

Liver King: How the rise of mega-influencers has put consumers at risk

January 19 2023, by Catalina Goanta



In his videos, Liver King is regularly seen eating platefuls of bull's testicles, raw animal livers and cows' brains. Credit: Instagram/@LiverKing

In the age of vloggers, influencers and content creators it might seem hard to imagine a world without YouTube. But back when the [first ever video](#) was uploaded in April 2005, showing a man visiting a zoo, it was not really clear who would want to watch it, or how YouTube could make money.

These days, anyone can make money online by building a brand around being themselves—or not—as Liver King, an extremely buff fitness creator recently found out. [Liver King](#), is the social media personality of Brian Johnson, a muscular and often shirtless TikTok star who promotes "ancestral living" as something he does to be "strong, healthy and happy (autoimmune-free, eczema-free, allergy-free, fatigue-free". For Johnson, this means eating platefuls of bull's testicles, raw animal livers and cows' brains.

He sells his lifestyle in the form of nutritional supplements, personalized dietary advice, as well as workout exercises—and he also promotes different services and products to his 1.7 million followers on [Instagram](#) and 3.8 million followers on [TikTok](#).

That is, he did until leaked emails revealed that Johnson's looks were not so much explained by the performance of his products, but by a monthly [US\\$12,000 \(£10,000\) investment in steroids, which he hid from his fans](#). Liver King is now being [sued for US\\$25 million](#) by his followers who feel they were tricked into buying his muscle-building supplements.

How it began

For as long as the internet has been in existence, users have been searching for creative (and sometimes scandalous) ways to monetise themselves. Back in the early days, some tried to ride the e-commerce wave, going as far as using auctioning websites to sell [the right to name their unborn child](#), or [their own virginity](#).

Others went the advertising route, auctioning off parts of their face to become walking billboards for internet companies willing to pay them. [Hostgator M. Dotcom](#) was one of them. Between 2005 and 2008, he acquired around 30 ads on his face (mostly for porn websites and online casinos) before his body's real estate value plummeted from four to two

figures.

The Liver King exposé may have been shocking to fans, but influencer-related scandals are nothing new. And one of the biggest, the infamous 2017 [Fyre Festival](#), that went bust after the organizers spent tremendous amounts of money on Instagram influencers and hidden advertising, marked a shift to the age of the mega-influencer.

Be they [famous people](#) from the "real" world—like sports stars and entertainers—or native internet celebrities such as YouTubers like [Jenna Marbles](#), this was a time when influencer marketing became a desirable internet sales strategy. Anybody with a following, a phone and a YouTube account could start making (a lot of) money from brand deals.

The internet entrepreneur

These days mega-influencers are no longer the only stakeholders of an ever-growing industry. Instead, monetisation options on social media platforms have exploded, meaning that more and more people now make a living online. As mapped in [a recent study for the European Parliament](#), subscriptions, donations from live streams and the selling of merchandise or [digital content](#) online is big business.

Even the terminology has changed: from the advertising-ridden "influencers", to "[content creators](#)"—everyday internet entrepreneurs monetising their identity on the social media platforms of their choice. Just like the Liver King, who has fans and subscribers on Instagram, TikTok, YouTube and Facebook, creators are often active on many platforms simultaneously. They combine whatever options they can to maximize their activity, depending on the algorithms of the platform as well as consumer trends.

Through their content, creators establish trust, relatability and

authenticity with their audiences. This one-sided relationship that a social media user engages in with a media persona is known as a "[parasocial relationship](#)". This is where users form attachments with public figures that feel (and are) very real. [Research shows](#) that these kinds of relationships can influence a person's beliefs, attitudes and purchasing behavior as well as levels of trust in various groups.

And when creators withhold their commercial incentives or hide inconvenient truths (see Liver King) they lie to and mislead their audiences. From a legal perspective, this raises many questions.

More transparency

Branded content, paid partnerships and content creation can open up whole new worlds to online entrepreneurs but it's also important to acknowledge that [commercial activity](#) comes with [certain legal obligations](#) though currently the rules vary from one country to another. In the UK, for example, an influencer must disclose when they've received any form of monetary payment, a loan of a product or service, or have been given the product they're posting about for free.

In my current [project](#), which looks at how to tame influencer marketing, I want to find out what stricter transparency obligations on [social media platforms](#) might look like and if these are needed.

Many governments around the world, including in the [UK](#), [France](#) and the [US](#), have been already [investigating how to further regulate influencers](#). And I believe that this is something that needs to happen sooner rather than later.

Indeed, given that many of us can struggle to tell the difference between [ads and regular content](#) online it's clear that influencers could be doing a lot more in the way of transparency.

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