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Understanding Persuasive Communication Strategies of Online Social Influencers through the Lens of Sociology and Decision Neuroscience

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Abstract

This literature review synthesizes current research to explore the persuasive communication tactics employed by online social influencers and their impact on the psychological and sociological development of adolescents. The analysis, which integrates concepts from decision neuroscience and sociological theory, examines existing case studies and empirical evidence on influencer practices related to youth consumerism, identity formation, and social engagement. The paper identifies several central themes, including the wide range of influencer types—from entrepreneurial figures to wellness advocates and educational role models. It also addresses the multifaceted effects of influencer practices, noting both their potential to harm and benefit adolescent well-being, body image, and social relationships. A key focus is on recurring cognitive and perceptual strategies (scarcity, social proof, loss aversion, authenticity signaling) that are documented in recent scholarly work. By combining sociological frameworks like charismatic authority and cultural reproduction with insights from decision neuroscience on reinforcement schedules and cognitive bias, the paper frames digital influence as a social, culturally ingrained, and affectively charged phenomenon. The conclusion advocates for implementing ethical standards, regulatory measures, and improved media literacy as crucial protections to foster healthy adolescent development and reduce the risks associated with influencer-driven persuasion.

Keywords

Social Media, Influencers, Communication, Strategy, Economic Framing, Cognitive Biases, Persuasion

1. Introduction

All-pervasive social media is reshaping the lives of children, youth, and young adults in ways that are previously unknown. A current worldwide study across 42 countries found that among young people aged 11, 13, and 15 years, over 77% fell into the active or extensive daily social media usage groups (Boniel-Nissim et al., 2024: p. 5). Among these constituencies, influencer followship on social media (SMIs) is a normative behavior: meta-analyses of marketing involving influencers establish that most adolescents report following at least one influencer regularly, most commonly across multiple platforms (Libai et al., 2025). Such a convergence of high visibility and influencer following is sociologically significant insofar as adolescence is a period marked by heightened sensitivity to social judgment, juxtaposed with the development of executive control. Decision neuroscience perspectives also reveal inconsistent social rewards, such as likes, shares, and comments, as reinforcement schedules that program attention and enhance the persuasiveness of influencer posts (Lindström et al., 2021; Turner et al., 2025).

The issue, therefore, is how influencers exploit these conditions—and at what cost. This review addresses three questions: 1) What counts as a social media influencer, with brief case studies across cultural contexts; 2) How influencer practice relates to harms (body dissatisfaction, consumerism, displacement of offline ties) and potential benefits; 3) Which tactics do the persuasive work, from authenticity cues to cognitive-bias and micro-perceptual maneuvers. Throughout, sociological theory is linked to decision-neuroscience findings to clarify mechanisms and inform interventions.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Defining the Social Media Influencer

The Social Media Influencer (SMI) is a digital content producer who accrues visibility, credibility, and symbolic capital through continuous production and interaction with followers, and uses that position to influence attitudes or behaviors (Abidin, 2021; Libai et al., 2025). What differentiates influencers from traditional celebrities is the triad of perceived authenticity, relatability, and parasocial intimacy—A one-sided yet emotionally meaningful relationship in which audiences feel they "know" the creator despite no reciprocal contact. Teens often describe influencers as "someone like me, but slightly more successful", a framing that lowers resistance to persuasion.

Case studies highlight such variation. MrBeast (Jimmy Donaldson) exemplifies spectacle-based influence on YouTube: extravagant giveaways, endurance tests, and philanthropy blend entertainment with beneficence to cultivate attachment. Kylie Jenner exemplifies commercialized lifestyle influence: limited-release beauty "drops" and exclusivity cues operationalize scarcity and social proof. Across both cases, persuasion flows through perceived authenticity, repeated exposure, and reward-like anticipation around launches and events.

Social media's influence extends well beyond Western cultures. In China, for

example. Artist Li Ziqi, who entertains millions of followers on YouTube, Weibo, and Douyin, is well known for chic vignettes of farm life, cooking, and ancient handicrafts. Her popularity demonstrates that influence need not always be commercially overt but can instead reinforce the importance of cultural heritage in appealing to a global youth demographic. Similarly, in India, education content producers on platforms such as YouTube sell math or language skills to teenage students, illustrating the possibility of influence spreading from lifestyle into pedagogy.

Finally, self-consciously pro-social influencers—mental-health advocates, fitness coaches, and study-skills educators—show that influence can be protective as well as risky (Paraskeva et al., 2024; Nagata et al., 2025). Mechanisms include social modeling and self-efficacy (clear goals, graded challenges), identity-based motivation (aligning healthy behavior with valued identities), and habit formation (cue–routine–reward loops that co-opt the same reinforcement dynamics that drive entertainment engagement). In controlled settings, influencer-delivered content improves girls' body image (Paraskeva et al., 2024) and strengthens constructive routines in micro-communities. Trust embedded in daily micro-interactions is the lever through which positive change propagates.

2.2. Adverse Effects of Influencers on Adolescents and Youth

Despite their cultural salience, influencers are repeatedly linked to adverse outcomes for youth. Body image concerns are prominent among adolescent girls (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020). Usage can be classified as non-active, active, intensive, and problematic (van de Grift et al., 2024); intensive/problematic patterns are associated with higher odds of body dissatisfaction and weight misperception, consistent with diary-based evidence (Glaser et al., 2024). Content genres such as thin-ideal, fitspiration, and staged lifestyle posts drive upward comparison and negative mood.

Influencers also normalize materialism and consumerism. Unboxing rituals and portrayals of extravagant living instill the value of possessing more, while the advertising of food and beverages by influencers is increasingly regarded as a health commercial determinant (Lafontaine et al., 2025). Since influencers are often regarded as friends or role models, their suggestions are frequently perceived as more credible than those overtly offered by brands. This breakdown of friendship and advertising diminishes adolescents' critical defenses against marketing, which raises some considerations for the developing mind.

A primary concern is the realistic social substitution. Adolescents often replace offline social relationships with online parasocial relationships, viewing influencers as friends. Even though these relationships may provide a sense of belonging, they reduce the time spent on actual socializing in the physical world. Sokolova & Kefi (2021: p. 247) proved that parasocial interaction strongly predicts purchase intention but could also promote loneliness. Riehm et al. demonstrate that increased online time predicts increases in symptoms of depression, supporting the

view that substitution effects are responsible for worse well-being (2025).

Influencers can be detrimental not only through their individual actions but also as agents operating within structurally embedded forces of the attention economy, shaping how adolescents construct their identities, aspirations, and daily routines, often to the detriment of health and direct social interaction. The attention economy refers to a system in which human attention is commodified as a finite resource, aggressively competed for by online platforms seeking to maximize user engagement (Davenport & Beck, 2001; Wu, 2016). Within this landscape, influencers function as more than content creators; they are instruments of platform design, perpetuating cycles of continuous consumption and social comparison. To devise effective countermeasures, such as literacy education, regulatory oversight, and the promotion of pro-social influencer content, it is essential to understand the negative impacts these embedded practices exert on youth populations.

2.3. Historical Context of Influencers over Time

Influencers have been present across cultures for centuries. Centuries before the digital era, religious leaders such as the Buddha and Christ were considered ethical exemplars, reshaping social norms. Royalty had also conventionally established fashion and etiquette norms. 20th-century pop icons, including Marilyn Monroe, The Beatles, and Elvis Presley, helped shape taste and consumer culture.

Sociologically, Weber (1978)'s charismatic authority explains why certain creators command loyalty in uncertain contexts; decision neuroscience clarifies how loyalty is sustained. Charisma and authenticity cues recruit reward and salience systems (e.g., ventral striatum for reward prediction; amygdala for affective salience) while mentalizing networks (medial prefrontal cortex/temporoparietal junction) support parasocial trust and identification (1941). In parallel, Gramsci's cultural hegemony explains how repeated narratives normalize consumerist ideals; neurocognitively, repetition and social proof consolidate value learning via dopaminergic reinforcement. Influence is thus simultaneously cultural and neurocomputational (1971).

Contemporary influencers are defined by their unprecedented scale, broad accessibility, and uniquely participatory modes of interaction. Unlike traditional one-to-many broadcast models, social media platforms empower many-to-many communication, enabling micro-celebrities to cultivate intensely loyal audiences through ongoing real-time engagement. Empirical research demonstrates that influencers frequently equal or surpass traditional celebrities in persuasive impact, particularly when their credibility and audience identification are high (Libai et al., 2025). Notably, micro-influencers, those with fewer followers but highly engaged follower bases, consistently exhibit superior engagement metrics compared to their celebrity counterparts (Chen et al., 2024).

The rise of **virtual influencers** introduces a significant historical shift: simulated personas now anchor authenticity not in individual identity but in the

crafted narratives and interactive experiences they deliver. As Zhang & Park (2024) describe, virtual influencers transform the traditional basis of authenticity, allowing digital architectures and algorithms to mediate intimacy at scale. This evolution positions the influencer phenomenon as an extension and reimagining of longstanding traditions of mediated influence, shaped anew by the technological logic of contemporary social platforms.

2.4. Trends in Communication Strategies of Effective Influencers

Format innovation, parasocial interaction, and authenticity management are frequently cited in recent literature as key communication strategies that influence the persuasive effectiveness of social media influencers, particularly among adolescents. The importance of these themes emerges from the critical functions each serves in the influencer-audience dynamic.

Chiefly, authenticity forms the core of influence. Influencers strategically craft distinctiveness and transparency to appear authentic while balancing sponsorships (Audrezet et al., 2022). Authenticity mediates trust by aligning self-presentation with perceived identity, which fosters connection and similarity. This congruence reduces suspicion, invites emotional investment, and stabilizes parasocial bonds—a pathway through which trust in the influencer spills over to products, lifestyles, and values.

Second, parasocial relationships enhance the persuasive power. Young followers, Sokolova & Kefi (2021: p. 247) assert, perceive influencers as close friends or idols, and familiarity ahead of time more precisely predicts purchasing behavior than real competence. For instance, if a teenage beauty blogger promotes a facial product, fans will more likely see the message as an opinion from an intimate friend rather than a paid testimonial. This blurring of private and commercial communication raises receptivity because it is founded on perceived proximity, shared values, and idealized identification. Parasocial interaction leverages the developmental need for belonging and identity exploration among teenagers, generating trust and emotional identification that amplify the persuasive impact of influencer messaging. Consequently, ostensibly personal advice not only guides consumer decision-making but also reinforces the influencer's ongoing authority in followers' everyday decision-making.

Third, influencers consistently adapt to leverage algorithmic affordances. The rise of short-form video platforms has encouraged aggressively edited, rapid-fire narratives that are programmed to hook in the first few seconds. On TikTok, for example, creators frequently use rapid cuts from scene to scene, trending audio clips, and on-screen text to capture viewers' attention and drive watch time. Turner et al. (2025) argue that reinforcement learning models explain this change: creators experiment with formats, receive mixed audience feedback, and they continuously adjust their plans. Audience feedback is not one-dimensional; it has positive feedback in the form of likes, shares, comments, and saves, as well as negative signals such as rapid swiping or low watch times. These signals act as a reward or

a penalty that trains creators, just like reinforcement learning agents, to adjust their content. Over time, influencers learn the platform's unspoken "rules of success", adjusting their stylistic tastes, such as pacing, audio selection, or editing modes, in an attempt to maximize exposure, engagement, and ultimately, influence.

A feedback loop between creators, audiences, and brands is increasingly driving the professionalization of the influencer economy. As Libai et al. (2025) explain, the spread of agencies, sponsorship disclosure rules, and official brand partnerships has constructed formal value chains around influencers. In this arrangement, researchers refer to "supply-side niche identity formations" emerging: communities of influencers focusing on specific themes, such as sustainability, fitness, or mental health. These niche communities enable brands to align themselves with specific cultural values and target audiences, while influencers position themselves as cultural intermediaries who embody these values. For example, eco-aware lifestyle influencers engage with sustainable fashion brands, and authenticity, along with shared purpose, is enhanced. Through such exchanges, influencers not only commodify their websites but also resecure authenticity, proximity to their followers, and algorithmic agility, thereby sustaining their professional status within a digital economy.

2.5. Framing and Shifting of Economic Valuation Cognitive Bias

Influencers shape attitudes and behavior by recruiting cognitive biases and affective heuristics in ambiguous choice contexts—processes tied to identifiable neural substrates. Scarcity and time-limited offers amplify expected-value signals in reward circuits (ventral striatum), reinforcing approach. Bandwagon/social proof taps social-valuation in medial prefrontal cortex while salience systems (amygdala) flag popularity cues as behaviorally relevant. Grounding these tactics in reward-learning clarifies why modest design tweaks can reliably shift choice (Zhang & Park, 2024).

Other tactics involve the sophisticated framing of economic choices. The decoy effect, for instance, is employed when a less attractive third option is presented to make a target option appear more desirable, a strategy commonly seen in tiered membership models (Grimani et al., 2023). Furthermore, loss aversion is activated by framing potential losses, such as missed opportunities, as being more significant than equivalent gains (Yechiam & Hochman, 2025).

Beyond these specific cognitive biases, influencers also engage in broader strategies that blur the lines between persuasion and entertainment. They professionally craft emotional and sensory experiences to sustain audience attention. Humor, for instance, is a common tool used to mitigate resistance to commercial messages while enhancing the perceived likability of the influencer. Conversely, influencers may also engage in physically demanding or uncomfortable stunts to elicit sympathy and convert personal discomfort into a spectacle of perceived authenticity. The deliberate use of surprising sensory intrusions, sometimes referred

to as "jump scares", also serves to heighten arousal and sustain viewer investment. Collectively, these variable reward systems create a potent form of reinforcement learning, where the unpredictable nature of rewards, such as shoutouts or likes, motivates audiences to remain consistently engaged (Lindström et al., 2021; Turner et al., 2025). Ultimately, these pervasive strategies demonstrate how influencer culture commercializes not only audience attention but also emotions and sensory states, making the boundaries between influence, entertainment, and genuine human interaction increasingly indistinct. To provide a clear and structured overview of these key persuasive tactics, along with their underlying mechanisms and examples, see **Table 1**.

Table 1. Cognitive and emotional tactics in influencer persuasion.

Tactic	Mechanism	Example	Effect
Scarcity	Limited-time or exclusive offers	Kylie Jenner's cosmetic "drops"	Creates urgency and perceived value
Bandwagon Effect (FOMO)	Social proof via popularity signals	Highlighting follower counts or trending products	Promotes conformity among adolescents
Decoy Effect	Adding a less-attractive option to steer choice	Membership tiers	Primes audiences toward the target option
Loss Aversion	Framing absence as missed opportunity	Limited deals framed as "don't miss out"	Losses weigh more than equivalent gains
Jump Scares/Sensory Intrusions	Startling edits or audio spikes	TikTok jump cuts	Sustains arousal and attention
Comedy	Humor reduces resistance to persuasion	Meme-based ads	Increases likability, softens commercial intent
Suffering	Pain/discomfort as performance	Eating challenges, stunts	Generates sympathy, perceived authenticity

Persuasive tactics of social media influencers and their underlying mechanisms (adapted from Lindström, Bellander, Schultner, Chang, Tobler, & Amodio, 2021; Nagata, Otmar, Shim, Balasubramanian, Cheng, Li, Al-Shoaibi, Shao, Ganson, Testa, Kiss, He, & Baker, 2025).

Influencers maintain audience engagement by employing perceptual strategies that operate at the micro-temporal level, framing both attention and sensory processing. This approach complements the use of cognitive heuristics, such as scarcity and loss aversion, by targeting more fundamental, moment-to-moment psychological mechanisms. A prime example of this tactic is the prevalence of dual-screen content on short-form platforms such as TikTok and YouTube.

In this common video format, an influencer occupies one side of the screen, while an unrelated yet visually and audibly captivating clip plays on the other. Examples often include satisfying tasks like soap carving, simple gameplay like Subway Surfers, or crafts that evoke the autonomous sensory meridian response

(ASMR). This technique capitalizes on well-established principles from cognitive psychology, which demonstrate that humans are instinctively drawn to dynamic motion cues, even when those cues are not central to the primary message.

Research suggests that this paradoxical content format is highly effective at sustaining engagement. For instance, a study by Glaser et al. (2024) found that young viewers frequently reported feeling heightened vigilance and overstimulation in response to dual-screen videos, a state that, counterintuitively, compelled them to continue watching for more extended periods. From a neuroscientific perspective, these unexpected changes in motion or sound may function as "dopaminergic pings", triggering the brain's reward system and creating a continuous loop of arousal and anticipation that extends the viewing session. By leveraging these perceptual biases, the dual-screen format ensures sustained exposure to persuasive messaging that is subtly layered within the main video. See **Figure 1** for an example of a split-screen video format that is increasingly more common in use among influencers.

Figure 1. Split-screen format increasingly more common in use by several influencers.

The IKEA effect operates through the consumer's active engagement in creating a product. This bias refers to the tendency for people to assign greater value to products they have partially created. Influencers leverage this through tutorials, live-streamed cooking demonstrations, and interactive challenges. For example,

beauty influencers often invite followers to replicate make-up routines step by step. By involving the viewer in co-creation, influencers not only promote the product but also foster a more profound emotional attachment to the process. Chen et al. (2024) found that participatory practices increased purchase likelihood and brand loyalty in micro-communities. Beyond commerce, Paraskeva et al. (2024) demonstrated that participatory influencer-led exercises improved adolescent girls' body image, indicating that similar mechanisms can be redirected toward positive outcomes.

Authenticity signaling also operates at a perceptual level. Low-production choices, handheld filming, unfiltered images, visible mistakes, signal sincerity. This aesthetic has sociological roots in what Abidin (2021) calls "calibrated amateurism", a strategy where influencers deliberately downplay polish to maintain relatability. Audrezet et al. (2022) argue that such signals preserve trust even if the influencers are engaging in commercial conduct. For virtual influencers, designers now copy imperfections, delayed speech, and asymmetric eye contact to mimic realism (Ju et al., 2024). In either case, the sensory perception of "authenticity" is assumed to be a substitute for trust, and it illustrates how superficial aesthetics significantly impact persuasion.

These tactics emphasize that influence is not simply a function of persuasive argument or reflective prejudice. It is multisensory, taking over attention, perception, and aesthetic cues in ways that are immune to rational scrutiny. Understanding these processes is essential for developing media literacy curricula to teach adolescents not only to recognize overt persuasion but also to think critically about the sensory designs of digital media.

3. Conclusion

Social media influencers have become a unifying force in contemporary youth culture, shaping daily life through a sophisticated blend of cognitive exploitation, psychological vulnerability, and algorithmic reinforcement. This influence is not merely a function of persuasive argument but of its ability to target the fundamental perceptual processes that govern attention. The pervasive rise of dual-screen content exemplifies this strategy, deliberately pairing a primary persuasive message with a secondary, unrelated sensory stimulus to bypass conscious cognitive processing.

This technique, which leverages human sensitivity to dynamic motion and auditory cues, creates a continuous state of heightened vigilance and arousal, compelling viewers to remain engaged for longer durations. Each unpredictable sensory event acts as a "dopaminergic ping", consistently rewarding the brain and solidifying the viewing habit. Consequently, the dual-screen format transforms passive consumption into a form of active, habituated engagement, ensuring prolonged exposure to the persuasive content.

This influence, while often presented as harmless entertainment, is a profound and impactful social force. Its risks are clear: the promotion of unattainable body

ideals, the normalization of consumerism, and the replacement of in-person social connections with parasocial relationships, which can amplify feelings of isolation and depressive symptoms. Nevertheless, influencers can also be powerful agents for positive change, supporting public health campaigns, social causes, and educational content.

Navigating this landscape requires concrete, testable interventions. Beyond ethical guidelines and platform enforcement, media-literacy curricula should explicitly counter perceptual tactics: 1) Dual-screen inoculation—practice "attentional labeling" (name the side-clip, time the jump-cuts), then rewatch without the distractor to feel comprehension gains; 2) Calibrated-amateurism audits—use checklists to spot low-production authenticity signals (shaky camera, "mistakes", informal tone) and cross-check disclosure; 3) Bias drills—reframe scarcity/bandwagon claims into base-rate and opportunity-cost terms to blunt reward-chasing impulses; 4) Co-creation with guardrails—channel the IKEA effect into prosocial challenges while teaching when "participation" is being commercialized. Teaching at the same micro-temporal level where content persuades operationalizes literacy in practice.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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Appendix: Persuasive Communication Strategies of Social Media Influencers

Category	Mechanism/ Tactic	Sociological Perspective	Decision Neuroscience Principle	Examples from Influencer Practice	Impacts on Adolescents/Youth	Managerial/ Regulatory Implications
Cognitive Bias Exploitation	Scarcity/ Urgency	Normalizes consumerism by presenting limited goods as markers of status and belonging.	Scarcity bias: perceived value increases when availability decreases.	Kylie Jenner's cosmetics "limited drops" with countdown timers.	FOMO-driven purchases, financial pressure, compulsive buying.	Disclosure rules for limited offers; restrict urgency tactics in youth-facing ads.
	Bandwagon Effect/FOMO	Reinforces peer conformity and collective identity formation.	Social proof: adolescents imitate perceived majority behavior.	Influencer campaigns showing "everyone is trying this challenge".	Heightened anxiety, peer pressure, reduced autonomy in choices.	Platform prompts clarifying when popularity metrics are manipulated.
	Decoy Effect (Inferior Third Choice)	Shapes consumer decision-making within capitalist logics of "choice architecture".	Asymmetric dominance: inferior option steers toward target option.	Tiered subscription levels (Basic/Plus/ Premium bundles).	Reduces critical evaluation, drives upselling acceptance.	Transparency in pricing structures; consumer education on choice framing.
	Loss Aversion	Constructs belonging as something to lose rather than gain.	Prospect theory: losses loom larger than equivalent gains.	"Don't miss out" on exclusive access or community drops.	Heightened anxiety, compulsive behaviors, identity insecurity.	Label warnings on loss-framed advertising; media literacy campaigns.
	Reinforcement Learning Loops	Embeds capitalist attention economies into everyday social practices.	Variable-ratio reinforcement: intermittent rewards maintain behavior.	Likes, unpredictable engagement spikes, algorithmic boosts.	Compulsive checking, screen-time addiction, mood swings.	"Nudge" design for healthier engagement; usage time warnings.
Perceptual Tactics	Dual-Screen/ Split Attention	Multitasking as a cultural norm, overstimulation of attention.	Visual salience and orienting reflexes sustain arousal.	TikTok clips with gameplay running alongside a talking head.	Overstimulation, reduced critical reflection, attention fragmentation.	Design guidelines restricting dual-screen content in youth-targeted ads.
	The IKEA Effect (Participation)	Encourages self-identity through "do-it-yourself" co-production.	Endowment effect: effort increases valuation.	Makeup tutorials, step-by-step recipes, co-creation challenges.	Stronger emotional attachment, internalization of brand.	Ethical application in education/ health; guardrails against exploitative marketing.
	Authenticity Signaling	Calibrated amateurism: low-polish aesthetics signify "realness".	Heuristic processing: imperfections as cues of sincerity.	Handheld filming, "no filter" posts, behind-the-scenes errors.	Builds parasocial trust, makes persuasion less detectable.	Require sponsorship disclosure even in "authentic" formats.

Continued

Sociological Functions	**Parasocial Interaction**	Blurs boundaries between friendship and commercial relationships.	Emotional bonding activates reward systems linked to intimacy.	Influencers replying to comments, live shoutouts.	Perceived friendship makes persuasion harder to resist.	Educators teach adolescents to distinguish parasocial from reciprocal relationships.
	Identity Curation & Cultural Intermediation	Influencers act as taste-makers and cultural translators.	Narrative framing: identity cues prime affective decision-making.	Sustainability, wellness, or "clean living" niches.	Shapes aspirations, can marginalize alternative cultural values.	Policy support for diverse influencer ecosystems to reduce monocultural hegemony.
Historical Continuities	**Charisma (Weber)**	Charismatic authority recast in digital networks.	Social salience and attention bias toward high-status figures.	MrBeast philanthropy spectacles framed as generosity.	Adolescents valorize "heroic" figures, sometimes at self-cost.	Public debate on ethical limits of charisma-based influence.
	Cultural Hegemony (Gramsci)	Reproduction of consumerism as "common sense".	Priming effects: repetition normalizes ideology.	Unboxing luxury goods, everyday aspirational branding.	Perpetuates inequalities, intensifies class divides.	Critical media literacy integrated into schools to expose ideological reproduction.