



Ole Nymoen, Wolfgang M. Schmitt

Influencer

The Ideology of Advertising Bodies

(Original German title: Influencer.

Die Ideologie der Werbekörper)

160 pages, Paperback

Publication date: 08 March 2021

© Suhrkamp Verlag Berlin 2021

Sample translation by Alexandra Roesch

pp. 7 – 17; 30 – 35; 45 – 48; 55 – 59

FOREWORD

The influencer is one of the most important social figures of the digital age. It is a phenomenon that is shaping pop and consumer culture, the advertising industry and capitalism and, for a long time now, it has not only been limited to the Internet. ‘Lavender farmers in Provence are complaining about influencers,’ the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* reported in August 2019, when Instagram stars trampled across fields in search of the perfect shot. National parks have also complained about the destructive onslaught of Instagrammers in search of selfies; in Paris, particularly photo-worthy streets were closed off to protect the residents. However, the consumer goods industry welcomes the new celebrities with open arms: their images adorn growing numbers of product lines in supermarkets and chemists; trade journalists are forced to sit in the back rows at fashion shows because the front rows are reserved for Instagram stars with millions of followers; large newspaper companies reach only a fraction of the subscribers that a successful YouTuber can attain. The traditional advertising market continues to decline, and TV commercials are losing ground as young people watch less and less television, while influencer marketing continues to grow unchecked. A 2019 study often cited by the advertising industry states that ‘German marketers are willing to pay top influencers up to €38,000 per post,’ and that they planned to ‘spend 42 per cent of their total budget on influencer marketing.’ Influencers have significant economic, but also ideological power - which, as we will show, is used not only for advertising purposes, but also for questionable cultural and political influence on their followers.

‘Influence’ is exactly what influencers do in many different ways, but this does not mean that everyone who has influence is an influencer. A newspaper columnist, a newsreader, a top athlete who supports children in need, a musician who sings in support of or in protest against something – they all influence the discourse, society, the economy and even politics, but they are not influencers. If you were to describe anyone who has a certain audience as an

influencer, then the term would be completely arbitrary and therefore useless. The influencer, as in the figure that has been talked about in the marketing world since about 2007, should instead be understood as a person who has become well-known through social media and who publishes their own content as well as advertising content for all kinds of products (from clothing and fitness and cosmetic products to financial services) in the form of posts, photos or videos. As a rule, the influencer is not the ambassador for a single brand but promotes a number of different products. It is crucial that the influencer links the product as closely as possible to themselves by showing how they use it, while portraying themselves as a consumer and presenter. ‘There is nothing more authentic as a multiplier than someone from the target group,’ the operator of an agency for influencer marketing explains the principle.

Authenticity – which may to some extent be merely a mask of authenticity - is the most important factor in influencer marketing. This means that the influencer is neither a fictitious persona such as Madge the Manicurist in the Palmolive adverts or Mr Whipple in the case of Charmin bathroom tissue, nor is it just a celebrity who, as part of an advertising campaign, lends their face and reputation to a product, for example when George Clooney sips espresso or Heidi Klum bites into a burger. In these cases, the advertisers are also trying to create a credible overall image by means of a well-known personality, but the stars are merely advertising their public image, which does not have to correspond to their private image. Moreover, in influencer marketing, it is important that the influencers have their own profiles or channels with a lot of followers – predominantly on Instagram, YouTube and TikTok – in order to directly address their viewers.

For decades, advertising was mostly accepted whether you liked it or not, so you used the ad breaks on television to nip to the fridge. Sometimes you perceived adverts as annoying or you were simply indifferent (although it nevertheless had an effect that was admittedly difficult to measure). It was rare for ads to be considered entertainment – unless they were particularly funny, sexy or scandalous. Influencers not only changed the consumption of goods, but fundamentally changed advertising as a whole: suddenly it is watched voluntarily, consciously, even gladly. It not only becomes more difficult to tell the difference between what is advertising and what isn’t (despite the labelling obligation), but more and more people simply don’t care. Everything is entertainment, everything is advertising, and everything can become a commodity – even your own persona.

We are going to examine the phenomenon of the influencer in ten chapters: its pop-cultural vanguard becomes visible in the cinema of the nineties and noughties (Chapter 1), while at the same time capitalism was in trouble due to a lack of demand, to which influencer marketing promised a supposed solution (Chapter 2). Advertising mediums are created, whose class affiliation is ambiguous (Chapter 3) and which are characterised by a paradoxical mixture of individualism and imitation (Chapter 4). The body becomes a selling space (Chapter 5), old and new gender roles are established (Chapter 6), always in supposedly direct dialogue with the community (Chapter 7). For a while now, influencer content has also consisted of campaigning for socio-political causes such as feminism or anti-racism (Chapter 8). In addition, the influencer often thinks and acts globally, travels constantly and represents a consumerist cosmopolitanism (Chapter 9). And finally, influencer advertising offers something that is desperately sought after: the promise of advancement (Chapter 10).

We are certainly not idealising influencers; we see in them a danger that should be taken seriously, as they are anti-Enlightenment and manipulate their followers. They create a false consciousness, and they know how to exploit this in turn for profit. Indeed, they glorify the ‘damaged life’ of late capitalism.

CHAPTER 1

PATRICK BATEMAN’S CHILDREN

A young female influencer sits on a snow-white flokati carpet; the background is an equally white curtain. This is not a room but a cocoon. The influencer, wearing only a black lace body suit, a gold necklace and flashy earrings, has placed a white cloth mask on her face. An arrow in the middle of the picture nudges the viewer to interact: if you click on the symbol, a short Instagram video starts, in which the influencer carefully pulls off the mask and then smiles happily into the camera, which seems at the same time to be a mirror. She coyly places a strand of blonde hair behind her right ear and lets out a soft, barely audible sigh of happiness. She now shows what is supposed to be her true face, which has been duly moisturised by the mask. Without make-up, authentic, real – is the implicit advertising message. The cloth mask with almond oil and hyaluronic acid, according to the personal description alongside the video, is a product of a supermarket chain’s own brand, with a link attached. It goes on to say that the mask turns our ‘home office into a beauty salon’ – a little red heart replaces the full stop and concludes the text. The question of why the home is quite naturally called a home office is no longer posed in this neoliberal context, which has declared the self to be a project that constantly needs to be optimised. Working for and on oneself removes the separation of inside and outside, of private and public – the neoliberal subjectivity is like a Möbius strip, as aptly indicated by the hashtag #beautifulfrominsideandoutside.

What did cinema know, what did it see coming? More than we did. The camera glides along the steady waves of John Cale’s minimal music piano then through a luxury flat in New York, past Robert Longo’s painting *Men in the the Cities* and designer furniture in Bauhaus style; it glances briefly at an artistically rumped bed in the bedroom, on the sideboard a gigantic vase that is even whiter than the sheets. A well-toned 27-year-old has just got out of bed and is waiting for the audience in the bathroom. While he urinates standing up, his flawless face is reflected in the framed poster of the musical *Les Misérables*. His voice-over, so detached from his body, informs us about his morning routine, which in the year 2000, when the film *American Psycho* was released, was not yet a YouTube genre of its own, as the platform would not be founded for another five years. Patrick Bateman (Christian Bale), the name of the proto influencer, explains that his credo is to take care of yourself. A balanced diet and a rigorous exercise programme – a thousand sit-ups a day – do him just as much good as the ice mask, the deep cleansing lotion, the water-active cleansing gel, the honey-almond body scrub, the herbal

mint face mask, the aftershave, the anti-wrinkle eye balm and the moisturising protective lotion.

We don't find out which cosmetics companies the products come from; only over the course of the film are we introduced to the subtle differences between the brands, which Bret Easton Ellis uses in his book, on which the film is based, to draw characters that have no personality. Bateman makes no secret of this: 'There is an idea of a Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me,' he explains coolly, while he pulls off the transparent face mask like a second skin. And even if we feel that our lifestyle is the same as his, Bateman tells us: 'I'm just not there.' He speaks to us in confidence – with the honesty that cannot escape the lips of an influencer, whose capital is the illusion of an authentic self as well as their supposed closeness to us. In *American Psycho*, however, we viewers are not customers, but accomplices. Unlike Bateman's colleagues, we know that at night the investment banker turns into a serial killer who dismembers his victims with the same meticulousness with which he cares for himself. At first glance, the influencer's morning routine does not indicate the ugly, subterranean side of capitalism, but we suspect it is there – if we believe in the prophetic power of cinema, which anticipated the influencer before we knew them.

The last time cinema, which now makes less money than the gaming industry, was pop-cultural avantgarde was probably in the nineties and early noughties. It did not merely reflect the spirit of the times, but shaped it, took up discourses and consistently developed them. Today, when everything has become ever more fast-paced, cinema often lags behind when it tries to make film stars out of YouTubers, but the comparatively expensive films often reach fewer viewers than a simple video shot on a smartphone. At that time, cinema was still the most important reference medium from which other industries wanted to learn: product advertising, as almost all marketing strategists will confirm, needs good storytelling to create the right incentives to buy.

Scriptwriters, who for decades have happily been providing information in various guidebooks on how to manipulate the audience through clever storytelling in which the audience's emotions are precisely led to this or that character, unwillingly become pioneers of a new form of advertising. This manipulation can, of course, equally apply to products: *Save the Cat* is the title of one of the best-known guides to screenwriting, which according to its author Blake Snyder, names one of the golden rules: if the audience is to sympathise with the hero from the very first moment, then he must be shown doing something good, such as saving a cat from a dangerous situation. This screenwriting law has long been applied to products in advertising so that these appear to be a saviour in an emergency: in one ad from the early noughties, for example, a hitchhiker, lost in the burning hot desert, who has been waiting in vain for hours for a ride, spots a Coca-Cola vending machine in front of a run-down petrol station. Hastily, the young man drinks a bottle of Coke, while a car, a truck and a bus roar past him at that very moment. The pleasure of the cold drink seems to have distracted him from the matter at hand, but then, suddenly, two Latina beauties appear on the terrace and give him a ride to the next town. The man gratefully kisses his Coke.

Successful influencers are also masters of storytelling when they integrate the products to be promoted into supposedly everyday stories. The fact that Instagram talks about a 'story', meaning a 15-second picture and video snippet that disappears after 24 hours, is significant. In the stories, as if by chance, there is mention of waking after a good night's sleep, in order to

link to a sleep tracker app. There is a corresponding dating platform for today's search for a partner, and unrequited love is combated with chocolate from a Swiss manufacturer. Just stories that life writes. In the process, the influencers also adopt the principle of 'Save the Cat!' when they support this or that good cause – there is always a 'woke' bandwagon that is worth jumping on.

Advertising that doesn't look like advertising is particularly effective. This is where clever storytelling helps, and here too cinema is the forerunner: product placement in films, in which the goods are embedded in the action, made it apparent early on – as long as it was elegant and not too obtrusive – that our world is less dominated by logos than through logos. When James Bond, depending on the advertising deal, wears Brioni or Tom Ford, drinks Bollinger or Dom Pérignon, quenches his thirst with Heineken in between, escapes his pursuers in an Aston Martin, BMW or Audi over the decades, then the film character becomes a testimonial that invites identification and imitation. High prestige, worldwide recognition and a consumerist lifestyle make Bond the perfect influencer, especially since this character, created by Ian Fleming, literally embodies the term: Bond has influenced several generations of (male) viewers. The film theorist Siegfried Kracauer noted as early as the 1920s that films are 'the mirror of society' and often anticipated the future. If Kracauer found many indications of the fascisation of society in the cinema of the Weimar Republic (which he later compiled in *From Caligari to Hitler*), so the films of the nineties and noughties foreshadow the rise of the influencer. This means that films are commodities, but at the same time capitalist conditions are expressed in them: 'In order to research today's society, one would need to listen to the confessions of the products of its film industry. [...] At the same time, the epitome of the film motifs is the sum of social ideologies.'

The Bond films, however, not only mirror society, they shape it. They are both magnifying and distorting mirrors; Bond himself is a reflection in which the viewer believes he recognises himself, indeed, even identifies with. In addition, Agent 007 is the first travel influencer, a fact that tourism boards around the world recognised early on. For showing a long action sequence in Mexico City at the beginning of *Spectre* and for 007's reply to his superior's question about what he was doing in Mexico: 'A long overdue holiday', the production company is said to have received millions of dollars in subsidies from the Mexican state. The fact that Bond is a fictional character in no way diminishes the desired credibility that the secret agent acting on the service of Her Majesty (and the corporations) projects far beyond the screen. The great Bond actors – from Sean Connery to Daniel Craig – become one with their role at some point. Wherever they are, they are always also Bond, which is why Pierce Brosnan remained the advertising face of Brioni even after he retired from the role – even if a hint of the fictional surrounds this ad, making it more and more out of step with the times, as authenticity is the high-value word of the moment and not only in marketing. The Bond series, which relied on product placement to finance the costly productions from the start and which brought out its own licensed products such as deodorants, was *The Truman Show* avant la lettre, except that Truman became an influencer against his will – clueless, an innocent of the kind that no longer exists.

[...]

CHAPTER 2

THE SAVIOUR OF CAPITALISM?

[...]

Karl Marx described the problem owners of capital had not only to produce goods, but also to realise their value (i.e. to sell them) in the second volume of his work *Das Kapital* (Capital. A Critique of Political Economy). Only when the commodity has found a new owner and has been exchanged for money can the capitalist breathe a sigh of relief – if this does not happen, the invested capital is devalued and the storage of the surplus commodity costs extra. If power lies on the side of capital during the production process, it is entirely the opposite during the realisation process, which is why the customer can laugh at the seller when he complains of his woes. This is how Marx describes the sales discussions between customer and owner of goods:

The buyer he would ultimately find would laugh in his face if he were to say to him: 'I could not sell my goods for six months, and their preservation during that period did not only keep so and so much of my capital idle, but also cost me so and so much extra expense.' '*Tant pis pour vous!*' the buyer would say. 'Right here alongside of you is another seller whose wares were completed only the day before yesterday. Your articles are white elephants and probably more or less damaged by the ravages of time. Therefore, you will have to sell cheaper than your competitor.'

The advertising industry has been trying to answer this realisation problem of capital since its inception. There must be no stagnation, no lack of demand, and so the advertising business has proved to be as vital to the capitalist mode of production as it is dependent on it itself. It is true that there were early forms of advertising long before the Industrial Revolution (just as goods were produced for exchange before the formation of capitalism without the exchange form becoming economically dominant over the subsistence economy), but it was only with the dawn of the industrial age that business advertising reached its full maturity. In his history of advertising, Hanns Buchli wrote:

A police regulation was published in Paris as early as July 1734 prohibiting the distribution of commercial pamphlets, and this ban is undoubtedly due to the guild regulation that still existed at the time and to other restrictions on commercial freedom of movement.

This was supposed to prevent price undercutting, which today would probably be interpreted as a competitive advantage for the consumer. Only when the fetters of the feudal mode of production were broken could advertising develop along with capitalism.

Printed newspapers played a decisive role in this. According to Buchli, 'the '*Moniteur Universel*' was probably the world's first newspaper to publish its advertising rates on the 5th May 1789' – in the year of the French Revolution. Only two years later, in 1791, 'a law was enacted, which established the unrestricted freedom of labour, industry and the exploitation of every trade, which put France way ahead of all other states.'

From advertisements to product promotion: together with the market economy, a new industry was emerging that was slowly becoming independent and was tasked with making the positive news of the beautiful world of consumer goods omnipresent. Large campaigns in newspapers, on the radio and television, on advertising pillars and on smartphones have been the constant companions of capitalism ever since, which meant that in the early seventies a new form of aesthetics emerged, which Wolfgang Fritz Haug called ‘commodity aesthetics’.

There is a contradiction that was analysed early on by Marx in *The Capital*: the difference between exchange value and use value is an essential element. The buyer is interested in the commodity because it has a practical use – in Marx’s terms: a use value. Practical here does not merely mean the basic purpose of a commodity (e.g. ‘Is this scarf warm enough?’), but also that the scarf makes the buyer look younger, more attractive or more fashionable. Marx says:

The commodity is first an external object, a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of one kind or another. The nature of these needs is irrelevant, e.g., whether their origin is in the stomach or in the fancy.

But it is different for the commodity owner: for him the commodity has no practical use – if it did, he would hardly be selling it – apart from being the bearer of exchange value. This contradiction is the starting point of Haug’s *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics*:

From the point of view of needing the use-value, the object of the exercise has been achieved if the purchased article is usable and satisfactory; from the exchange-value side this is achieved when the exchange-value is converted into monetary form. In so far as the logic of exchange is the determinant, the seller values the material and immaterial things which the other person needs to survive – his or her necessities of life – practically, the other person’s life functions as a mere instrument in obtaining exchange-value.

This contradiction between seller and buyer, between exchange-value and use-value, finds a ‘pseudo-solution’ in commodity aesthetics. It creates a ‘promise of use-value’ that convinces the customer that the purchase of the commodity is for his well-being – and not for the enrichment of the seller. This is done by the appealing design of the commodity and the transformation of the goods into a brand.

‘Just forget the word banana!’ the United Fruit Company advertised in Germany in 1967. ‘Remember Chiquita!’ In present-day capitalist society, there are types of commodities, whose generic concepts expressing their use-values are no longer available to people. There are categories of commodities for which people in contemporary capitalist societies no longer have any concepts of use value.

Haug sums this up, saying: ‘Their place has been taken by a copyright trademark.’ Advertising is essential for the emergence of the brand but the promise of utility value it generates rarely coincides with the real use value. More often it is a matter of ‘aesthetic illusion’: in a sense, a double reality is produced– ‘first the use-value, second, and more importantly, the *appearance* of use-value.’ In this way, television commercials link the use of

a perfume with sensual love – knowing full well that in reality the latter is seldom achieved by merely spraying on a perfume.

The illusion is intended to ensure that what has been produced with capital investment and entrepreneurial risk does not become a white elephant. And just as capital is permanently accumulated and reinvested, advertising must also constantly create new requirements so that it doesn't come to a standstill. By way of illustration, Haug describes the crisis-ridden west German fashion industry of the 1960s, which resorted to drastic measures in order to sell new suits:

The result was slogans mobilizing the *anxiety* potential and aimed to undermine the then current standards of appearance of the sober, orderly and well-groomed bourgeois. 'Cowards wear grey,' they proclaimed. 'Old coats make you look fat!' 'Old suits make men appear tired!' 'Always wearing the same suit is like eating left-overs. Boring!' Old – meaning in concrete terms older than one season's fashion – and grey were to be equated with cowards, fat, tired and boring.

The campaigns are not always so coercive, but the function of advertising in capitalism is still the same today: it is meant to ensure the constant reproduction of capital by making new goods desirable to consumers, even if the old ones still completely fulfil their function. And just as commodity aesthetics must always sing the praises of the renewal of the product range, it too has been revolutionised in ever shorter cycles over the course of the emergence of mass media.

Since the turn of the millennium, the advertising industry has been forced to react several times to changes in media consumption: for example, when the importance of television adverts went down, product placement became the preferred form of advertising at the beginning of the noughties. This was mainly due to the fact that recording, as well as Pay TV channels, had increased the options available to media users to circumvent advertising breaks.

From then on, commodities were increasingly integrated into programmes, series and films, which increased their effectiveness. Without running the risk of viewers switching channels, the advertising factor was maintained and the product in turn became associated with the programme. However, this boost in effectiveness can hardly be compared with what became possible through the commercialisation of the Internet.

What had long seemed like a distant fantasy to the advertising industry now became possible: personalised advertising that directly targeted interested consumers and did not just solicit the masses (thereby bypassing many), as had been the case with television spots and entire pages of newspapers. Over the last two decades, large digital companies have specialised in collecting and analysing user data in order to advertise more effectively than ever before.

The crowning achievement of this development in online advertising is undoubtedly the influencer. Those who want to advertise no longer have to go through the hassle of finding out how to approach a target group: a manufacturer of dietary supplements only has to find a fitness influencer who is willing to cooperate and agree to a product placement in his or her everyday online life. The remuneration of the living advertising pillar can even be made dependent upon the success of its advertising effect (for example, with so-called affiliate links, through which companies are informed when users are redirected to their web shop via an influencer's profile), so that the biggest disappointments and poor investments can be avoided.

The social media stars in turn create intimacy by illustrating their everyday lives without being pushy. They seem like friends full of good intentions who recommend a product to their followers. In truth, they are primarily helping themselves – and the crisis-ridden system in the realisation of capital.

[...]

CHAPTER 3

THE EMERGENCE OF ADVERTISING BODIES

‘Je vois la vie en rose’ - this is how Édith Piaf once sang about great love. Three quarters of a century later, the colour revered by the iconic chanson singer serves less to extol the highest of feelings, but rather for the adornment of adolescent girls by the advertising industry, as demonstrated by one influencer posing for an Instagram photo on the beach. Pink lipstick, pink top, pink hairband, pink fingernails: the clothes as well as the accessories reproduce clichés of femininity, which, despite all the progress made by feminism, can still, to this day, be used to turn a profit. The object of desire, the image of which is combined with the charms of the smiling young woman, is a pink perfume bottle, which she holds in her right hand. After the obligatory question to the community – ‘When was the last time you were really happy? What put you in a good mood? For me it was the first day at the beach – perfect for relaxing and letting go’ – the influencer gets to the actual purpose of her post in the description of the image: ‘I took my new favourite fragrance ‘IRRESISTIBLE’ by @givenchybeauty with me on our trip to the beach. This *eau de parfum* totally won me over with its fruity, soft, powdery but above all feminine scent that always puts me in a good mood and reminds me of these great moments.’ Equating good mood with happiness seems to leave the online community as unbothered as the marketing speak: more than 90,000 fans ‘hearted’ this picture. *‘Mon Coeur qui bat.’*

Even if the role of the influencer in the world of digital capitalism consists of ensuring the realisation of capital, this does not mean that the influencer sees him or herself as engaged in this mission. On the contrary, many influencers seem to misunderstand their own profession. One example of this is a statement by perhaps Germany’s most well-known YouTuber, who told the magazine *Zapp* in October 2019: ‘Someone like Anne Will (German television journalist and political talk show host) is an influencer, I am an influencer, we all influence people,’ as if the term were linked to the mere influence of any kind and not to the specific form of advertising of influencer marketing.

How does this discrepancy come about? How can it be that YouTubers and Instagram stars, whose system-stabilising role is the marketing of products, often see themselves less as advertising faces than as inspiring entertainers and friends of the community – or at least publicly present themselves as such? Is it simply about dazzling the public, who are meant to

believe that this is entertainment rather than commerce? No, such an assumption would fall short of the mark – instead, the role of the influencer seems different from their individual perspective than from the perspective of capital.

With few exceptions such as footballers and pop and reality TV stars, who attract millions of followers due to their previous celebrity status, almost all influencers have a mountain to climb. Over months or even years of work, they have to offer entertainment to the online world – in the form of funny videos or beautiful travel photos – and build up a community. Only then can the reach they have gained be used for advertising messages. No company would think of using Instagrammers with a couple of dozen followers for an advertising campaign.

This was illustrated by the first generation of YouTubers: it consisted of previously unknown young people, who happened to be in the right place at the right time. They experimented in front of the camera and put the results online –whether these were sketches they created themselves, parodies of Lady Gaga videos or make-up tips. These clips were not published for the money, but for the attention and recognition, and anyone watching them today will be amazed at how unselfconscious the current click-millionaires smiled into the camera back then, how amateurish their video editing and lighting was. But then they professionalised in no time at all: the clips were produced more elaborately, edited faster, filmed better – and money could be made.

As early as 2007, two years after the company was founded, YouTube launched its partner programme: the platform places commercials before the videos of its producers, from which both parties earn money. This programme was the first source of income for the early YouTubers, who were not yet influencers at that time. But that would change in the following years, when they were offered their own collaborations, shared their daily lives and held products up to the camera - in short, when influencer marketing came into being.

So two phases can be identified: first to emerge are the internet stars who attract thousands and thousands of fans. Then the stars become influencers. This also shows why some professional YouTubers don't understand their role as realisers of capital: they see themselves as entertainers who advertise on the side because this is the order in which their career developed. Today, however, almost every internet career begins with an economic consideration. Capital, in turn, represented by companies willing to advertise, sees influencers as celebrity entertainers, who are now going to be introduced to their actual purpose (though they don't realise it).

[...]

The Class Affiliation of Influencers

The big difference from earlier celebrities lies in the communication, which – despite the gigantic wealth gap between influencers and followers – is supposed to simulate equal status: influencers are not supposed to appear larger than life. Back in the day, the megastars of the film and music industry were idolised beings who could only be cut out of magazines and adored. Influencers, on the other hand, don't talk to their followers as if they are subordinates

or admirers, but as if they are friends. They ask them for advice and give them (paid) product recommendations in return. This marketing strategy, which combines authenticity and communication as used with a peer group, is older than the influencers. We can find predecessors of this form of advertising as early as the 1970s, for example when Wolfgang Fritz Haug describes gift advertising using hostesses in his *Critique of the Aesthetics of Commodities*:

While in this procedure free gifts are handed over, the looks, behaviour and conversation of the ‘hostesses’ serve as the living packaging of the procedure. In the place of mere packages, human beings are used to counteract any misgivings about mere packages. The ‘first-name gambit’ means that they are paid to act as packages, which appear to behave as independent-minded people who confide their experiences to you and are personally attractive. The humanity of these hostesses is calculated by capital to be the very illusion which deceives the consumer in the course of the free-gift promotion. For the hostesses, it means that they hire out their physical and mental powers to capital, which assumes the expression of these human powers, dresses up in them, and appears to the buying masses in their guise as ‘charming, intelligent and adaptable.’

Followers seldom appreciate their influencers for their intelligence, but apart from this small flaw, the influencers have perfected the ‘pally’ ploy. They, too, are supposed to appear as if they can make their own decisions and appear attractive in the literal sense. They are supposed to bind their followers to them as well as the products they are advertising.

Any yet their role remains ambivalent: while the hostesses in Haug’s example undoubtedly appear subordinate to capital, the class affiliation of the influencers is less clear. YouTubers and Instagrammers seem to elude classical categorisations (e.g. on the basis of the means of production) because of their heterogeneity. While some of them are entrepreneurs themselves and produce their own cosmetics, fitness or merchandising products, many influencers are merely privileged self-employed.

In order to judge their class affiliation, we therefore have to examine the various relations of exploitation to which the influencers are subjected or from which they benefit. The category of exploitation must not be misunderstood (as it often is) as a moral one. Following the Marxist theory of surplus value, what is meant by this is rather, that parts of the wealth created do not accrue to its producers but are appropriated by other societal participants.

So how do influencers earn their money? Often by renting out their physical and mental powers to capital. No matter how high their income, they are mostly sellers of their own labour power and in this respect, they are exploited. The (advertising) value they create, which consists of an improved image of the advertising partner (and ideally translates into higher sales figures), exceeds their remuneration – the added value realised with their help is appropriated by the advertising companies.

However, such subordination to capital is not a given for all influencers. When they reach a certain level of professionalism and prominence, they can become capitalists themselves. They then often co-operate with large companies, for example with cosmetics companies, to market their own shampoo or make-up. If this is the case, they act as equal exploiters if they do not sell their products themselves. Whether it is self-help books or

merchandise, it is easier than ever for influencers to bring their own products to their followers, for example with the help of platforms like Shopify.

The most valuable company (in terms of market share) in Canada today, which also co-operates with the Kardashians, was founded by Tobias Lütke from Koblenz in Germany. With a partner, he initially marketed snowboards through an online shop that he programmed himself, before he came up with a decisive business idea: why shouldn't every medium-sized business, indeed every individual, run his or her own web shop? The company, which was founded in 2006 and now has five thousand employees, is probably the biggest profiteer from influencer marketing.

The most successful influencers are thus able to subordinate the role of capital. The core of their new business model – their own online shop, own ticket shop, self-published cookbooks, direct acquisition from advertising partners – is the so-called disintermediation. This means the business does not function entirely without intermediaries, since the platform requires the software for the online shop and, crucially, digital payment services for its social media presence. Influencers are thus exploited and exploiters at the same time, if, on the one hand, they serve capital and, on the other hand, they employ staff to help them organise appointments, to improve their photographs and help with editing videos. Many of these jobs created by influencers are so-called 'bullshit jobs' – not to be confused with 'shit jobs' that are hard, badly paid and unpopular, but desperately needed. Anthropologist David Graeber defines 'bullshit jobs' as:

A form of paid employment that is so utterly pointless, unnecessary or dangerous, that even the person doing it cannot justify its existence, although he feels, by the terms of his employment, it is necessary to pretend that this is not the case.

As an example of such a job, Graeber gives the story of a graphic designer working for the advertising industry who spends all his time digitally altering women's curves and whitening teeth. Despite being paid well, he describes his work as a 'bullshit job' because he is aware of the harmful consequences of the images he produces. Graeber states:

If you [...] subtly improve the appearance of celebrities, you want to change the unconscious assumptions of the viewer of what the reality of everyday life – in this case the bodies of men and women – should look like, and thus create the unpleasant feeling that the lived reality as such is an inadequate substitute for what is actually right.

The influencer's employees do this when, with the help of Photoshop and Insta-filters, they recreate the world of their employer as a desirable alternative to a reality in which there are folds of fat and crooked teeth – and in which they also belong.

[...]