# Unilever’s influencer strategy highlights risks of AI-driven marketing shift



# The Evolution of Influencer Marketing: Adapting to an AI-Driven Future

Unilever's recent commitment to allocate half of its marketing budget to influencer partnerships marks a significant shift in the industry, signalling an intention to collaborate with a much larger pool of influencers than ever before. At first glance, this appears to be an ambitious strategy to harness the growing power of social media. However, as Ludovica Damonte of The Secret Little Agency points out, this approach risks reducing influencer engagement to mere transactions, undermining the authentic relationships that originally propelled this marketing channel.

Influencer marketing has thrived on trust, with audiences drawn to influencers not just for their polished images, but for their authentic perspectives. Yet, as brands like Gymshark and Drunk Elephant have successfully demonstrated the potential for influencers to drive immediate sales, a shift has occurred. The emphasis has moved from cultivating genuine relationships to maximising reach and generating conversions—a transformation that threatens the essence of influence itself.

With organic reach dwindling and content demands escalating, brands now seek quantity over quality. Influencers, in turn, adapt by morphing into content creators, cranking out a constant stream of sponsored posts. The result? A saturated landscape where genuine influence feels like a commodity. The rise of technology further complicates matters. AI-generated influencers are already producing convincing content at unprecedented speed, raising concerns about the future relevance of human creators. Statistics reveal that only 75% of influencers earned more than $500 in the past year, and a mere 2% made upwards of $50,000, suggesting that the economic landscape for creators is precarious.

This transformation in influencer marketing is not just a challenge for individual creators but a dilemma of epic proportions for brands. As trust erodes and influencer marketing increasingly resembles traditional advertising tactics, the driving force of this approach—authenticity—becomes vulnerable to replication by AI technologies.

In countering this trend, brands must reconsider how they approach influencer collaborations. The focus should shift from sheer numbers to meaningful engagement, which could be achieved through three key strategies:

1. **Crafting Compelling Narratives:** Authentic storytelling resonates more deeply than simple promotional content. For instance, the partnership between Klook and Marie Kondo illustrates how personal journeys can be leveraged to connect with consumers on a deeper level. Brands should seek stories that challenge norms and reflect the complexities of real life.

2. **Identifying Unexpected Advocates:** Not all influential voices emerge from celebrity circles. Innovative campaigns, like ON Running’s partnership with Elmo, demonstrate how cultural relevance can sometimes trump star power, encouraging brands to explore non-traditional ambassador relationships.

3. **Timing Engagements Effectively:** Brands must be attentive to the cultural zeitgeist, launching campaigns that resonate with current events or social movements, similar to how Skims has partnered with influencers during peak moments of public interest.

While Unilever's increased investment in influencer marketing could be seen as a positive indication of the channel's potential, it must be paired with a thoughtful strategy. The absence of intention turns influencer marketing into a numbers game where all parties ultimately lose. As authenticity, relevance, and cultural connection are gradually eroded, the industry risks making itself obsolete.

The road ahead for influencer marketing demands a return to fundamentals that AI cannot replicate: genuine storytelling, recognisable faces, and pertinent moments that resonate emotionally. It's time for brands to stop chasing mere reach; they must strive to delight and surprise consumers, ensuring that the future is defined by sharper, more intentional marketing efforts rather than a race towards scale.

In this evolving landscape, the most successful brands will remember that true influence is about forging lasting connections, not just securing advertising space.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.thedrum.com/opinion/2025/05/07/we-can-still-save-influencer-marketing-ai-eats-it-alive), [[2]](https://www.unilever.com/news/press-and-media/press-releases/2023/unilever-reveals-influencers-can-switch-people-on-to-sustainable-living/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.thedrum.com/opinion/2025/05/07/we-can-still-save-influencer-marketing-ai-eats-it-alive), [[4]](https://www.forbes.com/sites/esade/2024/10/30/ai-and-influencer-marketing-how-businesses-can-navigate-the-future/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.thedrum.com/opinion/2025/05/07/we-can-still-save-influencer-marketing-ai-eats-it-alive), [[5]](https://www.forbes.com/councils/forbesagencycouncil/2024/08/08/will-ai-take-over-the-influencer-marketing-industry/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.thedrum.com/opinion/2025/05/07/we-can-still-save-influencer-marketing-ai-eats-it-alive), [[6]](https://www.businessinsider.com/disclosure-use-of-ai-influencer-marketing-creator-economy-2023-6)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.thedrum.com/opinion/2025/05/07/we-can-still-save-influencer-marketing-ai-eats-it-alive), [[7]](https://www.foodnavigator.com/Article/2023/09/18/Unilever-research-Greenwashing-fears-thwart-sustainability-messaging-among-influencers/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.thedrum.com/opinion/2025/05/07/we-can-still-save-influencer-marketing-ai-eats-it-alive> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.unilever.com/news/press-and-media/press-releases/2023/unilever-reveals-influencers-can-switch-people-on-to-sustainable-living/> - Unilever, in partnership with the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT), conducted a study examining the role of influencer content in promoting sustainable behaviors. The research found that 75% of participants were more likely to adopt sustainable practices after viewing social media content about sustainability. Additionally, 83% of respondents considered TikTok and Instagram effective platforms for seeking advice on sustainable living. The study highlights the significant impact influencers have on encouraging environmentally friendly choices among consumers.
3. <https://www.unileverusa.com/news/2023/our-ambition-to-unstereotype-influencer-brand-content/> - Unilever is committed to eliminating stereotypes from influencer brand content. Research involving 3,300 Generation Z consumers from the UK, US, and Brazil revealed that 93% had encountered stereotypes on social media, leading to feelings of frustration, anxiety, sadness, and anger. The company emphasizes the responsibility of brands and influencers to ensure their content is inclusive and free from harmful stereotypes, aiming to create a safer and more equitable online environment.
4. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/esade/2024/10/30/ai-and-influencer-marketing-how-businesses-can-navigate-the-future/> - This Forbes article explores the evolving landscape of influencer marketing with the rise of AI-generated influencers. While human influencers currently lead in popularity and revenue, virtual influencers are gaining traction, with the market projected to reach $37.8 billion by 2030. Brands are leveraging AI influencers for greater control over messaging and image, but challenges such as maintaining authenticity and addressing ethical concerns remain. The article discusses the potential for a hybrid model combining human and AI influencers to maximize engagement.
5. <https://www.forbes.com/councils/forbesagencycouncil/2024/08/08/will-ai-take-over-the-influencer-marketing-industry/> - This Forbes article examines the impact of AI on the influencer marketing industry. It discusses the benefits of AI-generated content, including scalability and efficiency, but also highlights concerns about authenticity and consumer trust. The article emphasizes the importance of transparency and ethical considerations in AI-driven campaigns, noting that while AI can enhance marketing efforts, it should not replace the human touch that consumers value in influencer content.
6. <https://www.businessinsider.com/disclosure-use-of-ai-influencer-marketing-creator-economy-2023-6> - As AI-generated content becomes more prevalent in influencer marketing, industry leaders are advocating for increased transparency. Agencies like Ogilvy are implementing measures such as using hashtags and watermarks to disclose AI involvement in campaigns. A survey revealed that 86% of internet users believe AI-generated content should be disclosed, underscoring the need for clear communication to maintain trust between creators and their audiences.
7. <https://www.foodnavigator.com/Article/2023/09/18/Unilever-research-Greenwashing-fears-thwart-sustainability-messaging-among-influencers/> - Unilever's research indicates that while 60% of content creators aim to promote environmental sustainability, 84% hesitate to include sustainability messages in their content due to fears of being accused of greenwashing. The company is collaborating with sustainability experts to support content creators in delivering authentic and impactful sustainability messaging, aiming to overcome these challenges and encourage more influencers to share environmentally friendly content.