

Posting for a Paycheck: How Gen Z Turned Social Media into a Career

In 2021, a teenager made \$17.5 million by posting dance videos. Welcome to Gen Z's job market.

As the first generation who has grown up wholly in the digital era, Generation Z is capitalizing on their tech savvy skills and creating careers by posting on social media. Some considered making internet content a hobby or a fun way to earn extra cash. However, it has now turned into a reliable and growing career path.

Just in 2021, Forbes reported that famous TikToker Charli D'Amelio earned \$17.5 million. There are many other people like D'Amelio who saturate the timelines of platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram. These people are considered social media influencers and have similar income and status to celebrities. Even popular celebrities, such as Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson and Kim Kardashian, are top earners on Instagram. However, the difference lies in the fact that influencers were unknown before they built their careers online.

These individuals get the title of "influencer" because they attract millions of followers based on the interpersonal content they create surrounding their interest in topics such as beauty, fitness, lifestyle, and travel. Unlike celebrities, influencers build a more vulnerable and engaging connection with their followers.

"To be an influencer means to be a relatable person or role model whose content connects with a lot of people," said Adriel Domfeh, a growing TikToker with 425k followers. Domfeh creates relatable TikToks that surround African parenting, culture, and community. "In the past 3 months, I've been getting noticed in public by younger kids saying that they relate to my videos so much."

This connection to their following is what allows them to generate business and have brands embrace them. They successfully market themselves and share a part of their lives, allowing followers to see them as reliable. Marketers take note of that and use them as spokespersons for their brands. In fact, Pew Researchers reported that 94% of marketers who have used influencer marketing campaigns have found them to be effective.

In an interview with Loyola University Chicago's Associate Marketing Professor and Department Chair, Jenna Drenten mentioned how there is a ranking system for influencers and that's what determines their marketing value. 10,000 followers is a micro-influencer, 1 million followers are considered a meso-influencer, and over 1 million is a macro-influencer. She states, "influencers attract brands because they have the benefit of a large audience and the trust of their following."

A Vox article from 2018 explained that micro-influencers average \$1,000 a post, meso-influencers can earn up to \$10,000 a post, and macro-influencers can earn up to \$100,000-\$250,000 per post. Numbers can vary depending on the niche of the influencer and the steady growth of the industry. But the following count is just the tip of the iceberg when determining if a creator has actual influence. For example, a private media company called Influencer Marketing Hub conducts research by providing reports on the social media and influencer marketing industry. Using data from 2021, their 2022 Bench Report showed how businesses see micro-influencers as a better investment because they charge less and audiences tend to be more engaged and actually take action. Investment in micro-influencers grew from 89% to 91% in 2021.

Fashion and lifestyle content creator, Deja Dee, explains that engagement is what brings in the money and what brands want to see when doing partnerships. How many people are sharing? How many people are visiting brand pages? How many people are commenting?

Deja Dee averages 10k followers on Instagram and makes fashion content promoting and styling trendy clothes for college-aged and curvy women. The quality of her videos and her reputable following engagement has allowed her to garner a partnership with the Amazon storefront. She says, “I make ‘get ready with me’ videos styling trendy clothes found on Amazon and everyone likes those videos. But if no one is clicking the link or buying the items, then I’m not the one really winning.”

A lot of time and effort goes into creating content and promoting items that followers can engage with. In fact, Domfeh spends an average of 20 hours every week planning and creating quality content that followers engage with. “Every day I spend about 30 minutes to an hour brainstorming, one hour on recording, and another hour on editing,” he says. Although the videos he creates are no longer than 3 minutes, he puts in the same amount of hours as someone who works a part-time job. He expressed that inspiring people and using his creative skills is what he wants to do for a living and social media has become a stepping stone for that.

How successful both the influencer and the brands become, suggests that there is value in the partnerships and this industry. Influencers are becoming financially stable with less work and restrictions while brands are getting reliable and authentic promotions. It’s a give-take system that many businesses are utilizing for success. According to Pew Researchers, experts projected that 68% of marketers are investing in influencer marketing.

Social media influence does come with its ups and downs. Deja Dee mentioned that she vlogs a lot of her life and college experience but had to start limiting the number of places she brought her camera. “I noticed that I was becoming more worried about content and less about enjoying life.” With content being very contingent on their own lives and vulnerability, influencers give up some of the same freedoms as celebrities. Additionally, influencers have to be cautious about their words and actions because you can lose followers just as fast as you can gain them.

For example, influencer BrotherNature grew a following based on befriending a herd of deer and naming them “Deer Squad.” Due to the platform he developed, he founded a non-profit organization called Everybody Eats helping those with food insecurity problems. His platform went downhill when old tweets resurfaced of him using anti-Black and anti-Semitic language.

With every industry, there are pros and cons. But LUC’s Drenten explains that based on her studies there is potential for this industry to stay around a long time. With apps like TikTok, it is easy for people to blow up and grow a following due to the easy-to-use features of the app. Given the growing number of social media influencers, brand relationships, and the various niches one can explore, an oversaturated market doesn’t seem likely anytime soon. Domfeh states, “I think everyone should become an influencer. It’s fun and has a lot of opportunities.”

Whether it's a side hustle or a full-time gig, influencing is no longer just a trend — it's a defining career path of a digital generation.