The Changing Face of Celebrity Culture

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2023

With an estimated net worth of $100 million[1] and a penchant for philanthropy through crazy acts of kindness, 25-year-old YouTuber MrBeast has built a sustainable model for his business where his flamboyant, eye-catching videos are funded by expensive brand partnerships and commissions from the platform. He rose to fame after releasing a video titled, "Counting to 100,000" in 2017 where he spends 44 hours doing just that. He then began to post heartwarming donation videos of his philanthropic acts, "I helped 2000 amputees walk again", "We're giving away $30 million in free food", and even "We powered a village in Africa"[2]. These donations come from the profit he makes from his ad revenue, merchandise sales, and sponsorships[3], he even employs a team of 250 people to help run his many channels[4].

MrBeast is what we would call a social media influencer, an internet personality who got famous on a particular social media platform for their perceived authenticity and credibility in a specific industry. They are self-appointed experts and critics who got their fame from creating content on anything and everything you can think of, right from how to play a specific level of a video game to the Vitamin C serum I use daily in my skincare routine. This is a major shift from our traditional idea of celebrity which consisted of actors, musicians, and others in the entertainment industry. This evolution has created a unique impact on how people view and interact with celebrities. Through this essay I aim to explore the implications of this change on society at large. I want to look at the similarities and differences between traditional celebrities and new-age influencers, how

[1] Wallin, E. (2023) *Jimmy Donaldson (mr. Beast) net worth*, *Wealthy Gorilla*. Available at: https://wealthygorilla.com/mr-beast-net-worth/ (Accessed: 06 December 2023).
[2] These YouTube video titles were taken from MrBeast's YouTube account "Beast Philanthropy"
[3] Information taken from the channel bio of "Beast Philanthropy"
[4] Wallin, E. (2023) *Jimmy Donaldson (mr. Beast) net worth*, *Wealthy Gorilla*. Available at: https://wealthygorilla.com/mr-beast-net-worth/ (Accessed: 06 December 2023).

this dynamic has created a new era of advertising, and what impact perceived authority has on influencer marketing and consumer behavior.

Fame, Influence, and Power are woven together. Fame is a mode of recognition. Influence is what you can do backed by that recognition. Power intrinsically gives you influence to implement things independently. For the purposes of this essay, I will not be considering individuals who have influence as a result of having power, for example, Paris Hilton, who was famous for being the Heiress of the Hilton Group Hotels. Instead, I will be focusing on those who created influence out of thin air and because of that gained power.

The advent of social media has transformed the public perception of celebrities and democratized the picking of the celebrity. In the age of instant access and constant connectivity, individuals now have direct and personal interactions with their favorite stars through social media. The driving force behind who is anointed a celebrity has been shifted from the industry and paparazzi to the public, as the public's opinion holds immense sway over the success and reputation of our new age celebrities.

Traditional celebrities like Meryl Streep and Dolly Parton relied on their talent and performances to establish a reputation and create a loyal fanbase. They operate in a unique sphere, often limited by the roles they play on screen or the genre of music they produce. The accessibility of social media platforms has empowered influencers to create a following for themselves, they are able to make themselves famous simply by jumping on current trends or starting a content stream on a topic. Previously, celebrities needed to prove themselves to people in the industry, they had to be noticed and then given a chance at notoriety. They needed a platform, like "The Oprah Winfrey Show", "The Ellen

DeGeneres Show", or even the several late-night shows, all of which gave visibility and validation to their fame. Influencers are bypassing that entirely by making themselves famous on their own platform. They are often seen as relatable, trustworthy, and knowledgeable individuals because of their perceived authenticity which leads to their success. In essence, traditional celebrities are manufactured and developed by the entertainment industry, while influencers create a personal brand, that we could also call 'home grown public personalities'. Take Emma Chamberlain for example, she went from filming herself sewing an entire outfit on YouTube to interviewing celebrities at the 2022 Met Gala; her videos seem to embody being a quirky, authentic person simply having a conversation with her audience while doing ordinary things.

Influencer fame is inherently different from paparazzi defined fame. When we see pictures of celebrities taken by the paparazzi, we are given a peek into their glamorous lives, showing us the unattainability of their lifestyles but still giving us something to aspire to. It makes us feel like we know these celebrities. This paparazzi culture normalized the desire to watch others as well as the desire to be watched. Influencers follow the same pattern, they give us a peek into their own lives and because we are conditioned to think that that is a legitimate way to connect with them, we think we know them and perceive them as genuine, honest, and one-of-us.

In the introduction to her book "The Influencer Industry" Emily Hund says that bloggers simply preceded what we now know to be content creators. She describes bloggers by saying, "They followed different communication norms – in particular, a conversational tone and a lack of separation between their editorial content and that which was sponsored by a brand – and most of all, they portrayed themselves as driven by passion,

indicating a wholesomeness and authenticity that elsewhere seemed lacked"[5]. This description matches content creators, they disguise their sponsored content in a sea of genuine work, they come up with novel ways of presenting the product, and of course, they show that they consider themselves "regular people searching for a like-minded community with whom to share and critique ideas, products, and more".[6] So, as David Giles says, they are "perceived as sufficiently 'ordinary' to act as a trusted source of advice"[7] without revealing that they are being paid to promote certain products. Their power lies in their ability to create an emotional connection between brands and their potential customers.

There are even famous Instagram accounts that teach people how to get famous, this could be advice on how to get brand deals, grow their following, and even just tips on how to become an influencer. "If you live your life stylishly and if you display it tastefully, the very art of beautiful living can be self-funding itself."[8] It is basically self-expression through the means of commodities. There is a distinct difference between influencers suggesting what to buy and what to think, how to operate in the world. While it may seem like their primary focus is on promoting product and services, their influence extends beyond consumer behavior.

[5] Hund, E. (2023) 'Introduction', in *The influencer industry: The Quest for authenticity on social media*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, p. 5.
[6] Hund, E. (2023) 'Introduction', in *The influencer industry: The Quest for authenticity on social media*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, p. 5.
[7] Giles, D. and Edwards, L. (2018) '8 "Instagram and the Rise of the Social Media "Influencer"', in *Twenty-first century celebrity fame in Digital Culture*. United Kingdom: Emerald Publishing.
[8] *Social Media influencers - history of lifestyle and fame in the Digital Age - Cultural Analysis* (2021) *YouTube*. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8SvLjG1NkR8&t=742s (Accessed: 05 December 2023).

The concept of authority has always played a crucial role in advertising and marketing. Film stars and sportspersons were once the only reliable source of persuasion and endorsement, contributing to their domination of advertising for decades. However, now there is a shift in how consumers perceive authority figures. With influencers' perceived authority stemming from their candor and knowledge in that field, there is an increased reliance on and credibility of recommendations and online reviews from influencers. This is evidenced by the many videos with titles in the same vein as "Best TikTok skincare finds of 2023" and "Reviewing viral makeup products".

The Authority Principle tells us that customers are more likely to trust and engage with the opinions of individuals they perceive as authority figures within a particular field, and often without questioning it.[9] As influencers continue to establish their authority within their respective niches, it becomes increasingly essential for organizations to collaborate with them to generate product and brand awareness, this is known as influencer marketing.[10] We can see examples of this everyday: Dunkin Donuts partnering with Charli D'Amelio by adding a drink of her name to their menu[11], Monica Ravichandran posting several ads using Maybelline products[12], and Sarah Palmyra narrating her journey using prescription skincare products from Apostrophe[13]. Similarly, several brands have leveraged influencer marketing campaigns to achieve success. For instance, Daniel Wellington collaborated with micro-influencers on social media where in exchange for a

[9] *What is authority principle?: Role in Marketing & Business Strategy* (2023) *WiserNotify*. Available at: https://wisernotify.com/marketing-term/authority-principle/ (Accessed: 06 December 2023).
[10] *What is influencer marketing? Definition, Guide, & More* (no date) *Mailchimp*. Available at: https://mailchimp.com/resources/what-is-influencer-marketing/ (Accessed: 06 December 2023).
[11] *'the charli' dances onto the Dunkin' menu* (2020) *Dunkin'*. Available at: https://news.dunkindonuts.com/news/the-charli-dances-onto-the-dunkin-menu (Accessed: 06 December 2023).
[12] Information taken from Monica Ravichandran's Instagram feed @glow_bymonica
[13] Information taken from Sarah Palmyra's Instagram feed @sarahpalmyra

watch, they would promote his products.[14] Another great example is Amazon fashion, they give influencers an affiliate link where they earn commissions every time someone purchases the product from their link.

For lifestyle influencers the goal is to get people interested in the overall aesthetic of your personal lives. This entails being intentional with things like product consumption, the interior design of the space you showcase in the videos, and even where you take your holidays. Everything needs to align with your chosen aesthetic and build up to a cohesive image. Lifestyle influencers leverage their engaging lifestyles to build a relatable persona which they hope to create desire for. Aspirational living perpetuates the idea that they live an exclusive life that can somehow be achieved by doing and owning certain things; this could be buying that 20-piece kitchen set which looked amazing in their cooking video, or a $500 air purifier that they swear changed their lives, or even something as simple as bed sheets. They market their lifestyle as being covetable and then show you what you can buy to get it. Unlike traditional celebrities who advertise products through formal endorsements, influencers aim to seamlessly integrate sponsored content into their everyday lives. With lifestyle propagation these influencers aren't selling you just the product, they are selling you an identity, they are selling the idea of who you can be with the help of those products.

A notable issue with this type of influencing is that majority of the time these influencers have not spent a single dollar on the items they are urging you to purchase, they are usually gifted these items by the brand. That Instagram model you saw carrying different

[14] Marketing, J. (2018) *Watches: How Daniel Wellington worked with micro-influencers*, *Join*. Available at: https://join.marketing/blog/watches/#/ (Accessed: 06 December 2023).

luxury designer bags in each video was probably sent those in PR packages. These influencers don't even have to afford the lifestyle they're preaching to you. This alludes to a dangerous level of consumerism, where we start placing more emphasis on the aesthetics of our life and reaching these unattainable standards that the influencers have put before us than figuring out how we want to live. We let their values become our values, we let them decide what we prioritize, and how we measure our success.

As consumers we feel the pressure to keep up with the trends that influencers and celebrities alike are being paid to promote. This also means we need to be more well read and vigilant before jumping on the bandwagon. We need to realize that their authenticity is greatly compromised by the fact that their words can be bought. Capitalism has permeated this field as well as made it possible. This is evidenced by the controversial all-expenses-paid trip where Shein flew a few influencers to their sweatshops in China to rehabilitate their public image in the US. Those influencers then made content justifying or minimizing the exploitation and even blatantly lying about the working conditions of the employees.[15]

The pandemic brought with it the rise of the online world at a pace we've never seen before. Suddenly we were all hooked to our phones and tablets, and often the most interesting things available to us were TikToks and Reels. With the influencer marketing industry being projected to grow to $21.2 billion in 2023[16], it is no surprise that CBS reported that 86% of the young Americans that were surveyed said that they were

[15] Romo, V. (2023) *Shein invited influencers on an all-expenses-paid trip. here's why people are livid*, *NPR*. Available at: https://www.npr.org/2023/06/30/1184974003/shein-influencers-china-factory-trip-backlash (Accessed: 06 December 2023).
[16] West, C. (2023) *22 influencer marketing statistics to Guide Your Brand's strategy in 2023*, *Sprout Social*. Available at: https://sproutsocial.com/insights/influencer-marketing-statistics/ (Accessed: 06 December 2023).

"willing to try out influencing".[17] This means that children are now aspiring to become content creators and pursue that full time as their primary source of income. Being an influencer is a serious job where people are earning serious money and that is why delving into the nuances of the culture they are a part of and perpetuate is vital. They have the power to shape and change the minds of an entire generation and are often equipped only with Chauffeur Knowledge where they "reel off eloquent words as if reading from a script"[18] parroting information they've been fed by big corporations.

In a world saturated with influencers and the allure of their curated lifestyles, the necessity for unwavering vigilance from our end as consumers becomes increasingly apparent. As we navigate through the digital landscape, we must recognize that the power wielded by influencers transcends mere marketing; it can guide choices, shape opinions, and mold aspirations. In the precarious dance between genuine influence and opportunistic exploitation, our prudence serves as a shield, preserving the authenticity and integrity of our societal fabric.

[17] Min, S. (2019) *86% of young Americans want to become a social media influencer*, *CBS News*. Available at: https://www.cbsnews.com/news/social-media-influencers-86-of-young-americans-want-to-become-one/ (Accessed: 06 December 2023).
[18] Dobelli, R. and Griffin, N. (2014) '16 "Don't Take News Anchors Seriously"', in *The Art of Thinking Clearly*. New York: Harper, pp. 51–53.