

Influencers in the Network Society: Monetization Strategies Across Social Media Platforms

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Introduction

The rise of social media has reshaped the dynamics of communication, commerce and cultural production, leading to what Manuel Castells describes as a “network society”. In this society, networks constitute the new social morphology, and the spread of networked communication technologies gradually influences the social structure. Among the main actors in this new paradigm are social media influencers, individuals who take advantage of their online presence to exert a significant impact on the opinions and behaviors of their followers. This paper explores how influencers monetize their presence on various social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, TikTok and Twitch. Examining platform-specific and multi-platform strategies, we will analyze the economic and social implications of influencer marketing within the framework of Castells’ network society.

Understanding the Network Society

Manuel Castells’ network society theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the transformations brought about by information and communication technologies (ICTs). According to Castells, the network society is characterized by a shift from traditional, hierarchical forms of social organization to more flexible, decentralized networks. These networks are driven by the proliferation of ICTs, which enable the rapid dissemination of information and facilitate new forms of social interaction and economic exchange. In this context, social media platforms are essential examples of the infrastructure that supports the network society. They function as nodes in a global communication network, where information flows seamlessly across geographical and temporal boundaries. Influencers, with their large and assiduous following, become central nodes within these networks, acting as intermediaries between brands and consumers who facilitate the flow of information and capital.

Monetization Strategies on Instagram

Instagram, with its visually-oriented interface and huge user base, is one of the most popular platforms for influencers. Influencers on Instagram employ various monetization strategies, including sponsored posts, affiliate marketing, product placements and selling their own products or services.

Sponsored Posts: Brands pay influencers to promote their products or services through posts, stories or reels. These posts are usually marked with hashtags such as ad or sponsored to maintain transparency with followers. For example, fashion influencer Chiara Ferragni collaborates with luxury brands such as Dior and Chanel, promoting their products to her millions of followers.

Affiliate Marketing: Influencers promote products using exclusive affiliate links. They earn a commission on sales generated through these links. This strategy benefits both the brand, with increased sales, and the influencer, with a steady source of income. Beauty influencer Huda Kattan often shares affiliate links for beauty products, taking advantage of her expertise and trust with her audience to boost sales.

Product placements: Unlike traditional ads, product placements are fluidly integrated into the influencer's content, making them more authentic and less intrusive. Fitness influencer Kayla Itsines incorporates product placements for fitness equipment and clothing into her workout videos and posts, blending them naturally into her content.

Selling Products/Services: Many influencers launch their own product lines or offer services such as coaching or consulting, leveraging their personal brand to boost sales. For example, entrepreneur and influencer Kylie Jenner launched her own cosmetics line, Kylie Cosmetics, which has become a multi-million dollar business.

These strategies highlight the role of influencers as key players in the network society, where they act both as content creators and marketers, bridging the gap between brands and consumers.

YouTube Monetization Strategies

YouTube offers a different set of monetization opportunities for influencers, mainly through advertising revenue, sponsored content, affiliate marketing and fan funding.

Advertising revenue: YouTube partners with creators through its AdSense program, allowing influencers to earn money based on the number of views and clicks on ads displayed during their

videos. This model depends heavily on the scale of the influencer’s audience. Popular YouTuber PewDiePie, for example, generates significant revenue through ad views on his gaming and entertainment videos.

Sponsored Content: Similar to Instagram, brands collaborate with YouTubers to create sponsored videos. These partnerships are often more elaborate and integrated into the content, sometimes taking the form of product reviews, tutorials or unboxing videos. Technology YouTuber Marques Brownlee often collaborates with technology companies to analyze their latest gadgets, providing detailed insights for his viewers while promoting the products.

Affiliate Marketing: Influencers include affiliate links in the descriptions of their videos, earning commissions on sales generated through these links. This strategy is particularly effective for technology and lifestyle influencers who frequently review products. YouTuber Liza Koshy, for example, often includes affiliate links to beauty and lifestyle products in the descriptions of her videos.

Fan funding: Platforms like Patreon allow fans to support their favorite creators through monthly subscriptions or one-time donations. This model fosters a sense of community and loyalty among followers. YouTuber Philip DeFranco uses Patreon to fund his news program, offering exclusive content and perks to his supporters.

These strategies underline the multifaceted role of YouTube influencers as entertainers, educators and marketers, all within the framework of the network society of decentralized, user-generated content.

Monetization Strategies on TikTok

TikTok’s rapid growth and unique format have created new opportunities for influencer monetization, including brand partnerships, in-app purchases and live broadcasts.

Brand partnerships: TikTok influencers collaborate with brands to create short, engaging videos that promote products or services. These partnerships are often highly creative and adapted to suit the viral nature of the platform. Influencer Charli D’Amelio has partnered with brands such as Dunkin’ Donuts and Morphe Cosmetics, creating content that aligns with her dance and lifestyle persona.

In-App Purchases: TikTok offers a virtual currency called “coins”, which users can purchase and gift to their favorite creators during live broadcasts. The influencers can then convert these coins into real money. This system has been used effectively by influencers such as Addison Rae, who receives gifts and monetary support from her fans during her live sessions.

Live broadcasts: During live broadcasts, influencers can receive gifts from viewers, which are converted into diamonds and then into cash. This interactive format increases engagement and provides a direct source of income. Fitness influencer Demi Bagby uses live streams to conduct training sessions, receiving support from her engaged followers.

Creators Fund: TikTok's Creators Fund compensates influencers based on the performance of their content. This program encourages the creation of high-quality, engaging videos and guarantees a steady income for top creators. Influencer Bella Poarch benefits from the Creators Fund, earning money from her popular lip sync and dance videos.

These strategies reflect the dynamic and innovative nature of TikTok as a platform, where influencers must continually adapt to new trends and audience preferences to maintain their relevance and monetization potential.

Monetization Strategies on Twitch

Twitch, a platform focused primarily on live broadcasts, offers unique monetization opportunities for influencers, including subscriptions, donations, sponsorships and advertising.

Subscriptions: Viewers can subscribe to their favorite streamers' channels for a monthly fee, gaining access to exclusive content and benefits such as ad-free viewing and custom emoticons. Popular streamer Ninja has built up a substantial income through subscriptions, offering exclusive perks to his subscribers.

Donations: Fans can support streamers through one-off donations, often accompanied by personalized messages displayed on the stream. This direct form of support fosters a strong sense of community and connection. Streamer Pokimane often receives donations from her loyal fan base, which she uses to improve her streaming setup and content quality.

Sponsorships: Brands partner with streamers to promote products or services during live broadcasts. These sponsorships can include product placements, sweepstakes and exclusive discount codes for viewers. Streamer DrLupo collaborates with gaming and technology brands to showcase their products during his broadcasts, providing value to both his audience and sponsors.

Advertising: Streamers earn revenue from ads shown during their broadcasts, with income based on the number of viewers and ad impressions. This model is similar to YouTube's advertising revenue system. Influencer Shroud, for example, generates significant ad revenue due to the large audience for his game broadcasts.

Twitch's monetization strategies highlight the platform's emphasis on real-time interaction and community building, with influencers playing a central role in creating and sustaining these digital communities.

Multiplatform Strategies and Economic Implications

Many influencers use multiple platforms to diversify their sources of income and maximize their reach. Multiplatform strategies include:

Content repurposing: Influencers often repurpose content from various platforms to reach different audiences. For example, a YouTube video can be edited into shorter clips for Instagram and TikTok. Fitness influencer Cassey Ho, known as Blogilates, repurposes her workout videos on YouTube, Instagram and TikTok to engage with her various audience segments.

Brand Consistency: Maintaining a consistent personal brand across multiple platforms helps influencers build a loyal following and attract lucrative brand deals. This consistency is crucial for long-term success and sustainability. Entrepreneur and influencer Gary Vaynerchuk maintains a consistent personal brand of entrepreneurship and hard work across YouTube, Instagram, LinkedIn and TikTok, attracting a wide range of followers and business opportunities.

Audience engagement: Engaging with followers on various platforms increases loyalty and monetization opportunities. Influencers use tools such as cross-promotions and platform-specific content to keep their audience engaged. Influencer and author Lilly Singh engages her audience through skits on YouTube, stories on Instagram, challenges on TikTok and interactions on Twitter, creating a cohesive and interactive presence.

The economic implications of influencer marketing in the network society are profound. Influencers act as micro-entrepreneurs, leveraging their personal brands to generate income and create economic value. This phenomenon has disrupted traditional advertising models, transferring power from established media organizations to individual content creators. Brands now allocate significant portions of their marketing budgets to partnerships with influencers, recognizing the value of authentic, targeted advertising.

Social Implications of Influencer Marketing

In addition to its economic impact, influencer marketing has significant social implications within the networked society. Influencers shape cultural norms and trends, often serving as role models for their followers. This role has both positive and negative consequences.

On the positive side, influencers can promote social causes, raise awareness about important issues and foster a sense of community among their followers. Many influencers use their platforms to advocate for mental health, environmental sustainability and social justice, leveraging their reach for positive change. For example, environmental activist Greta Thunberg uses her social media presence to mobilize global youth for climate action, demonstrating the powerful impact of influencers in driving social movements.

However, the influencer phenomenon also has potential downsides. The pressure to maintain an aspirational and carefully curated image can lead to negative mental health outcomes for both influencers and their followers. In addition, the commercial nature of influencer content can sometimes blur the lines between genuine recommendations and paid promotions, leading to issues of transparency and trust. The controversy surrounding beauty influencer James Charles' paid promotions and the subsequent backlash highlights the challenges of maintaining authenticity in the commercialized world of influencer marketing.

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Conclusion

In conclusion, the emergence of social media influencers epitomizes the profound transformation occurring within Castells' network society, where the proliferation of networked communication technologies reshapes social, economic, and cultural dynamics. Influencers, as central figures within these networks, wield significant power in shaping opinions, behaviors, and trends through their strategic use of platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Twitch.

Our examination of the monetization strategies employed by influencers reveals a complex ecosystem where individuals convert social capital into economic value through various methods tailored to each platform's unique characteristics. Instagram's visual focus facilitates brand partnerships and affiliate marketing, while YouTube's ad revenue model and merchandise sales cater to content creators producing long-form videos. TikTok's algorithm-driven content discovery promotes rapid follower growth and brand collaborations, whereas Twitch's live streaming environment supports subscription models, donations, and sponsorships.

The economic implications of influencer marketing are substantial, with influencers becoming pivotal players in the advertising industry. Brands increasingly recognize the efficacy of influencer partnerships, resulting in a significant shift of marketing budgets towards these collaborations. This phenomenon has democratized content creation, enabling individuals from diverse backgrounds to achieve financial success through their online personas.

However, the rise of influencers also presents critical social implications. Influencers' ability to shape cultural norms and consumer behaviors can have both positive and negative effects. On the positive side, influencers can leverage their platforms to raise awareness about social issues, promote positive behaviors, and build supportive communities. Conversely, the pressure to maintain a curated and often idealized online image can contribute to mental health challenges, such as anxiety, depression, and a distorted sense of reality among followers. Additionally, the spread of misinformation and the potential for manipulative marketing practices pose ethical concerns.

Within the framework of Castells' network society, the role of influencers underscores the importance of understanding the interconnectedness of technology, society, and culture. As influencers continue to navigate and shape the digital landscape, it is essential for researchers, policymakers, and industry stakeholders to critically examine the broader implications of this phenomenon. Addressing ethical considerations, promoting transparency, and fostering a balanced portrayal of online identities are crucial steps towards harnessing the positive potential of influencer marketing while mitigating its adverse effects.

Future research should explore the evolving strategies of influencers in response to changing platform algorithms, emerging technologies, and shifting audience preferences. Additionally, examining the long-term impact of influencer culture on societal values, mental health, and

consumer behavior will provide valuable insights into the sustainable integration of influencer marketing within the network society.

In summary, social media influencers represent a transformative force within Castells' network society, reflecting the intricate interplay between communication technologies and social structures. By understanding the economic and social dynamics of influencer marketing, we gain a deeper appreciation for the multifaceted nature of contemporary digital interactions and their far-reaching implications for our interconnected world.