures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the impact of new regulations with regard to the transparency of influencer marketing? • Which narratives are influencers using in disclosed sponsored posts and how is this different from non-sponsored posts? • Does a consistent use of ad disclosures lead to a better understanding of the tactics? • Does a consistent use of ad disclosures lead to a lower effectiveness of sponsored posts (e.g., in terms of engagement)? • How are disclosures used in different countries/continents and what lessons can be learnt? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Persuasion Knowledge Model • Advertising Literacy • Narrative Persuasion • (Brand) Authenticity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Qualitative research can be conducted among influencers to assess their experiences with disclosure regulation and how their content strategies have been changed. • (Automated) content analysis can shed light on the narratives used in #advertising/#sponsored posts and compare the evoked engagement between sponsored and non-sponsored posts. • A cross-country comparison can be conducted with regard to influencer marketing regulations and how it affects the industry and consumer.
The dark side of influencer marketing (influencer perspective)			
Dark and ugly sides of being an influencer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the impact of being displayed in influencer posts for children of influencers? How is their psychological wellbeing being affected? Does it contribute to ill-being (e.g., depression)? How does it impact their identity construction? • What is the impact of privacy violations on kidfluencers? • How can the privacy of kidfluencers and influencers' children be protected? What privacy management strategies are being used by influencer parents? • What is the impact of implementing privacy protective measures on the effectiveness of sponsored posts? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social Identity Theory • Communication Privacy Management Theory • Digital Labor • Emotional Labor • Cultivation Theory • Social Cognitive Theory 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Qualitative, ethnographic research among kidfluencers can examine how they experience their influencer activities. • Longitudinal research can examine the impact on their identity construction. • Experimental research can examine the impact of privacy protective measures on the efficacy of sponsored posts.

thinking or materialism) and well-being and ill-being (e.g., self-esteem, life satisfaction, or depressive feelings), and especially among children and adolescent samples.

The potential and shortcomings of advertising disclosures

Much of the research elaborating on the dark side of influencer marketing concerns the lack of transparency and improper disclosure of sponsored content. In practice, influencers are hesitant to disclose their sponsored content as it may evoke resistance and irritation among followers (Karagür et al. 2022). Followers are expecting authentic and genuine content from influencers. When they notice that the influencer-generated content is being sponsored, it may arouse skepticisms among followers and lead to

lower credibility perceptions of the influencers (De Veirman and Hudders 2020). Accordingly, many studies focused on the impact of adding advertising disclosures on increasing advertising recognition. These studies show that it is important to use a clear language to improve advertising recognition (Evans et al. 2017), and either an influencer- or platform- generated disclosure can improve this recognition, although platform-generated disclosures exert the strongest effects (Karagür et al. 2022).

Although many studies show that such disclosures may harm influencers and brand evaluations, the study of Naderer, Matthes, and Schäfer (2021) shows that a disclosure may increase influencer trustworthiness when followers feel highly similar to the influencer. Some qualitative research also shows that followers actually don't mind that influencer-generated content is being sponsored, as long as there is a good balance between sponsored and non-sponsored content (Van Dam and Van Reijmersdal 2019). Future research should further elaborate on the impact of sponsorship disclosures and examine how it improves the transparency of the influencer tactics and people's understanding of the commercial deals behind those sponsored posts.

Risks involving a young target audience

Influencer marketing appeared to be a very lucrative tactic to reach a young and engaged audience (Boerman and van Reijmersdal 2020; Van Dam and Van Reijmersdal 2019). These young audiences may be especially vulnerable to adverse advertising effects as their ability to critically reflect on this content is still limited. As such, children have not yet fully developed advertising literacy, which refers to the knowledge and skills related to recognizing advertising and that can help them to critically reflect on those persuasive attempt and resist temptations (Rozendaal et al. 2011).

Research on how those young children respond to influencer marketing is however quite scarce (De Veirman, Hudders, and Nelson 2019). Influencers are considered as close friends and are often peers (other young children being influencers, also known as kidfluencers), which makes it very likely that children will follow their advices (De Veirman, Hudders, and Nelson 2019). In addition, the hidden nature of influencer marketing hinders the activation of the – albeit limited – advertising literacy and makes it more difficult for children to recognize the content as advertising, which is a precondition to resist the temptation (Rozendaal et al. 2011). Future research should elaborate on how young children are affected by influencer marketing and how they can be more empowered to critically cope with the tactic.

The dark side of influencer marketing (influencer perspective)

When asking children (aged 8 to 12years) about their future dream jobs, Lego found that about one third of the children living in the US, UK and China indicated that they want to become a YouTuber (Taylor 2019). It was even the number one job aspiration for kids in the UK and US. Examples of famous kid vloggers, including Ryan Kaji, who is among the highest paid YouTubers, appeal to children's imaginations (Berg 2020). People often only see the shiny, bright side of an influencer's life, which consists of exciting activities, loads of free products, many friends, and successes.

However, the life of a vlogger or famous Instagrammer may be harder than it looks. As such, influencers can suffer from a continuous search for likes and popularity. Social

media have been the ideal tools to compare one's life to that of others (Chae 2018). This also relates to social media influencers who compare their successes with those of other influencers which may lead to depression and pressure. It requires great hard work for influencers to keep up with their peers in making exciting content that receives large views. Advertisers often have strong demands in their contracts with influencers, and labor protection is low, especially with regard to child labor (van der Hof, Verdoodt, and Leiser 2019). Many influencers may not even receive financial compensations (pay) for their work, but only free products or event invitations. Accordingly, much of the labor conducted by influencers can be considered as underpaid labor. Research on these dark side of being an influencer is however very limited.

Influencers not only need to satisfy the demands of advertisers, but also those of followers. Research has shown that they make compromises in their management of authenticity and try to adjust their content to include what their followers want (Audrezet, de Kerviler, and Guidry Moulard 2020; Wellman et al. 2020). Influencers are also giving up a lot of private information and lose control over the spreading of this information to gain following and trust. However, it is unclear how these matters will unfold in the long run. Interviews with parents of kidfluencers, for instance, revealed that it is often the parents who manage the profile and create online identities for their children. How will this affect children's identity development when they get older? Future research on the impact of these privacy violations among children influencers is also needed.

In sum, this paper aimed to reflect on the bright and dark sides of influencer marketing. Most past research until now focus on the benefits of using social media influencers to promote brands or highlight the dangers associated with the lack of transparency of this tactic. Other dark sides remain hidden, as well as the potential to use social media influencers for the public good. Bringing these aspects under attention may pave the path for new research on the perils and gains of influencer marketing. Debunking the big bad wolves and envious stepmothers can lead to a more ethical and transparent use of influencer marketing.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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