When Fans Become Anti-Fans

How to Navigate Negative Influencer– Follower Relationships

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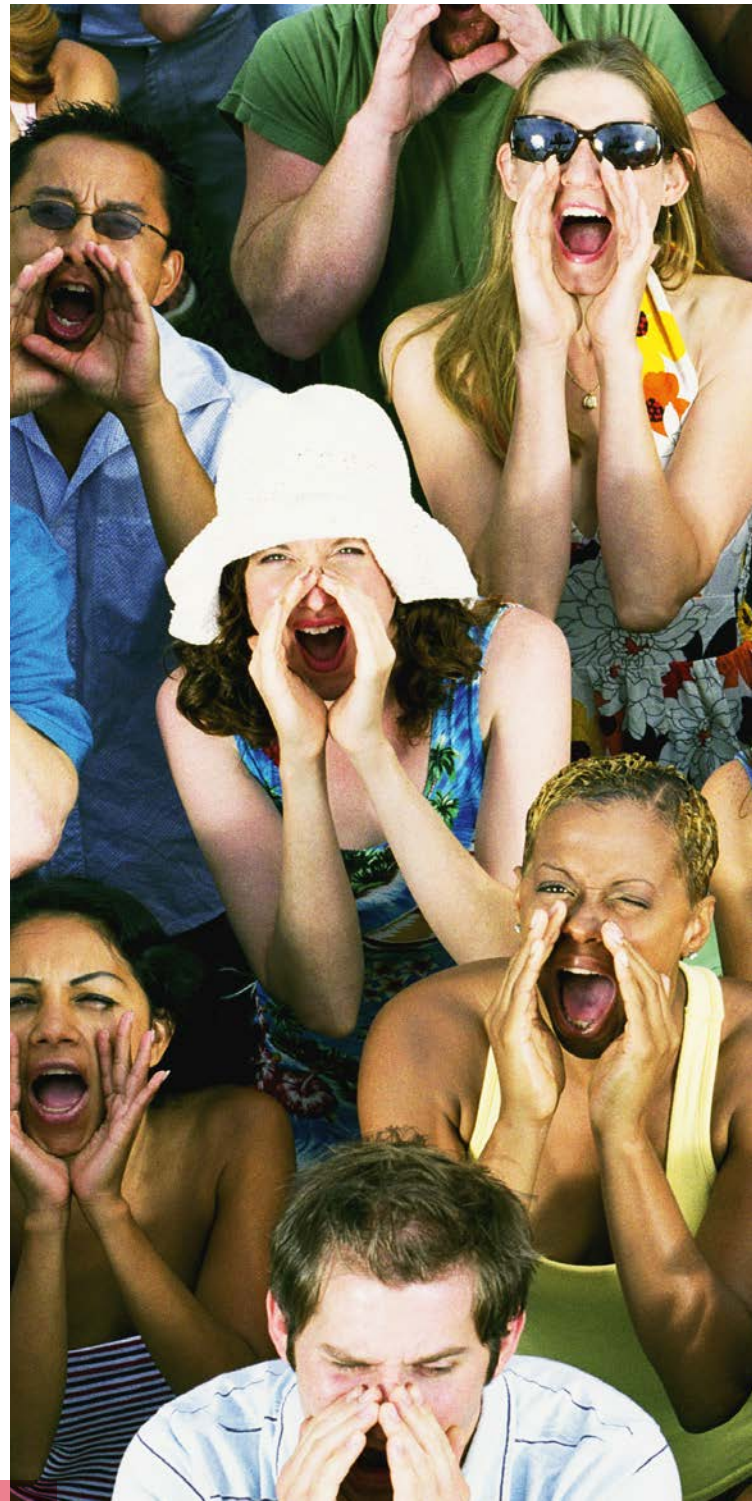Senior Lecturer in Marketing
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Mike Powell, gettyimages

Influencers' success hinges on more than just polished images and clever captions. At its core is an "intimacy pact"—a subtle, often unspoken, agreement that influencers will create an illusion of intimacy in exchange for followers' support. Both sides benefit from this arrangement. Followers enjoy a "parasocial relationship" with influencers; they feel as though they personally know influencers who regularly share "private" moments and actively respond to their comments, fostering a sense of intimacy. In return, followers reward influencers with attention and engagement, commodities that can be monetized through display advertising and brand partnerships. Yet, while this intimacy pact underpins influencers' commercial success, it is fragile and fraught with risk; when broken, it can swiftly turn admiring fans into outspoken critics.

When the intimacy pact breaks: From fan to anti-fan

The intimacy pact is built on shaky ground, as parasocial relationships between influencers and followers are inherently one-sided, built on a carefully crafted illusion of intimacy. When influencers become more guarded about topics they once discussed freely due to increasing privacy concerns, ▶

become less committed to interacting with their growing fan base or begin to heavily moderate their comments sections in ways that censor even constructive criticism from followers, this illusion shatters, leaving followers feeling excluded and ignored. Followers' disillusionment intensifies when influencers ramp up their commercial activity, leaving followers feeling exploited. When followers feel an influencer is no longer upholding their side of their unspoken agreement, the intimacy pact crumbles and parasocial relationships sour, with feelings of friendship and admiration quickly giving way to anger and contempt.

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> Former fans can become anti-fans, devoted to critiquing and retaliating against the influencers they once loved.

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Interestingly, rather than simply unfollowing, many disappointed followers rally together on "gossip forums" like Tattle Life, Guru Gossip or GOMI ("Get Off My Internets") to vent about influencers. On these forums, the normally unspoken intimacy pact is vocalized as forum members discuss influencers' perceived failure to fulfill their end of the bargain. In these communities, former fans become anti-fans, devoted to critiquing and retaliating against the influencers they once loved.

The appeal of anti-fan communities: Rebuilding intimacy and seeking retaliation

We studied two popular anti-fan communities, each with around 200,000 members, and found that anti-fans used these forums to rebuild the illusion of intimacy that influencers failed to sustain. Anti-fans filled gaps in influencers' narratives with their own theories, backed up with "evidence" gathered through extensive online research, which often cast influencers in a negative light. They also perpetuated the belief that influencers read their forum threads by interpreting influencers' social media content as attempts to address forum members' critiques. This enabled anti-fans to feel seen and acknowledged by influencers despite feeling ignored on other platforms. Additionally, since anti-fans believe influencers have broken the established intimacy pact, they deliberately choose not to uphold their own side of this agree-

ment. They used the forums to maintain intimate knowledge of the influencer's activities without directly viewing the influencer's content, preventing their attention from being monetized by the influencer. The forum also enabled anti-fans to retaliate through mass reporting of noncompliant posts to regulators, mass complaints to brands partnering with influencers and collective boycotts of these brands.

Figure 1 shows what we found on how the intimacy pact is formed, why it breaks and the anti-fan behaviors that can ensue. It includes typical posts from the forums to illustrate our findings.

How anti-fans can harm influencers and endorsed brands

The anti-fan behaviors prompted by a broken intimacy pact can harm the reputation and commercial success of influencers and the brands they endorse. Even though such anti-fan behaviors take place in online forums that are separate from influencers' own social media profiles and content, they can cause damage in various ways.

Reputational damage
When influencers' names are searched online, anti-fan communities often rank highly in the search

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engine results. Influencer critique is, therefore, highly visible to those seeking information about an influencer. Thus, existing fans might be sensitized to critical perspectives on influencers, while prospective brand partners might be deterred. Indeed, our study found that many anti-fans first discovered the anti-fan communities by searching for an influencer online.

Commercial damage
In addition to harming the reputation of an influencer, anti-fan communities also produce ways for consumers to access an influencer's content without benefiting them financially. Forum users shared links to websites that enabled them to ▶

How the intimacy pact between influencers and their fans is established,
how it breaks and how fans react

FIGURE 1

An intimacy pact is established

Influencer shares regular insights into their personal life & is responsive to followers' comments, enabling them to feel that they know the influencer intimately

Followers provide attention and engagement, which the influencer can monetize (e.g., via display advertising and brand partnerships)

The intimacy pact is broken

Influencer shares less of their personal life, becomes less responsive to followers' comments and begins heavily moderating comments, eroding the illusion that followers know the influencer intimately
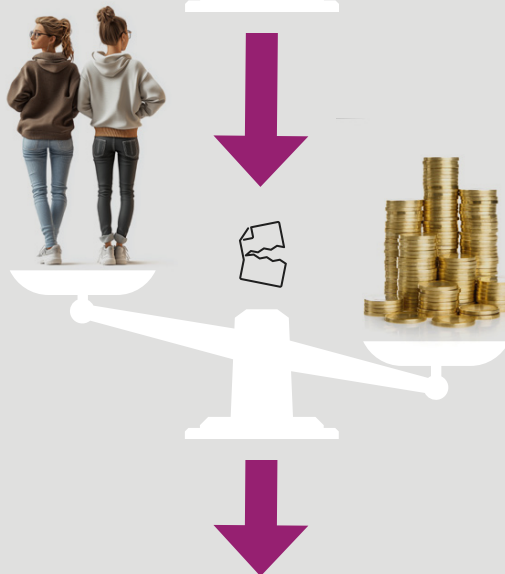
Influencer continues to monetize their followers' attention and engagement, increasing the amount of commercial content that they post and often only posting when there is a direct financial benefit

Followers feel …

EXCLUDED   IGNORED   EXPLOITED

"She set the boundaries and level of privacy in her life. She can't just suddenly shift them and not expect a reaction."

"She never replies, says thank you or even just acknowledges [her followers] with the little heart/thumbs up button."

"It's pretty unfair and hypocritical of her to give nothing to her followers but still expect them to buy a stupid app."

Disillusioned followers become anti-fans, turning to anti-fan communities to …

"Could she make it any more obvious that she's addressing everything that's discussed on here!"

[To a poster who summarized a video] "Thanks for responding (I didn't want to give her another view or any ad money by watching it)"

REBUILD THE ILLUSION OF INTIMACY

AVOID & RETALIATE AGAINST COMMERCIALIZATION

What influencers should do to prevent anti-fan movements

1

Remain responsive to their followers even as their follower base grows.

2

Moderate followers' comments more liberally, allowing reasonable levels of constructive criticism.

3

Be mindful to establish a level of intimacy that can be sustained long term.

4

Attempt to resolve dissatisfaction voiced by followers and apologize if appropriate, ensuring that their followers feel seen and acknowledged.

5

Prevent feelings of perceived exploitation among followers by keeping a good balance between commercial and organic content.

6

Be open and transparent about brand endorsements, ensuring that they are appropriately disclosed.

How influencers can prevent anti-fan retaliation

For sustainable success, influencers must preserve the illusion of intimacy that underpins the intimacy pact, particularly as their commercial activities increase. They must keep the nature and frequency of their postings at the expected level, even when there is no direct financial benefit, as followers are skeptical of influencers who only hold up their end of the intimacy pact when there is clear commercial intent. Further, they must remain responsive to their follower base even as it grows and avoid deleting or blocking critical comments on their social media content, as this motivates participation in anti-fan communities as spaces free from censorship. We recommend that influencers allow their followers to express reasonable, constructive criticism and listen and react to followers' concerns. While this may be more time-consuming than the common censorship approach, such responsiveness enables followers to feel seen by the influencer, preserving the intimacy pact and thus reducing the likelihood and scale of anti-fan movements. Figure 2 summarizes our key recommendations to influencers.

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How brands can avoid being targeted by anti-fans

The nature of influencers' relationships with their followers is attractive to brands. However, brands must understand that consumers' feelings of love and adoration for their favorite influencers are not cast in stone. If influencers break their side of the intimacy pact, parasocial relationships can quickly sour, and resultant anti-fan behaviors affect not only influencers but also the brands they endorse. Therefore, when selecting influencers for influencer marketing campaigns, brands must look beyond their follower count, as the benefits of a larger follower base may not outweigh the risks posed by disgruntled anti-fans. To safeguard their reputation and ensure the success of their cam-

access influencers' YouTube videos whilst blocking display advertising. Others offered witty recaps or comedic parodies of influencers' content, enabling forum members to gain knowledge of the influencer's life without providing monetizable views in return. These activities can reduce the visibility of influencers' brand endorsements, decreasing the effectiveness of influencer marketing campaigns.

Legal problems, negative sentiment and brand boycotts

Furthermore, anti-fan communities rally together to retaliate against influencers, demanding that regulators punish them for improperly disclosed brand endorsements. They also turn against the brands these influencers endorsed, commenting negatively on the brand's social media posts, sending emails to members of the brand's marketing team and threatening to boycott these brands should they continue to work with these influencers.

How brands should select influencers to avoid anti-fan retaliation

FIGURE 3

1 Screen influencers thoroughly before commencing with brand endorsements.

2 When selecting influencers, look beyond their follower count and instead analyze the relationships the influencer cultivates with their followers.

3 Seek out influencers who are responsive to followers' comments and avoid those that ignore and/or heavily moderate their comments.

4 Avoid influencers whose content is highly commercialized, containing little organic content.

5 Screen influencers for the existence of anti-fan movements, assessing their scale and activity levels.

6 Be open and transparent about influencer partnerships, closely following relevant advertising disclosure regulations.

paigns, brands should take a closer look at influencer–follower relationships to assess the risks associated with prospective influencer partnerships. Understanding the nature and dynamics of these relationships will help managers establish which influencers foster genuine and lasting connections with their followers and which have large, disgruntled anti-fan communities that may negatively impact the brand. Assessing the influencer's responsiveness to their fan base and their ratio of commercial to organic content, as well as monitoring anti-fan activity surrounding the influencer on leading gossip forums, can help brand managers avoid influencer marketing partnerships likely to lead to high levels of negative sentiment or threats of brand boycotts (see Figure 3).

Prevention is better than cure

As anti-fan communities can cause substantial harm, influencers, their management teams and brand managers involved in influencer marketing campaigns should take measures to reduce the likelihood of being targeted by anti-fan communities. For brands, this means looking beyond surface-level metrics like follower counts and engagement rates to introduce a more thorough screening process when selecting influencers for influencer marketing campaigns. For influencers and their management teams, this means taking measures to avoid parasocial relationships souring in the first place to prevent fans from becoming anti-fans. The rise of anti-fan communities underscores the consequences of neglecting the fragile intimacy pact that underpins influencers' success, and our research provides insight into the measures that influencers can take to safeguard it. In our study, we observed no evidence of anti-fans returning to fandom, meaning prevention is better than cure. A proactive approach to managing these relationships will, therefore, determine who thrives and who falters in the world of influencers. ◄

FURTHER READING

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