

Midwest said they want to become social media influencers (Langdon 2022), 14.75% said that influencer is the only career choice they can imagine.

Influencer capitalism is not a type of capitalism but an ideology that claims that by being active on social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube there are great opportunities for becoming wealthy and famous. Influencer capitalism is the dream, fantasy, and desire of users to become celebrities that accumulate a wealth of social relations, money, influence, likes, positive comments, etc. Influencer capitalism is the online manifestation of the American Dream's ideological claim that in capitalism everyone has an equal opportunity to make a career, from a dishwasher to a billionaire, by having a good idea and believing in themselves. While the USA is often depicted as the "land of opportunities", the gurus of neoliberal Internet individualism present Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, and YouTube as the online spaces of opportunities.

This chapter provides an analysis of the foundations of influencer capitalism. It shows that becoming a famous influencer is not by chance, but due to the capitalist operations of talent agencies, media companies, venture capitalists, and advertisers. Section 7.2 discusses influencer capitalism's political economy. Section 7.3 analyses the ideology of influencer capitalism. Section 7.4 asks whether or not there can be alternatives to capitalist influencers, namely socialist influencers. Section 7.5 draws some conclusions.

7.2 Influencer Capitalism's Political Economy

Social Media Influencers

"Influencers" are online celebrities who create content that is distributed on digital platforms and who have a significantly sized fan community who feel emotionally attached to the influencers and follow and regularly engage with the latter's content by liking, commenting, or purchasing branded commodities advertised on the influencers' channels and pages. Influencers "have fame that is native to social media, such as the YouTube star or highly followed Twitter user, and exist within many interest groups and subcultures besides cult and genre fandom" (Marwick 2016, 338).

Virtual influencers are "CGI or virtual celebrities who do not have a physical form at all, but are created, crafted, narrated and managed to promote or sell a particular message or brand" (Leaver, Highfield and Abidin 2020, 200). Lil Miquela is an example of a digital avatar that is a virtual Instagram influencer. Created in 2016, @lilmiquela had 1.8 million followers on Instagram in January 2020 and 2.7 million in October 2023¹. Lil Miquela promoted brands such as Calvin Klein and Prada. She also has released music songs such as "Not Mine", "Automatic", "Money", and "Wasted" that have achieved millions of views on YouTube.

Let us have a look at some examples of social media influencers.

¹www.instagram.com/lilmiquela/ (accessed January 30, 2020 and October 19, 2023).

Charli D’Amelio, Khaby Lame, MrBeast, Ryan’s World

Taking into account earnings, engagement (number of likes, shares, comments), the number of followers, and entrepreneurship (founding of companies), Forbes (2022) ranked **Charli D’Amelio** as the second most successful social media influencer in 2022. Her 2021 revenue was US\$17.5 million (Forbes 2022). She is very popular on TikTok where she posts dance videos. She and her family are managed by United Talent Agency. Her older sister Dixie followed into her footsteps and also became a highly followed TikToker who posts dance videos. Their family created a family business named D’Amelio Family Enterprises. Charli D’Amelio has worked for, among others, Sabra Hummus, Dunkin’ Donuts, Snap, Hulu, and Prada. Working with cosmetics brand Morph, she and her sister created a new cosmetics brand. She released a book published by Abrams Books and lent her voice to a character in the animation film “StarDog and TurboCat”. She invested into the banking app Step that is targeted at teenagers.

Khaby Lame is a highly popular influencer on TikTok and Instagram. He posts comedy videos. He has promoted brands such as Hugo Boss, Pepsi, Netflix, and Paris Saint-Germain. Forbes (2022) ranked him the eighth most successful influencer in 2022. His 2021 income was US\$10 million (Forbes 2022). Together with his manager Alessandro Riggio, Lame founded the social media agency Iron Corporation. Riggio became Lame’s manager when the latter only had 1,000 Instagram followers and 100,000 on TikTok (Lundberg Toresson 2022).

MrBeast is a very popular YouTuber and TikToker who posts videos of stunts and challenges, tournaments he conducts, gameplay videos, funny videos, etc. Forbes (2022) listed him as the most successful social media influencer in 2022. His 2021 revenue was US\$54 million (Forbes 2022). He founded the restaurant concept app MrBeast Burger and Feastables, a company that sells the chocolate bar MrBeast Bars. Reed Duchscher’s talent agency Night Media manages MrBeast. Night Media describes itself as helping “the world’s most influential artists reach their full potential as entertainers and entrepreneurs”².

Ryan’s World (formerly Ryan ToysReview) is a YouTube channel directed at kids. It was founded in 2015. It features “kidfluencer” Ryan Kaji, born in 2011, and his twin sisters Emma and Kate. The videos show how Ryan and the girls unbox and play with toys. In 2022, the total wealth of Ryan’s World was estimated to be US\$ 35 million and the average monthly income US\$1.11 million³. In 2022, Forbes (2022) ranked Ryan as the 23rd most successful influencer, with 2021 earnings of US\$27 million. Besides income from ads and sponsorship, Ryan’s World also earns money from a Walmart toy line called Ryan’s World⁴, Ryan toothbrushes, and Ryan toothpaste. Ryan’s parents have a marketing and merchandise contract with the children’s media company PocketWatch

²<https://www.night.co/#about> (accessed June 12, 2023).

³<https://filmora.wondershare.com/youtube/ryan-kaji-net-worth.html> (accessed March 1, 2024).

⁴www.walmart.com/browse/toys/ryan-s-world-toys/4171_3438149_5568688 (accessed June 12, 2023).

(Spangler 2017). PocketWatch was founded with the help of venture capital from Third Wave Digital, Jon Landau, UTA Ventures, Downey Ventures, and WME. In 2018, the game app Tag With Ryan, which is aimed at children, was released. PocketWatch produced the TV series “Ryan’s Mystery Playdate” that premiered in April 2019 on Nick Jr., a children’s pay television channel operated by Nickelodeon. One of Ryan’s World’s most watched video is “HUGE EGG Surprise Toys Challenge with Inflatable Water Slide”, where Ryan opens plastic surprise eggs that contain Disney cars such as Lightning McQueen, Paw Patrol toys, and Disney Marvel superheroes such as Spiderman. There is no indication in the video and in the YouTube caption that the video advertises brand toys.

Ryan’s World has been criticised. The basic criticism being that the channel tries to manipulate children into becoming consumer junkies who do not realise that they are constantly confronted with hidden ads while watching YouTube:

Can young viewers tell the difference between advertisements and product reviews on the popular YouTube channel Ryan ToysReview? The watchdog group Truth in Advertising says no. On Wednesday it filed a complaint with the Federal Trade Commission, accusing the channel’s administrators of deceiving children through “sponsored videos that often have the look and feel of organic content”. [...] Nearly 90 percent of the Ryan ToysReview videos have included at least one paid product recommendation aimed at preschoolers, a group too young to distinguish between a commercial and a review, Truth in Advertising argued in its complaint. The channel’s sponsors have included Walmart, Hasbro, Netflix, Chuck E. Cheese and Nickelodeon, according to Truth in Advertising. Many children do not recognize advertising until they are 8 or 9 years old, said Josh Golin, the executive director of the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood. [...] Last month, several senators asked the commission to investigate Ryan ToysReview, which they said had posted two commercials for the fast-food chain Carl’s Jr. without disclosing that they were ads. (Hsu 2019)

Pre-school and primary school children do not easily understand what advertising is. The blurring of the boundary between content and ads on branded content such as Ryan’s World videos makes it even harder for kids to understand the concept of advertising, that ads often lie and deceive, want to make us buy commodities, present capitalism and consumer culture as the best possible world, etc. Independent of the question what the actual effects of hidden ads in kidfluencer videos are on children, it is troubling that such videos exist that promote consumer capitalism and advertising culture.

Rich Influencers and Proletarianised Platform Workers

Influencers spend many hours a day creating online content, building and maintaining their online selves, and engaging with their Internet fan base. Influencing is not a status but a process and set of practices (Marwick 2016). Famous online influencers are not just earning a living online, but are quite wealthy. They turn themselves into