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# Influencers

**axis**

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*70% of teens think that YouTubers are more reliable than celebrities and 88% of consumers trust online recommendations as much as face-to-face recommendations. Social media influencers are real people, and they're more likely to be authentic and to interact with their audience, so brands are starting to take note.*

—[Influencer Marketing Hub](#)

# When They Talk, We Listen.

Social media is changing day by day. What started as a way to connect with family and friends and share life has turned into marketing, advertising, and selling products to a larger online community. [95 million](#) photos and videos are posted to Instagram every day. And [300 hours](#) of video are uploaded to YouTube every single minute. You can get lost down a rabbit trail of endless content that spans everything from funny dog videos to deep posts about religion and philosophy. That's a lot to keep up with—or compete with if you're trying to get your content out there.

If we were to be on social media platforms for only 2 hours a day, that would tally up to [over 5 years of time](#) over the course of our lives. [As of 2015](#), teens are spending 9 hours a day using media. That's more time than they spend sleeping at night. And with people in general spending [more time than ever online](#), brands, movements, and celebrities alike have all realized the power of social media to persuade people to engage in a desired behavior. As a result, a whole new animal has been born: the influencer.

## — What's an “influencer”?

Technically, we're all influencers in one way or another, but the term is used specifically to refer to a person who uses their social media presence and platforms to influence others to believe, buy, or do something (or commonly, all three). Importantly, an influencer ultimately uses his/her power to market products (their own or someone else's) to their [large online following](#), and by doing so, they also make money, which is why it's now considered a job. Many influencers start out on Instagram or YouTube with a small audience and build it by [posting consistently and making connections](#) with their followers. Typically, they make a name for themselves inside a niche and become an authority in that niche.

You'll find influencers in every type of niche. They build brands around anything like eating healthy or creating art, and share their lives with people who are eager to listen. Some examples are:

- Journalists, who travel throughout the country and world, documenting their experiences;
- Bloggers, who write about anything from life experiences to reviewing products;
- [Bookstagrammers](#), who post photos of their bookshelves, current reads, and more;
- Makeup artists, posting tutorials, sharing favorite brands, and more;
- YouTubers, who make daily content like vlogs and more;
- Video gamers, live-streaming video games and commentating as they go through different levels within the game;
- Photographers, posting all their photo shoots, projects, events, and more.

In order to grow their platform and reach, influencers are on their different platforms every day, engaging with their audience, growing relationships, and gaining trust. But for the most part, they don't just do it for fun; they want to monetize their accounts and get paid (e.g. by YouTube for views on their videos and/or by sponsors who pay them to market their products). And companies *want* to use influencers because they work:

When an influencer you trust recommends a product, it feels the same as a friend saying he just discovered the best brand of mac n' cheese ever and you need to try it. It's much more personal feeling than a commercial on TV, a billboard, a spread in a magazine, or a banner on a website.

Companies use influencers because they're *not* celebrities. People want to see what their peers are using and loving, and give that a try. And unlike celebrities, influencers have built a network of people who know and trust them, people who see them as an authority figure and are ready to listen to their advice.

## — What's the difference between a celebrity and an influencer?

There are distinct differences between them (though these are slowly disappearing), and they typically have to do with how a person became famous. Celebrities are people who achieve stardom for something they do offline (acting, sports, politics, singing, etc.), whereas influencers become famous for their online presence. This is important because if a celebrity doesn't ever create social media accounts (rare, but it happens), they are still known and have fans, but an influencer's fame *depends on* and indeed was built by their social media presence.

Importantly, **Gen Z prefers influencers over traditional celebrities** because of their level of interaction and relatability. Celebrities are often seen as iconic, superior, unrelatable, and "other," whereas influencers are seen as more accessible, relatable, approachable, and similar to their followers. As the Influencer Orchestration Network (ION) [points out](#), "Social media influencers inhabit a place between celebrities and friends," meaning they feel like peers with whom Gen Zers have a relationship, but also like someone they can aspire to become. According to [a Google study](#), "70% of teenage YouTube subscribers say they relate to YouTube creators more than traditional celebrities," and ION points out that, "social media creators get 12 times the number of comments that a traditional celebrity does."

It's also important to note that celebrities and influencers are not mutually exclusive; influencers can also become celebrities, and celebrities can become influencers—or it may be impossible to tell if they were ever one before the other (e.g. the Kardashians). In fact, nowadays, people often become celebrities *only because* they already have a large online presence. Media companies will often choose to hire the singer/actor/athlete/etc. who will bring fans with them over the ones who are virtually unknown. For this reason, people feel the need to begin cultivating their "brand" or persona at younger and younger ages.

## — What does the blue check mark mean?

It lets people know you're legit. Officially, it's called being "verified," and platforms use it to denote that you are who you say you are. They only do this for accounts of celebrities, large brands, and influencers who have a large enough following (though what this

threshold is is not disclosed by the platforms). For more details on different platforms: [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#), [Snapchat](#), [TikTok](#).

## — Where did influencers come from?

[This infographic](#) shows how advertising and marketing have changed through the past few hundred years, with influencers slowly emerging thanks to the Internet, social media, and the need for companies to find ways around ad blocking software (which blocks traditional online banner ads). Combined with new abilities to harness "word of mouth" (i.e. going "viral"), marketers realized that younger generations trust product endorsements by people they feel that they know (influencers) more than they trust them from people who feel separate and different (celebrities).

In addition, everyday, average people realized that social media had effectively democratized fame, taking the power away from large corporations and media conglomerates and putting it in the hands of the people. Anyone who wanted to get famous could, simply by utilizing the power of social media. So more and more people started blogging, vlogging, making tutorial videos, putting their music online, and more in an attempt to gain followers and attract advertisers. For more on this, check out [this fascinating article](#).

## — Why are companies willing to give them money?

Companies love them because they introduce the product directly to the customers. An influencer may have fewer followers than a celebrity, but the audience is engaged and invested. [This Forbes article](#) explains that using influencers in marketing strategies costs a lot less money than contacting big names (celebrities). And much like established public figures, influencers can introduce the product directly to a company's desired audience. But because it can be cheaper to use influencer marketing, companies can hire multiple influencers, "for [a] fraction of the cost of a big name."

When you see an ad pop up in the middle of a YouTube video, you might tune out or skip ahead, but influencers use their personal connections to make you want what they're selling. Instead of just putting a commercial in front of you, they weave products into their regular content. Because they're making real connections with people online, followers trust their recommendations. If your friend says she found a new product that worked wonders on her skin, you might be more inclined to give it a try. We trust the opinions of our friends, and companies trust the abilities of influencers to turn friends and followers into customers.

## — Why does my kid want to be one?

From the outside, being an influencer looks like a fun job. You become an authority on a topic you're passionate about and inspire others who want to follow in your footsteps.

Influencers' feeds are aesthetic, their content is well thought out, and their posts can be insightful, fun, humorous, and more. One of the most attractive parts of being an influencer is the idea of getting paid to "live your best life" and do what you would already be doing—traveling around the world like the [Bucket List Family](#), sharing fashion hacks like [Hilary Rushford](#), even playing video games (like [Ninja](#)). Pretty enticing, right? Especially to a teenager who already spends a ton of time on social media and thinks that "traditional" jobs are the worst thing ever. But, as we'll discuss more below, like any job, being an influencer has its drawbacks, some of which might be worse than the drawbacks of other jobs.

## — Is being an influencer for one's job as fun and easy as it seems to?

Since influencers as we know them today wouldn't exist without social media, it follows that all the problems related to social media—obsession with image; comparison; obsession with likes, follows, and unfollows; number of views; time spent; etc.—are there for influencers. But because everything they do is focused on social media, these problems can be on steroids for influencers. Have your teenager who wants to become one think about this: If there's pressure to curate a certain image or interact a certain amount or post often enough or look a certain way now, how much more so will those pressures increase when they try to make their livelihood off of it?

One of the reasons why a fan might prefer an influencer over a traditional celebrity is because the layers of separation that exist between them and the celebrity are essentially stripped away with an influencer. There's no more mystery, no need for paparazzi to follow them around to find out even the tiniest detail of their personal lives. Instead, most influencers willingly share these details in an effort to become more relatable. Plus, followers tend to think that because they've faithfully followed someone and essentially helped propel them to fame, the influencer then "owes" them things, like content every so often or personal looks into their lives. But what happens is one of two things: Either 1. they feel they can never turn the camera off and just relax and be themselves; they must always be on and ready to share themselves with the Internet; or 2. they become less and less authentic as they create a persona to share online in an attempt to keep some semblance of privacy. As you can see, neither of these are good, but they nonetheless happen because fans expect influencers to interact and be willing to show their lives, much more than they expect the same of celebrities.

That leads to another problem that's not obvious at first glance. What we see when an influencer posts an image or a video or other types of content is simply what they post. What we *don't* see is how long it takes them to create that content. So a teenager might think, "Great, a post plus a story or two on Instagram a day, a video on YouTube a day... easy! I can do that no problem." But as some influencers are making more apparent (as YouTuber [Jake Paul did](#) in 2018 after vlogging every day for 500 consecutive days), it takes a ton of time to make, say, a 5-minute YouTube video or to get the perfect shot and write the perfect caption for an Instagram post. When your job becomes a 24/7 requirement with no time off ever, that can lead to burnout and exhaustion very quickly.

But it doesn't have to be that way. It's possible to set followers' expectations early on by telling them when and how often to expect content, though posting less frequently typically leads to slower growth and monetization.

Beyond what we've already discussed, there's also pressure to conform to a certain image because one's fans want it or because sponsors threaten to revoke their endorsements. There's also the fact that the Internet can be a very cruel place. Anyone who is a public figure online is under constant scrutiny, with people waiting to pounce on anything that could potentially be controversial (a recent example is [#CancelJames](#), a feud between YouTubers James Charles and Tati Westbrook). There might be pressure to pose in certain ways or in certain levels of undress ("everyone else does it!"), or becoming famous might open up access to things like drugs and alcohol. There's the possibility that your teen could be contacted by other famous people (as [this teen](#) was when she became famous virtually overnight), and you wouldn't even know it or be able to stop it. And there are "managers" and "agents" who might claim to want to represent your child, but may not have the best of intentions. None of this even begins to speak to the fact that teenagers are at a time when they're trying to figure out who they are, what they want, and what they stand for, so building a brand around something that could change a lot isn't always a good idea. The list goes on.

One of our staff at Axis remembers her mom always saying that she wouldn't wish fame on anyone. Though it didn't make sense to her teenage brain at the time, she now realizes that her mom was referring to all the pressure that came along with being famous. And it's only getting worse. If your teenagers aspire to become an influencer, all of these things are worth discussing at length so that they have a better idea of what they're getting themselves into.

## **How do I talk to them about this without coming across as condemning or ignorant?**

Whether you're in favor of influencer marketing or not, you can and should converse with your kids about the influencer phenomenon in order to guide them toward wisdom and flourishing. Start by simply asking what influencers your teen may have noticed on social media platforms. With teens being so involved on sites like Instagram and YouTube, a lot of their interests and ideas may be coming from influencers. By asking such a non-threatening question, you won't put them on the defensive from the start. Then take time to check out the influencers' profiles with your teen. It can help them to open up and share about who they're following. It can also give you insight into the world of influencers and the types of people your teen looks up to on social media.

Next, rather than just telling them what you think, it's important to ask questions that get *them* thinking. Some helpful questions are:

- What influencers do you follow? Why do you like to follow them?
- What makes this person qualified to give advice in this (or any) area?
- Do you know how they became an "influencer"? Does that make you trust them more or less?

- Is following him/her good for you?
- Is being an influencer really as good as it seems? How do you know?
- How can you be a positive influence on the people around you, whether that's online or in the real world?
- Is there a line you're not willing to cross in order to build your brand and make money? What is that line? How did you decide to put it there?
- How do you define "success"? What would it take for you to consider yourself successful?
- Is that different from how God's defines success? If so, how?
- How could you use your "brand" as a way to reach God's version of success?
- What exactly would you want to "influence" your followers to do?
- How would you use your influence to help others, to glorify God, and to bring true beauty to the world?

## — Does Scripture say anything about this?

Does it speak specifically about our modern iteration of what it means to "follow" someone or be an "influencer"? No, but as there's "[nothing new under the sun](#)," there's a lot we can learn from God's Word.

When we look at the stories told throughout [Judges](#), [1 & 2 Samuel](#), [1 & 2 Kings](#), and even after, we get a clear picture of how powerful influence can be. Before the time of the judges, Joshua had been a leader for the Israelites, one who devoted himself to following the Lord, obeying His commands, and not allowing himself to be influenced by the surrounding cultures. During his leadership, the Israelites also followed God, but after he died, the Israelites slowly forgot about all that God had done for them (rescued them from Egypt, lead them through the wilderness to the promised land, etc.) and "[did evil](#) in the eyes of the Lord." Scripture tells us that God's anger burned against them, so He allowed their enemies to prevail. Eventually, they cried out to Him for deliverance, and He provided a "judge" to lead them in battle. For a time, they followed God again. But time and time again, they strayed, needed rescuing, cried out to God, were given a leader, returned back to God, then strayed again.

As [this video](#) points out, the many judges who ruled over the Hebrews during this time varied in their devotion to God. And it's clear that the worse the ruler was, the more God's people strayed. Their influence made tremendous difference. What's also worth noting is that, after awhile, the Israelites got even more whiny, asking God why the other nations had kings and they didn't. [God tells Samuel](#) that their asking for a king was not them rejecting Samuel as their leader, but rejecting God as their ultimate leader and king. God had designed it so that He would be their leader—their influencer—and they would be His special people, set apart for His glory. Instead, they looked at what everyone else had and wanted it, discontent because they thought others had it better.

There are *many* levels of influence, both good and bad, to analyze here, but what's quite clear is that no one should have more influence on what we love, desire, pursue, hope for, believe, etc. than God Himself. If anyone else holds this power in our lives, we will be led astray. In addition, it illuminates just how much responsibility and power a leader or



"influencer" has. It's no small task to be in such a position, and [we are responsible](#) for how we guide, teach, or influence others.

Other parts of Scripture worth examining with your teen are:

- How Jesus guides His disciples;
- How Paul shepherds different communities of believers;
- [The serpent's](#) influence over Eve and Adam;
- Naomi's influence over [Ruth](#);
- [Proverbs 27:17](#), [Proverbs 13:20](#); and
- [1 Corinthians 15:33](#).

## — Should we only follow Christian influencers?

Honestly, no. Both Christian and non-Christian influencers can have really great content, but the opposite is also true; both can have really terrible content. Being influenced by people will come with positives and negatives, whether they're Christian or not. And just blindly following a person because they call themselves a Christian doesn't mean their content will actually be Christ-honoring or true. In fact, the Bible tells us to be wary of [false teachers](#) who disguise themselves. Plus, within the Christian community there are so many different doctrines and beliefs that simply calling oneself Christian doesn't tell us where they stand on those things, let alone how they feel about promoting something simply to get a paycheck.

Ultimately, we should use discernment when deciding who to follow, no matter who they say they are. Outward appearances may be deceiving, and God tells us that [He looks deeper](#) than what we see on the surface. In a world where people can so easily masquerade as anything they want, discernment is necessary.

In addition to this, we also need to be aware that even Christian influencers might promote things we don't need, because a brand is paying them to advertise for them. Not everything an influencer tells us to buy is something we need to have in our lives, nor should we value a influencer's opinion if it only increases our greed or dissatisfaction with our lives.

If we're unsure, we need to ask God to give us wisdom and discernment, as well as the strength to make the right choice. Sometimes we love things more than we love God, so even if they're not inherently bad, we've allowed them to take a place in our lives that is meant only for God...and we need to give them up. But that can be extremely hard to do. So we need to ask God for His strength and determination to follow through.

## — If my teen only has a few thousand followers (or fewer), there's no way they've been contacted by sponsors, right?

Actually, no. Brands love what they call "[nanoinfluencers](#)," or accounts that are pretty

influential in a very small community and are willing to do sponsored posts for around \$50 (typically younger teens). Companies are starting to utilize these nanoinfluencers because they have the time on their hands to make creative posts that don't look like ads, they cost a fraction of most other ads, and they get pretty good results. So if your teen fits that bill, it's quite possible a brand has DMed (direct messaged) them asking if they'd like to "collaborate."

## — What do I do if people start contacting my teen to do sponsored posts?

Regardless of whether you decide it's smart for your teen to engage in this activity or not, it's important to talk to them about it. Because anyone at any time can attempt to DM your child, even if your child's account is private. So if you never talk to them about it, they won't have your wisdom to guide them when it does happen. Ask them if they or their friends have ever been contacted by someone to do sponsored posts. What did they do? Do they wish they could do sponsored posts? Why or why not? Are they aware of the laws governing sponsored posts? What would they do if someone wanted them to post something without disclosing that it's sponsored?

If, after lots of prayerful consideration, you do decide it makes sense for your teen and your family to do sponsored posts, it's important to set up boundaries and guidelines to protect your teenager. Make sure he/she knows these guidelines, is willing to follow them, and knows that being an influencer is a privilege that can be revoked if they abuse it.

It's also important to vet brands and companies who contact your teen. Some are legitimate, others may not have good track records of actually paying or asking for them not to disclose it's sponsored. We encourage you to research the company reaching out to your teen, and find out all the specifics included in doing a sponsored post before reaching a decision.

Some **pros** of doing sponsored posts are:

- 1. The ability to make money in a field you're passionate about.** Not everyone gets a chance to do what they love, and being able to make an income from sharing your life experiences with the world is a huge plus for a lot of people. You can also partner with brands you love, people you're excited to root for, and products that have changed your life.
- 2. Exposure for brands and companies that are doing good in the world.** Some companies are working toward a better, cleaner, happier environment and are doing good by donating proceeds, among other things. Working alongside a company who provides clean water in other countries can go a long way in other people's lives.

Some **cons** are:

- 1. Creating posts or an online persona simply for the sake of popularity.** It's a trap we can all fall into if we're not careful, and even doing a sponsored post can be

inauthentic if it's not something you actually support or use in your life. The goal of sponsored posts and ads is that our followers will know when we're working with another brand. But sometimes if we're not clear about it, we can give off the wrong impression. That's why the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) has come up with ways for paid content to be clearly marked, as described in this article.

- 2. Overanalyzing every post and its reception from your followers by counting likes.** Teens spend hours a day on social media platforms, which includes sites like Instagram and YouTube. With that much time scrolling through and posting content, teens can become pretty enamored with things happening in the online world.
- 3. People who might try to take advantage.** Not only are some brands/companies not ethical, there are others who might try to offer their services as agents or managers for your teen that are only there to prey on the vulnerable and take what they can for themselves.

## Recap

- Being an influencer comes with both positives and negatives.
- It can be a great way to connect with people and be a source of income for some, but it can also take up way more time and energy than "traditional" jobs, and there can be a ton of pressure.
- Influence, both that which others have on us and that which we have on others, is not something to be taken lightly.
- God's Word is full of examples of influence being used well and poorly.
- God Himself should be our ultimate influence; if something or someone's influence is more important to us than God's, then we have allowed it to become an idol.
- God can speak to us and teach us through both Christians and non-Christians, and both Christians and non-Christians can influence us for good or for ill.
- It's quite possible that your teens have already or will be contacted by brands, thanks to the nanoinfluencer concept.
- Being an influencer is not inherently evil or bad, but deciding whether or not this is good for your teen and your family will require lots of prayer, discussion, and wisdom.
- If your teen is an influencer or becomes one, make sure you set up healthy boundaries to protect them and vet any and all companies who contact them for partnerships.

## Final Thoughts

Influence is not a new concept—in fact, it's been around since the beginning of time. But it's never been so monetized or so tangible. So even if your teenager never becomes famous or an "influencer," there will always be people around them that they can influence, for good or for evil. Online or in person, large audience or a group of friends, you can encourage your teen to be a positive voice in their community and live a life of authenticity. And while becoming an influencer is not inherently bad, it does come with

a lot of risks and pressures, all things about which your teenagers need your guidance, wisdom, and, yes, sometimes even protection.

But isn't that exactly what it means to be a parent? Yes, we're caretakers and providers and authorities and chauffeurs and cooks and laundromats and coaches and mentors and all the many other roles we hold. But what it all boils down to is that we're the biggest influencers in our kids' lives. May we use our influence in this area and all others to point our kids toward flourishing, love, kindness, goodness, beauty, and, above all, Christ.

## Related Axis Resources

- [The Culture Translator](#), a **free** weekly email that offers biblical insight on all things teen-related
- A Parent's Guide to: [Social Media](#), [Instagram](#), [Snapchat](#), [TikTok](#), [YouTube Stars](#), and [Twitch](#)
- [Social Media Video Kit](#) (to watch with teens)

If you'd like access to all of our digital resources, both current and yet to come, for one low monthly or yearly fee, check out the [All Axis Pass](#)!

## Additional Resources

- "[Influencers Faking Brand Deals](#)," *The Atlantic*
- "[Understanding influencer marketing and why it is so effective](#)," Forbes
- "[Cameo, the Celebrity Shout-Out Startup, Nears \\$300M Valuation](#)," *The Hustle*
- "[The Increasing Allure of Being an Influencer in College](#)," *Fashionista*
- "[For brands of all shapes and sizes, influencer marketing is a serious bet](#)," Quartz
- [In the Dust of the Rabbi: Five Lessons on Learning to Live as Jesus Lived](#), Ray Vander Laan

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