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### I Love Fashion Influencing and I Hate it at the Same Time

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## **I Love Fashion Influencing and I Hate It at the Same Time**

My head perks up at the sound of a thump on my front porch. I open the front door of my house and find a package addressed to me from adidas. It's the fifth package I've received this week from a brand and it's only Wednesday. I hurriedly rip open the standard brown outer packaging and reveal a black box containing a white sports bra with the black adidas logo on the front, a black cropped t-shirt with mesh on the sleeves and a pair of classic adidas Superstar sneakers in white with black stripes on the sides. I'm working with adidas to advertise their Black Friday deals through a blog post and an Instagram post. I pull out a pink tulle skirt and a black high-neck blouse I'm wearing tonight to a pre-New York Fashion Week party in SoHo and add the sneakers to my outfit ensemble. I mentally thank adidas for providing me with a comfortable pair of shoes to wear to my event. How did I get here?

Ten years ago influencing didn't exist and now it's the future of fashion advertising. Half a million people on Instagram are influencers, and *Business Insider* anticipates brands will dedicate at least \$15 billion to influencer marketing campaigns after 2020. Why? Social media is an obligatory part of our lives now and influencers use social media for more than communicating with their peers or keeping up with family members. Influencers within specific niches post about their favorite movies, clothing pieces, food and more to direct their followers to brands they support. Influencer advertisements on social media may persuade followers to make a purchase, which is a powerful marketing tool for a brand to take charge of. For many, influencing is a way to make money, either as a side-hustle or as a full-time occupation depending on one's reach and following. Micro-influencers with as little as 10,000 followers can charge from \$100 to \$250 per Instagram post as compared to celebrity influencers who make millions.

Money isn't the only reason people invest their time in social media. Influencing has a novelty aspect to it. Most influencers have obtainable lifestyles and built themselves up from nothing. They post about events or products their followers can buy or take part in such as the new Frozen movie or a sweater from Walmart. The products they communicate come across as genuine when they personalize them with funny captions or wear an average outfit that would be found on a person they know. Influencers establish an online relationship with their viewers and followers by engaging with them through comments and messages so they appear more personal. This sets them apart from celebrities. They experience the same things their followers experience such as school, work, and seasonal activities like pumpkin picking so they appear relatable to the people following them and their audience gets to know them on a personal level.

Influencing is fun, and it's an opportunity to look effortlessly glam without waiting for an occasion to arise. For some, this may be an everyday look, but for others who don't work in a creative field, this is a way for them to de-stress, use their imagination and become a part of the fashion industry. Fashion influencers enjoy applying a full face of makeup, experimenting with fake eyelashes and nails, and styling their hair. They love dressing up in unique, trendy outfits such as leopard print fur coats and leather leggings they wouldn't normally wear during work or school hours. Fashion influencing gives women a chance to feel special and relatively famous. They're constantly in front of the camera and love being in the spotlight as photographers capture their every pose. They find it enjoyable to scroll through pages of clothing on popular

websites like ASOS and Zara to find cute pieces to share with followers in a blog post. And they enjoy filming their makeup routines, holiday outfits or shopping hauls to share their knowledge with like-minded audiences on YouTube. Influencing is an escape from the mundane lifestyle.

And people enjoy influencing because it's turned into a freelance job. Fashion influencers create their own opportunities for themselves by experimenting with photography, writing, and video aside from school or work. They turn these interests into a business and a way to connect with other people by engaging with followers and monetizing their platforms. Brands reach out with the opportunity to work together and they send products or payment in return for a photo posted to Instagram, a video posted to YouTube or a blog post written on their websites. Fashion influencers can directly pitch content ideas to brands via email to receive opportunities on their own without waiting for the press to contact them first. Receiving party or event invitations are bonuses for the hard work influencers put in and more arise as one's following increases.

I couldn't help but smile and shake my head while lacing up my new adidas Superstars as I got ready to head out the door. adidas is the most well-known brand I've worked with and they are paying me \$300 as well as sending products for me to advertise on my blog. I set aside the black box in my closet next to the two pink shoe boxes I received from Shoe Dazzle earlier that week and the black box containing booties that I received from Naked Feet Shoes. I remember a time when brands barely reached out to me and now my Gmail inbox is flooded with at least eight different collaboration requests per day. This collaboration is a huge deal for me, and I couldn't help but feel accomplished as I strode out the door ready to show off my latest look for Instagram that night. Just as I step out the front door, I remember to quickly browse through my email and check the tracking numbers of my next set of packages. I'm expecting at least three to arrive on my doorstep tomorrow, and I make a mental note to start prepping my content.

People think social media fashion influencing is just a matter of celebrities running it like the Kardashians but in fact it's been around for centuries. During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, fashion media began to take off in Paris, France, as women became more educated and earned more money to spend on clothing. A fashion obsession then spread throughout Europe. Fashion plates, art illustrations of women wearing clothing, were the first form of fashion media advertisements that later developed into magazines. As time progressed, the plates grew more and more descriptive and eventually included information about the type of clothing depicted in the illustrations and about future pieces to come. The plates were often found in almanacs or small pocketbooks at the time along with information about other topics. Meanwhile in Britain, *The Lady's Magazine* published the first colored fashion plates in the industry.

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the U.S. Federal Trade Commission was founded once the New York Stock Exchange opened again following the war. Marketing was needed, and philosopher of media theory Marshall McLuhan included colored clothing advertisements in each chapter of his books. Fashion advertisements of women dressed in long dresses and feathered hats and men in ties and trousers then appeared in books such as *American Cloak and Suit Review* and *The Clothier and Furnisher*.

Today, American retailers are dominating the fashion industry and bringing a fresh perspective to their clothing lines that reach beyond aesthetic appeal. There's the well-known teen fashion

retailer Aeropostale launching a new line with a focus on inclusion complete with jeans to sweatshirts. Ugg launched a new line complete with fur coats and fancy boots including models of different generations to merge age gaps. Burberry's fall collection embraces British culture and emphasizes self-expression through their line of coats, heels, and clutches.

Then we have leading fashion advertisers such as the powerful Louis Vuitton brand with advertisements of celebrities like Sophie Turner gracing the page with a sultry expression painted on her face, Gigi Hadid decked out in a pink padded headband and a bright red trench coat for Prada and Kaia Gerber dressed in an acid wash denim jumpsuit for Stella McCartney that makes the viewer want to purchase a piece of designer clothing despite the cost.

But the leaders in fashion advertising today are influencers. The Kardashians didn't invent fashion influencing, but they are some of the most prominent people involved in the industry today. Kim has represented every brand from Louis Vuitton to Sugar Bear Hair vitamins and her followers are quick to follow suit. Then we have Kylie, one of the youngest billionaires, with a makeup line, and Kendall modeling in luxury fashion shows. There is Ariana Grande, who has one of the highest followings on Instagram, and is iconic for her high ponytail, thigh-high boots and sweatshirt dresses that followers frequently copy. Rihanna is quickly taking over the fashion industry with her Fenty brand after recently celebrating much success from her Savage x Fenty fashion show that blew away any of Victoria's Secret's past fashion shows. Then there's Meghan Markle making her mark on fashion with her elegant, classic style. However, celebrities aren't the only form of influencers we see today. There are also the fashion influencers who started out as average people such as Chiara Ferragni, one of the biggest names in fashion today. She's an Italian influencer who rose to fame through her blog The Blonde Salad and made Forbes' Top Fashion Influencers List. Similarly, there's also Danielle Bernstein, an F.I.T. drop out from Long Island who rose to fame through her blog We Wore What where she captures street style and is now a brand in herself along with the brand of clothing she markets, and Arielle Charnas from Something Navy, another powerful fashion blog that brought her into the spotlight in New York City. She also has her own clothing line that retails at Nordstrom.

Society is quick to judge but having influence over consumer purchases or receiving gifted items isn't necessarily a bad thing. Inspiring someone to purchase something you own is an honor and shows that your fashion sense is appreciated by other people. Receiving gifted items from brands which admire your work is a reward for spending hours creating content for your social media platforms and can improve your reach as an influencer. Gifted items can prevent you from overspending on clothes, makeup or whatever industry you're involved in. Influencing is a new way to earn money outside of a traditional 9-5 job that many people are lucky enough to turn into a full-time job with hard work and a large enough follower count. Social media influencing is a competitive edge when applying for jobs because in today's digital age having followers matters and can be added to a resume as another sample of your work.

Influencing looks easy, but in reality, it's a lot of work to create the perfectly curated content you see on the Internet. I glam myself up, and I love it and hate it at the same time. Fashion blogging revolves around clothing and what I look like and that means I have to look put together all the time in order to create. If I want to shoot photos or video, I have to have a full-face of makeup on, my hair done and wear my newest outfit to share with my followers. To fit the title of a

fashion journalist and blogger in her early twenties, this is my makeup routine: Neutrogena cleanser, Micellar water, primer, foundation, concealer, powder, bronzer, blush, highlighter, eyebrow pencil, eyeshadow, eyeliner, mascara, lipstick, setting spray. I only feel like a true influencer once I've done my full routine. If I use simple drugstore makeup products, the total still comes out to more than \$100. But I will make double the amount I spend. There are plenty of days where I don't feel like dressing up and want to stay home with my hair in a messy bun and a makeup-free face but that's not my brand. The motivation alone to get ready sometimes is a huge struggle of influencing.

Choosing an outfit takes almost as long. I'm a perfectionist when it comes to my Instagram feed and I don't repeat outfits, or my content is repetitive. I have stress about keeping up with fashion trends because that means I have to buy new clothes all the time. I don't have the money to do that as a grad student but I don't want to fall behind my competitors either. I try to constantly churn out new content my followers want to see by styling the latest trends. Plenty of the items I would like to share on my platforms such as Chanel or Gucci bags I don't have the money to afford without a full-time job and it can be frustrating to face financial road-blocks as a content creator.

The process of creating the content is strenuous too. Besides for the hours it takes me to get ready to shoot, it takes me just as long to film videos, shoot photos, edit, and write blog posts. This is where the journalist in me comes out. I shoot most of my photos by myself because I can't afford to book a photographer when they cost at least \$200 per hour and I don't like to inconvenience my family or friends unless they volunteer. This requires me to lug around camera equipment and wake up extra early to shoot before people come around because I get self-conscious and I don't want people in my shots. If I'm shooting at home in Connecticut, I will get up at eight but if I shoot in New York City I wake up at six to avoid the crowds. The same situation applies to videos. Shooting a look book with several outfit changes could take me up to two hours, and I will lug around my tripod and camera to five different locations to film.

Outsiders have the illusion that brand deals are as easy as receiving a steady stream of products for free without doing any work. This couldn't be farther from the truth. When Raw Sugar Living reached out to me to work together, I had to sign a contract agreeing to post content on specific dates and include all of the correct hashtags and accounts tagged that they wanted. I completed my full hair, makeup, and outfit routine and traveled to a Bed, Bath and Beyond store to shoot with a display of skincare products. And then I came home to edit the photos with my set of filters, send the photos back to Raw Sugar for approval and re-do any photos they didn't agree with in the store a second time before finally posting a photo to my Instagram feed and a photo to my Instagram story for \$150.

My adidas collaboration required me to shoot at least three different outfits in street style settings and write a blog post for \$300. I traveled to three different locations for this shoot and changed in my car three times before shooting each look myself. It took over an hour. Taking photos is the easiest part of the campaign, however. The writing and editing process consumes me. Editing a video with Adobe Premiere takes me two to three hours depending on how elaborate I want the effects to be. Writing takes me approximately the same amount of time because I have to write, edit photos for the post and include links to all of the outfits I reference in the post. Editing

photos don't take me longer than 10 minutes per photo but applying a filter and using Photoshop are extra steps that prolong the process.

Growing my influence is the most difficult process of influencing. Fashion influencing is mainstream now, and it's easy for my work to get buried under the thousands of other content creators. I didn't gain a following overnight it took years of dedication, engagement and hard work before I saw any progress. It's extremely challenging to grow today with all the different algorithms and hacks people use. Instagram has an algorithm that doesn't show photos in numerical order so my photos may only be shown to 10% of my audience depending on how engaging I am with other bloggers I follow that day. It took me almost three years to reach 10,000 followers organically, and that's a low number in the influencing realm. Earning blog views is just as challenging. My website isn't a social media platform, so I have to manually direct people to my content outside of the audience my SEO terms attract.

People are not as willing to spend their time reading a blog post as they are with using social media and my views and subscribers fluctuate. Some months I could get over 4,000 views and other months I barely make 1,000. Influencing isn't a stable full-time job unless you have extremely high numbers of followers on multiple platforms and bring in consistent income. The most I make from my posts is \$200 to \$300 which is nice side money but it's not enough to sustain the life I want to live in New York City.

We are an attention-seeking generation but posting content online about yourself is still viewed as narcissistic and embarrassing. No one wants to be known as the person who only posts about themselves or constantly fishes for validation from other people based on their appearance. Fashion influencing challenges this societal norm by encouraging people to embrace their interest in style and what they love about themselves by dedicating social media platforms to their looks and how they would individually style their clothing. But not everyone agrees with this hobby and influencers are turned into easy targets for criticism and negative backlash.

Fashion influencing as a side-hustle sets me apart from my peers but this isn't always a good thing. Influencing has made me unrelatable. I'm the girl that struts around in extra outfits as if I'm going to a party instead of to class. I don't find common ground with people easily because my goals aren't to work a 9-5 job, get married and live in the suburbs. I want a glamorous life, and influencing helps me get there. Social media isn't new, but the majority of average people aren't involved with it from a business standpoint and they don't understand why people pursue it. Most of my friends or acquaintances don't understand why I spend my entire weekend working on fashion content when I could be out enjoying myself at a restaurant or a bar. Some of them get annoyed with me when my posts constantly overcrowd their social feeds or I have to delay a plan because I'm working on a blog post or a campaign. And I've had friends jokingly tell me I'm a narcissist for posting photos of myself but I know they're serious deep down.

My family members are the most annoyed with my side-hustle. They think it's a waste of time. Unless I'm making a steady income, it's not worth it to them and a traditional 9 to 5 job is the only way to go. They think it's cute when I say I have over 10,000 Instagram followers or get over 3,000 views on my blog posts but they don't understand what it actually means to have social media influence. To them, social media is an invasion of privacy and a distraction that

causes nothing but harm. They think it's a nuisance when I ask them to help me shoot photos or video and they don't want to be involved in the process.

I feel like a human target in my hometown. I don't dress the way other people I live near dress. I like pointed-toe leopard print booties and oversized white faux fur jackets, not boring jeans, flannels, and Vans sneakers. Anytime I wear something out of the ordinary I get looks from people and they aren't compliments. When I shoot photos I'm frequently stared or honked at and almost all of my neighbors around my age make fun of me for influencing. My friends and relatives don't understand why I try out fashion trends like padded headbands or dad sneakers instead of dressing "normal."

My college peers are another story. I've had college classmates comment rude things on my Instagram photos and critique what I'm wearing or ask why I posted certain things. They've made irrelevant comments on my blog posts. I was referred to as "the girl with the blog" and passers would snicker and laugh when I took photos on my campus enough so that my friend and I would wake up extremely early to shoot before anyone was around.

Past journalism professors and advisors told me to delete my social media platforms and my website. They told me I won't be taken seriously as a journalist and it's a conflict of interest if I'm an influencer. It's one or the other to them and there's no separation. They've said that employers won't like influencing and it doesn't count as experience.

Fashion journalists believe fashion influencing is the end of magazines and fashion as we know it. They believe bloggers and influencers are ruining fashion media and undermining the industry. They view it as the stupidity of social media and that influencers shouldn't receive the same opportunities that writers receive such as fashion week invites or access to merchandise and press previews. Media professionals do not appreciate fashion being normalized, and having the average everyday person become an expert when they spent years working their way up to these prominent positions through schooling and endless jobs.

I wasn't always like this. I hated social media for the longest time. I wanted to write for magazines and books. I wanted to write well-researched journal articles and essays. I spent my free time studying and reading not trying to find the fastest way to grow a following online or flaunting in front of cameras. I don't know how this happened or who I've turned into.

Social media was never something I obsessed over. I was always the last person to join new social media platforms out of my school peers. I didn't obsess over likes or take photos every time I went somewhere to show off to my followers. I feared being in the public eye, and I hated when people's attention was on me no matter what the reason was. I liked meeting face to face with friends instead of relying on online communication to fuel relationships.

I thought I was going to work for print magazines and I understood they were dying but I wish I tried harder to save them. I spent my college years pursuing a magazine journalism degree with dreams of moving to New York City and working for a beloved glossy under Condé Nast or Hearst. The possibility of pursuing other job opportunities never crossed my mind.

This past summer, I worked for *Interview Magazine* and it was the complete opposite of what I thought working for a magazine would be like. *Interview* had previously folded its print and digital publications in May of 2018 after filing for bankruptcy, and although it relaunched, it's still struggling. The office is absolute chaos as early as 9:30 a.m., the writers and editors are stressed and overworked because there's a lack of employees, the fashion content is limited to a few photos and its social media analytics constantly fluctuate. But maybe I could've fought harder to make changes by offering suggestions to improve the content and organization of the brand instead of allowing my magazine to run itself into the ground.

Instead, fashion influencing took over. I feel guilty about my love of fashion influencing because I thought my career would always be in print magazines. I had betrayed something. When I started out as a magazine writer, I had thought I would write long-form pieces about social implications that impact the fashion industry, cover New York Fashion Week runway shows, or interview celebrities such as Shawn Mendes and Taylor Swift. When I started receiving shoes from adidas, dresses from Showpo and skincare products from Neutrogena I thought this was a fun hobby that would get me extra exposure in the fashion industry. But I couldn't reconcile the two.

In the influencer industry, everything is commoditized. I have 11,000 followers on Instagram but that's nothing to marketers. There's someone out there with thousands or millions more and three times the reach I have. Every achievement is undermined by the necessity to gain a larger audience, more sponsorships, more money. The entire industry is based on greed and the need for attention or validation. My self-worth shouldn't be based on how many products I receive in the mail from brands or how many likes my Instagram photo received. But unfortunately, it is and I dislike influencing for these views of myself.

Influencing isn't impactful in the same way a written long-form magazine piece on the need for more sustainability in the fashion industry or uncovering sweatshop labor in Bangladesh is. I know I'm not making a difference in someone's life or informing them of vital information they need to be aware of. The content I'm creating isn't going to matter to the majority of people, and I think about this a lot.

Some days I think back to what my life was like before I started influencing. I think about how I could wake up on a Sunday without having to get dressed in full hair and makeup to shoot photos, or spend hours writing a blog post when I have school assignments to work on. I recall when I used to read classic books such as *Pride and Prejudice* and *The Great Gatsby* in my free time. I try to picture what my life would be like if I walked away from all social media right now and invested my time in something more meaningful. But then another adidas box arrives at my door and I picture how I would style the pieces and the never-ending cycle of fashion influencing continues.

**Word count: 4,389**

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### **Interview List**

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