



To Like or Dislike? Women's Complex Relationship with Social Media Influencers

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Introduction

For centuries celebrities have used their fame and notoriety to make money promoting products and services. There is even [evidence that Roman gladiators](#) allowed their likenesses to be used on murals that advertised wines and oils. So, there's nothing new about well-known people encouraging their fans to buy certain products. But it took the rise of the smartphone and the invention of social media to take this idea of celebrity endorsements and flip it on its head.

Today, unfamous people with large social media followings are leveraging those audiences to land corporate sponsorships and endorsement deals. In some cases, these so-called "social media influencers" are [able to earn six-figure incomes](#) or higher.

Influencers are immensely popular among teens. Young people spend hours each day watching, engaging with, sharing, and interacting with content produced by these

social media personalities. Adolescents don't just turn to influencers for amusement. They seek them out for information, guidance, advice, and a feeling of "being in the know."

Research shows women and teen girls in particular are drawn to influencers. Females between the ages of 16 and 24 [spend more time on social media](#) than any other demographic, and 56 percent of them use social media to research brands and products, making them ripe for influencer marketing campaigns. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that young women and teen girls follow social media influencers at [much higher rates](#) than men and boys – with beauty, fashion, food, and lifestyle topics being the most popular among girls and young women who follow influencers.

The large number of hours women spend consuming influencer content raises some thorny questions about

how such content impacts them psychologically, emotionally, and socially. These questions are particularly relevant for young girls and teens, as [research](#) has found that social media can be especially damaging to their development.

The Reboot Foundation and the Women’s Forum for the Economy & Society wanted to learn more about the perceptions women and girls have of the influencers they follow. We also wanted to know more about their views on the relationship between social media content and their feelings of self-worth, and whether they see influencing as a viable “career path.” But the perspective of female social media users is just one side of the coin. We also wanted to better understand influencers: the perceptions they have of their female followers, their opinions on influencing as a career, and their thoughts on the psychological impact their content might be having on young women who follow them.

To answer those questions, Reboot and the Women’s Forum surveyed more than 3,600 women, ages 13 to 42, in four countries: Brazil, France, Great Britain, and the United States. The research, conducted by the firm YouGov, took place in September and October 2023.

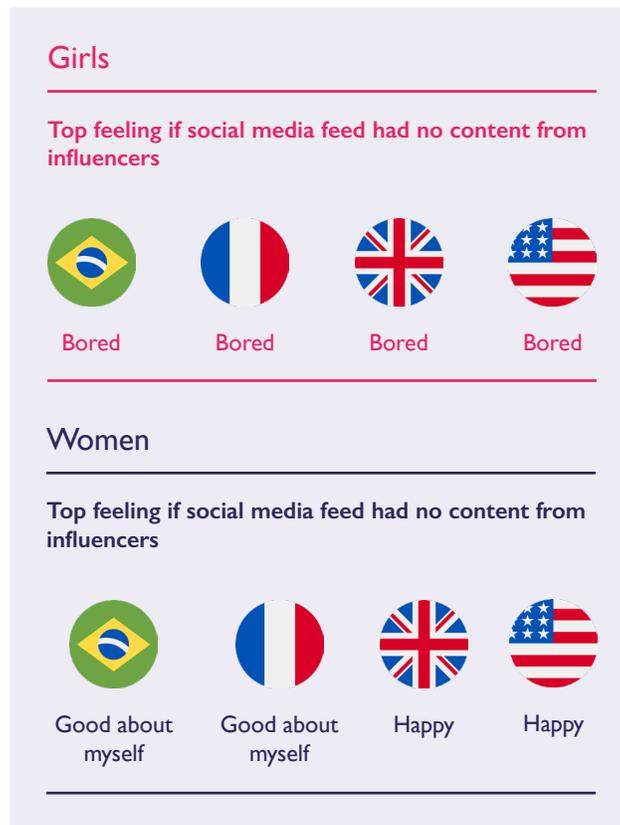
The data revealed a seemingly love/hate relationship between women and the influencers they follow. The mixed feelings span multiple issues, from how the content influencers produce makes them feel to the amount of respect they have for the work influencers do. For example, more than 60 percent of women acknowledged that influencers have at least “moderate” influence on their opinions, yet barely a third trusted influencer endorsements. Another example: About half of women said they wanted to see less content from influencers in their social media feeds, yet 72 percent of them follow social media personalities.

There were also significant generational and cultural differences in how women view social media influencers. Overall, the older the respondents, the less respect they had for influencers. Teens, on the other hand, love them. Generally, women and girls in Brazil and the U.S. were the most engaged and enthusiastic about influencing; those in Great Britain and France were more skeptical and critical.

Regarding influencing as a career, substantial numbers of teen girls said it is a path worth exploring, especially in Brazil and the U.S. And a surprising number of women of all ages – 39 percent – have taken steps to become social media influencers, such as trying to generate income through their platforms or cultivating huge online followings. Influencers, however, said it’s a tough way to earn a living: 78 percent of them said they do not make enough money to support themselves.

One area where there was near unanimous agreement across nationalities and generations was on the question of whether social media is damaging to a woman’s self-esteem and feelings of self-worth. More than 70 percent of teen girls and women believe that the content produced by social media influencers can be harmful. However, influencers do not see themselves as the problem. Indeed, only about one influencer in four agreed that their content might be harmful, and nearly a third of them said they would not give up influencing anyhow.

The issues and contradictions revealed by this survey warrant additional study and investigation. As teens and children increasingly live their lives online, the roles that influencers play in their development and maturation is something that should concern parents, educators, and child advocates alike. As for influencing as a possible career path, the data from this survey strongly suggests that women and girls should look elsewhere for a payday.



Methodology

Between Sept. 22 and Oct. 14, the Reboot Foundation and the Women’s Forum surveyed women and teen girls in four countries to better understand their social media use, their opinions on social media influencers, and their thoughts about social media influencing as a career path.

The survey comprised 3,673 women and teen girls between the ages of 13 and 42 in Brazil, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

The sample consisted of:

- 915 in Brazil (322 teens)
- 820 in France (85 teens)
- 1,026 in the U.K. (262 teens)
- 912 in the U.S. (247 teens)

The sample was balanced on age, education, and region, with teen social media users and adult social media influencers weighted to reflect their appropriate proportion within the overall population. The survey was conducted by YouGov, and has a margin of error of:

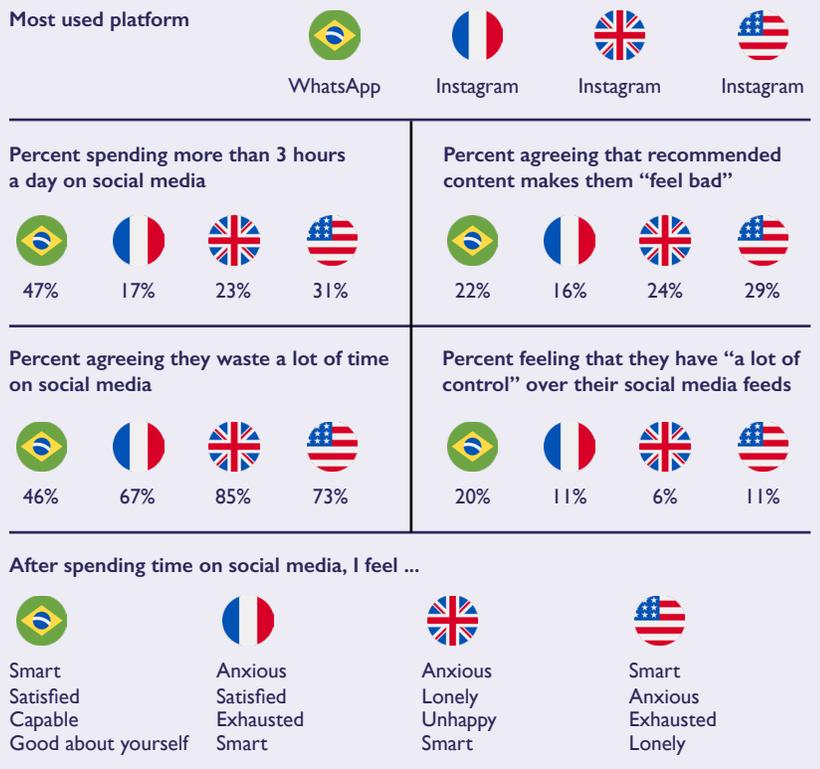
- Brazil (+/- 4% adults, +/- 6% teens)
- France (+/- 4% adults, +/- 13% teens)
- U.K. (+/- 4% adults, +/- 6% teens)
- U.S. (+/- 5% adults, +/- 6% teens)

The survey also included an oversample of 1,066 female social media influencers. To be considered an influencer, respondents needed to meet at least three online activities associated with social media influencing such as earning an income from these activities, attempting to develop their personal brand as a business, or encouraging followers to purchase or engage with specific products, services, or issues.

Girls



Women



Key Findings

The relationship between teen girls and influencers can be toxic.

No demographic spends more time browsing social media than teen girls. Surveys and research have shown that teen girls and young women ages 16 to 24 spend, on average, **three hours and 14 minutes a day** on social media, almost a full hour more than their male counterparts. And this might be a low estimate, as a **2023 report from Reboot** found that 29 percent of young girls and women spend more than four hours a day scrolling TikTok.

Data from this survey bears this out. Except for teens in France, girls in every country reported high levels of enthusiasm for and engaging with influencers. They also reported trusting influencers at levels that were, in some cases, twice that of adult women. It's this trust that draws companies to pay influencers to promote their products. Similarly, governments or NGO's often partner with influencers to promote healthy, social, or environmentally friendly behaviors.

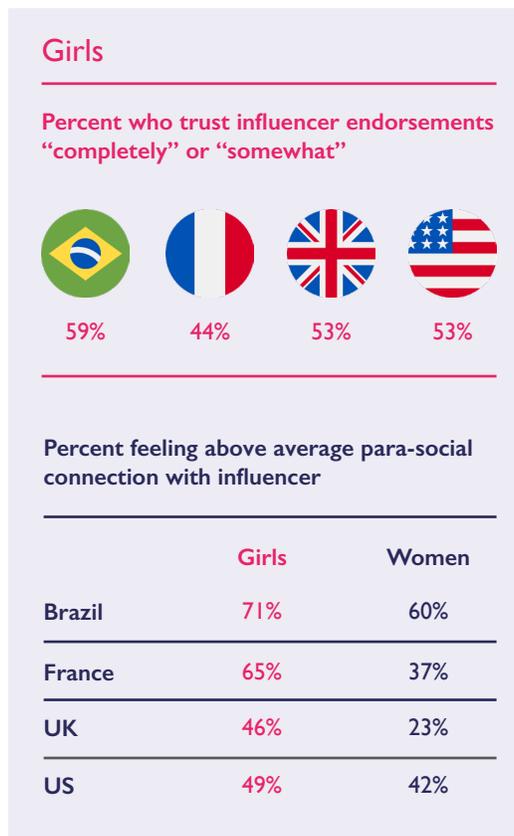
Teen girls, like all adolescents, experience cognitive changes that are important to consider in the context of their social media use. For example, teens' prefrontal cortex, responsible for executive functions like impulse control, is underdeveloped, which can lead to risk-taking behavior and poor decision-making. Emotional factors can also affect their cognitive performance; stress and emotions can impact their memory and information processing. These cognitive weaknesses can make teens vulnerable to manipulation and exploitation by influencers who are being paid to push a product or issue.

One finding from the survey, in particular, highlights the power imbalance between girls and influencers. Nearly 60 percent of girls acknowledged feeling a positive "connection" with an influencer. These "connections" are what psychologists call "para-social," meaning they are one-sided emotional attachments. In short, these girls felt a sense of closeness with the influencer, even though there was no real-life interaction or personal relationship that could justify those feelings.

Normally, these types of fan/celebrity relationships aren't worrisome, but social media can create pernicious effects when influencers leverage these "para-social" relationships to steer their followers into making purchases or developing certain beauty standards. Consider that while 60 percent of girls said they felt a connection with an influencer, more than three-quarters of them knew that influencer content could be harmful to their self-esteem and self-worth.

On the flip side, the influencers generally did not see a problem with this because, while other influencers might be posting harmful content, a majority of

influencers in this survey – 63 percent – said *their content* was not harmful to their followers, an apparent act of **cognitive dissonance**.



But what if their content was harmful? Would the influencers change the type of content they produce? Most said they would. However, 30 percent said they would continue influencing even if they knew that their content caused caused their female followers to “feel bad about themselves.” U.S.-based influencers were particularly callous, with 42 percent saying they would not stop.

Would any parent allow such a relationship for their daughters in real life?

The pervasive influence of social media on the lives of teenage girls is a complex and concerning issue that warrants additional research. The results of this survey reveal that many young girls may not be aware of how they could be manipulated or exploited, even when they are aware of the potential harm to their self-esteem and self-worth. The reluctance of some influencers to change their content, even in the face of evident harm, underscores the need for a more critical examination of the role and responsibility of these online figures. Ultimately, addressing the challenges posed by social media’s impact on teenage girls requires a collaborative effort involving parents, educators, influencers, and platforms to promote healthier digital environments that protect the well-being of young girls.

Influencers

If you knew that the content you post causes your female followers to feel bad about themselves...

Percent who answered “probably” or “definitely” would continue influencing



24%



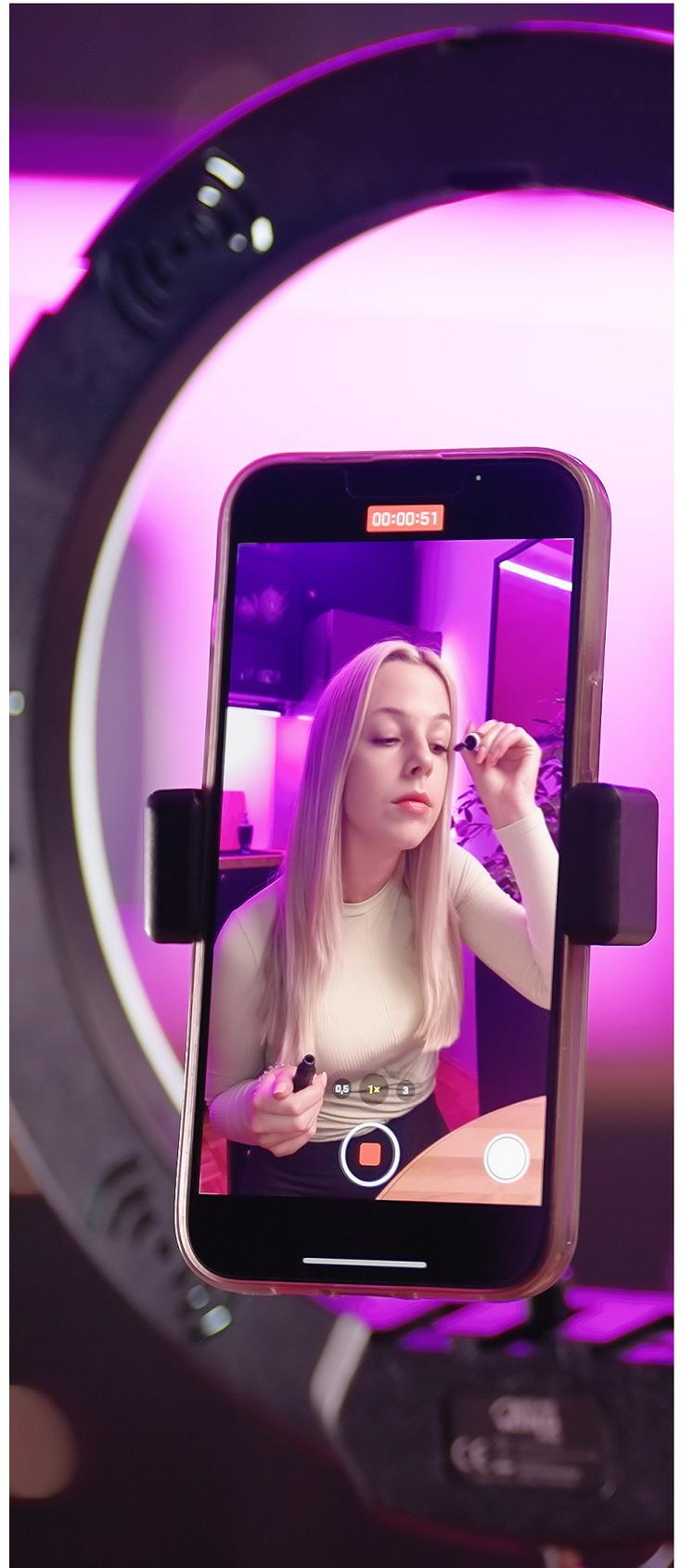
35%



25%



42%



Profiting from self-doubt.

Several studies and independent researchers have found a link between social media usage and negative feelings of self-esteem and self-worth among users, especially among girls. The results of this survey yielded similar data. Women and teens who used social media for more than three hours a day agreed with the statement 60 percent of the time: “On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.” Lighter users – women who spend less than three hours a day perusing social media – agreed with that statement 67 percent of the time. The one exception was in Brazil, where women and girls showed the same levels of self-esteem regardless of how much time they spent online.

When asked if they agreed with this statement, “I thought I could never be as good as other people,” respondents again showed a significant difference based on their social media usage. Just a little more than one-third (35 percent) of those who used social media for more than three hours a day said that statement was not true, compared with 44 percent for those online less than three hours daily.

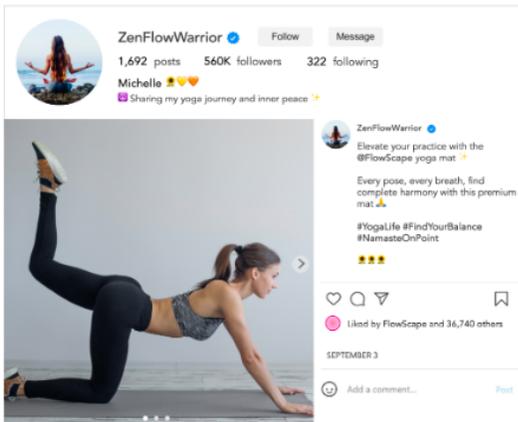
The survey asked respondents to view four posts from different social media influencers. Two of the posts

promoted uni-sex products – a lamp and a backpack – while the other two focused on women’s cosmetics and fitness. After viewing the posts, survey-takers were asked about how the posts made them feel. Women reported worse feelings after viewing the posts about cosmetics and fitness than they did after looking at the content promoting the lamp and backpack.

After looking at the cosmetics and fitness posts, nearly a third of women – 32 percent – reported feeling discouraged, exhausted, lonely, anxious, or unhappy. The posts promoting the lamp and backpack provoked negative feelings in only 19 percent of women.

The data reveals how content on topics like fitness, beauty, and fashion tap into women’s feelings of self-doubt. These posts often simultaneously present a balm for those negative emotions: “Buy this product or do this workout and you can look like me.”

Beauty influencers either unwittingly or intentionally accept these terms and, the impact on their followers, to make money. That this occurs at an almost subconscious level in both the content creators and their female users should give pause to every woman with a social media account.



Many older women can't quit their influencers.

Except for women in Brazil, the adult women surveyed were unenthusiastic about influencer content and the profession itself. They wanted to see less influencer content in their social media feeds and they expressed more negative opinions about influencing as a career.

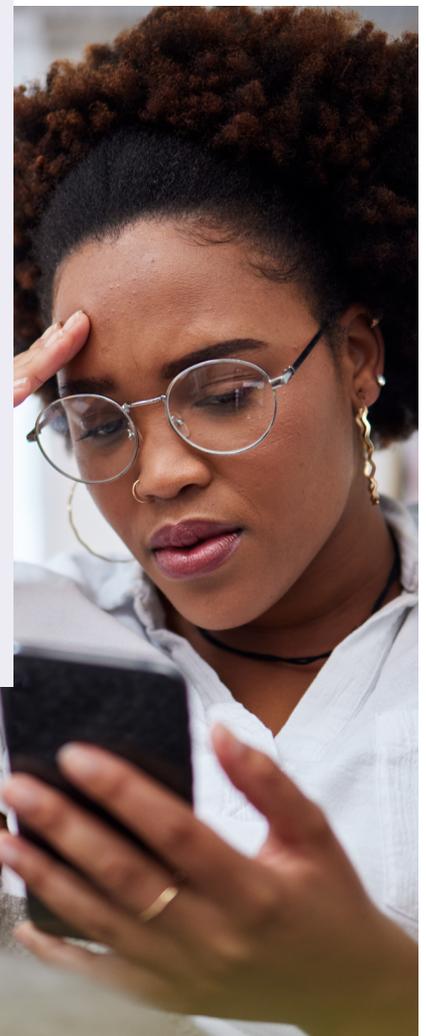
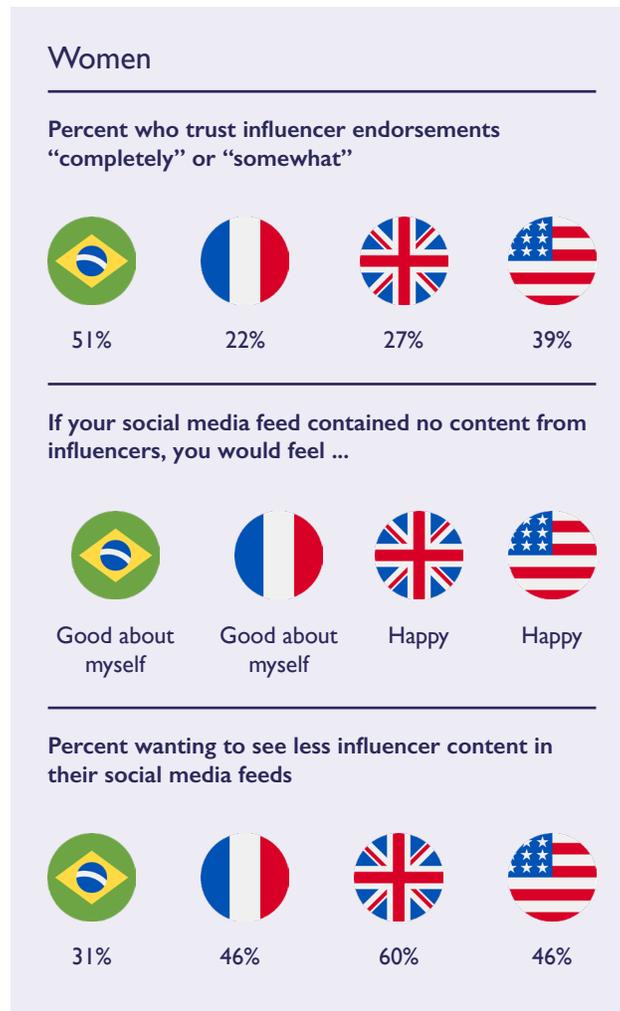
Yet, these same women acknowledged that their opinions on things like beauty, fashion, food, and careers are at least “moderately” influenced by the content they consume. It is a confusing paradox.

For example, about half of women older than 18 said they wanted to see less content from influencers in their social media feeds. They said they would feel “happy” or “good about myself” if their feeds contained no content from influencers at all.

One might think, given these responses, that these women would cull influencers from their feeds. But that’s not what’s happening – 72 percent of them said they continue to follow social media personalities. If they truly wanted to see less influencer content, a good first step would be for them to stop following influencers.

Another contradiction: only 12 percent of adult women said they have “a lot of respect” for influencers (take out women from Brazil, and the number drops to 5 percent), yet 60 percent acknowledged that social media personalities have at least a “moderate” amount of influence on their opinions.

These contradictions demonstrate a love/hate relationship women seem to have with the influencers they follow. On one hand, they want to see less content from influencers and they have little respect for their career choice. On the other hand, these same women continue to follow influencer accounts and allow their opinions to be shaped by the content they consume. These contradictions illuminate a perplexing dynamic that older women seem to share with influencers, where their influence is strong, even when users are ambivalent.



The Reboot Foundation

The Reboot Foundation is an international non-profit that offers practical tools for parents, teachers, and others who are interested in cultivating a capacity for critical thinking. Reboot believes the resources to help people improve thinking should always be free, and offers a library of teacher lesson plans, parent and educator guides, frameworks, and videos to help people improve their capacity for critical thinking.

Reboot also supports the work of scholars at Yale University, Princeton University, and at Sciences Po in Paris. These partners lead innovative research in critical thinking and misinformation.

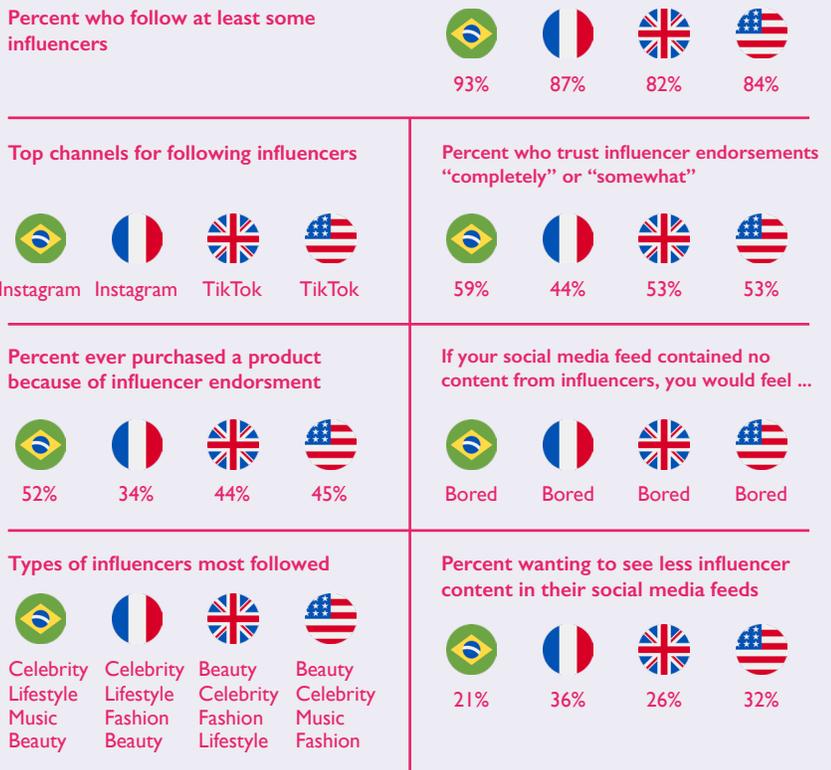
Reboot makes all of its research free to the public, and it always publishes its methodologies and approaches for full transparency.

Helen Lee Bouygues is Reboot's founder and president. An accomplished business leader, Helen's work with dozens of companies led her to conclude that critical thinking is crucial to the success of a business. This led her to create the Reboot Foundation in 2018 to develop and promote free resources on critical thinking. Since then, she has become a sought-after expert on issues related to critical thinking, social media literacy, and disinformation in the digital age.

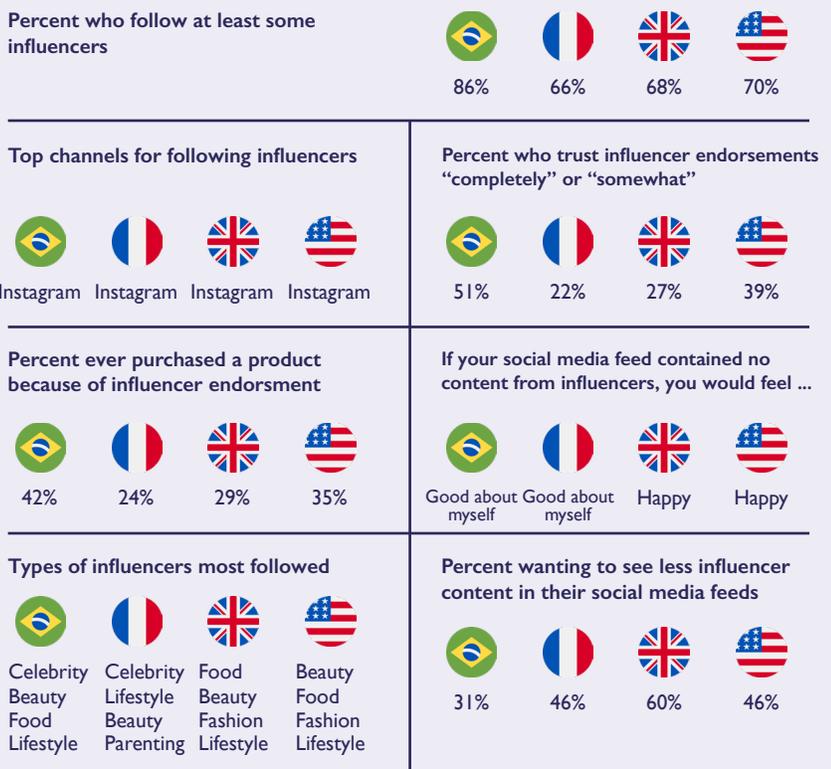
The Women's Forum for the Economy & Society

The Women's Forum for the Economy & Society envisions a world where women are equal actors and decision-makers in politics, business, and in society. The Forum seeks to remove structural barriers to equality, ensuring that women of all generations, ethnic, cultural, and social backgrounds can rise as key drivers of a more just and inclusive world. For more information please visit <https://events.womens-forum.com/womens-forum>

Girls



Women



Most Brazilian women are fans of influencers. Most women in other countries are not.

Looking at the survey data holistically it's clear that adult women generally have little regard for influencers and their chosen career paths. They have little respect for the work influencers do, and they mostly ignore their product pitches and recommendations.

In Europe, the French have a particular disdain for the influencing profession. They have the lowest levels of trust (22 percent) in influencer endorsements and they share or comment on influencer content far less frequently than do women in the other countries. They also had the highest level of self-esteem of all those surveyed.

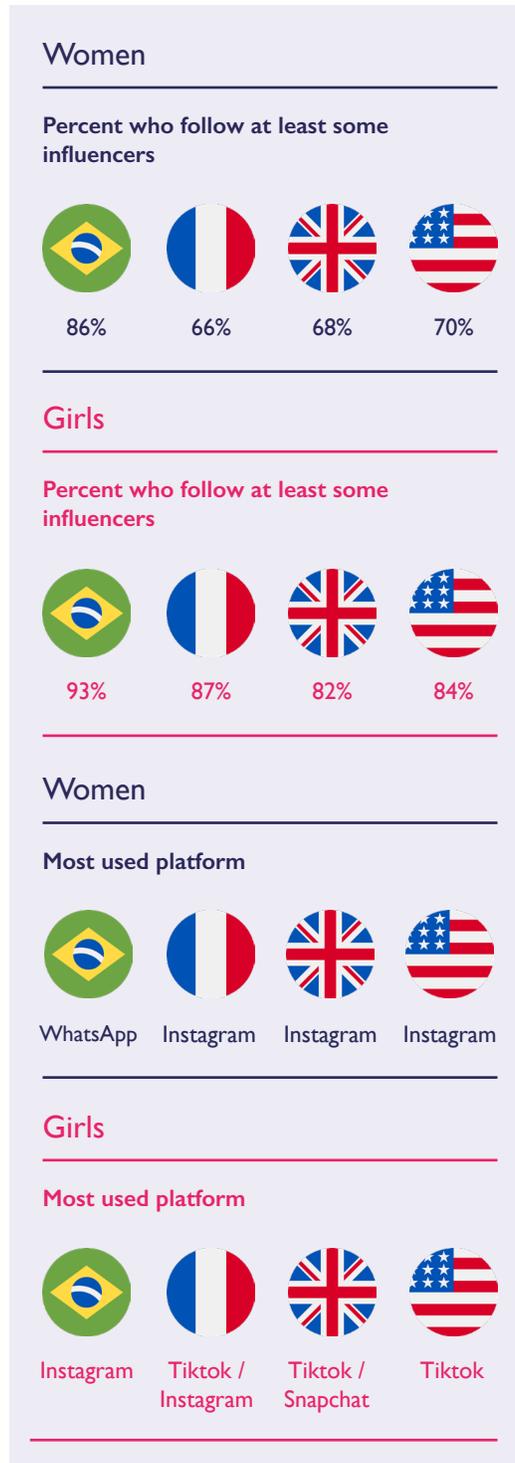
On the other end of the spectrum is Brazil where women and girls are highly engaged and enthusiastic about social media and social media influencers. Nearly half of the adult women in Brazil – 47 percent – said they spend at least three hours daily on social media, far more than second-place U.S. at 31 percent. They were also far, far less likely to believe that these hours are “wasted.” Less than half (46 percent) of Brazilians said that “they waste a lot of time” on social media, compared with 85 percent of those from the U.K.

Women in Brazil were also much more likely to trust influencer endorsements – 51 percent said they do – and to purchase products on an influencer’s recommendation – 42 percent have.

When it comes to influencing as a career, 35 percent of women in Brazil said they have “a lot of respect” for influencers compared to just 2 percent of those from the U.K. and 4 percent of French women. Nearly half – 45 percent – of adult women in Brazil said they would become an influencer “if money were no object” – a rate four times higher than women in France and the U.K.

While women in Brazil have high opinions of influencers, their teenage daughters are even more enthusiastic.

Among the Brazilian teens surveyed, 51 percent said they were interested in pursuing influencing as a career. Teens there also expressed the highest levels of respect for influencers (39 percent) than any other demographic group across all the countries surveyed. The next closest was the U.S. at 22 percent. Finally, teens in Brazil were far more likely than those from other countries to say they would feel “bored” and “out of the loop” if there was no influencer content in their social media feeds.



Significant numbers of teens worldwide want to pursue influencing as a career.

As stated earlier, teen girls are much more open to the idea of pursuing a career in social media. More than half of girls in Brazil (51 percent) were interested in being social media influencers if “money was no object.” In the U.S., it was 42 percent, and in the U.K, it was 34 percent.

Among women, interest was much lower, except in Brazil where 44 percent of adults would consider that career path if money wasn’t a barrier. This was twice as high as women in other countries.

Both teens and women, though, have a distorted view of the potential earnings influencing can yield, and they are misinformed about how many hours influencers spend each week making content for their platforms.

A large majority of teens – 63 percent – said they thought influencers made enough money to support themselves and did not need to find additional sources of income. For adults, it was even higher: 72 percent said they thought influencers could support themselves through their social media platforms.

85 percent of corporate partnerships in 2021 included female influencers.

Some influencers can indeed command huge sums through corporate sponsorships or paid posts. Fitness blogger [Kayla Itsines](#), for example, reportedly earns \$150,000 per sponsored post. It’s also true that women dominate the influencing industry – 85 percent of corporate partnerships in 2021 included female influencers. Research has also found that women can charge up to four times more than men for a sponsored post.

But that doesn’t mean that all influencers are pulling in six figures. As it is with most industries, the most successful social media personalities are the outliers. Only 29 percent of the influencers surveyed for this report described their social media work as a “full-time job.” The rest – 71 percent – described their work as either a “part-time job” or as something else, like a hobby or a passion project. The vast majority – about eight in 10 – said that, as of yet, they are unable to support themselves through influencing.

Social media users are also misinformed about the amount of time and effort influencers put into their jobs.

Roughly one-quarter of both teens and adult women thought that influencers spend at least 20 hours a week creating content, fewer than 10 percent of the influencers surveyed said that was true. In fact, 69 percent of them spend less than 12 hours a week making content. (Only 3 percent reported spending 30 hours or more a week.)

And then there are other aspects of the influencing that often go unseen by their legions of followers.

Influencers experience harassment at much higher rates than others. (For this survey, harassment was defined as unwanted or hurtful emails, texts, messages, or social media posts.) Across all the countries surveyed, influencers experienced online harassment twice as often as a typical female social media user. What’s more, roughly one in four influencers – 26 percent – said they’ve experienced harassment in real life that first began as online harassment.

Finally, there’s the mental toll of working in an industry that few people respect. Only 17 percent of female influencers said they feel “a lot of respect” from others for the work they do. Even in Brazil, where trust in influencers and enthusiasm for their content was the highest, less than 40 percent of teen girls and women said they had “a lot of respect” for social media personalities.

Percent interested in being social media influencers		
	Girls	Women
Brazil	51%	44%
France	21%	11%
UK	34%	11%
US	42%	19%

Conclusion

This report outlines the contradictions and disconnects that exist among women, teens, and social media influencers. The relationships and connections that tie these three populations together are new and **not very well understood**. However, the results of our survey should be a wake-up call for every parent who has a teen daughter with unfettered use of social media.

Teens must be taught to understand that the user-influencer relationship represents a business transaction, and the user is the thing being sold. They must be taught to recognize that influencers are actively trying to get their followers to think or act in certain ways, or to buy certain products and this can lead to poor choices and unhealthy feelings.

One way to help teens better understand influencing and their role in it is to **teach them how to be better critical thinkers**, and to impart to them strong media literacy skills. These skills go hand-in-hand. Young people must be taught how to think logically, how to analyze, and how to draw conclusions from what they see and read online. As a society, we need to do far more to teach teenagers how to think for themselves, and how to evaluate their sources of information. We need to teach them, and ourselves, how to be better critical thinkers to protect ourselves from influencers whose primary mission is to persuade, convince, and – ultimately – profit off their followers.

