

## Unboxing Comparisons: Influencers and the Distortion of Success

By Nadia Schoenauer

Oftentimes, it feels as if 45% of all content posted on social media is a regurgitation of the following narrative:

[insert influencer name here] just unboxed a PR package from [insert brand here], the value of this gift is [insert amount here]. Isn't that crazy. [insert name here] is a model-actor-Tik Toker-entrepreneur-nutritionist-fashion mogul-designer-creative director-amateur chef-pro surfer who skyrocketed to fame after posting an *iconic* TikTok where they [insert something here]. [Insert name's] good looks, quick-wit, and relatability led them from their parent's humble \$5M house in [insert state here] to sunny Los Angeles where they now own and operate their very own [insert category here] brand and make *hilarious* TikTok collabs with [insert washed up celebrity name here]. With the right amount of luck, maybe you too can become rich and famous overnight!

With few exceptions, the "origin stories" of many popular influencers are the same. The luck of a favorable algorithm grants these individuals a trip from obscurity to overnight internet-fame. It's like a modern fairytale, these influencers go from showing their going-out outfits in a dingy college house to rubbing shoulders with C-list celebrities at a club in Ibiza. Yet, the ease of this transition from "ordinary" to "rich and famous," has done nothing but further distort perceptions of success and self-image.

There's no doubt that the omnipresence of social media is suffocating. The everflowing feed of perfection (smiling faces, flawless skin, loving families, large friend groups, etc) is unavoidable. Now, add the presence of a beautiful, rich, successful, twenty-something with the "perfect bod" (whatever that means) and pearly white teeth. *Oh, and they make sooo much money from posting on TikTok, you probably can't even comprehend a number so high.*

While you sit in your college library, wondering if you should splurge for a bar of chocolate in this week's grocery haul, they spend their days throwing money at sales associates in Paris. Leaving their casual shopping trip with \$15,000 worth of luxury goods...without a second thought. Imagine that.

I'm not saying these influencers don't deserve their version of success (however defined). Nor do I think these individuals are immune to personal struggle or hardship. *I wouldn't wish intense online scrutiny on anyone, not even my worst enemy.* In my rational mind, I understand curated and easily-consumable content shields us (the social media user) from the behind-the-scenes efforts. I know there's more to the Instagram posts and TikToks than

what meets the eye—the hardships, struggles, the situations that led to the successes posted online aren't necessarily broadcasted to an audience of 10 million followers.

But it's hard.

It's hard when you take a study break on TikTok and see someone around your age relaxing on a fully funded brand trip to Mykonos: laying in the warm Greek sun, enjoying gifted PR merchandise, and sipping on Aperol Spritzes. It's hard knowing that they were given this from posting a dancing video to a trendy sound at 16. And despite your differences, it's hard not to compare their standings at nineteen to your own.

From experience, it's near impossible to not fall into the trap of comparison. With each new influencer that pops up on “mainstream social media,” it feels as if a new standard is set. As time goes on, the standards have become more unrealistic and unattainable. The established timelines for success, certain milestone markers, are slowly inching closer and closer, despite not matching your personal path.

*You're supposed to be jet-setting across the globe at 19 and sitting in the front-row at Paris fashion week, catch up! What do you mean you don't already have a successful brand collaboration and beautiful SoHo loft...yikes. You're running out of time, you only have two more years to get into a long-term relationship, only three more years until you're supposed to start your dream fashion PR job. [insert influencer name here] did that at twenty-one, you should be working harder.*

Despite how ideal it may seem, I don't want the life of an influencer. I know that my definition of success does not manifest in shallow friendships or PR packages worth thousands of dollars. Yet, it's tough to witness as influencers my age seemingly do nothing other than look pretty on social media, and in turn, receive an endless stream of praise and money. It's tough to feel like my life is somehow less exciting and fun than that of an influencer my age...like my life diverging from that of an influencer somehow makes me less than.

As un-glamorous as it may sound, I love my ordinary life, the ordinary joys that come from just being a young woman, from being a college student. I love laughing with my friends in our college house that perpetually smells like bacon and popcorn. I love driving to Dairy Queen for my bi-weekly Blizzard while singing my heart out to 2010s pop-hits. I love the creativity and freedom college has granted me. I love it all, even if I'm not jet-setting to Paris fashion week or sitting courtside at a basketball game.

When I think of my future, I see the good and the bad. The future joys waiting for me are blurry (but visible); I see the people I have yet to meet and the experiences that will eventually shape my life. But in that line of sight, I also see the student loan payments and

overarching feelings of uncertainty. In the time between now and the future, I know it's okay to flail a bit, it's okay to be utterly clueless, it's okay to enjoy the mundane joys of my tiny college town instead of glorious Mykonos.

Yet, there's this voice in my head telling me I could follow in the footsteps of these influencers. Maybe I could be the next new [insert name here] multi-hyphenate who makes it big in the [insert brand category here] industry after having a [insert stupid topic here] TikTok go viral. How exciting. What if posting a TikTok and hoping the algorithm takes me under its wing is my golden ticket to an easy life. I'd be done with the endless comparisons and spiraling in self-doubt. Mykonos get ready, I'm here to drink Aperol Spritzes and get gifted free makeup that I'll never use and will eventually throw away.

At my core, I know that success is multifaceted. An influencer's post fails to capture the nuances of their relationships with others, their self-image, their emotional states, their academic and professional standings, their efforts to better themselves. I know that success exists beyond one's apparent ease of their life. It exists beyond the "GRWM to go clubbing in Ibiza" videos and the PR boxes.

I know money and gifts in exchange for an Instagram post don't necessarily buy happiness. But, it would be nice to get some free stuff and have some extra money to buy the fancy chocolate at the grocery store. For now, I'm okay to keep overthinking in my college library... I would make a lousy influencer anyway.