

HED: The Social Media Game: Student Influencers are Making an Impact

DEK: “How College Kids are Becoming the Most Valuable Asset to Modern Brands”

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By Zack Kotronis

It took a single email to change everything for Hannah Krohne. It was impossible to count how many times she had flipped through her inbox, hoping to get the response she had been working tirelessly for. Four months of being in front of the camera had still not exhausted her dreams. The numbers were beginning to climb; views and likes were now in the hundreds of thousands, and Hannah sensed that companies would soon take notice. She needed a breakthrough, something to validate the long hours of editing, content ideation, and fashion research. Finally, it came. A fashion brand was offering Hannah her first-ever partnership. She immediately got on the phone with her parents to break the news. “It felt like an ‘I made it’ moment,” Hannah said. Looking back now—having reached over 150,000 followers on her TikTok page—it seems she could have never imagined that her social media work was about to give her the opportunity of a lifetime.

Part I: The Makings of a Student Influencer

Being a student influencer has become more than just a hobby or a small taste of digital fame. Many of them are pivoting from their would-be career paths, and those like Hannah are making a living by doing so. “I do have a full time job after college, but my social media will—by far—be my main source of income...[my social media] has made itself a career of its own,” said Hannah, now a senior at Syracuse University. She took me back to where it all began, living at her sorority house in her sophomore year of college. Hannah was never a stranger to fashion sense, so roommates mobbed her room for outfit inspiration. She was a natural at styling her “sisters.”

But somewhere along her fashion counseling, Krohne’s friends returned some valuable advice: the idea of starting a fashion account on TikTok. A double major in marketing and

entrepreneurship, Krohne’s career ambitions aligned with the idea, and it made so much sense for someone who styled everyone around her. After some reflection, Krohne decided to post her first video on TikTok and, with the support of her friends behind the camera, “Hannah Lizzy” was born.

As a fashion-based student influencer, Krohne highlights outfits throughout her content as recommendations for her audience. She frequently makes “Get Ready With Me” videos where she informs viewers about her outfit of choice, while also narrating day-by-day experiences to let her authenticity shine through. She credits her social media expertise for opening the door to several entrepreneurial experiences. “Every kind of opportunity that I’ve gotten over the past year has basically been because of my social media,” Krohne told me. She now partners with Dolce Vitta (a shoe brand), Revolve, Frankies Bikinis, and others, showcasing their items through her videos. According to Krohne, the social media traction she gained in September 2023 helped brands realize her ability to “tell a story using fashion.” Her work exemplifies how student



influencers are beginning to capitalize on their social media success by collaborating with

professional brands, something students have never before been capable of.

Part II: A Brief History of Influencers

Influencer marketing via social media has been around for well over a decade now, a transformation that allowed non-celebrities to endorse products on their own for the first time. Brands have since been incentivized to partner with influencers due to many advantages that celebrities cannot provide. According to an article by Joy I. Rowden, a broadcast journalist major and former student influencer herself, “Influencers tend to be better at building stronger parasocial relationships with their fans than celebrities.” Additionally, while celebrities often have a larger following, they are also less interactive with their audiences. But influencers offer a solution for brands. They specialize in creating UGC (user generated content), a more engaging approach to consumer outreach. UGC is defined as “any type of content that is created and shared by users, rather than by brands or companies.”(Lane 2023) Content provided by social media influencers often provides greater transparency for consumers, therefore affecting purchasing behavior. “Their fans see them as more relatable and trustworthy, which creates a one-sided friendship dynamic.” (Rowden, 2022) Influencers are also a more cost-effective option for brands to pursue as sponsors. “Influencers have an easy and robust marketplace where [brands] can drive down the cost of reaching a whole lot of people with a personalized message,” said Sean Branagan, director of the Center for Digital Media & Entrepreneurship at SU’s Newhouse School of Public Communications.

Part III: Brands are Counting on Gen-Z

Such advantages may give student influencers an edge, especially with brands attempting to target younger audiences. “The business model right now is that you can get a microinfluencer who may have an audience of 5,000 to 10,000 people, but an audience they connect with, and it

can be very beneficial because of that,” said Jonathan Glass, a professor at SU’s Newhouse School. His work also includes teaching the “Social Media for Communicators” graduate course. Glass reasoned with the idea that student influencers show promise for brand marketing. “Influencers, and especially young influencers, have very much come into play over the last 5 years because they are designed to attract audiences,” he said. It’s notable that brands are beginning to view student influencers as favorable ambassadors when attracting younger consumers.

In recent years, the landscape of brand-influencer partnerships has shifted as a result of platforms like TikTok, making way for Gen-Z creators. Such opportunities are heavily supported by advertising students like Ashley Shapiro, an SU senior with experience as a brand ambassador. Together with companies like Valentino Beauty, Hero Cosmetics, and Aquaphor, Shapiro operates on the other side of brand deals. “My brand currently sources content creators who have the time, expertise and resources to make branded content for them.,” Shapiro said. She highlighted visibility as the key incentive for student influencers, whether they opt to pursue social media in the long-term or see it as a “resume-booster” for their career paths. In Shapiro’s words, “I think it’s a great way for students to expose themselves to brands and learn about the media industry.” No matter the goals of student influencers, their ability to attract audiences based on their shared interests is a future asset for media-based businesses.

Part IV: What Works Best?

But not all social media-aspiring students at SU identify as influencers. When looking strictly at values of production, you’ll see a major contrast between influencers and content creators. Take Dylan McKinley for example, more commonly known as “DylanDoesBasketball” on Youtube.

His work in the basketball realm of media involves video essays, documentaries, and more.

McKinley describes content creators as more passion-oriented, with a focus on storytelling

rather than content motivated by sponsorships. “It’s really easy to put in the work when you’re enjoying what you’re doing”, McKinley said. “I wanted to make the best possible content in this niche that I felt no one else was doing successfully.” McKinley’s approach has been nothing short of successful, as his “DylanDoesBasketball” page now has a following of over 180,000. His example illustrates that student content creators can still be as financially successful as student influencers, despite having different opportunities for income.



So what route happens to be the most sustainable way for students to create a business out of their social media? It isn’t simple enough to draw conclusions from who does what because of the success on both sides. But some educators of social media see the creator model as more profitable long-term. “I think we are at the beginning of a soon-to-be popping influencer bubble,” said Branagan. “As soon as the algorithm shifts—something that you have no control of—then you’re out of business.” In addition, TikTok’s potential U.S. ban may pose a significant threat to influencer marketing. An entrepreneur himself, Branagan is less concerned about the field of content creators, of which he sees as doing more than “just what the brands want.” Could that mean creators hold more influence after all? And if there is a future where tik tok is banned, what will their futures as brand ambassadors look like? “The media world is constantly changing,” said Claire Ceccoli, a dual major in PR and psychology. “I think that another platform

will eventually emerge as the next outlet for brand ambassadors to promote content.”

Whatever the case may be, it isn't impossible for social media figures to find a balance between influencing and content creation. It all comes down to the creator themselves. “With student content creators and where [influencership] is going, it really involves making entertaining content while including promoted products more casually,” said Neil Adams. The four-year student influencer has amassed nearly 50,000 followers on TikTok and partners with Dell Technologies, Mountain Dew and Rockstar Energy (both under Pepsico). Adams envisions UGC as a personalized blend of content creation with influencer marketing. “I see it as including products as a part of what you are creating rather than a call to action for consumers,” said Adams.



A Television, Radio, and Film major, Neil Adams has been building on his social media since his freshman year.

Part V: The Trend

It's unclear exactly when student influencers appeared on college campuses. With no data to track when this wave of students suddenly fell in love with creating content on social media, it'd be wise to consider what came about in the last half-decade that could have spurred such a movement. For one, Covid-19 sent socioeconomic shockwaves around the world, leaving most of us phone-users trapped in our homes. Quarantining did its best job to allow parasocial relationships to thrive, while TikTok was already on its way to becoming the most popular app in the United States. “Both TikTok's popularity and the fact that people were stuck in their houses

really drove up short-form content and the level of digital production,” said Neil Adams. That shift may have been enough to convince brands of the student influencer reach, especially when marketing towards a younger demographic.

Since then, the number of student influencers at schools like SU has only grown, with some reaching social and financial heights that were once unimaginable without a college degree. The social media success proven by these college kids will only continue to inspire others in the content creation of their own. “Content creation is absolutely still on the rise,” according to Chris Ern, a PR student and advertising manager at the Daily Orange. “I know a ton of people that post personalized content to relate to larger audiences. They see the trend and it works.” So, putting on my influencer boots, I’ll have to close with a return to Hannah to offer some friendly social media motivation. After reflecting on her first brand deal, and the many since then, she finally knows what she’s been capable of this whole time. “Now that I’m here, I can make this something that’s meaningful for the rest of my life. It’s all up to me.”

Sidebar #1 Hed: A Go-To Guide for Surviving a World Without TikTok

We get it, you might be losing your mind a little bit about the potential TikTok ban. This is a life-changing moment for many of you Gen-Zers, and it’s hard to imagine how you guys would fare without 5-second content to flip through! The earliest the ban can go into effect in the US would be January 19th, 2025, just less than 8 months away. That being said, here’s a look at our top 3 ways to survive losing your For You Page for good.

1. Delete TikTok

We promise that our first option on this list will be the most controversial of them all! For those of you that are strong enough to endure it, maybe getting a head start on losing TikTok would prepare you for the worst. It might be time to start relocating your screen time towards other apps and, if you’re feeling really crazy, get outside!

2. Save what you Love

OK, we can go backwards for a second. If you’re not the cold-turkey kind of TikToker, then we’re sure you’d want to keep track of your favorite videos through the years. Make sure to scroll back and save them into your camera roll. Will the Photos app be the home of ancient

TikToks? We think so!

3. Make the Best of Lost Time

This one might be the trickiest for all you screenagers. Think about all the hours you've collectively spent on TikTok in the last few years! Just imagine what you could be doing with all that time. Reshape your routine. Get a little more active than letting your fingers twiddle on a screen. You could even learn a new hobby (no VR please)!

Sidebar #2 Hed: Hannah Lizzy Styles it Up With New CamAir Collab

Climb the influencer rankings enough, and brands will soon be knocking at your door. In early



February 2024, Hannah Krohne (a.k.a. “Hannah Lizzy” on TikTok) released her first-ever merch collab with CamAirApparel. The rising TikTok star released her very own sweat set and phone cases to mark her fashion design debut. This was a first look at what Hannah’s very own fashion inspiration would look like, and we just can’t get enough of these designs! The “Lucky You” sweat set is a perfect blend of simple and standout, lined with fleece on its interior for a cozy fit. The designs on Hannah’s exclusive phone cases are an exotic contrast, with gestures to fashion and party nights out. We’re so excited to see what other collabs lay ahead for Hannah! The collab launch was limited in supply, but is still available on CamAir’s website. We’re so excited to see what other collabs lay ahead for Hannah!

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Source List:

Hannah Krohne - (317) 903-0830 or hekrohne@syr.edu

- Runs major TikTok fashion recommendation page
- Partners with fashion brands, started as a microinfluencer, and informed me of everything that went into her social media content production.

Neil Adams - ndadams@syr.edu or (413) 270-5755

- TRF major, content creator on youtube, instagram, tik tok
- Brand ambassador for Dell, Rockstar Energy, MTN Dew

Dylan McKinley (“Dylan Does Basketball”) - (215) 380-1079

- Long-form content creator on Youtube
- A contrast to the more generic student influencer that I felt was worth including.

Sean Branagan - jpbranag@syr.edu

- Director of the center for digital media/entrepreneurship at Newhouse. • Deep understanding of social media & history of influencers; offered insight as to what content matters to social media audiences.

Jonathan Glass - jnglass@syr.edu

- Professor of digital journalism at Newhouse; Teaches social media for communicators.
- His insight on how marketing agencies/brands strategize with student influencers was why I opted to include him as a source.

Ashley Shapiro - alshapir@syr.edu

• Senior advertising major, her perspective helped to build the brand narrative of why student influencers are becoming increasingly significant to consumer reach. **Chris Ern** - cern01@syr.edu or (732) 778-5936

- PR student, advertising manager at the Daily Orange

Claire Ceccoli - clceccol@syr.edu

- PR/Psych Dual Major

Web Sources

- <https://scholarworks.calstate.edu/downloads/tx31qr35d>
- <https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/what-is-user-generated-content-76042/>