Research Review

Like & Subscribe: Influencers and the Shift to Parasocial Authority

March 11, 2026

In early 2025, Meta [faced significant criticism](link) from users and media outlets for AI-generated Instagram profiles the company had created as part of its metaverse construction. These synthetic personas included a Black queer single mother sharing stories about parenting, a sage Black grandfather figure offering advice, and an Asian male dating guru.

Meta had designed these AI personas to populate its metaverse spaces with relatable figures, characters whose carefully constructed backstories and identities were meant to foster the kind of intimacy and trust that drives engagement on social platforms. Yet the backlash was swift and severe. Users did not object to AI in principle; rather, they recoiled at what felt like a corporate attempt to manufacture the very quality that audiences have come to value above almost everything else, including traditional markers of credibility: genuine, lived experience. Relatability had become so prized that even a tech giant with vast resources could not simply engineer it into existence, particularly given the trickiness of defining it. Audience expectations were evolving swiftly, so that what was entertaining in a given season was cancelled for inauthenticity in the next.

This controversy raised fundamental questions about authenticity, representation, and the nature of social media influence itself. What does it mean when the "relatability" and "personality" that draw users to influencers are wholly fabricated? More critically, how did we arrive at a point where social media personalities have become primary sources of information for millions of people navigating questions of health, politics, and daily life?

These questions illuminate a profound transformation in our information ecosystem. The decline of local newspapers and broadcast news, accelerating since the 2008 financial crisis, had already left gaps in how ordinary people encountered current events. Social media platforms filled much of that void, but COVID-19 marked a turning point. Lockdowns drove unprecedented numbers of users onto platforms like TikTok and Instagram, while traditional media struggled with production shutdowns and declining ad revenue. At the same time, public health institutions issued guidance that shifted as the science evolved, creating confusion that eroded trust in official sources. Into this vacuum, influencer content joined

the roster of highly opinionated, privately developed, and niche information sources shaping ordinary users' daily news habits.

Over the past two decades, public attention spans and approaches to "truth" have undergone significant transformation. The authority of legacy media began eroding well before the rise of social platforms, as 24-hour news cycles, corporate consolidation, and high-profile journalistic failures chipped away at audience trust in the early to mid-2000s. Social media platforms emerged in this context, quickly propelling risky startups into Big Tech behemoths with active stakes in their nations' elections, geopolitical relations, and war zones by the 2010s. The subsequent rise of short-form video content in the early 2020s, pioneered by Vine and later dominated by TikTok, further fragmented attention and rewarded brevity over depth. In recent years, generative AI and virtual influencers have introduced new uncertainties about the provenance and authenticity of online content. Each of these shifts has widened the information gaps that influencers now increasingly fill, raising critical questions about expertise, trust, and the spread of both knowledge and misinformation in digital spaces.

> "Over the past two decades, public attention spans and approaches to 'truth' have undergone significant transformation."

Ultimately, social media influencers are individuals who have cultivated followings on platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, leveraging audience attention for income through brand partnerships and sponsored content. Understanding social media influencers and the platforms on which they depend — who succeeds, who gets marginalized, and how trust is constructed and exploited — is essential for comprehending our contemporary information ecosystem and its implications for democratic discourse and social equity.

The Research Landscape

Who gets to be influential, and at what cost? A growing body of literature has emerged to study the ways in which social media influencers structure, and are structured by, a web of political, cultural, and socioeconomic forces; this work is largely carried out by scholars of political communication, media and feminist media studies, political economy, platform studies, and cultural studies.

Current areas of research focus on how influencers shape political discourse, voter behavior, and the spread of misinformation ([Alsharawy & Landgrave 2025](#); [Cheng et al.](#)

2023; Flamino et al. 2023; Goodwin et al. 2023); foundational theoretical frameworks for understanding influencer culture (Abidin 2018, 2021, 2026; Duffy 2017; Hund 2023; Poell et al. 2025); digital labor, its gendered dimensions and often precarious working conditions, and the power dynamics that structure influencer economies (Arriagada & Craig 2024; Jarrett 2019, 2022; Grohmann 2025; Banet-Weiser 2021; Gill 2017; Strengers & Kennedy 2020); how platform capitalism shapes and constrains influencer practices (Poell et al. 2021, 2025); and the ways influencers engage with social and cultural reproduction (Hesmondhalgh 2008; 2019; Bishop 2025; Glatt 2024). This interdisciplinary convergence reflects both the complexity of influencer culture and its impact across public life.

From Fashion Blogs to Information Empires

The genealogy of contemporary social media influencing can be traced back to the rise of fashion bloggers and the digitization of fashion advertising in the 2000s (Pham 2015; Duffy 2017; Hund 2023). These early practitioners laid the foundations that would come to define influencer culture: the cultivation of personal brands, the monetization of lifestyle content, and the performance of accessible expertise.

Central to understanding this evolution is Duffy (2017)'s concept of "aspirational labor" — work carried out by social media influencers who contribute significant uncompensated time and effort toward an aspirational outcome that is statistically unlikely to materialize, given the intense competition and high stakes of the influencer economy. While platforms promise democratized fame and fortune, the reality is closer to a "jackpot economy" characterized by extreme inequality and winner-take-all dynamics (Ross 2009). The chance to achieve extraordinary success normalizes precarious working conditions for the vast majority of participants.

The rise of Instagram in the early 2010s marked a crucial turning point. Originally a geotagging app with substantial funding and mentorship from Twitter's team, Instagram became known for its nostalgic polaroid-style filters before Facebook's acquisition transformed it into a dominant visual platform (Leaver et al. 2020). This period saw the emergence of a kind of "calibrated amateurism," or the performance of unpolished, candid behavior by influencers seeking to appear authentic to their followers – revealing the calculated nature behind seemingly spontaneous bursts of content (Abidin 2017).

The "short-video turn" represents the most recent phase of this evolution. Musical.ly, launched in 2014, had already demonstrated the appeal of brief, music-driven video content among younger users before ByteDance acquired the app in 2017 and rebranded it as TikTok the following year. By 2019, TikTok was mounting a serious challenge to Instagram and YouTube's dominance, but it was the pandemic lockdowns of 2020 that transformed the

platform from a Gen Z novelty into a mainstream force ([Kaye et al. 2021](#)). With hundreds of millions of new users flooding onto TikTok during quarantine, established platforms scrambled to respond. Instagram launched Reels in August 2020, and YouTube introduced Shorts the following year. This competitive pressure pushed all major platforms toward prioritizing brief, highly edited content over traditional images or long-form videos, fundamentally reshaping the environment in which influencers operate.

This shift reflects broader generational changes in communication preferences and attention patterns ([Kaye et al. 2021](#)), while simultaneously accelerating two crucial processes that explain influencers' growing role in information dissemination: first, "datafication," defined by [Mejias & Couldry (2019)](#) as the quantification of human life through information extraction, breaking down users' traits in ways particularly useful for advertising metrics; and second, "platform dependency," where influencers become reliant on the rules, layouts, and limitations of social media platforms for their livelihood and reach ([Leaver et al. 2020](#)).

What are the consequences of these information empires? Through data collection, platforms quantify users into "types" ([Cheney-Lippold 2011](#)) and collect data on what they would likely like to hear, creating feedback loops that prioritize engagement over representative reporting. For example, a study of YouTube's algorithm found that platform use resulted in increased political polarization ([Cho et al. 2020](#)). Meanwhile, through the system of platform dependency, influencers learn to avoid content that might result in bans or algorithmic de-prioritization. These twin pressures create cost-benefit behaviors that systematically result in echo chamber formation, where audiences receive information tailored to their existing beliefs rather than comprehensive or challenging perspectives. Ultimately, datafication and platform dependency explain why news production and consumption via social media influencers pose significant public risks, such as the recent phenomena of anti-vaccine content on short video formats in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 Acceleration Case

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 fundamentally altered the landscape of social media influencing. Anxieties around health, life, and death accelerated the transformation of entertainers into information authorities – and, simultaneously, drove rapid polarization among digital users.

Worsening mistrust in traditional media and public health institutions left an information gap, which influencers stepped in to fill. Their "non-expert expertise" offered a kind of implicit credibility in the eyes of the general public; over the course of the pandemic, there

was a proliferation of health and wellness influencers, legal "experts," and political commentators whose authority derived not from formal training or institutional affiliation, but from their ability to cultivate parasocial relationships and project authenticity. The pandemic brought users of every generation onto social media for the first time, creating new markets for different types of influencers ([Hund 2023](#)).

This expansion occurred despite – or perhaps *because* of – the absence of traditional credentialing mechanisms that typically validate expertise in medical and legal fields. The result had profound implications for public health communication. Audiences increasingly turned to influencers for guidance on everything from vaccine decisions to treatment options, the information they received often contradicted official health recommendations. [Reporting by Glossy in as early as 2020](#) found that 'lifestyle' influencers, usually associated with travel and living content, were increasingly leaning into paranoid theories about the "scamdemic" and questioning the reality of COVID-19 to their followers.

Victimization Narratives: Social Media as "Thought Police"

An emerging dimension of *influencer culture* – the practices, habits, and genres associated with creating influencer content and building a following – involves the strategic deployment of victimization narratives, in which influencers position themselves as targets of censorship or persecution by social media platforms ([Bishop 2025](#)). This dynamic has become particularly pronounced in political and health-related content, where influencers frame the enforcement of content moderation policies (i.e., deplatforming or content removal) as evidence of their truthfulness – and that they are, indeed, brave truth-tellers fighting against powerful forces that seek to silence them.

These narratives tap into broader cultural anxieties about free speech and institutional control. The effectiveness of their framing lies in its ability to transform platform dependency into a source of credibility: the more an influencer claims to be targeted by platforms, the more authentic and trustworthy they appear to audiences skeptical of mainstream institutions.

This relationship has created perverse incentives where influencers may deliberately court controversy or push platform boundaries to generate the appearance of persecution, knowing that claims of censorship can increase audience engagement and loyalty. The result is an information ecosystem where the mere appearance of being silenced becomes a form of social capital, complicating traditional approaches to content moderation and fact-checking. Andrew Tate is perhaps the most prominent recent case. After being banned from

YouTube in 2022 for violating policies on hate speech and harmful content, he leveraged the deplatforming to amplify his brand, framing himself as a truth-teller the establishment wanted to silence ([Love et al. 2025](#)). Tate's followers reposted his content across accounts specifically to evade the bans, and his audience arguably grew larger after removal than before. Joe Rogan benefited similarly during the 2022 backlash over COVID-19 misinformation on his Spotify podcast ([Colbjørnsen 2024](#)). The public pressure campaign to remove him from the platform became a rallying point for his audience, reinforcing the narrative that powerful forces wanted to suppress his conversations.

Gendered Polarization: The Great Digital Divide

Recent research has identified sharp divergences in political inclinations, platform use, and information consumption across gender lines, fundamentally reshaping how we understand both influencer culture and democratic participation ([Boyce Kay 2021](#)). While women represent 80% of all social media influencers, prominent male influencers have risen to outsized impact over the last several years. Meanwhile, this gender breakdown is reversed for *news* influencers – a 2024 Pew Research Center report estimated that [men take up an estimated 63%](#) of news-related accounts with more than 100,000 followers across major social media platforms.

This masculine turn in influencing has heightened polarization and hostility on issues related to gender, sexism, trans identity, and patriarchy. Figures like Jordan Peterson, Andrew Tate, and other notable "pickup artist" creators and YouTubers have cultivated massive followings among young men, promoting ideologies that explicitly reject feminist advances and democratic norms (Boyce Kay, 2024). These influencers often position themselves as victims of feminist overreach or "woke" censorship, using victimization narratives to build loyalty among audiences who feel displaced by social changes.

Young boys in particular have become enamored with figures like Mr. Beast, whose image-making provides a pipeline to what can be understood as masculinity narratives ([Johnson 2022](#)) within "Silicon Valley ideology" ([Schradie 2015](#)), a blend of wealth, immaturity, and grandiosity that positions technological entrepreneurship as the path to masculine success. These figures represent a significant departure from traditional masculine role models, replacing physical prowess or moral leadership with algorithmic optimization and viral success.

The rise of gendered nostalgia and "I'm just a girl" memes, along with "tradwife" content on TikTok, reveals how influencer culture has become a site for negotiating changing gender

roles and expectations. These trends often present themselves as playful or ironic, but function as vehicles for more serious conversations about women's roles, domestic labor, and feminist politics (Parke 2024). Further, survey research both in the United States and around the world shows that while young men are increasingly consuming content that promotes anti-feminist and anti-democratic ideologies, young women are gravitating toward more progressive politics. This digital gender divide has profound implications for democratic participation and social cohesion, as different demographic groups increasingly inhabit entirely separate information ecosystems.

AI, Algorithms, and Artificial Influence

The emergence of virtual influencers, AI girlfriends, and digital clone technology represents the logical extension of influencer culture's trajectory toward complete commodification of personality and relationship. These technologies promise to eliminate the human labor and unpredictability (Atanasoski & Vora 2019) that make traditional influencer partnerships challenging for brands, while raising fundamental questions about authenticity, consent, and the future of human social connection.

Virtual influencers like Miquela (@lilmiquela), Shudu (@shudu.gram), and Rozy (@rozy.gram), computer generated characters who act as fashion models and content creators online, demonstrate how racial and ethnic identities can be designed and deployed as commercial assets, divorced from the communities and histories they represent. The prevalence of non-white virtual influencers reveals how racial difference becomes a resource for generating algorithmic engagement and brand differentiation – all while *actual* creators of color continue to face marginalization and exploitation within human influencer economies.

> "The emergence of virtual influencers, AI girlfriends, and digital clone technology represents the logical extension of influencer culture's trajectory toward complete commodification of personality and relationship."
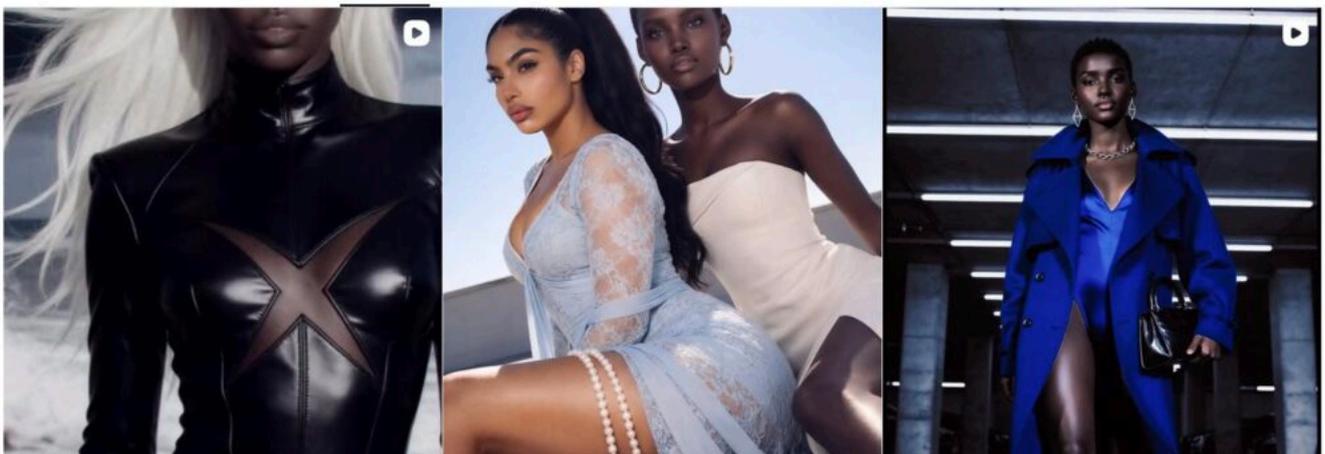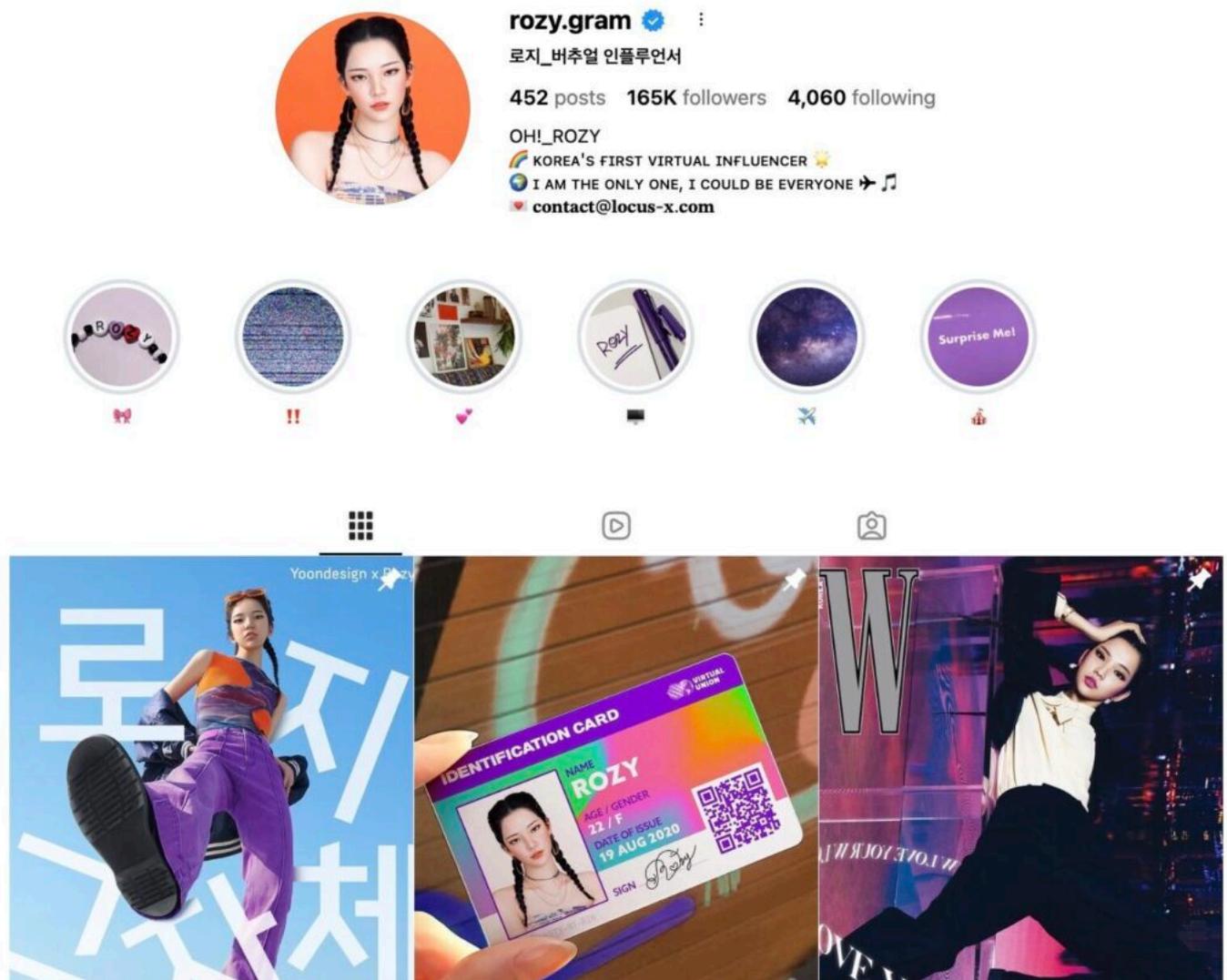
Source: Instagram

Left to right: Instagram profiles of virtual influencers Miquela, Shudu, and Rozy.

AI girlfriend applications and digital clone technology extend this logic into intimate relationship spheres, promising users personalized companionship and sexual gratification through artificial personalities designed to optimize user engagement and retention ([Muldoon & Parke 2025](#)). These technologies represent the ultimate expression of platform capitalism's imperative to monetize human emotional and social needs, transforming intimacy into a subscription service.

The implications of these developments extend far beyond entertainment or marketing. As virtual beings become increasingly sophisticated and widespread, they have the potential to fundamentally alter human expectations about relationships, authenticity, and social connection. The normalization of artificial companionship may erode the social skills and empathy necessary for democratic participation and community building.

Global Perspectives Beyond Silicon Valley

Recognizing influencer culture and impact beyond Western contexts is crucial for understanding both the diversity of influencer practices and the ways that different cultural and political systems shape platform use. In recent years, scholars have increasingly advocated against cultural essentialism and ethnocentrism in analyzing influencing, platforms, and governance structures ([Poell et al. 2024](#); [Steinberg et al. 2025](#)), emphasizing the need for culturally situated analyses that avoid universal assumptions about how influence operates.

Latin America represents a significant subset of social media users who remain critically understudied in English-language scholarship ([Arriagada 2025](#); [Grohmann 2025](#)). Research in these contexts shows different models of influencer professionalization, platform use, and audience engagement that challenge assumptions derived from US-centric studies. In fact, a [2025 Reuters Institute report reveals](#) significant global variations in news consumption that challenge universal assumptions about influencer culture. In Thailand, 49% of respondents use TikTok for news on a weekly basis, while in the UK only 6% do so; similarly, 35% of respondents in Brazil identified social media as their main news source, compared to just 12% in Denmark. These differences can result from a wide range of factors, including press freedoms, literacy levels, local media ecosystems, and technological infrastructure.

The role of social media platforms similarly (and dramatically) varies across national contexts; companies often apply different policies and maintain distinct agreements with governments regarding content moderation, data collection, and political influence across different markets. ByteDance's operations in India and China, for example, differ significantly from its Western presence, reflecting varying regulatory environments and cultural expectations ([Kaye et al. 2021](#)). Understanding this nuance is essential for developing policy responses and regulatory frameworks that can account for local contexts while still addressing the global implications of platform-mediated influence.

Implications and Future Directions

These global variations reveal that influencer culture is not a monolithic phenomenon – but rather, a set of practices that adapt to different cultural, economic, and political conditions. The transformation of social media influencers from entertainment figures to information brokers represents one of the most significant shifts in our contemporary media landscape. This change has occurred largely without institutional oversight, regulatory framework, or public deliberation about its implications for democratic discourse and social well-being.

> "The transformation of social media influencers from entertainment figures to information brokers represents one of the most significant shifts in our contemporary media landscape."

The research reviewed here reveals systematic patterns of exploitation, marginalization, and manipulation that require urgent attention from policymakers, platform companies, and civil society organizations. For example, data worker unionization movements and co-ops globally are demonstrating alternative modes of data ownership, labour laws for the digital age, and platform governance through practical organizing and communications ([Grohmann 2023](#)). The concentration of influence among white creators, the exploitation of creators of color, the manipulation of vulnerable audiences, and the spread of misinformation through influencer networks all demand coordinated responses that go beyond individual platform policies.

At the same time, influencer culture has created new opportunities for marginalized voices, alternative perspectives, and creative expression that bypass traditional gatekeeping mechanisms. The challenge is to develop approaches that preserve these democratizing potentials while addressing the significant harms that current systems enable.

Moving forward, research in this area must continue to examine the intersections of race, gender, class, and nationality in shaping influencer success and platform access. The rise of artificial influencers and AI-mediated social interaction requires new frameworks for understanding authenticity, consent, and human agency in digital spaces. Most critically, the role of influencers in political communication and democratic participation demands sustained attention from scholars, policymakers, and citizens concerned about the future of democratic discourse.

References

For the full list of references used in this review, visit [our Zotero library](#).

Banner image credit: Elise Racine / https://betterimagesofai.org / https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/