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Internet content creators as authorities for the young generations

Twórcy internetowi jako autorytet młodych pokoleń

Abstract

Aim. The aim of the article is to describe the phenomenon of traditional authorities being supplanted by internet content creators, who are particularly popular among the youngest generations. The article also presents the concept of media authority, referring to individuals acquiring behavioural patterns from television or internet figures.

Methods and materials. The paper uses the method of analysis and synthesis of subject literature sources.

Results and conclusion. In contemporary times, traditional authorities are being superseded by media authorities. Young people increasingly seek role models among internet content creators. Through the content published on their social media, they influence the shaping of values, behaviours, and choices of growing individuals. The messages of influencers are not always authentic and do not always carry positive value, which some of their audience may not be aware of. In the context of the ubiquity of social media and the phe-

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nomenon of the significant influence of internet content creators on the formation of identity and lifestyle of young individuals, appropriate educational and upbringing actions are extremely important. They should develop in children and adolescents the ability to think critically – to reflect and verify the content posted by influencers. It is also important to make young individuals aware that their media role models often have the primary motivation and goal of ensuring a source of income, including through the promotion of products and services. These tasks should be carried out within the framework of media education.

Keywords: influencer, impact, social media, media authority, youth.

Abstrakt

Cel. Celem artykułu jest opisanie zjawiska wypierania tradycyjnych autorytetów przez twórców internetowych, którzy są szczególnie popularni wśród najmłodszych pokoleń. W artykule przedstawiono również pojęcie autorytetu medialnego odnoszącego się do czerpania przez jednostki wzorów postępowania z telewizyjnych czy internetowych postaci.

Metody i materiały. W pracy wykorzystano metodę analizy oraz syntezy źródeł literaturowych.

Wyniki i wnioski. Współcześnie autorytet tradycyjny zostaje zastąpiony przez autorytety medialne. Młodzi ludzie coraz częściej poszukują wzorów do naśladowania wśród twórców internetowych. Poprzez treści publikowane w social mediach mają oni wpływ na kształtowanie systemu wartości, zachowania i wybory dokonywane przez dorastające jednostki. Nie zawsze przekazy influencerów są autentyczne czy niosą ze sobą pozytywną wartość, czego część ich odbiorców nie jest świadoma. W sytuacji powszechności mediów społecznościowych i zjawiska wywierania znacznego wpływu twórców internetowych na kształtowanie się tożsamości oraz stylu życia młodych jednostek niezwykle istotne są odpowiednie działania wychowawcze oraz edukacyjne. Powinny one rozwijać w dzieciach oraz młodzieży umiejętność krytycznego myślenia – refleksji oraz weryfikowania treści zamieszczanych przez influencerów. Ważne jest również uświadamianie młodych jednostek wzorujących się na swoich autorytetach medialnych, że często ich główną motywacją oraz celem działalności w mediach społecznościowych jest zapewnienie sobie źródła dochodów, w tym przez promowanie produktów i usług. Te właśnie zadania powinny być realizowane w ramach edukacji medialnej.

Słowa kluczowe: influencer, wpływ, media społecznościowe, autorytet medialny, młodzież.

The word “authority” is widely known and most often used to emphasise the important role of some figures in the lives of others. A given individual may have an authority

figure or authority; it is also said that every generation has its own authority figures. Undoubtedly, the youngest generations often find their role models or the person they admire in the virtual world, especially in social media. The words of Mirosław Rewera (2023), who points out that “[...] young people fascinated by the media and virtual world draw inspiration from it in the process of constructing their world” (p. 60), seem right here. This author also notes that “[...] from an educational point of view, the situation is all the more worrying because the media have more to say than parents, teachers, educators, or catechists” (Rewera, 2023, p. 60). As evidenced by the results of a study conducted by Melissa S. Kearney and Phillip B. Levine (2020), children from families of lower economic status spend more time using media than children from better-off families, and it is these children who may be more exposed to negative media role models.

The aim of the paper is to describe the phenomenon of traditional authorities being displaced by online creators, who are particularly popular among the youngest generations. The paper will also introduce the concept of media authority, which refers to individuals taking their role models from TV or Internet characters. At the outset, however, it is worthwhile to introduce the meaning of traditional authority.

Authority represents respect, prestige, high evaluation, and recognition, which are granted by the social environment to a person or a group of people. People endowed with authority are admired, are a source of fascination, and behavioural patterns, and become a kind of signpost in other people’s lives (Szymański, 2013). As Paweł D. Piórkowski (2016) emphasises, “An authority by magnitude A is a person who testifies with the whole of his/her life and behaviour to his/her own esteem and the values he/she proclaims” (p. 6). On the other hand, following Piotr Sztompka (2007), it can be pointed out that authority is legitimised authority, i.e., authority that is accepted by its recipients. Małgorzata Szyszka (2023), in turn, emphasises that traditional authority is usually understood as someone heroic, unmatched, widely known, unavailable, and valued by successive generations. Furthermore, authority has a relational character, which follows from two main premises: it is not possible to recognise oneself as an authority and a person who does not have an indirect or direct relationship with other people could not be their authority. Any authority is therefore of a social character (Szymanski, 2013).

The literature on the subject distinguishes between formal and informal authority. The former is defined as being obeyed by those under one’s authority, while the latter denotes earned recognition and trust. Formal authority is somehow imposed on the subject who recognises it. It is an expression of respect resulting from the position occupied by a given person, as well as the authority associated with it, regardless of who and what the individual who exercises it actually is (what qualities and values he or she is guided by) (Tuziak, 2010). Informal authority, meanwhile, emerges and is formed

regardless of external factors. In its emergence and formation, a role is played by, as Bożena Tuziak (2010) describes, “[...] independent acts of perception, valuing, identification, etc.” (s. 67). Informal authority does not appear suddenly. The person endowed with it has acquired it as a result of regular, diverse interactions with other people (Tuziak, 2010).

Not only is authority important from the point of view of the individual, for whom it provides a point of reference for his or her actions, decisions taken or values, but it also proves to be extremely important in terms of the permanence and harmony of the social order. Indeed, in addition to its educational function, it also performs ordering and stabilising functions – it provides a model of behaviour in the process of implementing selected tasks. This impact of authority plays a significant role under conditions of uncertainty and danger. In addition, valuable and lasting interpersonal relationships are based on it. Other individuals, as well as social groups, submit to an authority who is also a leader in a voluntary and non-conflictual manner (Tuziak, 2010). It is worth noting at this point that research shows that when an individual has a role model, the likelihood of them engaging in risky behaviour decreases (Atif et al., 2022).

The decline of traditional authority is very often raised in social discourse. Margaret Szyszka (2023) writes as follows: “It is difficult today to speak of authority in its traditional formulation. This is the result both of the blurring of the concept itself and social, technological and value transformations” (p. 89). Until a few decades ago, for a significant number of individuals, the authority was parents, teachers, and great figures such as John Paul II. Subsequently, these authorities were replaced by representatives of the world of popular culture, e.g., world-famous singers, music bands or successful athletes. Nowadays, these authorities are increasingly being replaced by social media, thanks to the popularity of the so-called “influencers,” also known as Internet artists, i.e., people who publish various types of content on sites such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, or YouTube, is growing, attracting the attention and interest mainly of the youngest generations. The words of Mirosław Rewera (2023), who states that

[...] Internet creators, also referred to as influencers, have become idols and sometimes even authorities for the younger generation. The relatively new phenomenon of media authority creation has become a specific challenge for education. The social media age has emboldened millions of web users to take on the role of “authorities” (p. 8).

Media authority, as Magdalena Wasylewicz (2016) notes, is an imprecisely defined term. However, it should certainly be pointed out that its genesis is related to the fact of the universality and egalitarianism of the media, which predestine certain figures to the title of authorities. They appear in the media, gaining increasing popularity.

This is how idols and celebrities are born, who do not always possess the qualities of authority (Barabas, 2019). As Magdalena Barabas emphasises, a celebrity or idol may or may not be an authority. A celebrity is someone who appears in the mass media and is known for being known. Stanisław Kowalik (2006), in turn, states that

The idol, however, is in its essence a negation of authority. It programmatically opposes established social values, habits, and accepted lifestyles. [...] An idol is incapable of promoting a particular worldview, an original take on the meaning of life, a considered moral stance (p. 204).

The media and media personalities have played a significant role in redefining the concept of authority. Certainly, its accessibility to those who look up to it as their role model has also changed. In this context, Lyndsey Jenkins, Ruoyun Lin, and Deborah Jeske (2016) note that the ubiquity of social media and surrounding oneself with it in daily life, both professionally and privately, has enabled individuals to connect *online* with mentors and role models.

Social media, as already mentioned, has become a platform for the activities of people – influencers – who want to gain a crowd of followers, usually to benefit financially from their popularity. Often the content – photos, videos, or posts – is about their daily lives and often about people close to them. Alfred Archer and Catherine M. Robb (2004) write about this as follows: “[...] social media influencers are those who, almost by definition, offer their private lives for public consumption to influence others to emulate their behaviour or beliefs” (p. 129). However, it is important to remember that these are only fragmented, well-selected information/images designed to create a certain specific identity for a given influencer, which is intended to be interesting and attractive to their potential audience. Undoubtedly, this is part of a ubiquitous culture of posing (Melosik, 1996), whose main vehicle is the virtual world and whose boundaries are increasingly blurred with the real world.

The meticulous activity and image-building by influencers on social media certainly reflect the contemporary culture of narcissism. As Magdalena Szpunar (2014) explains, the image and self-presentation of the individual are its defining characteristics. In the culture of narcissism, what is important is how a person presents themselves in the virtual world, and how they take care of their image, rather than what values they hold or what they represent. At the same time, she adds, “the internet makes it easy to pose as a celebrity, offering quick instant fame” (Szpunar, 2014, p. 115), which has certainly contributed a great deal to the creation of people in the virtual world referred to as influencers. The primary purpose of their online activity is to influence fans and all those who observe their behaviour, communication and presentation (Vodák, Novýsedlák, Čakanová, & Pekár, 2019). It is worth noting that the word *influence*,

from which the term influencer was coined, comes from the Latin word *ad vertere* and means flowing from within. As Josef Vodák, Martin Novysedlák, Lucia Čakanová, and Miroslav Pekár (2019) explain, in a social context it refers to the ability to influence someone's behaviour, character, and development in the sense that it means "[...] an action or power to produce an effect without visible force or direct command" (p. 149).

At this point, it is worth noting that in social discourse the term *influencer* is not infrequently mentioned in the context of a profession (*The influencer profession...*, 2022). Information about it can even be found on the website of the integrated qualification system, whose task is to describe and collect various qualifications in one publicly accessible register, referred to as the Integrated Qualifications System (2024a). It is emphasised that this is the profession of the future and an influencer is defined as "[...] an influential, recognisable person who gathers around him or herself a group of internet fans with whom he or she builds lasting relationships" (*Zintegrowany System Kwalifikacji* [Integrated Qualifications System], 2024b).

Influencers can be defined as both thriving current or former actors, singers or even athletes on social media, as well as individuals who, without any previous achievements in a certain field, have gained popularity and gathered thousands, often millions, of recipients (followers) of their content (photos, videos, and posts) posted on social media. An interesting example is, one might say: former, actress Aleksandra Domańska, who, as she admitted in one of her interviews, consciously gave up acting for social media activity, which became her main source of income (Kmieciak, Sobocińska, 2023). She comments on this as follows: "My career is thriving on Instagram and that's what I want to focus on because it is the fulfilment of my dreams of independence and creativity" (Kmieciak, Sobocińska, 2023). Currently, the influencer is followed by 134,000 followers on Instagram (Instagram, 2024a). Undoubtedly, the fact of her previous profession as an actress and the popularity she has gained as a result has contributed to the accumulation of quite a large number of followers on her Instagram profile. Marlena Sojka, meanwhile, is an example of a person who gained her popularity only through online activity. Her first materials were uploaded to YouTube. Very quickly, their audience began to grow. Currently, the influencer is followed by almost 10 million people on TikTok, and she is referred to as the idol of the young generation (kjanas, 2023). It is worth mentioning that she also runs a second social media account together with her partner Kuba Nurek (marleyandkuba, November 13, 2024). On TikTok, they currently have more than 3 million followers. Kuba Nurek says the following about their online activities: "First and foremost, it is contemporary entertainment aimed at everyone, at younger and also increasingly older audiences. It mainly consists of making videos. In our case comedy to make our viewers laugh" (Bloch, 2021).

Many times, social media activities bring influencers significant financial rewards. Online creators who have managed to gather a large audience can count on offers

of advertising cooperation with well-known brands. They are aware of the significant influence of influencers on their followers, who constitute a group of potential consumers of their product or service (Szcurski, 2017). Influencers, in this case, are perceived by companies as mediators of content between the company and its environment (Tworzydło, Życzyński, & Wajda, 2019). At the same time, Dariusz Tworzydło, Norbert Życzyński, and Marek Wajda (201) note that “[...] they are increasingly using this way of reaching their customers to leverage personal relationships and related emotions in public relations and marketing messages” (p. 137). According to the public relations industry, the use of influencers in marketing processes yields better results than other advertising campaigns. In addition to their large audience, their biggest advantages are their credibility and their ability to attract attention. It is for these reasons that the earnings of influencers are certainly above average. In Poland, the earnings of influencers who have collected more than one million followers on their social media accounts can be as high as several tens of thousands of zlotys per month. An influencer may receive several thousand PLN for a single sponsored post on *stories*. The remuneration for a sponsored post published as a so-called “regular post” is even tens of thousands of PLN (Sirociuk, 2024). At this point, it is worth referring to the considerations of Brooke Erin Duffy (2020), who points out that influencers “[...] operate in an exchange currency exclusive to the so-called attention economy: social media metrics” (p. 2). To monetise their followers, online creators need to demonstrate their ability to influence through verifiable evidence, such as the number of likes on Facebook, the number of subscribers on YouTube or followers on Instagram, along with the more intangible tokens of “engagement.” There are four groups of influencers based on the number of followers they have: *megainfluencers* (more than 1 million followers), *macroinfluencers* (between 100,000 and 1 million followers), *microinfluencers* (between 1,000 and 100,000 followers), and *nanoinfluencers* (less than 1,000 followers) (Vodák et al., 2019).

Sometimes influencers use their popularity to become active in other industries, such as music. A perfect example is a formation called *Ekipa* [Crew], which operated very successfully on social media for several years until 2022 (Dzięgiel, 2024). It consisted of a dozen influencers and YouTubers and was founded by Karol Wiśniewski, nicknamed Friz (*Ekipa*, November 13, 2024). Together with his wife, Wersow, they are the most popular members of the group today. *Ekipa*’s music videos uploaded to YouTube break popularity records, and their first album, entitled *Season 3*, released in 2021, achieved gold record status even before its official release (*Ekipa*, November 13, 2024). One of the songs from this very album, *3KIPA*, has reached 115 million views on YouTube and 175,175 comments, which also testifies to the high interest in the musical output of these influencers. Its audience is largely children and young people, to whom the images from the *Ekipa* music videos reach, images that strongly promote consumerism,

glamour and a very high standard of living, unattainable for many average people. The video promoting the song shows the influencers in an exotic location, staying in a luxury hotel, and dancing on an exclusive yacht. An excerpt from the song's lyrics reads: "You know I love my people, our steps our moves. Our houses, our furs, our clothes, and our blouses. The Ekipa wears it, the Ekipa mows it" (EKIPA – 3KIPA, 2021). At this point, it is worth quoting Muhamad Hanafiah and Irwansyah Irwansyah (2022), who rightly point out that the existence of influencers amplifies consumerist behaviour among adolescents, as many of them see them as role models. Moreover, it should be noted that, according to the assumptions of the psychology of influence, individuals often do not realise that they are being influenced by someone else, as the effect mainly occurs in their subconscious (Lajnef, 2023). Certainly, these messages create the image of an influencer-entrepreneur, with a large income, living in wealth and luxuries, which is undoubtedly one of the reasons why some of their young audiences, when asked what profession they would like to pursue in the future, answer that they want to be influencers.

The emergence of an occupation (because it is difficult, in my opinion, to speak of a profession here, which I perceive as a useful, valuable, authentic occupation) described as an influencer is a sign of our times, of technological progress, of the development and ubiquity of social media. Here, however, the question arises as to whether this activity of influencers and the content they transmit can be assessed positively in the context of exerting a significant influence on the formation of a system of values, behaviour, and the making of choices by their young audience. Can simply being an online influencer be seen as a valuable or challenging activity?

It is also worth mentioning the almost legendary *Ekipa* ice cream, a collaboration between the described formation and the *Koral* company, which writes about it on its website as follows: "Unique sorbet ice cream topped with shooting sugar in collaboration with the most popular influencers!" (*Ekipa – lody impulsowe* [Impulse ice cream], November 13, 2024). *Koral–Ekipa* ice cream was named the most talked-about food product of 2021 in Poland (Tubilewicz, 2021). Only digital channels were used to promote them, including the social media accounts of individual *Ekipa* members. The concept of the campaign to promote the product focused on "[...] exploiting children's fascination with the colourful world of the Ekipa" (Tubilewicz, 2021). The objective of the campaign was achieved and *Koral* became the sales leader in impulse ice cream (ice cream on a stick) up to 65 ml in the 2021 season – it achieved a nearly 50% share of sales in shops with a maximum area of 300m² (Tubilewicz, 2021). Certainly, the involvement of Influencers played a large role in this, influencing the purchase choices of their followers, since, as Brooke Erin Duffy (2020) points out, persuasive communication by influencers is more "authentic" than traditional paid advertising. Moreover, certainly part of their audience identifies influencers, in this case members

of the *Ekipa*, as their close friends, being emotionally attached to them in some way (Zozaya-Durazo, Feijoo, Sádaba-Chalezquer, 2023). The phenomenon of observers' attachment to influencers is explained by the theory of parasocial relations. It refers to imagined social relationships and interactions with people (in this case, influencers) who are distant from their audience and who do not communicate individually or show interest in a particular person (Stever, 2017). Parasocial relationships are thus those in which there is no reciprocity and no opportunity for direct or individual contact with the admired media figure (de Bérail, Bungener, 2022). Research shows that loneliness and social difficulties are correlated with the occurrence of parasocial relationships (Liebers, Schramm, 2019), which in some way compensate for their social difficulties (Lozano-Blasco, Mira-Aladrén, & Gil-Lamata, 2023). Interesting findings are provided by Pierre de Bérail, Marlène Guillon, and Catherine Bungener (2019), according to whom social anxiety and an individual's parasocial attachment play a significant role in amplifying their YouTube addiction.

Undoubtedly, the formation of the *Ekipa* should be considered a cultural phenomenon of sorts, given their extraordinary popularity, especially among the youngest generation – children and teenagers. Certainly, the members of *Ekipa* represent for many of them a certain authority, or more precisely, a media authority. It is their emotional attachment to their media authorities, who undoubtedly also have a huge impact on consumer choices, that brands use to promote their products and services. In this case, it is difficult to speak of authentic influencer messages directed at their audience. We are dealing with conscious *influencer marketing* (Belanche, 2021).

However, there is a group of influencers whose social media content can be considered valuable for the formation of young people's own identity. Certainly, in such a situation, we are talking about a true authority – a person worth admiring, appreciating and emulating. One example of the positive influence of an influencer is undoubtedly Katarzyna Wągrowska, who on her profile on Instagram and her blog *Ograniczam się. Od nadmiaru do umiaru* [I Limit Myself. From excess to moderation], she publishes material on the subject of *zero waste*, which means not wasting, for example, food. As she writes on her blog:

I give lectures, workshops, online meetings, online courses and social media on the topics of waste reduction, conscious consumption and the sharing economy [...] I am the initiator of the action Givebox Poznań, as part of which several cupboards were created for exchanging things on the streets of Poznań (Wągrowska, November 13, 2024).

The influencer is also one of the founders of a place called "Po-Dzielnia," a sharing economy centre located in Poznań. It acts as a *free shop* (a shop where everything

is free) and an educational and cultural centre. Certainly, the activities of this influencer, who in her social media addresses topics that are very important in today's world, saturated with consumerism and threatened by a warming climate, can have a positive impact on the formation of a system of values, the choices made and lifestyles of both the younger generation and the elderly, whose behaviour can have a positive impact on the environment and the climate. Unfortunately, as it seems, given the significantly lower number of followers on her Instagram profile (currently 53,000 people) (Instagram, 2024b), the topic of *zero waste* does not generate much interest and does not attract many children and young people.

In conclusion, we see that traditional authority is now being replaced by media authority. Young generations increasingly look to online authors as role models. Through content published on social media, they influence the formation of the value system, behaviour and choices made by adolescent individuals. Influencers' messages are not always authentic or carry positive value, which some of their audience is unaware of. Given the prevalence of social media and the phenomenon of the considerable influence of online influencers on the formation of identity and lifestyles of young individuals, appropriate educational and upbringing measures are extremely important. They should develop in children and young people the ability to think critically – to reflect on and verify the content posted by influencers. It is also important to make young individuals, following their media authority figures, aware that often their main motivation and purpose of social media activity is to secure a source of income for themselves, including by promoting products and services that they are not necessarily advocates or users of, as they portray on social media. These very tasks should be carried out as part of media education, which is currently very often lacking in Polish schools.

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