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– DAVID SCHEAF, PHD



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THE INFLUENCER EFFECT

ANYONE WHO HAS SPENT MUCH TIME on social media has run across influencers – people who are paid to review products online. You can find them – or more than likely they find you – on TikTok, YouTube and Instagram. Influencers pitch clothes, makeup and digital devices. Some influencers have even shifted to making and selling their own products.

It seems like an entrepreneurial match made in heaven.

But it was a different connection that piqued David Scheaf’s interest: how do entrepreneurs who watch influencers interpret and leverage influencer content in their own entrepreneurial efforts?

Scheaf, who has a PhD in Organizational Science and serves as an associate professor of Entrepreneurship and Corporate Innovation at the Hankamer School of Business, studied the connection with Laura D’Oria and Michael P. Lerman of Iowa State University and Timothy L. Michaelis of Northern Illinois University. Their findings, “Para-social Mentoring: The Effects of Entrepreneurship Influencers on Entrepreneurs,” were published in the *Journal of Business Venturing*.

Scheaf’s interest started when he worked in Apple’s Retail Division.

“I noticed the growing prominence of large entrepreneurship influencers and began viewing their content,” Scheaf said. “Young people and students were sharing stories about how these influencers taught them valuable lessons. These included insights into starting and growing businesses.”

His students referred to influencers by their first names, as if they had established a personal relationship with them. The mechanisms behind this engagement and the potential benefits in shaping entrepreneurial learning intrigued Scheaf.

Any connection between social media influencers and entrepreneurship was unclear in previous research. Scheaf and his coauthors revealed fans and followers did more than consume enjoyable content – they felt an attachment to the influencers, which Scheaf terms “para-social mentoring” between influencers and their followers.

Academic literature about para-social relationships dates back to the 1950s, examining one-sided relationships viewers, listeners and fans have with celebrities.

The latter have no relationship with and are typically unaware of such people, but the fans often feel deep attachment, infatuation or even love.

“What we noticed from people who followed entrepreneurship influencers is that they didn’t view them as friends or romantic partners,” he said. “They viewed them as mentors.”

Mentorship and mentors have been studied extensively, but have tended to focus on contexts where the mentor and protégé know each other or work in the same organization. While para-social mentoring provides some of the same benefits, it has hazards not typically found with in-person mentoring.

There is a mismatch of goals when the influencer seeks broad influence for clicks, views and engagement, but the follower needs mentoring that’s circumstance-specific.

“This mismatch is most apparent when influencers peddle content that glorifies extreme hustle, suffering and relentless work as the only valid path to success,” Scheaf said.

If the influencer emphasizes the struggle as necessary sacrifices to success, the follower might work even harder on a product that isn’t gaining traction because their para-social mentor emphasizes the struggle as much or more than the win.

Scheaf hopes these insights will prove helpful to entrepreneurs who look to influencers for mentoring.

“Entrepreneurs, especially young ones, need to know the benefits and dangers of para-social mentoring and have the insight to seek an in-person mentor when it will better help them reach their goals,” Scheaf said. ■