

Chapter 12

The Superpower of Digital Influencers: Heroes or Villians? Impact on Children

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ABSTRACT

The popularity of UGC and digital influencers has drawn the attention of brands, who are now using it as a new communication tool. Children engage with social media at increasingly younger ages, making digital celebrities an effective channel to reach them, who are still in a premature stage of intellectual development. This study employs a mixed-methodology to answer the research question: How does Influencer Marketing impact children? What are the possible reasons that make them more susceptible to the persuasive power of digital influencers? It concludes that the influence of these celebrities on their young followers extends beyond consumption habits and is generally positive. However, it can be harmful, depending on how they wield their influence. Other factors contributing to children's vulnerability to this strategy include their trust in certain influencers, their limited advertising literacy, and the inadequate identification of sponsored content, which prevents children from critically evaluating paid content

DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3373-2367-1.ch012

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INTRODUCTION

In an age where digital connectivity is everywhere, social media influencers (SMIs) have become important figures, transforming the way marketing and communication work. These individuals create content, build large followings, and act as opinion leaders (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Huber et al., 2022). They use their perceived authenticity and credibility to hold significant persuasive power over their audiences. Among these groups, children are especially vulnerable because of their limited ability to understand advertising (Hudders et al., 2017). As children start using social media at younger ages, the impact of digital celebrities on their behaviors, perceptions, and buying habits raises serious ethical and societal questions (Pinto et al., 2022).

Digital platforms like YouTube and TikTok are crucial to children's entertainment and social interaction (Datareportal, 2023). These platforms enable parasocial relationships where influencers' stories and frequent interactions foster trust and admiration (De Veirman et al., 2019; Pretorius et al., 2022). Children often look up to these figures, seeing them as relatable role models (Barta et al., 2023), which makes them vulnerable to adopting the lifestyles, beliefs, and behaviors influencers showcase (Coates et al., 2019). This trust, along with children's limited cognitive skills to tell apart advertising from entertainment, gives influencers significant influence over their young followers (Hudders et al., 2017).

Although influencer marketing can have positive effects—such as promoting healthy habits (Castro et al., 2021) or raising awareness about sustainability (Huber et al., 2022)—its darker side cannot be overlooked. Studies indicate that influencers often endorse unrealistic lifestyle standards, unhealthy products, or potentially harmful behaviors, leading to feelings of body dissatisfaction, frustration, and low self-esteem in children (De Jans et al., 2021; Hudders & Lou, 2023). These negative outcomes emphasize the need for ethical influencer practices and increased transparency in identifying sponsored content (Van Dam & Van Reijmersdal, 2019). However, the frequent merging of promotional messages with entertainment often causes young audiences to remain unaware of the commercial intent behind influencer content, making them highly susceptible to persuasion (Lemon & Hoy, 2018; Hudders et al., 2017).

Advertising literacy, defined as the ability to recognize and critically evaluate commercial messages, plays a critical role in mitigating these risks (Dias & Duarte, 2022a). Yet, research shows that children's advertising literacy is often insufficient to resist subtle persuasion attempts, particularly when disclosures of sponsorship are unclear or poorly executed (Hudders et al., 2017; Boerman & Van Reijmersdal, 2020).

This study addresses two pressing questions: How does influencer marketing impact children, and what factors contribute to their heightened vulnerability to digital influencers? By employing a mixed-methods approach, including interviews

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