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How to Research Online Influencers

Contributors: Sophie Bishop

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How to Research Online Influencers



Learning Outcomes

By the end of this guide, readers should be able to:

- Articulate what makes someone an “online influencer”
- Identify different techniques and methodologies for researching online influencers
- Evaluate the pros and cons of each of various methodologies for their own research projects

Introduction

This guide aims to give an overview of the processes, strategies, and techniques that have been developed for researching online influencers. Firstly, the guide will support readers in identifying influencers. Although there can be cultural and disciplinary disagreements on what influencers *are*, the guide starts by identifying four influencer practices, namely, self-branding, authenticity, commerciality, and optimization. The theoretical context related to each of these practices is briefly introduced. These introductory sections are designed to support readers in developing their research questions related to influencer research.

The second part of this guide introduces the diverse techniques and challenges that academic experts have developed for researching online influencers. We consider opportunities and challenges within influencer ecologies related to three pri-

many methodologies, namely, strategic content collection, digital ethnography, and interviews. The guide supports readers in assessing the suitability of each of these methodological approaches for their project. The practical techniques for sampling, data collection, and analysis within each of these methodologies is then evaluated. The guide draws heavily from material examples of methodologies used within influencer studies over time by interdisciplinary researchers across different genres, platforms national, and cultural contexts. These tangible examples will help readers to understand how the complexities of influencer culture have previously been approached, and how ongoing challenges have been negotiated.

What Are Influencers, and What Are the Challenges in Researching Them?

Influencers are individual content creators who consistently produce social media content, in which their personal lives and insights are frequently mixed with commercial content, branding, and sponsorships ([Abidin, 2016](#)). Influencers work across many genres including beauty, fashion, gaming, politics, music, sport, and much more. One of the primary challenges in researching influencers is that many of them actively evade this label, instead referring to themselves as creators, using platform specific terminology like “TikToker” or “Instagrammer,” or occupational descriptors like stylist or comedian. This semantic distancing can make it difficult to identify influencers, and to research them and their content.

In light of this challenge, we can identify influencer *practices* – namely, common influencer behaviors and strategies. These practices are rooted in the academic concept of “micro-celebrity,” first identified by researcher Teresa Senft. Micro celebrity involves a “performance that involves people ‘amping up’ their popularity

over the web” ([Senft, 2008, p. 25](#)). Written in 2007, Senft’s work originally addressed techniques that individuals used when creating content for websites and blogs. As internet culture has moved on, influencer culture has undergone a process of “platformization” ([Nieborg & Poell, 2018](#)) in which social media platforms are “reconfiguring the production, distribution, and monetization of cultural content in staggeringly complex ways” ([Duffy et al., 2019, p. 1](#)). It is important to recognize that influencer content and culture are now deeply shaped by the business models and platform affordances of YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and no-doubt will be further shaped by a new range of newly developed platforms in the future.

The remainder of this section will identify and explain four distinct influencer practices, namely, self branding, authenticity, commerciality, and optimization. Each of these research strands can offer a guiding framework for readers who want to examine the many diverse and rapidly changing features of influencer culture across topics, platforms, and cultural contexts.

Firstly, almost all influencers employ *self branding* techniques, meaning the “self conscious construction of a meta-narrative and meta-image of the self” ([Hearn, 2008, p. 198](#)). Drawing from strategies previously employed by marketing professionals, influencers creatively pastiche visual and textual cues to build a consistent brand that is sellable to audiences and advertisers. Researchers have examined the strategies, cultural implications, and emotional labor of self branding ([Marwick, 2013](#); [Scolere et al., 2018](#)) often unearthing the deep and difficult emotional work undertaken by influencers as they consistently must hinge their online performance under one streamlined brand ([Lawson, 2020](#); [Lopez, 2009](#)). Interro-

gating influencers' self branding strategies offers insight into online genre, performance, and labor in influencer communities and cultures.

The second influencer practice worthy of examination is engagement with narratives of *authenticity*. The low barriers to media production on social media platforms have led to a celebration of the “ordinary and everyday” roots of some of the world’s most famous content creators ([Cunningham & Craig, 2018](#)). It is true that influencers often emphasize their lack of professional connections and legitimised expertise. Rather than evidence of normality, however, researchers should note that the performance of authenticity can also be understood as a stylistic choice. [Duffy and Hund \(2015, p. 477\)](#) research on fashion bloggers and Instagrammers show how the “authenticity ideal,” allows influencers to emphasize their relatability and cast themselves as “just like us.” Researchers have also shown how influencers include more mundane or “backstage” elements of their everyday life in their online work, for example, by deliberately including footage of housework or trips to the grocery store as “filler content” ([Abidin, 2017](#)). Some influencers emphasize their non-professional nature by intentionally lowering production values; they include outtakes and bloopers, or film and edit their content in an amateur fashion ([Bishop, 2018a](#)). Although many internet researchers have examined influencers through the lens of authenticity, it is an impossible task to unearth what is “real,” or “fake,” behind influencer practices. Instead, researchers working in this area ask what the concept of authenticity *does*—they examine how intentionally performing authenticity informs the media that is produced and consumed in the influencer (and wider platform) economy.

Thirdly, we can research influencer culture through a commercial lens. Indeed,

authenticity narratives are often employed by influencers to distract from their high commercial orientations. Many influencers generate income through brand partnerships, integrating sponsored messages in line with their own self branding ([Leaver et al., 2020](#)). Researchers have shown that sponsorship opportunities are distributed unevenly, and although some top-tier influencers make a living wage, the financial position of most influencers is varied and highly precarious ([Duffy et al., 2021](#)). There are prominent and consistent reports of influencer pay gaps, which disproportionately affect marginalized people along the lines of race, (dis)ability, and gender ([Lothian-Mcclean, 2021](#)). In examining influencers through an economic lens, researchers have also shown how influencers exist outside of a “mainstream” commercial ecology. Some influencers focused on sustainability reject commercial orientation through showcasing reusable or recycled products in “anti hauls” ([Wood, 2020](#)). Porn performer and sex work influencers are often prohibited from commercial sponsorships and are disproportionately victims of social media platform content moderation, for example under Instagram’s “vaguely inappropriate content” policy ([Are, 2021](#); [Swartz, 2020](#)). Finally, researchers have mapped the “reactionary” YouTubers making up the “alternative influence network” who fund their content through fundraising website Patreon and through monthly donations ([Lewis, 2020](#)).

Influencers are also notable for their strategic engagement with social media platforms as they intentionally optimize to be promoted by features like recommendation algorithms. Optimization means influencer content production is intentionally and strategically shaped in order to meet platform demands ([Bishop, 2018b](#)). Although influencers desperately want to be “platform complementors” ([Gillespie,](#)

[2017](#)), this exercise can be tricky, as it is not always clear what platforms actually want.

Often proprietary platforms do not share how their algorithms or architectures work publicly; they are often described as obscure “black boxes” ([Pasquale, 2015](#)). To cast light into the black box, many influencers research how algorithms work through strategic trials and tests ([Cotter, 2018](#)). Theories and strategies about how to “beat” algorithms are shared through “algorithmic gossip” on forums or Facebook groups ([Bishop, 2019](#)). Influencers can work as a collective, commenting, and liking each other’s content to improve visibility, organized in informal structures, such as Instagram “pods” ([O’Meara, 2019](#)). Other influencers employ behavior that they know is risky or controversial ([Bertaglia et al., 2021](#)) or intentionally discuss drama involving other content creators to increase their views and shares ([Christin & Lewis, 2021](#)). Many optimization strategies are prohibited by social media platforms ([Petre et al., 2019](#)), and so engaging with them involves a high degree of risk. Ultimately, internet researchers study influencer optimization strategies, because firstly they show the specific kinds of work and labour involved in a social media career. Secondly, following the theories produced by professional platform users can actually show us how platforms are working, at least for some prominent actors, at a particular moment in time.



Section Summary

- Influencers are a diverse group, who work across geographic locations, genres and platforms. One “way in” to researching influ-

encers is through looking at distinct forms of influencer practice.

- To focus their study, researchers can examine influencers' *self brands*; looking to how they perform consistent identities for social media platforms.
- Through examining definitions and performances of *authenticity*, researchers can interrogate contemporary systems of value and behavioral standards within influencer content.
- By looking at the relationship between influencers and *commerciality*, researchers can understand labor and representation with influencer cultures. By looking at what is seen to be non-commercial, researchers can find below the radar examples of influencer practice.
- Through looking at *optimization* for social media platforms, researchers can examine content production techniques and strategies, in addition to understanding how “black boxed” algorithmic processes may be working at a given moment in time.

Techniques and Methodologies for Researching Influencers: Strategically Collecting Content

The first influencer research method we will consider in this section is the *strategic collection of published influencer social media content*. Through this method, researchers collect influencer profile information and social media posts including text, images, and videos. Other relevant metadata that can be collected includes

publishing dates and times, video length, post caption, comments, likes, and shares. As influencers post huge quantities of content, researchers should identify clear boundaries around what data is relevant and suitable. Data collection can be structured through an identified time period (e.g. the last 30 days), on a specific platform (e.g. TikTok) or through identifying post popularity (collecting a certain number of the most popular posts on a given platform, or posted by a particular influencer).

To explore a new or unfamiliar influencer genre, a good first step is to find hashtags representing your research interests. These hashtags can be used to identify content posted over a fixed period—it is worth spending some time investigating the kinds of hashtags that are used in the communities you are hoping to research. For example, when internet researchers [Zeng and Abidin \(2021\)](#) sought to study forms of “discursive activism” by Gen Z TikTok creators ([Zeng & Abidin, 2021, p. 5](#)), they investigated the creators that were using the hashtag #OKboomer. They ended up with 1,755 posts, too many posts that they then needed to narrow down. Because they were experienced TikTok users, who had conducted participant observations on the platform before, they could manually identify the TikTok content that would be most useful to their investigation ([Zeng & Abidin, 2021, p. 5](#)). Here, the researchers used their own experience and wider research findings to select the influencer content most relevant to their questions. They could then assign different themes to this data pool, ready to apply thematic analysis.

In a different study, sociologists [Baker and Walsh \(2018\)](#) investigated fitness influencers on Instagram by collecting the top nine posts using diet-related hashtags #cleaneating and #eatclean over an eight-day period. Although the researchers

note that their sample was not representative of wider platform cultures (as the “top nine” shows the most popular posts), they argue that their work relevant as it *follows along* with the posts that Instagram deems to be the most popular. As discussed earlier, platform algorithms are essentially a “black box.” There is very little concrete information known about how they work, and this changes frequently. On one hand, you could say that these collected posts will be immediately “out of date” as a representation of the most popular content on Instagram. However, studying the top posts at a particular moment is important, as it can lend important insight to platform motivations, economics, and strategies at a particular time in history.

A further strategy involves orientating content collection toward one individual influencer, either on one social media platform or across platforms. Often this influencer will be highly visible, or representative of a particular genre. Florencia [Rapp \(2016\)](#) conducted a 22-month study of the influencer “Bubzbeauty”—one of the first YouTube beauty influencers to gain mainstream popularity—between 2013 and 2015. Garcia-Rapp collected and coded 313 of Bubz’s videos. As she was interested in the cultural practices and interactions between influencers and fans within the YouTube beauty community, she also collected top viewer comments ([Rapp, 2016](#)). Focussing on one influencer can serve as a “way in” to study a rapidly developing influencer genre. Many of the media practices and self-branding techniques introduced by Bubz have been emulated and developed by influencers in the beauty community, even as other sites, such as Instagram and TikTok have grown in popularity.

Similarly, Media Studies researchers [Maddox and Creech \(2021\)](#) sought to inves-

tigate political influencer spaces on YouTube, and did this through examining the content of LeftTube influencer Contrapoints. They identified the 30 most popular videos published by Contrapoints founder Natalie Wynn, and analyzed them as an example of political genres on the video sharing platform ([Maddox & Creech, 2021](#)). As much of the content, the collected referenced external media writing *about* Contrapoint’s channel they also included “news reports, commentary, and other forms of media discourse” as supplementary material in their analysis ([Maddox & Creech, 2021](#)). Indeed, it can be important to examine the wider publications about influencers in mainstream magazines, newspapers, and other journalistic sites. Such an approach can help map the wider cultural impact of influencers. An example of researchers using this strategy can be found in the work of [Deller and Murphy \(2019\)](#), who conducted content analysis of traditional broadcast and print media coverage of popular YouTubers in the United Kingdom. Through systematically examining mainstream press coverage about YouTubers in the United Kingdom, the authors found that journalists created and sustained boundaries hard between “real celebrities” and YouTubers, and often represented the influencers as money-hungry, deceptive, and talentless. This shows the importance of collecting data beyond social media platforms; many influencers are working in a hostile media environment, which brings additional pressures within their work.



Section Summary

- Researchers unfamiliar with influencer genres have identified popular hashtags used by influencers working in these genres. This approach can offer a first step to identify the most visible creators

posting within spaces of interest.

- Although research methods can be applied to wider influencer communities, researchers can focus their attention on one influencer, particularly if they are very representative of an important phenomenon or genre. There are several different strategies to select and collect content from one influencer, for example, selecting their posts over particular time periods or choosing a selected quantity of their most popular posts.
- Researchers can collect mainstream media content about influencers to research dominant social discourses and attitudes toward influencer culture.

Techniques and Methodologies for Researching Influencers: Digital Ethnography

Ethnography is defined as “an approach for studying everyday life as studied by groups of people” ([Boellstorff, 2012, p. 1](#)). Ethnography as a research method involves *immersion* within communities, cultures, and contexts. Influencer researchers choose their field site with care—creating boundaries around genres, topics, platforms, and geographics spaces. Focusing an ethnography on a single platform can afford benefits to researchers, particularly if you have a messy or rapidly growing field site. For example, media researcher TL Taylor has conducted extensive research on the business and play practices of competitive gaming

influencers on the livestreaming platform, Twitch. In her work, Taylor considered Twitch as a “boundary object,” which she defines as a “useful way of holding a cluster of things together to try and understand a broader phenomenon” ([Taylor, 2018, p. 15](#)). Although the gaming creators that TL Taylor researched often used different social media platforms, focusing on Twitch helped draw realistic research parameters, which helped center Taylor’s attention in both the data gathering and analysis stages.

Ethnography can be participatory; this manifests in different ways. Some researchers familiarize themselves with influencer practices by professionally producing content themselves, in order to understand the techniques, cultures, and risks experienced by influencers first hand. In her study of popular YouTubers in the United Kingdom, digital ethnographer Zoe [Glatt \(2022\)](#) created her own YouTube channel titled “Doctor YouTube.” During the data collection period of her PhD project, she regularly produced videos within established YouTube genres, albeit with an academic bent. Examples include a “day in the PhD life,” travel vlogs documenting trips to conferences and collaborations called “chats with YouTube experts” in which she catches up with journalists, academics, and other YouTubers. Creating this channel gave Glatt an insight into the affective (namely, the embodied emotional) aspects of YouTube content production, which are otherwise difficult for ethnographers to access and understand in full.

In addition to “virtual” worlds, there are many “physical” sites where influencers gather; these places can be easily accessible to researchers interested in understanding the diverse strains of influencer culture. For example, researchers can identify and attend influencer conventions in their geographic locations. Conven-

tions often feature creator presentations, industry talks and different types of networking sessions. In their study of “social media entertainment,” Stuart Cunningham and David Craig regularly attended the content creation convention “Vidcon,” which has sites in North America, Australia, and Europe. Through attending these events, the researchers sought to understand the interactions between organisers, brands, creators, and fans ([Cunningham & Craig, 2018](#)). Digital anthropologist Crystal Abidin has tracked the development of influencer industries over time and across locales, firstly by participating in events related to “blogshops” ([Abidin, 2013](#)) and then by conducting fieldwork at influencer talent agencies and in wider commercial settings ([Abidin & Ots, 2016](#)). Although Abidin situated herself within the communities online, she articulates the importance of contextualising her online ethnography within “physical” space. She notes that meeting influencers within her offline fieldwork spaces meant she was privy to “backstage” gossip that she would not be able to access otherwise, in addition to benefiting from audio and visual cues, while observing her participants, such as tone of voice, hand gestures, and facial expressions ([Abidin, 2013](#)).



Section Summary

- Many influencer researchers employ digital or virtual ethnography as a method. Although digital ethnographers often cannot physically participate within online spaces, they can do so virtually, or they can locate the physical locations where their research participants are likely to gather.
- Participating in “physical” influencer events can give researchers

a more holistic overview of influencer ecologies outside of social media platforms.

- Digital ethnography can include participatory methods, such as creating influencer content oneself to learn more directly about influencer experience.

Techniques and Methodologies for Researching Influencers: Interviews

Researchers will often conduct semi-structured interviews with influencers within their ethnographic work, or as a standalone method. Many of the digital ethnographic projects cited in this Doing Research Online entry have involved interviews either with influencers or those who work with them, such as talent managers and branding professionals (e.g. [Abidin, 2013](#); [Arriagada & Bishop, 2021](#); [Cunningham & Craig, 2018](#); [Duffy, 2017](#), and many more). Interviews can be conducted in person, although they often can take place in an online context such as video calls or over email. This allows researchers to easily record the interview and collect data across different locations and time zones.

An initial point of consideration is how readers may meet or contact influencers in order to recruit them for a research interview. If an in-depth ethnography is an option, then there could be networking opportunities at influencer conferences and industry events. Readers can meet and develop relationships with influencers and other industry stakeholders in these spaces. Trust can be built, which may

ultimately lead to recruiting influencers for interviews. However, developing confidence and rapport takes time, and this immersive process is not a realistic option for many time-poor researchers. Contacting influencers directly by email is another option. Influencers do often host public contact details for brand opportunities or collaborations on their social media profiles, which can be used by researchers. A standard recruitment email would politely introduce yourself, give an overview of your project, outline why the influencer would be suitable, give practical information (like timescales) and inform the influencer about ethical details, for example, whether they would be identified or anonymized.

It is important to point out that there are significant limitations related to interviews with influencers, and it is worth reflecting on whether they will be the most suitable method for readers to choose. Firstly, influencers are not as accessible as they may appear. It is true that influencers can seem to be more approachable than traditional public figures like Hollywood celebrities. However, we should remember that their accessibility is a key part of their authentic self-brand. In practice, most top influencers will have publicists or talent managers who will be the ones opening their emails ([Cunningham & Craig, 2018](#)). Furthermore, influencers are frequently approached with many interview requests, including from researchers. One influencer that I contacted told me that she received five requests for research interviews by academic researchers and students per day. Practically, she told me that she does not have time to say yes to these requests, even though she did enjoy the interviews when she did them.

The primary benefit of interviews is that they allow researchers to ask specific questions that are related to their own distinct research aims. But it can be worth

asking the question: are these aims really unique? Most influencers regularly produce significant volumes of content that covers expansive topics, often including reflections on the difficulties of being an influencer. They also give lengthy interviews to press, podcasts, and other influencers. Given the practical barriers to interviewing influencers, it is worth readers asking themselves if an analysis of influencers existing content may be sufficient for their research projects. Indeed, although Sociologist Brooke [Duffy \(2017\)](#) did conduct interviews with 55 bloggers, vloggers, and Instagrammers for her research project on digital content creators, she notes that influencers were often “pitching” themselves and their work during interviews. In this vein, the tone and topics covered closely echoed the content that they consistently posted online elsewhere. In that sense, strategic content collection may be a more suitable choice.



Section Summary

- Interviews with influencers gives research opportunities to ask direct questions related to their research projects.
- Influencers receive many interview requests and practically may not be able to participate in research projects due to time constraints.
- Influencers post a significant volume of content across social media platforms about a wide range of topics. This content can offer a more practical starting point for researchers looking to examine influencer culture.

Conclusion

This guide has introduced influencers and how to research them. Firstly, we looked at four key influencer practices. Through the practice of self-branding, readers can evaluate multiple strains of influencers' strategic identity performances. Researchers can map the changing nature of authenticity within influencer cultures and look to commercial and non-commercial influencer practices and cultures. Finally, the guide not only outlined the ways that readers can interrogate influencer optimization to support an analysis of influencer labor but also to collect data on how "black boxed" social media platforms work from professional platform users.

The guide has offered guidance on three different methodologies that have been used successfully in influencer research by interdisciplinary researchers. The first methodology, strategic content collection, has low barriers to entry and can be utilized according to researchers' own timelines. Strategic content collection can be applied to influencer genres, communities, individual influencers, or traditional media discourse about influencers. However, strategic content collection can ignore below radar content, which is not visible in the mainstream or promoted by social media platforms. The second methodology, digital ethnography, can give real insights into the wider physical and emotional contexts of influencer culture. Researchers may be afforded more backstage insights into influencer ecologies and may gain a more holistic understanding of their research field. However, digital ethnography can be time intensive, particularly when it involves "physical" attendance at influencer events in different national contexts. Finally, the guide introduced some steps for interviewing influencers. Although influencers do often have

publicly accessible contact information, they may not have availability for research projects. As influencers publish content across topics, researchers can first look to conduct content analysis on influencers' existing back-catalogues, to assess whether their research topics have been adequately addressed there.



Multiple Choice Quiz Questions

1. According to this guide, what are the four defining attributes that can help researchers to identify influencers?

a. Frequent content production, authenticity, commerciality, and optimization.



Incorrect Answer

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is B.

b. Self branding, authenticity, commerciality, and optimization.



Correct Answer

Feedback: Well done, correct answer.

- c. Filming content using professional lighting, authenticity, commerciality, and optimization.

**Incorrect Answer**

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is B.

2. What kinds of influencer content metadata is most suitable to be collected by researchers?

- a. Publishing dates and times, video length, post caption, comments, likes, and shares



Correct Answer

Feedback: Well done, correct answer.

b. Evaluation of influencer background, including set decoration.

**Incorrect Answer**

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is A.

c. Counting the pauses, nods, and sighs in influencer video content.

**Incorrect Answer**

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer

is A.

3. What participatory strategies have been used by researchers through digital ethnographic research?

a. Digital ethnographers have created their own social media channels and produced their own influencer content.



Correct Answer

Feedback: Well done, correct answer.

b. Digital ethnographers have become journalists who write about influencers.



Incorrect Answer

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is A.

- c. Digital ethnographers have attempted to turn their pets into online animal influencers.



Incorrect Answer

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is A.

4. What can be one benefit to researchers who are conducting ethnography at influencer events?

- a. They can gain more of an overview of their field site, outside of social media platforms.



Correct Answer

Feedback: Well done, correct answer.

- b.** They can take pictures of influencers, which might be helpful in analysis.

**Incorrect Answer**

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is A.

- c.** They may receive free gifts or prizes at influencer events.

**Incorrect Answer**

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer

is A.

5. What is one specific limitation for researchers undertaking influencer interviews?

- a. Influencers may give researchers a “pitch” which is no different from their own published online content.



Correct Answer

Feedback: Well done, correct answer.

- b. Influencers may be unwilling to answer some questions, particularly around sensitive areas.



Incorrect Answer

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is A.

- c. Influencers may not be able to attend interviews in person, and you may have to conduct research online.



Incorrect Answer

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is A.

SUBMIT

CLEAR

START OVER

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