

The Influencer Lifecycle in the Creator Economy: From Creation to Automation

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Cite as:

Norotte Yvan, Livneh Neta, Beichert Maximilian, Hofstetter Reto (2026), The Influencer Lifecycle in the Creator Economy: From Creation to Automation. *Proceedings of the European Marketing Academy*, 55th, (132785)

Paper from the 55th Annual EMAC Conference, Bath, United Kingdom, June 2-5, 2026



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This special session provides complementary perspectives on the stages of the influencer's journey. The empirical contributions highlight aspects of visibility formation, influence awareness, and economic value generation. Our discussant examines how algorithms shape each stage and outlines a framework of influencer automation. This session charts a comprehensive narrative of how influence is built, activated, monetized, and automatized, offering an integrated view of the evolving economics of online influence.

The project **Unfollowing Behaviour of Creators** investigates how new creators overcome the “cold start” problem of building an audience. Using six years of longitudinal data from a global audio-sharing platform, this research tracks how creators manage their follower–following ratio as a social signal to enhance perceived status and attract reciprocal attention. The analysis reveals the prevalence of strategic unfollowing as a proactive tactic to maintain a desirable public image while increasing follower counts. By documenting when and whom creators unfollow, the study identifies unfollowing as a critical, yet overlooked, mechanism of audience management and self-promotion.

Moving towards more established creators, the project **From Creator to Influencer** examines the inflection point where creators shift from content producers to budding micro-influencers. Combining observational data with two randomized field experiments, this research tests how receiving signals of recognition as an influencer heightens creators' influence awareness and changes their online behaviour. The results show that these signals act as strong cues of legitimacy, increasing posting and engagement, particularly among low-awareness creators. This study captures the behavioural and psychological transformation that precedes monetization, showing how recognition can trigger a shift from content creation to micro-influencing.

Finally, the project **The Influencer Effect** closes the loop by quantifying the downstream effects of influencers on digital marketing strategies. Using quasi-experimental data from a direct-to-consumer brand, this research compares the trajectories of customers acquired via an influencer on a social platform to those who were not. The analysis shows a robust effect of influencer-mediated acquisition such that customers first acquired through influencers repurchase more often, remain active longer, and spend more over time. This study provides

the first robust evidence that influencer-mediated acquisition enhances long-term customer value.

Building on this overview of the influencer trajectory, our discussant offers a forward look at how AI systems and algorithmic curation could reshape each stage of the influencer's lifecycle. What challenges and opportunities do influencers face when automating their activities? The framework presented outlines how AI agents and automation redefine authenticity, reputation, and influence in digital ecosystems.