Status, Belonging, and Digital Engagement: Interpreting the Influencer Phenomenon

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Abstract: This study examines the motivational foundations of aspiring to become an influencer by focusing on different dimensions of online presence. Rather than interpreting the influencer phenomenon as a purely media or marketing outcome, the paper conceptualises influencer aspiration as a motivational process embedded in online social environments. Using data from a voluntary and anonymous online survey (N = 1,146), the motivation to become an influencer was operationalised as a binary outcome variable and analysed in relation to three online presence-related factors: perceived belonging to online communities, the desire for strong online visibility and follower base, and economic engagement with online content creators. To explore these relationships, a binary logistic regression model was estimated. The results indicate that all three dimensions of online presence are significantly associated with influencer aspiration, with the strongest effect observed for the desire for online visibility. At the same time, the model's limited predictive performance suggests that aspiring to become an influencer is not a deterministic outcome of online engagement, but rather a complex, multi-dimensional motivational phenomenon. Overall, the findings highlight that influencer aspiration is closely linked to the quality of online experiences, including community attachment, status-oriented visibility, and engagement with the digital content economy, rather than to the mere intensity of online activity.

Keywords: Influencer aspiration, Online presence, Digital engagement, Social media, Belonging, Visibility, Content economy

Introduction

With the rise of social media, the structure of online publicity has fundamentally changed. Digital platforms are not only used for sharing information and maintaining contacts, but increasingly function as social spaces where individuals can gain visibility, recognition and community positions. In this environment, the emergence of influencers cannot be viewed merely as a media market phenomenon: the role of influencer embodies a specific online status position that conveys norms, aspirations and identity patterns. In many cases, the interpretation of the influencer phenomenon focuses on the economic or communicative aspects of content creation. However, it is at least as important to ask what motivates individuals to become influencers themselves and how this relates to their experiences and aspirations in the online space. The intention to become an influencer does not necessarily precede actual content creation, but can often be interpreted as an aspiration that appears early on in one's online presence. In this sense, online presence is not just a technical activity, but a combination of emotional, motivational and behavioural elements related to connecting with online communities, the need for visibility and participation in the online content economy. Social platforms provide opportunities to experience belonging, gather feedback and gain recognition, while the economic dimensions of online presence, such as financial support for content creators, are becoming increasingly important.

This study is based on the assumption that the motivation to become an influencer is not an isolated phenomenon, but is closely related to community ties experienced in the online space, the pursuit of online visibility, and involvement in the online content economy. The aim of the research is to explore how these online dimensions relate to the emergence of aspirations to become an influencer. This approach allows us to interpret the influencer phenomenon not only as an outcome, but also as part of the motivational processes taking place in the online space.

Literature Review

Understanding the influencer phenomenon increasingly goes beyond the traditional framework of marketing and media research and shifts towards issues of social status, identity and community embeddedness. Online visibility has become not just a communication tool, but a social resource that conveys recognition, symbolic capital and status. In this sense, the role of influencer is not only a profession or media type, but also an aspirational position that conveys norms and role models in the online space. Research examining the motivations for social media use points to fundamental psychological needs underlying online presence, such as the need for self-expression, connection and recognition (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012). These needs can become particularly pronounced in a digital environment where feedback can be quantified, visibility can be measured, and online status can be constantly compared with that of others. The online space thus becomes a medium that not only satisfies but also reinforces the desire for visibility.

The social dimension of attachment to community platforms is emphasised in the literature examining the relationship between online communities and social capital. According to Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe (2007), online networks can strengthen the sense of community belonging, especially among young adults. Belonging in the online space is not only about maintaining relationships, but also a form of social reinforcement of identity. This community experience can create a motivational basis in which becoming an influencer becomes a comprehensible goal. Research on online self-presentation shows that social media presence is closely related to the development of self-image and self-esteem. According to Mehdizadeh (2010), online self-representation is not merely a communicative practice, but is also linked to self-esteem and the reinforcement of personal identity. Similarly, platform use based on feedback and visibility can influence individuals' self-esteem and social self-definition (Gonzales & Hancock, 2011). These findings suggest that the intensity and quality of online presence are linked to psychological processes that may underlie aspirations to become an influencer.

Empirical research on influencers increasingly emphasises the role of identification and parasocial relationships. Croes and Bartels (2021) have shown that following influencers is not merely informational or entertaining, but is also linked to identification processes. The lifestyles, values, and success patterns conveyed by influencers can serve as aspirational reference points for followers. This process is reinforced by the mechanisms described by Shan et al. (2020) in the context of parasocial identification and perceived authenticity. According to approaches that emphasise the status nature of the influencer role, online visibility itself becomes a value. Renchen (2020) points out that the presence of influencers carries not only communicative impact but also symbolic recognition. This interpretation is further deepened by Hearn and Schoenhoff (2015), who describe the role of influencers as a digital redistribution of celebrity value. In this view, influencers are not merely content creators, but a status position embedded in the logic of the online attention economy.

The pursuit of online visibility and recognition gains a comprehensive interpretation in the context of the so-called attention economy. According to Marwick (2015), self-representations and follower bases on online platforms function as new forms of social status. In this environment, becoming an influencer is not an unusual phenomenon, but an aspiration that stems from the structural characteristics of the digital space. Influencer aspiration can thus be interpreted as a combination of the intensity of online presence, community attachment and the pursuit of status. Overall, the literature suggests that the motivation to become an influencer cannot be separated from the sense of belonging, visibility, and identity-forming processes experienced in the online space. The intensity and quality of online presence are linked to psychological and social mechanisms that can facilitate the development of aspirations to become an influencer. This theoretical background provides a solid foundation for empirical investigation of how different aspects of online presence relate to the motivation to become an influencer.

Research Question and Hypotheses

With the rise of social media, the phenomenon of influencers has become a defining element of online publicity. Influencers not only appear as content producers, but also embody online status positions that convey social

recognition, visibility and identity patterns. At the same time, the question of what factors motivate individuals to become influencers themselves and how their experiences in the online space contribute to the development of these aspirations is becoming increasingly important.

This part of the research is based on the assumption that the motivation to become an influencer is not the result of an isolated decision, but is closely related to the quality of an individual's online presence and their experiences in the online space. The online environment creates a digital space in which self-expression, visibility, feedback and the experience of community connection are all present at the same time. Together, these elements can shape the aspirations that lead to the emergence of becoming an influencer as a goal.

The research therefore focused on the question of how the motivation to become an influencer relates to different aspects of online presence. Treating the intention to become an influencer as an outcome variable, we examined the extent to which it can be explained by attitudes and behaviours related to online space. We did not interpret online presence as a uniform construct, but rather captured it along several distinct dimensions. These included the subjective experience of belonging to online communities, the desire for a strong online presence and follower base, and financial commitment to online content creators.

When formulating the research questions, it was important to ensure that online presence was not interpreted merely as a technical activity, but as a complex phenomenon that also encompasses emotional, motivational and behavioural elements. Accordingly, this part of the research does not focus on the social or demographic background of online presence, but rather on whether experiences and aspirations in the online space are directly related to the intention to become an influencer. Based on the above, the aim of the research was to explore the extent to which and in what direction the motivation to become an influencer is related to certain dimensions of online presence. To empirically test this, we formulated the following hypotheses:

H1: The motivation to become an influencer is significantly related to the subjective experience of belonging to online communities.
H2: The motivation to become an influencer is significantly related to the desire for a strong online presence and follower base.
H3: The motivation to become an influencer is significantly related to financial commitment to online content creators.

Method

The aim of the research was to explore how different dimensions of online presence – such as attachment to online communities, the desire for online visibility, and involvement in the online content economy – are related to the motivation to become an influencer. The study was conducted as part of a larger, multidimensional research project, but this paper focuses exclusively on the motivational factors related to becoming an influencer and certain attributes of online presence. Data collection was conducted using an anonymous online questionnaire via Google Forms. The questionnaire was completed in the first semester of the 2025/2026 academic year. The primary target group consisted of students at Óbuda University, but respondents were also asked to share the questionnaire with their relatives and friends. This snowball-type distribution helped the survey reach groups that would have been difficult to involve through institutional channels, but this sampling method also carries the risk of sample bias, particularly due to the overrepresentation of groups that are more active online. By the end of the first wave of the research, a total of 1,146 evaluable responses had been received. The sample size provided an adequate empirical basis for exploring correlations and establishing statistical models, but the composition of the sample cannot be considered nationally representative. The conclusions drawn are therefore primarily exploratory in nature and can be applied to the specific characteristics of the respondent group studied. When designing the questionnaire, ensuring anonymity and applying the principle of data minimisation were key considerations. We did not collect any data that could be used for direct or indirect identification, nor did we include any combinations of questions that could have been used to draw conclusions about the respondents' health status or identity. In this study, we captured the motivation to become an influencer with a binary variable ("My goal is to become an influencer"), to which respondents could answer yes or no. We operationalised the intensity of online presence using several variables. These included the subjective experience of belonging to online communities ("I feel like I belong somewhere on social media"), the desire for a strong online presence and follower base ("I would like to have a strong online presence/follower base"), and financial commitment to online content creators ("I have already supported a content creator financially"). We used a four-point Likert scale to measure attitude variables, while the question regarding financial support was answered on a binary scale. During data processing, we first performed descriptive statistical analyses to present the distribution of variables. We then used a binary logistic

regression model in the GLM framework, with a binomial error structure and logit link function, to explore the factors explaining the motivation to become an influencer. The model parameters were estimated using the maximum likelihood method. In order to examine the generalisability of the model and mitigate the risk of overfitting, we split the database into a training sample and a test sample in a 75–25% ratio. We evaluated the performance of the model on both subsets, paying particular attention to the limitations arising from the highly asymmetric distribution of the output variable. We used version 4.5.2 of the R statistical software package to perform the statistical analyses, relying on several additional packages (xlsx, dplyr, car, caTools, caret) during the analysis. Some of the figures were created using Microsoft Excel and draw.io.

Results

Descriptive Characterisation of the Motivation to Become an Influencer

The research focused on the motivation to become an influencer, which we operationalised as a binary outcome variable ("My goal is to become an influencer"). Of the 1,146 respondents, 114 (10.87%) answered yes, while 1,032 (89.13%) answered no. The distribution of the outcome variable is highly asymmetrical, suggesting that the intention to become an influencer cannot be considered a general aspiration in the sample, but rather appears to be a goal characteristic of a relatively narrow group of respondents. This distribution characteristic is also relevant from a methodological point of view, as the strong imbalance of the binary output variable (imbalanced distribution) affects the interpretability of the performance of predictive models.

Distribution of Attitudes Related to Online Presence

In connection with the motivation to become an influencer, we examined three variables related to online presence: the subjective experience of belonging to online communities (CMM2), the desire for a strong online presence and follower base (CMM5), and financial commitment to online content creators (CMH6).

Based on descriptive statistical analyses, it can be concluded that the majority of respondents have a rather positive attitude towards belonging to online communities, while the desire for a strong online presence or follower base is more divided. In contrast, financial support for online content creators can clearly be considered a minority behaviour pattern in the sample.
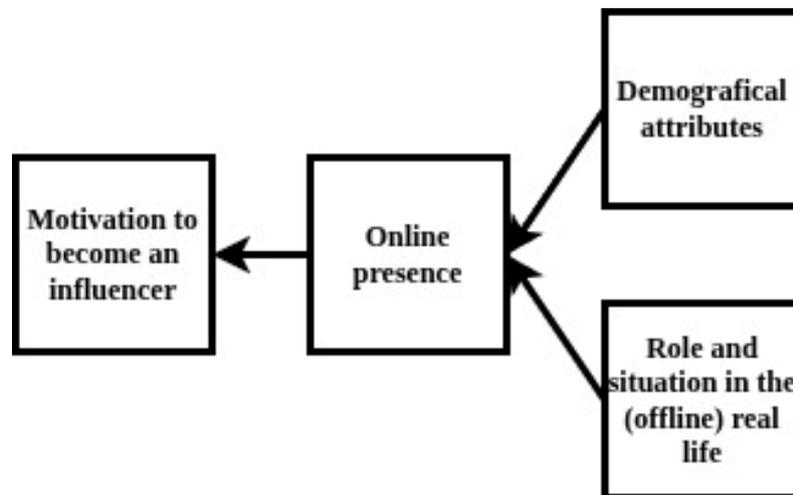

Figure 1. Certain dimensions of online presence appear in different ways and with varying intensity among respondents, which justifies their separate examination in explaining aspirations to become an influencer.

Logistic Regression Model Explaining the Motivation to Become an Influencer

We used a binary logistic regression model to explore the factors explaining the motivation to become an influencer. The outcome variable was the response to the question "My goal is to become an influencer" (yes/no), while the explanatory variables included three attitude variables related to online presence (CMM2, CMM5, CMH6) in the model.

Table 1 Binary logistic regression model for motivation to become an influencer

Variable	Estimate	Std. Error	z value	p-value
(Intercept)	-5.6834	0.4017	-14.149	p < 0.001 ***
CMM2	0.5758	0.1459	3.946	p < 0.001 ***
CMM5	0.9131	0.1352	6.706	p < 0.001 ***
CMH6	0.9928	0.2844	3.490	p < 0.001 ***

Null deviance: 559.14 (df = 859); Residual deviance: 375.37 (df = 856); AIC: 383.37

Based on the results of the model, all three variables related to online presence were statistically significantly associated with the motivation to become an influencer. The subjective experience of belonging to online communities (CMM2) had a positive effect, suggesting that the experience of online belonging increases the likelihood of aspiring to become an influencer. The desire for a strong online presence and follower base (CMM5) showed the strongest effect in the model, suggesting that the motivation to become an influencer is closely intertwined with aspirations for online visibility and recognition. Financial support for online content creators (CMH6) also showed a positive and significant relationship, suggesting the role of increased involvement in the online content economy.

Model Fit and Predictive Performance

The inclusion of explanatory variables significantly reduced the model's deviance from the null model, indicating an improvement in the model's statistical fit. However, due to the highly asymmetric distribution of the outcome variable, caution is warranted when interpreting the classification performance metrics. The accuracy values measured on the training sample and the test sample were of similar magnitude, which does not indicate significant overfitting. At the same time, the low Kappa index draws attention to the fact that a significant part of the model's performance can be attributed to high base accuracy resulting from class imbalance. These results suggest that although attitudes related to online presence are statistically significant predictors of the motivation to become an influencer, predicting this phenomenon based solely on these factors has limited accuracy.

Summary of Results in Light of the Hypotheses

Overall, the empirical results support the research hypotheses. The motivation to become an influencer is significantly related to the subjective experience of belonging to online communities (H1), the desire for a strong online presence and follower base (H2), and financial commitment to online content creators (H3). At the same time, the limited predictive power of the model suggests that becoming an influencer is a complex decision-making process in which factors other than online attitudes, not examined in this study, may also play a role.

Discussion

The aim of the study was to explore how the motivation to become an influencer relates to different dimensions of online presence. Based on the empirical results, it can be concluded that the aspiration to become an influencer does not appear as an isolated attitude, but is closely related to community experiences in the online space, the pursuit of visibility, and involvement in the online content economy. All three online dimensions examined showed a significant relationship with the motivation to become an influencer, but contributed to the interpretation of the phenomenon in different ways and with different explanatory power. The subjective experience of belonging to online communities (H1) was positively related to the intention to become an influencer, suggesting that influencer aspiration cannot be interpreted merely as an individualised pursuit of self-affirmation. The online community experience, the sense of belonging, and the role of community feedback suggest that the motivation to become an influencer is partly fuelled by social embeddedness. This is consistent with theoretical approaches that interpret online presence not only as a communication channel , but also as a social space where individuals' identities and role perceptions are constantly evolving.

The strongest correlation was observed in the case of a strong online presence and the desire for a follower base (H2). This result suggests that the motivation to become an influencer is closely linked to the pursuit of online visibility and recognition. In this interpretation, the role of influencer is not only a position of content creator, but also a status position in which attention, feedback and followers represent value in themselves. The desire for visibility can thus be interpreted as one of the central motivational elements of becoming an influencer, linking individual aspirations to the attention-based functioning of online platforms. Financial commitment to online

content creators (H3) also showed a significant relationship with the motivation to become an influencer. This result suggests that influencer aspiration is not solely a symbolic or identity-related pursuit, but is also related to the acceptance and internalisation of the functioning of the online content economy. Respondents who financially support the work of content creators are more likely to express goals of becoming an influencer, suggesting that the economic dimension of the influencer role is already present at the aspiration level.

At the same time, the limited predictive power of the model draws attention to the fact that the motivation to become an influencer does not follow deterministically from online attitudes. Although the dimensions of online presence examined are significant explanatory factors, they cannot fully describe the phenomenon on their own. This suggests that becoming an influencer is a complex decision-making and motivational process in which, in addition to experiences in the online space, other psychological, cultural or contextual factors not examined in this study may also play a role. Overall, the results indicate that the motivation to become an influencer is linked to the quality of online presence rather than simply its quantity. The combination of online community experiences, the pursuit of visibility and involvement in the online economy creates a motivational environment in which becoming an influencer can be interpreted as an understandable and attractive goal, but does not become a general or automatic aspiration among individuals active in the online space.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore how the motivation to become an influencer relates to different dimensions of online presence. The empirical results clearly support the notion that the relationship with the online space is not merely a background factor, but plays a significant role in the development of aspirations to become an influencer. The subjective experience of belonging to online communities, the desire for strong online visibility and a large follower base, and financial commitment to online content creators all showed a positive correlation with the motivation to become an influencer. The results suggest that the interpretation of the influencer phenomenon cannot be separated from aspirations for online status and visibility. The intention to become an influencer is more likely to appear among respondents who experience the online space as a community, identity-forming and recognition-providing medium. At the same time, the study also showed that becoming an influencer is not a mass phenomenon: the vast majority of respondents do not express such goals, suggesting that the phenomenon is linked to a smaller, more strongly involved group.

Although the logistic regression model revealed significant correlations, the results also indicate that becoming an influencer does not follow deterministically from attitudes related to online presence. Influencer aspiration can be interpreted as a complex, multidimensional motivational process in which, in addition to online experiences, other psychological, economic and contextual factors beyond the scope of this study may also play a role. Overall, the research contributes to the empirical understanding of the influencer phenomenon by supporting the relationship between the qualitative dimensions of online presence and the motivation to become an influencer with quantitative data. The results confirm that the influencer phenomenon cannot be interpreted merely as a media market or marketing issue, but is closely linked to status, belonging and digital engagement in the online space.

Recommendations

The findings of this study offer several practical implications for stakeholders operating within digital platforms, the content economy, and related organisational and policy environments. First, the strong association between influencer aspiration and the desire for online visibility suggests that platform designers and content ecosystems play an active role in shaping aspirational dynamics. Recommendation algorithms, visibility metrics, and feedback mechanisms implicitly define what is perceived as success in the online space. Platform operators should therefore consider how visibility-driven incentives may amplify status-oriented aspirations, and whether alternative forms of recognition—such as community-based contributions or collaborative visibility—could balance purely follower-based success metrics. Second, the positive relationship between influencer aspiration and perceived belonging to online communities highlights the importance of social embedding in digital environments. For organisations and brands engaging with influencer ecosystems, this suggests that influencer strategies should not focus exclusively on reach and metrics, but also on community dynamics and relational authenticity. Supporting smaller-scale, community-oriented content creators may foster more sustainable engagement patterns than prioritising visibility maximisation alone. Third, the link between influencer aspiration and economic engagement with content creators indicates that aspiring influencers are not only passive consumers of digital content, but active participants in the digital content economy. This has implications for platform governance and business

models, as users increasingly internalise the economic logic of content production at an early aspirational stage. Transparency in monetisation structures, clearer communication about income volatility, and realistic representations of influencer careers may help align expectations with actual opportunities in the platform economy. Finally, the limited predictive power of the model suggests that influencer aspiration should not be treated as a uniform or inevitable outcome of online engagement. Policymakers, educational institutions, and organisations involved in digital literacy initiatives may benefit from framing influencer culture as one of several possible trajectories within the digital economy, rather than as a dominant or normative career path. Emphasising diverse forms of digital participation and value creation could contribute to a more balanced understanding of success in online environments.

Scientific Ethics Declaration

Conflict of Interest

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