

The sudden dawn of the deinfluencer: can online superstars stop us shopping?

A backlash against overconsumption is spreading fast on social media. Is this the beginning of the end for our rampant, destructive consumer culture – or just influencing by another name?

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I am watching people I have never met cry at the smell of a perfume

I have never smelled. But I want it, and I am not alone. When influencers began posting videos of themselves reacting with tears and evocative descriptions of a scent called Missing Person by Phlur, likening it to the smell of someone you love and miss, it sold out in five hours and amassed a 200,000-strong waiting list.

Social media is now what markets and shopping centres once were – the place people go to spend their cash – full of such “must-haves” as heated eyelash curlers and “miracle” pink cleaning pastes. And when something goes viral online, it sells in real life. Influencers [reportedly sold \\$3.6bn \(£3bn\) of goods in 2022](#), with the \$700 Dyson Airwrap hair styler among the top sellers. In a [recent study](#), 54% of people said they made a purchase either in the moment or after seeing a product or service on Instagram. According to another report, 55% of TikTok users have made a purchase after seeing a brand or product on the platform. [On Twitter, that figure is 40%](#).

Influencers grease the system, sending people rushing to buy something in the hope it will do for them what it has apparently done for the influencer, be it giving them bouncier hair, curlier lashes or cleaner worktops.

“I just don’t think we talk about how impactful influencers truly are,” says Heidi Kaluza, a former fast-fashion influencer turned slow-fashion influencer who goes by [@the_rogue_essentials](#) on Instagram. While Facebook is the [favoured](#) social media platform for digital shoppers, TikTok is where [gen Z](#) goes to spend its money. Which makes it both the perfect and a paradoxical place for a new movement: deinfluencing.

If influencing is trying to convince people on social media to buy certain products, then deinfluencing is, very broadly, the opposite. Reportedly

originating on beauty TikTok last month, it has been huge on the platform ever since, spreading to game and book influencers. The hashtag has more than 185m views, while #antihaul – a reaction against “haul” videos, in which someone talks about their recent purchases – has more than 58m. One creator’s instructions not to buy various viral products of the moment – “Do not get the UGG Minis. Do not get the Dyson Airwrap. Do not get the Charlotte Tilbury Wand. Do not get the Stanley Cup. Do not get Colleen Hoover books. Do not get the AirPods Max” – has been liked more than 57,000 times. This backlash may be a reaction against influencer culture and the gargantuan sums some people have made from it.

“This might be controversial, but I do not think you need multiple sets of fancy coordinated loungewear,” says [@michelleskidelsky](#), who has more than 77,000 followers, in one such deinfluencer video. “A skincare fridge. Why are you buying this?” she asks in another.

“Just because you put pretty packaging over garbage, doesn’t mean it’s not still garbage,” says [@katiehub.org](#), in a video advising her 910,000 followers not to buy much-hyped makeup.

But as with most things on the internet, deinfluencing has different meanings for different people. In some posts, influencers aim to puncture hype. “It’s an opportunity to use my voice and share my honest and personal thoughts on experiences with products I’ve purchased that have become viral through social media,” Rachele di Stasio, a former dancer with more than 160,000 followers on TikTok, tells me by email. Her first video tagged “deinfluencing” has been watched more than 780,000 times. “Put this back on the shelf,” she tells viewers, referring to a \$60 lip balm from Tom Ford. For Liv Markley, a 20-year-old with 64,000 TikTok followers, “it’s about taking a step back” from products that are being “pushed as super-trendy” and “really evaluating how something works for me personally”.

Others recommend low-cost alternatives to luxury products they deem not worth the money. While [@alyssastephanie](#) admits to having bought 20 bottles of one expensive TikTok-popular sunscreen, she recommends an \$8 alternative from the US grocery store Trader Joe’s instead. “Honestly, it’s better,” she tells her 127,000 followers. Another popular type of content sees former employees of big-name beauty shops dish the dirt on which products were most frequently returned. Some recommend cheaper alternatives or question the merit of makeup that has gone viral.

But it is easy to see why deinfluencing has been called influencing by another name. “Deinfluencing is still influencing,” says Jasmine Enberg, a social media analyst at Insider Intelligence. “Creators are using their

power to sway the purchasing decisions of a broader population. They've just adapted the trend to resonate with consumers during an economic downturn."

Karen Wu, AKA [@cakedbybabyk](#), says: "It's definitely ironic because you're still influencing people by telling people what to do." In a recent video, she urged people not to buy a lipstick, comparing the feeling of it to having chicken grease on your lips.

There is also a strand of content under the deinfluencing umbrella that places a message about overconsumption and overspending centre stage. Paige Pritchard, who goes by the name of The Spending Coach on TikTok, has been posting content under the deinfluencer hashtag to point out that consumption habits that have been normalised by TikTok – from wearing a new outfit every day to having 50 different foundations – are not normal.

"To me, deinfluencing is living your life, drawing inspiration from what you see," she says, but not necessarily feeling that "you need to go out and create a carbon copy of someone else's life or hit copy paste on what someone else has". She takes the example of watching someone writing a journal as part of a post about their morning routine. You might like to incorporate writing a diary into your own life, but there is no need to rush out and buy exactly the same journal.

It is possible to see how influence without a consumption message can work because, in some corners of the internet, that kind of message has been around for a long time already. Aja Barber, author of *Consumed: The Need for Collective Change – Colonialism, Climate Change & Consumerism*, has been covering this beat for a decade, long before deinfluencers jumped on the bandwagon.

Doing outfit videos for clothes she already owns, she says: "I will tell people: 'I'm wearing these jeans from this maker. I wouldn't buy them because this maker really needs to sign the [accord for garment workers](#), but I know that they do very good plus sizes and so what I recommend is you go and buy them on eBay.'"

It is, she points out, a lot more nuanced than: "Swap this out for this, or this product isn't worth your money ... If you actually care about deinfluencing people, teach them a thing or two about the places that they are buying from. Let's start there."

Of course, old habits die hard and Barber has to remind people all the time that her intent is not to encourage them to buy things. "We all have a striped T-shirt, we all have a Breton top, we all have black trousers," she says. "Here's a way to put these pieces together in a way that feels

fresh ... We're looking at the shapes, we're looking at the structures of the pieces, right? It's not about having the particular brand."

Overconsumption is going to need some serious dislodging, of course, since the internet and shopping are a very happy couple. "Social media has been allied with selling products since its conception. People forget this is not a new thing," says Isobel Selby, a senior account manager at the influencer marketing agency Fanbytes by Brainlabs. Enberg suspects deinfluencing is just a reaction to the current economic woes: "The hype will die down as the economy improves. Deinfluencing isn't the remedy for overconsumption, nor is it the end of influencer marketing. TikTok creators will remain a major driver of commerce sales from social media, which (while slowing) will grow 29.8% in the US this year."

Ironically, having negative reviews thrown into the mix through deinfluencing might supercharge the sway of some influencers. "Creators are smart. Having a mix of positive and critical reviews helps them garner more trust and distance themselves from the recent series of influencer controversies," says Enberg.



Many creators say they will continue to post deinfluencer content. Illustration: MARK LONG/The Guardian

One such controversy has been cited as a catalyst for deinfluencing: the storm over whether beauty influencer Mikayla Nogueira was wearing false eyelashes in [a video](#) in partnership with L'Oréal to promote its mascara. It says something that TikTokers who were not influencers with large followings, but whose deinfluencer videos have found big audiences, have since been [sent PR products](#) to review online.

"Spending on beauty and personal care items is still at an all-time high," says Pritchard. She wants to be optimistic, but thinks it will take more time and an end to us "continually buying stuff that we see on social

media, thinking that it's going to be life-changing and then it's not". We live our lives in consumer culture, she adds – it is not easy to opt out.

Is deinfluencing a sign that the tide might be turning, even just a little, on consumerism online? "Overconsumption is something that I've started being very mindful about," says Wu. "I know it's ironic for an influencer to be talking about overconsumption, but this is something that I'm truly trying to work on." Many say they will continue to post deinfluencer content, but what that content looks like depends on how they see the trend.

"It's another movement of the dial," says Barber. She has seen it shift before, with personal ramifications for how her sustainability message has been received: "About three years ago, people stopped throwing tomatoes when I would open my mouth." Kaluza says: "This never would have occurred in 2019 ... It would have been squashed. I really think this is the beginning of the conversation in the mainstream."

Barber believes deinfluencing "has to be coupled with an anti-consumption message" and people slowing down their purchasing. That message, says Kaluza, will take hold with those who already had an uneasy feeling brewing around influence online. "It starts to explain something inside you that's always felt a little off about how you consume someone's influence," she says. Pritchard has been seeing these kinds of conversations on her posts, with people expressing a queasiness but unable to fully vocalise it.

There was certainly something in the ether for one TikToker, Nava Rose, who has nearly 6 million followers and calls herself "the girl with too many clothes". Even before the current deinfluencing moment, she posted videos apologising for her role in overconsumption. She hadn't understood why people were doing fast-fashion hauls during an environmental crisis, but now says she realises the role that influence plays. "I do have to take responsibility for my actions," she confesses [in one video](#). "The fact that some people actually consider shopping fast fashion to be a hobby is honestly quite disgusting. Find a new hobby please. Birdwatching is such a nice wholesome hobby."

"I think we're only going to continue to move in this direction," says Barber. "The writing is on the wall that the Earth can't sustain these systems any more."

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