

T. Bettina Cornwell and Helen Katz, **Influencer: The Science Behind Swaying Others**, New York, NY: Routledge, 2021, 128 pp., \$56.95 (paperback).

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The influence of influencers is indisputable. Coauthors T. Bettina Cornwell and Helen Katz recognize this inescapable societal infiltration and the “[need] to chronicle their [influencer’s] ascendance and be better able to envision their future” (p. 10) in their 2021 book, ***Influencer: The Science Behind Swaying Others***. Here, the authors acknowledge that “influence is a strange thing” (p. 10), and thus offer readers a compelling deep dive into influencer marketing—stepping beyond the saturated field of “how-tos.”

Divided into eight distinct yet related chapters, the text presents a multifaceted, well-researched, and comprehensive analysis of modern-day influencer marketing. The strength and value of the book stem from the myriad examples employed to illustrate and support the dissection of each topic, concept, model, and theory. This robust, contextual approach demonstrates depth of research and industry knowledge.

The book endeavors to serve as an “authoritative resource on the theory and practice of influencer marketing” (p. 3), with the objective of “explain[ing] influencer marketing from both a theoretical and conceptual standpoint and a practitioner viewpoint” (p. 10). Cornwell and Katz surpass this goal, delivering “a unique combination of practical examples and academic explanations to help readers learn more about influencers and influencer marketing” (pp. 10–11).

Written with an American focus, the text nevertheless offers a global perspective—including Canadian, European, Asian, and Australian references. With a broad audience in mind—targeting “decision makers, researchers, students, and influencers themselves” (p. 3)—each chapter purposefully concludes with discussion questions and further readings. Such design emphasizes the timeliness and pertinence of the book’s topic, encouraging further conversation, research, reflection, and analysis.

Although social media influencers and influencer marketing promote “unattainable lifestyles” (p. 146), Cornwell and Katz’s text is anything but—it is approachable, engaging, and relatable; detailed and informative without becoming too granular; example-based, although not overpowering. Each chapter may appear as a laundry list of related topics; however, the style in which the coauthors present the information is representative of the ever-changing field. The pair is also cognizant of the overwhelming nature of this topic, and they are careful not to bombard the reader with content. The example-based design of the book



is an astute approach—ensuring each topic, concept, model, and theory is tangible, while aiding in simplification and comprehension.

Chapter 1, “Introduction to Influencers,” opens with a description of an average morning routine—establishing the rationale for the book, while providing an alarmingly accurate depiction of the deep societal infiltration of brand messages. This scene, although mundane, is thoughtful and strategic—connecting with the reader, while offering a precursor to the book’s cadence and the authors’ writing style. The chapter “establish[es] the foundations of influencer marketing” (p. 13) and its history—looking at the “two key forms of external motivation to persuade consumers to buy their products” (p. 14) that brands relied on prior to influencer marketing: celebrity marketing and word of mouth. Here, the authors mention “psychological research on the power of authority in persuasion” (p. 14)—drawing a parallel to Lawrence R. Samuel’s (2010) book *Freud on Madison Avenue: Motivation Research and Subliminal Advertising in America*. With this, Cornwell and Katz outline the rise of the “sharing phenomenon” (p. 16) and its interrelatedness with modern-day marketing and public relations, define key terms, and introduce the different types of influencers: macro, micro, and nano. Providing a foundation for the following chapters, chapter 1 concludes with the notion that influencer success is based on *both* luck and science—suggesting we, as citizens and consumers, must strive to maintain awareness of how we are constantly and unavoidably being influenced.

Chapter 2, “Influencers in the Marketing Ecosystem,” expands its scope—“div[ing] deeper into the role of influencers in the broader marketing ecosystem” (p. 13). By way of examples, true to the authors’ style, the budding industry is explored through three key forms of media: paid, owned, and earned. Cornwell and Katz claim influencers are not “separate from the larger advertising and marketing ecosystem; they are, in fact, firmly embedded within it” (p. 24). This embeddedness underscores the reach and, ultimately, the influence influencers wield. The already dense second chapter also cites the American Influencer Council Incorporated—established in 2020—displaying the evolving nature of influencer marketing.

Equally detailed, chapter 3, “Endorsers and Influencers Clarifying the Boundaries,” compares and contrasts celebrity endorsers and influencers. The coauthors draw on the “match-up hypothesis” (p. 48) and discuss content development, the rise of user-generated content, and the shift in control—from brand to influencer—leading to the development of “human brands” (p. 49). Analyzing how influence spreads, they highlight the persistent search for “the essence of cool” (p. 57) and establish the concept of the double funnel (p. 58)—a process unique to influencer marketing. Ensuring ease of comprehension and accessibility, the pair insert a helpful flow chart (p. 58) to illustrate this process. Online information cascades are also briefly covered before concluding that there are both parallels and departures between celebrity endorsers and influencer marketing.

Chapter 4, “Who Are the Influencers?” considers “who influencers are from a conceptual level in order to better understand how they do what they do” (p. 65). To accomplish this, Cornwell and Katz look at the “broad characteristics of influencers . . . [and] develop an Influencer Process Model” (p. 65). They speak to the influencer–influencee relationship and expand further on types and characteristics—commenting on social bonds and the intricate, dynamic relationships at play. Consistent with the density of the preceding chapters, chapter 4 is nevertheless digestible thanks to the integration of examples.

The aim of chapter 5, "How Influencers Are Regulated," is to "examine the fledgling regulatory system surrounding influencer marketing" (p. 14) and "implications for public policy" (p. 90). Topics of disclosure, compensation, and fraud are also raised. Advancing the topic of fraud, Cornwell and Katz describe a plethora of associated concerns, ranging from engagement rate inflation to "collusion, blackmail, and extortion" (p. 100). They explore consumer response to regulated messaging (p. 102), copyright laws, and intellectual property rights. Key takeaways from this median chapter include lack of regulation, lack of industry-related academic research, and challenges associated with a field in constant flux. Given that this chapter covers an impressive amount of ground, one may expect it to be superficial. However, the authors' reliance on case examples allows them to share efficiently and effectively a fairly in-depth account of a broad spectrum of influencer marketing concepts.

Beginning with a question, capturing the reader's attention in just a few words, chapter 6, "Barriers and Challenges to Consider," dives into an example—a catalyst for the conversation about barriers and challenges beyond regulations—such as the "paramount . . . role of authenticity" (p. 110). Furthermore, the coauthors raise the importance of global awareness and sensitivities—using the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic as an example—reviewing the "four distinct crisis types for organizations" (p. 112). The remainder of chapter 6 focuses on elements of authenticity and lack thereof, arguing that "these boundaries and tensions are part of the influencer world" (p. 120)—a world in constant flux, yet nevertheless embedded in daily life and the organization and operation of society.

Explaining "How Influence Is Measured and Evaluated," as the title suggests, chapter 7 examines "current measurement approaches" (p. 124). Herein, the authors explain social listening, follower/"friend" count, the common inflation of engagement metrics, and associated issues of fraud, while considering engagement tracking and social media measurement tools. This chapter again underlines the evolving nature of influencer marketing and the resulting issues and inconsistencies—"a never-ending dance that will evolve as influencer marketing itself continues to develop" (p. 137).

The final chapter considers the future of influencer marketing—evaluating trends, competing viewpoints, growth and decline patterns, and the increasingly predominant role of influencers in the content production process. It pays particular attention to precarious domains within the field such as influencer marketing to children, and briefly touches on concerns regarding social good and well-being. Popular, challenging questions and topics are subsequently surfaced, such as: "Is there a negative impact on those receiving their [influencers'] messages, and is the effect so harmful that it is detrimental to the well-being of the larger society?" (p. 145). The concept of fear of missing out is also dissected, with the coauthors underscoring "the potential to raise anxiety and exploit fears with direct product solutions" (p. 145).

Concerns regarding parasocial relationships and social anxiety (p. 145), "the spread of misinformation on an array of health-related topics" (p. 146), and the promotion of "unattainable lifestyles" (p. 146) due to lacking regulations and the consequential impacts of this on "one's perception of reality" (p. 146) are also noted, along with social trust and trust-building—referencing the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign and election.

Although the final chapter has the potential to be interpreted as discouraging and pessimistic, it should instead be understood as realistic—offering a critical account of influencer marketing and the future of the field—demonstrating the pertinent challenges associated with the developing industry, practice, and profession.

Reference

Samuel, L. R. (2010). *Freud on Madison Avenue: Motivation research and subliminal advertising in America*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.