“It’s so fucking cold I’m going to freeze.” It was mid-January and 30 degrees outside, but getting the perfect ’gram is a year-round endeavor. So Mary Gui, a 28-year-old former advertising exec turned fashion blogger and Instagram “influencer,” who goes by @layersofchicblog, was wearing a sheer black dress for an outdoor photo shoot near the Brooklyn Bridge. “The goal is to not die,” she told me as she climbed the rocks by the pier. A park enforcement patrol officer told her to get down before she hurt herself, so she complied, waited until he walked away, and then immediately climbed back up. “Let’s get one showing the bag,” she told the photographer. Then one showing her nails. Then one showing her earrings. Thirty minutes later, when she felt she had gotten every possible angle of her outfit, she changed into a pearl-studded sweater and leggings in a pop-up tent, and the whole process began again. “Once I start shooting, I stop feeling anything,” she told me between poses. “But it takes like two hours to recover from a shoot in the winter, to feel my hands.” She got the shot she wanted, though — windswept hair, Manhattan skyline perfectly framed in the background. And over a thousand people liked the resulting post. Gui is one of a rapidly growing number of striving Instagram “influencers” who populate their social media feeds with curated photos of themselves in impeccably styled outfits and the latest designer handbags. You’ll find them against a backdrop of exotic beaches in Thailand, or chic architecture in Paris and Milan, or graffitied walls in New York and Miami. Their hair is perfectly blown out, but styled to look natural; their bronzed skin is more “sun-kissed” than “tan.” They might have ab definition in their bikini photos, but never too much, and their flowy maxi dresses hit the wind in just the right way. Their artfully arranged shots of brunch dishes at five-star restaurants are taken from above the table by standing on a chair; their breakfast in bed photos in luxury hotel rooms are framed on white Egyptian cotton sheets, and their newest accessories and beauty products are displayed on marble countertops. And in the midst of each carefully edited picture of an influencer just “hanging out,” brands have found a new method of direct yet subtle marketing to young, impressionable consumers. Instagram has become flooded with posts sporting the ubiquitous #ad or #sponsored captions — language that is required by US Federal Trade Commission endorsement laws — underneath photos of a new jewelry line or eye cream. And these sponsored posts have made maintaining an Instagram feed a very lucrative job, with some high-profile influencers being paid in the range of $150,000 per post. “The industry is so saturated with people, there are influencers everywhere now — the hot girl who wants to become a bikini model, the guy who has like 19 abs,” says Mike Tommasiello (@nydoorman), a 30-year-old microinfluencer (meaning anyone with fewer than 100,000 followers). Tommasiello originally gained online attention for being a fixture in the NYC club and party scene; his Instagram handle is tattooed on his right wrist. It might seem that all you need is a well-stocked closet, a modest following, a nice camera, and some basic familiarity with photo editing in order to make a living from posting on Instagram. But as the field grows more and more crowded with would-be social media stars, the margins of the business have become tighter, and it takes more than luck or good clothes to build a sustainable career as an influencer. In interviews with BuzzFeed News, people who’ve committed themselves to becoming digital-age style icons — with Instagram followings that range from 15,000 to nearly 5,000,000 — spoke candidly about the hours they’ve spent to make it work, the ins and outs of their budgets, and whether it’s all been worth it. Gui left her six-year career in advertising in mid-2016 to pursue her fashion blog and Instagram full time. Her feed is full of vivid pinks, blues, polka dots, floral prints, and delicate clothing details like bows and tassels; she describes herself as a “modern-day Carrie Bradshaw.” Inspired by street style blogs like Aimee Song’s Song of Style, Gui started her own in 2010, posting once a month. She joined Instagram in 2013, where she now has over 50,000 followers. It generally takes Gui up to two hours to edit one photo for Instagram, and an additional hour to write her blog posts (two to three times a week), and she does photo shoots for her outfits twice a week. “I sift through 300–400 photos taken per outfit,” Gui says. She edits them on her computer first in Adobe Lightroom, and then again with a suite of popular editing and filtering apps on her phone like Snapseed and Facetune. It took six months (and around 10,000 followers) for Gui to start making any money doing sponsored posts and campaigns. “In the beginning, I was using $2,000–$3,000 of my savings per month, and was only making $50 to $100 per post,” she says. Her social media presence still doesn’t fully cover her bills and living expenses. “It’s gotten better, though,” she says. Now, she’s able to charge up to around $500 per post, an amount that continues to grow with her following. “But it’s hard because it’s not consistent. One month you get a couple of high-paying brand collaborations, and the next month, none. And you might not receive the payment until 30 days later.” Her first sponsored posts in 2016 were with smaller brands; she’s since collaborated with heavyweights like H&M and Glamour magazine. Gui worked a temp job from November 2017 to February 2018 to help bridge the gap. “Relying only on Instagram income month-to-month is difficult at my level. But I’ve never considered quitting,” she says, adding that she’s been encouraged by her steadily growing following and has no intention of ever going back to working a full-time job. Photographers are Gui’s biggest expense — her ex-boyfriend used to take her photos, and she was reluctant to spend money on photography at first, but now she hires professionals: “I realized how important it is to have a consistent look, feel, and quality of photos.” Gui buys some of the clothing and accessories featured in her photos, though she says that expense has gone down over time as more brands will send her clothes for free. Many fashion influencers still spend a lot of money on clothing and accessories, despite being gifted items by brands (for both variety in their feeds and because not all gifted clothes reflect their personal style). Igee Okafor (@igeeokafor) is a 23-year-old men’s style and lifestyle blogger with 34,000 followers who grew up in Nigeria and now lives in Manhattan’s Financial District. Okafor wears classic and often luxury menswear (think double-breasted or three-piece suits, tweed, and houndstooth), and his photos wouldn’t look out of place in GQ. He says he also has to spend a lot on transportation (to brand events) and on maintaining his website. Okafor’s mother initially gave him the money he needed to start a blog; today, he estimates he spends a little under $2,000 a month on both clothes and photography (around $4,000 total). Not all influencers think spending that much money on clothes is necessary. Blogger Aimee Song (@songofstyle) — one of the most famous influencers on Instagram, with 4.7 million followers — explains, “When I was starting out, I thrifted a lot and because I worked at two different retail stores, I got a discount.” Song, now 31, rose to prominence by joining Instagram early on, in September 2011. “You just need good style,” she says. “You can have all the money in this world and still not have personal style.” For bigger bloggers like Song, there are even more expenses involved as their social media presence grows. Take Jessica Wang (@notjessfashion; 620,000 followers). When she started her blog three years ago, Wang only worked with her husband — who is also her photographer — but now employs a team including a communications director, a content strategist, additional photographers, part-time writers, and a web developer. Wang still buys her own clothes, because she wants to have control over her looks. “Besides the obvious shopping expense, there's marketing, legal, and accounting,” she says. On top of that, she spends money on travel, equipment, and venue rentals. Her Instagram and blog were originally intended to just help generate traffic for her online clothing store, but now she says her dream is to “keep producing high-end editorial content” — for lots of brands, not just fashion — and to work with an even larger staff. But many influencers, especially microinfluencers, end up running everything by themselves. Gui says the work involved in being an influencer and blogger can feel like multiple full-time jobs at once. “You have to do every single thing related to your blog,” Gui says. “You are simultaneously stylist, model, creative director, and photo editor; you also have to plan the shoots, figure out all the logistics, handle negotiations and invoicing.” And when your business is yourself, it can turn your whole life into work. Mary follows a set posting schedule — at least once a day at noon or 9 p.m. — and plans her captions in advance in a note on her iPhone. “It’s good to leave around eight hours between posts. And I’ve found that posting before 11 a.m. isn’t good for engagement,” she says. On Saturdays she stays in and prepares all her photos for the week ahead of time. Whenever Mary posts a photo on Instagram, she first replies to all the comments on her previous posts, then sets aside the next 10 minutes to reply to new comments, and to like and comment on other people’s photos that use the same hashtags (#realoutfitgram, #prettylittleiiinspo, #romanticstyle). “If someone comments on my picture in those first 10 minutes, I make sure to reply and comment on one of their pictures in return.” Gui estimates that she spends around three to four hours on Instagram per day on average. “If I don’t need to pay attention, if I’m watching TV, I’ll be on Instagram. I’ll be on Instagram anytime I’m waiting or bored.” She says she spends her subway commutes editing photos: “You don’t have service, so it’s the perfect time.” Gui’s time is also taken up by brand events, often several a week. Alexandra (Lex) Dieck (@lexiconofstyle; 85,000 followers), a 26-year-old Mexican-American fashion blogger and designer from Austin who now lives in NYC, says she used to go to events every night, sometimes as many as four in one evening. She now carefully picks and chooses what to attend, but sometimes prefers to stay in and meet her deadlines for sponsored brand posts. But in many ways, the job is as unglamorous as any kind of self-employment. “Some days I’ll look like a slob, sit at my computer, and answer like 500 emails,” she says. “There are days where I won’t speak to anyone.” Being an influencer can be isolating in other ways as well. David Pangilinan (@davidisherenow), a 23-year-old lifestyle influencer with 216,000 followers, says that his large social media presence can sometimes put a strain on his relationships. “I don’t speak about it on dates because it can intimidate people,” he says. “My best friends know they’re going to eat their food cold by the time I’m done taking photos for all my platforms.” Instagram actually became a problem in Pangilinan’s relationship with a man he dated for a while, who had a smaller online following. “After about six months, he said, ‘Make sure to tag me in your Instagram story!’ and I broke up with him because that made me question why he was really with me. It can be hard to decipher if people like you or if they just like your following.” Pangilinan says he tries to stay close to the friends he made pre–Instagram fame, because he worries that new people just want to be friends so they can come to an event with him. “It’s sad that the numbers start to define you and define the friendship,” he says. Nathaniel James (@thenathanielmanual), a 27-year-old menswear and lifestyle blogger with 23,000 followers, says he does struggle with comparing himself to other bloggers, both men and women. “As a blogger, your brand is you. You start to build this persona of yourself, a highlight reel of your life,” he says. “Either they have more followers than me, [or] they work with ‘better’ brands, have nicer bodies, a better face, a perfect smile. It definitely started to eat away at me to a very unhealthy point where I couldn’t stand to even be around my blogger friends.” NYC-based 26-year-old fashion blogger Cassandra DiMicco (@cassdimicco; 111,000 followers) agrees. “If you’re not getting enough engagement, it can feel really personal. And also you can see exactly how well other people are doing.” “It’s sad,” DiMicco says. “Ninety percent of people care more about making money than they do about anything else.” Of course, being an influencer can be very rewarding — once you make it. An industry rule of thumb mentioned by many influencers I spoke to is that you could expect to make 1% of your following per post (someone with 10,000 followers could charge $100 for a sponsored post, for example). “But it varies,” says James Nord, founder of Fohr Card, which bills itself as the first influencer marketing platform. Fohr Card is a website that influencers use to search for brands to collaborate with (and vice versa). “I’ve seen people with 350,000 followers make $1 million a year, and I’ve seen people with the same following make $70,000 a year,” he says. But he estimates that most influencers should be able to bring in an annual total about equal to their number of followers. Mark Zablow, CEO of Cogent, an influencer marketing agency, says that microinfluencers typically could make anywhere from $500 to $2,500 per sponsored post, whereas those with between 100,000 and 500,000 followers could make between $2,500 and $5,000. But according to the 23 influencers interviewed for this story, it took on average between one and two years (and between 10,000 to 20,000 followers) before they began to receive significant monetary compensation from working with brands — and even longer to begin to cover their living expenses. In the beginning, most were typically offered around $50 to $200 per post. Some influencers impatient to speed up the process of getting established may turn to fraudulent methods of building their following, including purchasing followers, likes, and comments, and using bots — which violate Instagram’s terms of service. Instagram, like Twitter and other social media platforms, has struggled to cut down on the influx of bots on its service over recent years, despite multiple efforts to crack down on the accounts. In 2014, Instagram purged millions of accounts suspected of spam. “I want cracking down on all of that ‘bought’ stuff, people who buy verification, even loop giveaways,” says Lisa DiCicco Cahue (@lisadnyc), a fashion and lifestyle influencer with 100,000 followers who also works as a model. (Loop giveaways are a technique some influencers use to pool their followers, tagging the next person in a “loop” where giveaway participants must like every image and follow every influencer involved for a chance to win the prize.) “Some bloggers want to take the easy way out,” Cahue says. “This isn’t a get-rich-quick career.” As Myspace and Vine have made clear, social media platforms rarely last forever. So where do Instagram influencers plan to go from here? Courtney Danielle (@curlsandcouture), a 28-year-old beauty/style blogger from Staten Island with 90,000 followers, thinks every influencer should have a “retirement” plan; hers is to become an author and open her own business, like a marketing agency or hair salon. “You can only do so many beauty tutorials,” she says, laughing. “Influencing is a stepping-stone to creating a platform for yourself for something more sustainable.” Danielle is also currently studying for the MCAT to go to medical school to become a surgeon, and would eventually like to meld her social media presence and passion for medicine together somehow. For some, though, Insta-fame is the end goal. Gui wants to hit 100,000 followers and to be able to fully support herself through her Instagram. Others, inspired by early bloggers like Song who’ve utilized their platforms to achieve success in business or philanthropy, are pursuing their own capsule collections and YouTube channels. Okafor wants to build his own menswear and lifestyle brand “like Giorgio Armani” and eventually own his own store. James wants to write a book, open a restaurant, own a ceramics studio, and have his own clothing line. DiMicco wants to start a brand or website or “any sort of company.” “If you have an audience, you have free marketing for starting whatever you want,” she says, “and it’s almost stupid to not create something of your own and promote it.” “I don’t want to be one of the people who just sustains themselves on their social media for their livelihood, because what happens when one day you’re not cool anymore?” says Tommasiello. Formerly an analyst for media agencies, Tommasiello used his social media cachet to work full-time with brands and influencers at social media marketing agency Talent Resources. “The influencers who do well are the ones who really give a shit, and do successful things outside of just posting content. People want more than just good pictures.” He mentions Danielle Bernstein (@weworewhat) — a high school classmate of his who’s now a successful blogger with 1.7 million followers — as an example of an influencer who branched outside her Instagram success (by launching an overalls brand). “The key to ‘making it’ is just living your life rather than being overly concerned with your pictures. To create interesting content, you have to be interesting.” But to some extent, Tommasiello feels he has already “made it": He says he spent his childhood in Long Island on the outside looking in as the son of immigrants who grew up very poor. “I didn’t have the same cool childhood experiences my classmates did, but now I get invited to all of those things by brands — charity galas, backstage at Coachella, Art Basel — that, to me, is crazy and so unexpected.” “If it ended tomorrow — if tomorrow, social media shut down and I had no job — I would still think that this was the coolest thing that’s ever happened to me.”