

Friends, likes, fake followers and cash—internet influencers under the microscope

May 9 2018, by Connie Clarke

Local businesses, PR agencies and consumers should beware, warns Murdoch University researcher Dr. Catherine Archer, as ethical concerns surrounding the activities of social media influencers grow.

Bloggers, Instagrammers, Snapchatters and YouTubers – terms that were barely used less than a decade ago – have risen to become powerful and popular figures used by brands and companies worldwide to cut through advertising clutter and reach consumers en masse.

Dr. Archer, from Murdoch's School of Arts, says internet influencers are gaining a stronger foothold in the public relations and media spheres in Western Australia, with more companies using their popularity to promote campaigns and products.

Some local Instagram stars and bloggers have close to 300,000 followers, and are often given products to sample or destinations to road test by companies looking to enhance their brand awareness.

They have even been engaged by State [government agencies](#) including Tourism WA and the Road Safety Commission to highlight destinations and campaigns such as Zero Hero.

Dr. Archer is among three researchers who conducted Friends, likes, fake followers and cash, which involved interviews with public relations

practitioners in WA and Singapore. The interviews revealed that issues around payments for posts, fake followers and the potential exploitation of children and other vulnerable groups were all significant causes for concern.

Organisations should investigate the background of influencers before engaging them to promote a lifestyle, destination or product, Dr. Archer said.

"Social media influencers are now known as "micro-celebrities" and they are increasingly setting the agenda in public relations and media relations that journalists and commentators once did," Dr. Archer said. "They are increasingly powerful and sought-after by brands, companies and even some government agencies.

"But there is a real grey area when it comes to social media influencers. It's not always spelled out in their Instagram and Snapchat posts what is and what isn't paid for.

"People can buy fake followers – essentially buying popularity through bot services – to bolster the strength of their account.

"Disclosure also emerged as an area for concern through the interviews that we did. If people have been paid for their posts or if the content sounds too much like an advertorial, audiences turn off."

Dr. Archer said internet influencer numbers were growing, but they were not yet classed as a "profession" and therefore had no professional body or code of conduct regulating their operations, so companies and consumers should beware.

She pointed to YouTube star Logan Paul and blogger and alternative health advocate Belle Gibson as extreme examples of vloggers and

bloggers whose practices turned out to be questionable and even fraudulent.

Logan Paul was roundly criticised and punished by YouTube for a vlog which showed him filming an apparent suicide victim in Japan's Aokigahara forest, while Belle Gibson, who falsely claimed she had brain cancer in order to promote alternative treatments, was ordered to pay a fine of \$410,000 by the Federal Court after being found guilty of misleading and deceptive conduct.

"We're not saying that all internet influencers are unethical – it's more a buyer beware message that there are some practices that many [public relations](#) companies view as ethically unsound," Dr. Archer said.

"Influencers are third-party endorsers who have the power to shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets and Instagram and Facebook posts," Dr. Archer said. "Their power is so great that agencies dedicated to representing bloggers and influencers have started springing up in Australia.

"It's important that people choose wisely and do their research. This is an area that is only going to grow and there needs to be some ethical consideration around engaging social media influencers," Dr. Archer said.

Provided by Murdoch University

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