

Here come the influencers

A new breed of social media stars is wooing brands with the promise of authenticity

FT Wealth

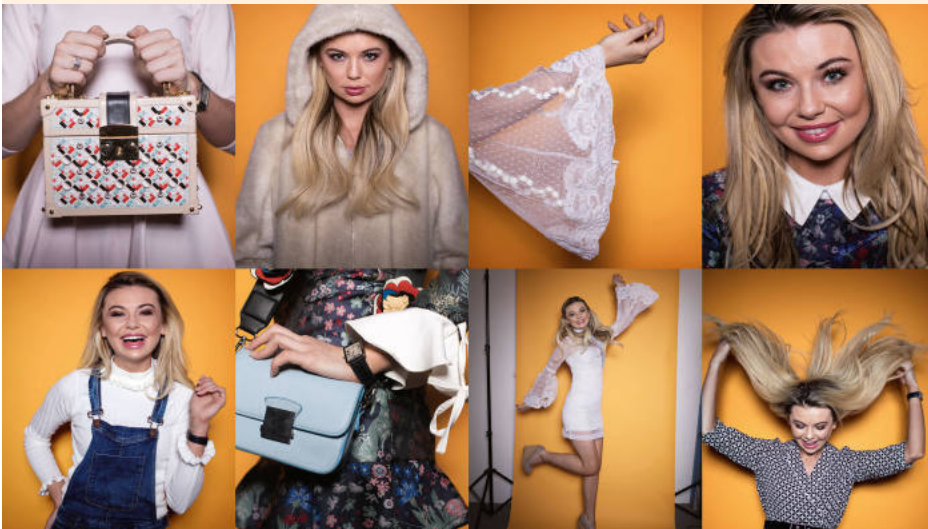


Photo favourite: Being snapped is part of the cycle of profile-raising that has made Georgia Toffolo an 'influencer' © Charlie Bibby

YESTERDAY by: **Kadhim Shubber**

Georgia Toffolo is followed by almost half a million people on Instagram and could be said to have one of life's easier jobs. It's a few days before the pop music industry's Brit Awards and the reality television star is at her flat in South Kensington, an expensive neighbourhood in west London. She's getting ready for the first of the week's many parties. A make-up artist is making sure she looks just right. An Uber car is

waiting outside. Her phone buzzes with a text. “So, this is interesting,” she says, in an enthusiastic, refined voice. It’s an offer for a paid Instagram post, advertising a £100 metallic rose gold watch from jeweller Abbott Lyon. The picture it wants her to share shows the timepiece on a disembodied arm, with wilting pink and white roses in the background. It’s a quick turnaround: the company wants it up in 15 minutes.

Toffolo considers the offer for a moment. “Definitely yes, because it’s nice content. It’s a good photo,” she explains. Neither of us knows whose arm is in the picture, but soon it’s shared with her hundreds of thousands of followers. The caption includes a discount code and reads: “AHHHH Rose Gold and Metallic obsession thanks to @abbottlyon”. Toffolo has barely paused from her party prep. “Do you see how easy it is?” she says.

This is the world in which Georgia Toffolo lives. The 22-year-old made her name three years ago when she joined *Made in Chelsea*, the UK reality TV show that follows the lives of young, rich Londoners like her. “Toff”, as she has become known to fans, has translated that fame into a sizeable online profile that includes 436,000 followers on Instagram and 96,000 on Twitter.



Former Made in Chelsea star Lucy Watson posing for the cameras at a London fashion show © Getty

But even those extraordinary numbers make her a minor player in an ever-expanding universe of “influencers” who have built enormous followings on social media and use their status to make money through advertising. While most of us are defined by a wage, theirs is a pay-per-post existence where

anything and everything can be monetised with enough imagination.

Before long, she's ready to go and we head into central London. When we arrive at the club by the Thames, paparazzi spot Toffolo and fire off a volley of flashes. She's unfazed; I stumble, blinded. There's work to do before we go in. First, a photo in front of a wall of logos outside the venue. Then, more photos in front of a different wall of logos inside. Finally, we are ushered to a crowded VIP area, where yet another photographer lies in wait. When everything settles down, I see we are at a fairly ordinary nightclub full of people in their early 20s. Toffolo is with two friends, one in a jumper with a dinosaur on it. It's the oldest I've felt in years.

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At 1M followers you can bring out your own clothing instead of promoting other people's

Matt Nicholls

The next morning I get an email from Toffolo's agent, Matt Nicholls of

United Agents. It was a successful night and photos of her have appeared in MailOnline, whose story claims she was “back to her old tricks” and “flaunting her petite figure”. This is the cycle between online and offline fame in action. Pictures in the celebrity press

attract new fans, which attracts more brands and more invites to parties, which attracts more pictures in the celebrity press, which attract new fans, and so on. It's designed to boost Toffolo's profile and earning power. "Raise the profile, raise the followers, raise the value," as Nicholls explains it.

Every facet of an evening can be sold. A specific brand of hair product can be promoted, a certain designer's clothes, even an appearance at an event; everything can be hived off separately to different brands.

"It's the Kardashians who have trail-blazed, really. Everything they do is monetised," Nicholls says, referring to the "royal family" of the reality television/social media kingdom. The result is a steady and largely effortless stream of cash for those with enough online "disciples", as he calls them. A person with a million Instagram followers can get £3,000 per post, he explains, and another £2,000 to wear an outfit to an event. "Very quickly you've earned £5,000 just by going out," he says.



Make-up bloggers Nic and Sam Chapman at a beauty and fashion festival in New York © Getty

The prices rocket as the number of followers increases. According to Captiv8, a US social media analytics company, payment for posts on Instagram can range from \$800 for people with fewer than 250,000 followers up to \$150,000 for those with 7m or more. The rates for Snapchat posts are broadly similar, Facebook carries a moderate premium and YouTube is the most expensive of all, with 7m or more followers resulting in an average fee of \$300,000. And that is before you count the other branding opportunities available to social media celebrities. The new and old worlds are effectively one and the same, with fame in one spilling into the other.

Another of Nicholls' clients, Lucy Watson, a former *Made in Chelsea* star, has 1.4m followers on Instagram

and is moving into publishing. “We are launching a vegan book with Lucy, so we want to push her veganism [in] every fourth post,” he says. That apparently is the sweet spot. Stars can also graduate out of the promotion business into owning the product itself. “When you’re at 1m you can bring out your own clothing instead of promoting other people’s,” he adds.

It is a well-trodden path. Zoe Sugg, aka [Zoella \(https://www.ft.com/content/fa5e47c6-od9b-11e4-815f-00144feabdco\)](https://www.ft.com/content/fa5e47c6-od9b-11e4-815f-00144feabdco), who made her name doing make-up tutorials on YouTube, released her first book, *Girl Online*, in 2014, helped by a ghostwriter with publisher Penguin. The work was a hit and made her the fastest-selling debut novelist ever. Fellow YouTube sensations, sisters Sam and Nic Chapman, now have their own line of make-up brushes — the UK’s bestselling brand of brush and the fastest-growing one in the US, according to Dom Smales, the founder of Gleam Futures, an agency that specialises in YouTube talent and manages both Zoella and the Chapmans.



YouTube star Zoe Sugg launches her first book, a novel about a teenage blogger © PA

Toffolo is hoping to go on a slightly different journey. At the moment, she sells the idea of glamour to her fans but has aspirations of a life in politics. While her Instagram features idealised pictures of parties and holidays, her Twitter account is full of observations on current affairs. The next time I meet her is outside the Houses of Parliament, where she is due to see Greg Hands, her MP. Inevitably, a paparazzo turns up just as we're entering the building.

Toffolo studied law then politics at university before

dropping out to join *Made in Chelsea*, and is thinking about a future away from the show. She is a supporter of the Conservative party and a regretful opponent of the UK's departure from the EU. "So I voted to remain, and I actually regret it so much, and I'm actually even embarrassed to say that I did vote Remain. I did it through being scared. It was stupid," she tells Hands over tea. He offers her advice on getting involved in her local Conservative party, and which dinners to attend and avoid. When we leave, she pulls out a notepad and checks off a list of talking points she wanted to raise in the meeting. She neglected just one and concludes: "That's probably the best meeting ever. And also it's good for you to see that I'm not just, like, a . . . chick that puts up Instagrams, you know."

Social media stars range from those like Toffolo, whose profile has been raised partly by traditional media, such as TV, to those whose fame is derived purely from their online presence. There are those, like the Kardashians, who started on the "famous for being famous" track, and there are others who have emerged on a wave of virality and creativity. There are the glamorous, like Toffolo, who may have 'nerdy' interests in addition to their fame, and there are others, like Simone Giertz, a Swedish YouTuber famous for building comically bad robots.

The creativity of some social media stars is key to their appeal to brands, says Edward East, who runs Billion Dollar Boy, which represents brand owners. The brands can farm out the production of advertising to a cottage industry of people whose large followings are proof of their skills — a potentially more appealing and cheaper route than sourcing ideas from a traditional creative agency. “You have a young person in a creative agency coming up with an idea who has an Instagram account with 200 followers versus someone with 100,000. The person at 100,000 is at 100,000 because they know what works,” says East.

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It’s good for you to see I’m not just, like, a...chick that puts up

Instagrams
Georgia Toffolo

The idea that these celebrities are more “authentic” is central to

their earning power. They are perceived to have a closer, more personal relationship with their fans, who tend to be younger and may have followed them from obscurity to their current position of fame. Their posts tend to have higher levels of engagement — comments, likes and shares — which brands see as offering better value for their advertising budget, as social media such as Facebook limit the reach of low-engagement

content. All of this has blurred the line between what is advertising and what isn't.

“Most people most of the time don't realise they've seen advertising,” says Guy Parker, chief executive of the Advertising Standards Authority. There are now rules requiring social media users to tell their followers explicitly when they have been paid to promote a brand, though these are not always followed.

Toffolo is reluctant to talk about these blurred lines. Some posts on her Instagram that look like promotions aren't labelled “ad”, but others are. If it was up to her, none would be. “I just feel like it's not part of my caption,” she says.

Whether her fans care either way is another question. Toffolo's watch post totted up just over 1,000 likes, below average for her. But the handful of comments are no less effusive. One is from an excited teenager: “You are one of the most down to earth person I know!”

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