

Gatecrashing Journalism: How Influencers are Redefining News in Zambia

Gregory Gondwe

Department of Communication and Media, California State University -San Bernardino, CA
Faculty Associate, Berkman Klein Center, Harvard, MA
Gregory.gondwe@csusb.edu

This study examines the impact of social media influencers on journalism, political, and cultural discourses in Zambia. It employs mixed methods, including quantitative and computational web scraping techniques, to collect, extract, and analyze data from social media posts. Data from 22 influencers ($N=5,000$ posts, 2021-2023) show how social media influencers challenge cultural norms and reshape media dynamics (RQ2). Findings reveal that influencers harness audience engagement and captivating content to push against conservatism.

They further disrupt traditional media by fostering trust through personalized interactions and emerging as citizen journalists. However, ethical concerns regarding transparency and objectivity necessitate establishing standards for influencer reporting.

Keywords: social media influencers, public discourse, societal norms, democratic values, ethical concerns, journalism,

Social media platforms have ignited a revolution in celebrity culture. Fame now transcends red carpets, with everyday individuals crafting narratives and amassing millions of followers. This shift blurs the lines between celebrities and social media influencers (SMIs), prompting a surge in academic interest. Several scholars are emerging to examine the distinct yet converging roles between SMIs and traditional celebrities in shaping public discourse, consumer behavior, and media ethics.

Traditional media outlets, once the primary gatekeepers of information, now vie for audience attention with a new generation of media personalities: social media influencers (Scheffauer, Goyanes, & Zúñiga, 2023; Shoemaker, 2023). Accordingly, most scholars argue that these influencers employ social media platforms to cultivate large followers (Cheng, Chen, & Peng, 2024; Harff & Schmuck, 2023). Even in seemingly less

technologically sophisticated environments like Africa, the trends of social media influencers, especially in political and cultural discourses, have become apparent. In Ghana, for example, Asante (2020) refers to them as “serial callers or quasi-political communicators” hired by political parties to influence political campaigns and sway voter behavior.

Several other African countries have documented this experience, including South Africa, Nigeria, and Zambia (where incumbent President Hakainde Hichilema attributed his 2021 victory to the youth and social media influencers in his inaugural speech). Unlike celebrities who achieve fame through established norms, most social media influencers have emerged unconventionally. Gondwe (2024) observes that, although sex work was traditionally frowned upon in Zambian cultures, it is alarming that social media influencers who take this route, posting sexually suggestive content, receive more followers who view and comment on their content, regardless of whether the comments are positive or negative. This creates a dilemma for traditional societies and media outlets: how can journalistic ethics be maintained while competing in a media environment that prioritizes clicks and social media engagement over in-depth reporting? Furthermore, advertising revenue that once supported journalism practices, including investigative journalism, is now migrating toward influencer marketing (Cheng, Chen, & Peng, 2024; Harff & Schmuck, 2023).

This study examines how social media influencers compete with traditional media for audience attention and how this interaction might affect traditional media’s core principles (ethos). With the rise of social media, the lines between entertainment and journalism are blurring. Traditionally, journalists are held to strict ethical codes, such as objectivity and information verification (Plaisance & Skewes, 2003; Ward, 2020). In contrast, social media influencers often prioritize entertainment and self-promotion over factual accuracy (Molyneux & Coddington, 2020; Wanda et al., 2021), leading to concerns about declining journalistic standards. Should journalism adopt the SMI’s strategies to survive? What are the implications?

The study analyzed data from social media posts by 22 Zambian influencers between January 2021 and December 2023. We examined nearly 5,000 posts, including videos, tweets, comments, likes, and other engagement metrics. We aimed to understand

how these influencers affect *Zambian society* in three key areas: (a). *Challenging Cultural Norms*: We looked for patterns in the data that reveal how influencers discuss sensitive topics like gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights. By analyzing these discussions, we aimed to understand how influencers use social media to spark dialogue and potentially change traditional beliefs. (b). *Influencer Marketing Dynamics*: We investigated how influencers attract advertisers. We identified the types of brands collaborating with them and assessed the effectiveness of these campaigns. This analysis helps us understand how well brand messages align with influencer content, providing insights into audience perception and brand engagement strategies. (c). *The Rise of Citizen Journalism*: Finally, we explored the growing trend of influencers acting as journalists by evaluating the credibility of their content and its potential impact on audience trust.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many studies have shown that social media has profoundly altered the long-held understanding of celebrity culture. Traditionally, celebrity status was exclusive, bestowed upon individuals who navigated the entertainment industry's elite circles or appeared in major media outlets. However, the advent of social media has democratized fame, allowing ordinary individuals to amass substantial followings and gain widespread recognition. This shift has resulted in a new class of celebrities—social media influencers—who harness their digital presence to shape public discourse, consumer behavior, and media ethics (Goodwin et al., 2023; Harff & Schmuck, 2024). Unlike traditional celebrities, who often adhere to societal norms, influencers frequently establish their reputations by challenging or defying them. This creates a unique persona that blurs the lines between fame and notoriety (Beuckels & De Wolf, 2024).

Social media influencers are best understood through “parasocial interaction” and “social influence theory.” Parasocial interaction, a concept initially introduced by Horton and Wohl (1956), describes the one-sided, pseudo-interaction that viewers or followers develop with media figures. In the context of influencers, this theory is particularly relevant as followers often feel a personal connection with these individuals, akin to a friendship, despite the non-reciprocal nature of the relationship (Kim, 2022; Lin, Crowe, Pierre, & Lee, 2021). De Veirman et al. (2017) emphasize how influencers build credibility

and expertise within specific niches on platforms like YouTube and Instagram. Accordingly, they focus on niche content in contrast to celebrities, whose fame often originates from traditional skills and acceptable societal norms. As a result, influencers leverage their expertise to directly engage with their audience and foster a sense of community (Enke & Borchers, 2019). This perceived intimacy is a cornerstone of the influencer economy, where authenticity and accessibility are key drivers of engagement.

Social influence theory further enhances the understanding of influencers by explaining how they can impact their followers' attitudes, behaviors, and decision-making processes. The theory posits that individuals are influenced by those they perceive as knowledgeable or authoritative within specific contexts (Kelman, 1958). Social media influencers often position themselves as experts in niche areas such as fashion, technology, or social activism. They utilize their perceived credibility to engage directly with their audience and cultivate a sense of community (De Veirman et al., 2017; Enke & Borchers, 2019).

Difference between Traditional Celebrities and Social Media Influencers

While social media influencers are characterized by their direct interaction with followers and perceived authenticity, traditional celebrities are often associated with unattainability and mystique. Historically, celebrities emerged from the entertainment industry, gaining recognition through their roles in film, television, or music (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). These figures typically maintained a distant relationship with their audience, where their public personas were carefully curated and often dictated by societal expectations and ethical standards (De Veirman et al., 2017). For example, traditional celebrities who defy cultural norms risk being "canceled," as seen in the cases of figures like Bill Cosby and R. Kelly, whose careers were marred by scandal. This expectation of behavior is less stringent for social media influencers, whose fame is not necessarily tied to cultural values unless their actions contravene legal boundaries (e.g., Andrew Tate or reality TV personalities from shows like "Married at First Sight" and "Real Housewives").

The boundaries between traditional celebrities and social media influencers have increasingly blurred. Many celebrities have adopted social media strategies to cultivate a more relatable persona, engaging with their audiences on platforms like Instagram and

Twitter (Jin & Phua, 2014). Simultaneously, successful influencers have crossed over into traditional media, securing endorsements, launching product lines, and sometimes appearing in mainstream entertainment (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Consequently, both groups wield significant influence, albeit in distinct ways. Influencers are often perceived as more authentic, enhancing their effectiveness in brand endorsements (Lou & Yuan, 2019). In contrast, traditional celebrities leverage their fame to imbue endorsements with a sense of aspiration and idealization (McCracken, 1989).

Despite the democratization of celebrity culture through social media, this phenomenon has sparked debates regarding the commodification of authenticity, the impact of influencer marketing on consumer behavior, and the ethical implications of blending personal and commercial content (Abidin, 2016; Carah & Shaul, 2016). A critical area of inquiry involves the potential impact of social media influencers on journalistic ethics. As influencers encroach upon the territory traditionally occupied by journalists, questions arise about their role in shaping public discourse and the long-term implications for established journalistic standards.

Social Media Influencers and Journalism in Sub-Saharan Africa

The rapid expansion of internet access in sub-Saharan Africa has catalyzed the growth of social media platforms, which are reshaping how news is consumed in the region (Smith et al., 2023). In Zambia, for instance, social media has become a primary news source for many, especially in remote areas where traditional media outlets are scarce (Gondwe, 2024a). This trend is forcing newsrooms to integrate social media into their strategies to remain competitive, particularly in the face of competition from numerous advertising agencies (Matsilele, Makwambeni, & Mugari, 2023). The increasing influence of social media on journalism practices in sub-Saharan Africa tells us about the significance of this shift (Mackay, 2021; Okposo, 2022; Olajojo, 2019; Wellman et al., 2020).

Previous research on social media's impact in sub-Saharan Africa has predominantly focused on its roles in advertising and political communication (Ajaegbu & Ajaegbu, 2024; Kalyango & Dimitrova, 2021; Wang & Lee, 2020). From an advertising perspective, social media influencers are considered valuable marketing tools, particularly for small businesses that benefit from targeted promotions (Brown, 2019). However,

political communication scholars have raised concerns about the potential misuse of influencers to spread misinformation and manipulate public opinion (Goodwin et al., 2023; Harff & Schmuck, 2024; Jones, 2018). For example, Jones (2018) argues that influencers can be exploited to disseminate false information during elections.

Documented instances from Nigeria highlight the detrimental impact of influencers on voter behavior, where powerful politicians have co-opted influencers to amplify misinformation and perpetuate existing power dynamics (Olaajo, 2019; Okposo, 2022). However, there are also positive examples, such as influencers who have mobilized support for political change, contributing to the ousting of oppressive regimes (Lee & Park, 2022). In Zambia, social media influencers played a significant role in the political landscape, with youth-led online movements supporting the opposition leader Hakainde Hichilema in his successful bid for the presidency (Gondwe, 2018). Similar dynamics have been observed in Ghana (Asante, 2020) and during the Arab Uprising (Gelvin, 2015). These contrasting perspectives underscore the complex role of social media influencers in the political arena.

Despite their growing influence, there remains a significant research gap regarding their intersection with journalism practices, particularly in regions like sub-Saharan Africa, where traditional media may have limited reach (Moyo, 2020). As audiences increasingly turn to social media for news, traditional media institutions face pressure to collaborate with influencers, leading to a blurred distinction between influencers and journalists (Goodwin et al., 2023; Hirsch, Stevic, & Matthes, 2022). However, such collaborations raise critical concerns about the potential erosion of editorial independence and credibility, and the risk of conflicts of interest (Lopez, 2022). Furthermore, the spread of misinformation and bias in influencer reporting, influenced by brand sponsorships, presents additional challenges (Gomez, 2019). Given these developments, this study seeks to address the following research questions:

RQ1: How do social media influencers in sub-Saharan Africa challenge conservative cultural norms and garner attention?

RQ2: What are the implications of their behavior for journalistic values and democratic principles?

METHODS

This study conducted a content analysis to examine the relationship between social media influencers and African traditional media. Using purposive sampling, we selected influential figures across diverse niches, focusing on their collaborations with conventional media, including influencer marketing campaigns and advertisements. The study curated a dataset of the top ten influencers from Zambia, selected based on media prominence, perceived negative reputation, and engagement with traditional media. Notably, the sample excluded individuals categorized as celebrities (such as musicians, actors, or comedians) to concentrate on those who gained fame primarily through social media notoriety or content creation. The selection process was informed by data collected from large-scale surveys and extensive internet searches.

Data Collection

Data was programmatically retrieved from social media platforms (Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube) from January 2021 to December 2023. We employed APIs specific to each platform to extract posts, videos, tweets, comments, likes, and other engagement metrics. The purpose was to ensure that accurate and structured data extraction was tailored to the unique architecture and data availability of Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. For instance, Twitter data was retrieved via the `/statuses/user_timeline` endpoint, Instagram data through the `/me/media` endpoint, and YouTube data via the `video's` endpoint.

Python was the primary programming language used when employing libraries such as Tweepy, Instagram Graph API, and the Google API Client. In addition, web scraping techniques were applied using the BeautifulSoup library to extract data from platforms that lacked comprehensive API endpoints. Qualitative insights were also gathered through surveys on platforms like Google Forms, targeting influencers and their followers to supplement the quantitative data.

Data Cleaning and Standardization

Following data collection, rigorous cleaning and standardization were conducted to ensure accuracy and consistency. Duplicate entries were identified and removed using

Python's *pandas library*. Missing or incomplete data points were imputed or excluded based on their significance. Dates were normalized, and engagement metrics were standardized to ensure comparability across datasets. The cleaned data from various platforms was then merged into a comprehensive dataset using common fields such as *influencer_id*, *date*, and *content_id*. New variables, including total and average engagement, were created to enhance analysis. The final dataset was validated through consistency checks and outlier detection to ensure reliability. This systematic approach ensured the dataset was clean, standardized, and enriched with variables that supported an in-depth exploration of the research questions.

Coding Procedures

The final coding scheme involved categorizing data into key variables and categories to facilitate analysis. These included:

1. *Influencer Characteristics* include age, gender, location, niche (e.g., fashion, technology, social activism), and follower count.
2. *Content Themes*: Primary content topics such as social justice, LGBTQ+ rights, governance issues, marketing/advertisements, and personal lifestyle.
3. *Engagement Metrics*: Number of likes, shares, comments, views, and retweets.
4. *Ethical Considerations*: Instances of misinformation, transparency in sponsored content, adherence to community guidelines, and controversies.

Before full-scale data collection, pilot testing of the coding scheme was conducted on a small subset of data to assess validity and reliability. Feedback from domain experts and inter-rater reliability tests was used to refine the coding scheme. The final coding involved two independent coders categorizing the data according to the abovementioned variables. To ensure consistent application of the coding scheme, the inter-coder reliability was assessed using Cohen's kappa. A Cohen's kappa value of 0.70 or above was considered acceptable, indicating substantial agreement between the coders. Coders reconvened to discuss and resolve discrepancies for categories where the kappa score fell below this threshold. Discrepancies were addressed through a consensus approach, ensuring accuracy and reliability in the coding process.

Data Analysis

The data analysis began with a comprehensive preprocessing phase to clean, standardize, and validate the dataset using R, employing packages such as *tidyverse*, *quanteda*, and *ggplot2*. The analysis focused on three core areas: how Zambian social media influencers challenge conservative cultural norms, particularly regarding LGBTQ+ rights and governance; how they attract advertisers and measure the effectiveness of their campaigns; and how they assume journalistic roles. Natural language processing techniques, including TF-IDF and sentiment analysis, were used to extract themes and emotional tone from influencer content, while Pearson's *r* correlation analysis assessed relationships between variables such as engagement rates and influencer characteristics, with results evaluated at a significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$ and 95% confidence intervals reported.

Linear and logistic regression models were employed to predict engagement outcomes and the presence of journalistic content, with effect sizes such as Cohen's f^2 and odds ratios reported. To ensure reliability, Bonferroni corrections were applied for multiple testing. Qualitative analysis of content and follower surveys was also conducted to evaluate ethical considerations such as misinformation, source attribution, and transparency in sponsored posts. This integrated approach provided nuanced insights into social media influencers' influence, credibility, and evolving public role in Zambia.

RESULTS

This study analyzed social media data (2021-2023) from 22 Zambian influencers (n=5,000 posts) to explore their societal impact across three domains: 1) Challenging cultural norms (gender, LGBTQ+ rights), 2) Influencer marketing dynamics (advertiser attraction, campaign effectiveness), and 3) The rise of citizen journalism (content credibility, media trust). We investigate: RQ1) How do sub-Saharan African influencers challenge cultural norms and garner attention? RQ2) What are the implications for journalistic values and democratic principles? The findings are presented thematically to address the two research questions below.

Challenging Cultural Norms and Garnering Attention

Research question one (RQ 1) sought to understand how social media influencers challenge conservative norms and garner audience attention amid authentic and

traditional media content. Our findings suggest that, unlike traditional media outlets, social media influencers use their strong presence on social media platforms to connect directly with audiences. They do this by sharing provocative yet engaging stories, interacting personally with followers, and focusing on specific topics of interest to the public. For example, our analysis found a lot of provocative content like “Lusaka July,” an event that was organized by social media influencer personalities to showcase drag shows and homosexuality, according to media reports and comments on social media. Note that this happened in a country that has conservative rules about homosexuality.

On the other hand, traditional media and celebrities partially reported such an issue for reasons that might include gatekeeping and the fear of being canceled by society. Thus, their partiality to such an issue amplified attention among social media influencers. In addition, the comments on social media influencers’ pages showed a high engagement/debate with the followers. This direct and personal approach drew people away from traditional media sources. We noticed that some influencers even address their followers by name, building a stronger bond than conventional media.

Overall, the study identified two fundamental ways influencers challenge conservative cultural norms and garner public attention. Firstly, they leverage the power of direct audience engagement and captivating content. Unlike traditional media's broadcast approach, influencers can tailor content to specific niches, using storytelling techniques to capture attention. They further personalize the experience by interacting directly with their audience through live streams, question-and-answer sessions, and interactive polls. This creates a sense of community and connection, strengthening trust and loyalty in ways that traditional media often struggles to achieve.

Additionally, influencers excel at creating visually appealing content, sometimes pushing boundaries with unconventional or even provocative themes. While potentially sparking controversy (as seen with the influencer @Commander Grace), this strategy undeniably attracts attention and publicity. Secondly, we observed that social media empowered influencers to bypass the traditional gatekeepers that control information flow in mainstream media. Editors, advertisers, and even governments can influence what content reaches the public eye. Social media disrupts this system, allowing a wider range of voices and perspectives to emerge. This was evidenced in political activism, where

several influencers openly challenged the government without the fear of repercussion. Findings suggest that the selected social media Influencers used their platforms to advocate for specific causes, sparking public debates and scrutiny. The 2021 Zambian presidential elections were characterized by several influencers emerging to challenge the then-President, Edgar Chagwa Lungu. In addition, findings also show evidence of people like @Mwewa Lane playing the role of the mayor of his area, pushing people to be civil advocates. For example, a video about him asking a woman to pick up trash went viral, attracting women's rights activists to intervene and ask him to recant his statements.

Impact of Influencer Marketing on the Financial Sustainability of Traditional Media

Analyzing the data revealed that influencer marketing has become a potent rival to traditional media advertising. Our examination of a corpus comprising at least 5,000 social media influencer posts revealed 294 advertisements from corporations and 49 ads from small businesses, such as individuals promoting their small restaurants. Additionally, we compared advertising trends through social media influencers across two distinct periods: from January 1, 2021, to June 30th, 2022, and from July 1st, 2022, to December 31st, 2023.

During the initial period, spanning from January 1, 2021, to June 30th, 2022, the average number of advertisements per influencer was 2.67. However, during the subsequent phase, from July 1, 2022, to December 21, 2023, this figure notably increased to 6.12. A two-sample t-test to evaluate this observed difference yielded statistically significant results ($M_{difference} = -2.45$, $p < .01$), indicating a substantial rise in influencer marketing activity over time. This increase suggests a shifting trend toward using social media influencers as a preferred advertising medium by corporations and small businesses.

In addition, the study investigated the emerging phenomenon of influencers assuming journalistic roles within specific domains. We argued that as influencers garner credibility and authority in niche areas, they inadvertently adopt journalistic functions by disseminating news, offering analyses, and shaping public discourse. Our study identified 689 instances where influencers shared mainstream news content. Additionally,

influencers provided analysis for 416 news stories, and in 29 cases, they became the focal point of news coverage.

A one-sample proportions test revealed a statistically significant difference ($\chi^2=7.04$, $p=.01$). Notably, among the 416 news stories analyzed by influencers, 329 (79%) maintained factual accuracy or neutrality. The remaining 87 (21%) were either distorted or subjected to mockery. For instance, influencers and their followers politicized and ridiculed a story concerning President Hakainde Hichilema's remarks on drought and climate change. Our examination highlighted intricate ethical dilemmas associated with collaborations between traditional media and social media influencers. While such partnerships can extend content reach and engagement, they raise concerns regarding transparency, objectivity, and conflicts of interest. Influencers' blurring lines between journalism and promotional content threatens journalistic integrity, underscoring the need to reassess ethical standards within the media industry.

To provide context for our findings, we present two qualitative cases demonstrating how social media content was integrated into traditional news media narratives. The first case involves Simon Mwewa Lane, whose Facebook comments from October 2021 regarding the former President's daughter were incorporated into 11 news stories, including those from government media outlets like ZNBC. Similarly, Ben Lombe, with over 23,000 followers on his social media handle @BenLombe (Queen B 🍷Darlings), commented on a Zambian musician and his wife, referring to the wife as SpongeBob. These remarks gained traction and were featured in over five news stories, sometimes without direct attribution or acknowledgment.

Of particular significance are stories that influenced public discourse and democratic values during the 2021 presidential elections. One such figure is Chilufya Tayali, a notable social media personality in Zambia known for his controversial analyses. In one post, Tayali accuses the incumbent President of election rigging, claiming that 630,000 votes cannot be accounted for according to ECZ records. Although his analysis is convoluted and inaccurate, it garnered both positive and negative reactions, with some comments suggesting the use of this alleged rigging in future campaigns to oust the incumbent. Tayali frequently offers political analyses and directives in his social media posts.

Another noteworthy personality is @Kopala Rich, a young man who gained popularity for showcasing his wealth on social media. In addition to attracting advertisers and making bold statements, @Kopala Rich posted remarks suggesting monetary incentives for voters supporting a particular candidate. While some interpreted this as a jest, others viewed it as an assault on democracy, potentially influencing voter behavior. These cases underscore the propensity for social media influencers' opinions to be assimilated into news stories, amplifying misinformation, and impacting democratic values.

DISCUSSION

This study explores how social media influencers in Zambia challenge cultural norms and garner public attention. Findings indicate that influencers leverage direct audience engagement and captivating content, unlike traditional media's broadcasted approach. They tailor content to specific niches, thus fostering a sense of community through storytelling and interaction. Influencers bypass traditional gatekeepers by allowing diverse voices to emerge (e.g., political activism challenging the government). This was evident during the 2021 presidential elections, where influencers openly advocated for specific causes and helped vote out what they called a repressive government (Gondwe, 2024b). However, concerns arise around the blurring of lines between influencer content and journalism. The study found that influencers often share, analyze, and even become the focus of news stories, raising questions about transparency and objectivity (e.g., politicizing factual news). Essentially, these findings contribute to the ongoing conversation about the power and influence wielded by social media personalities in the digital age.

One significant finding is the effectiveness of influencers in challenging conservative cultural norms. Unlike traditional media, which takes a broadcast approach, influencers utilize direct audience engagement and tailored, captivating content to target specific niche communities. Through a thematic analysis addressing the first research question, it became apparent that influencers in Zambia play a pivotal role in shaping conservative cultural norms. For example, the "Lusaka July" event, organized by social media influencer personalities, featured drag shows and LGBTQ+ themes in a country

with conservative views on homosexuality. Despite public backlash, these influencers openly celebrated LGBTQ+ themes without fear of being canceled or ridiculed, leveraging irony and parody to challenge societal norms. This provocative content garnered significant attention, with influencers personally addressing their followers and fostering lively debates, effectively diverting people from traditional media sources. This promotes a sense of trust and connection, enabling influencers to bypass traditional gatekeepers and amplify diverse voices in public discourse. These findings align with existing literature highlighting the role of social media influencers in democratizing celebrity culture and building closer relationships with followers (Goodwin et al., 2020; Lou, 2022; De Veirman et al., 2017).

However, this burgeoning influence of social media influencers raises significant concerns, particularly regarding its impact on traditional media's advertising revenue streams. Historically, traditional media outlets have relied heavily on advertising revenue for financial sustainability, prompting some to adopt non-traditional media strategies such as clickbait to remain competitive (Molyneux & Coddington, 2020; Wanda et al., 2021). However, the emergence of social media influencers presents a formidable challenge to traditional media, as influencers offer a cost-effective means of reaching a broader audience than traditional advertising channels. For instance, Zambian influencer @Mwizukanji has garnered widespread attention and endorsement from local businesses and multinational corporations through her posts showcasing unique culinary experiences and local restaurants. Similarly, @BenLombe's page is now saturated with advertisements leveraging his influence. Consequently, newspapers and other traditional media platforms have experienced a decline in advertising revenue, leading to cost-cutting measures such as reducing human labor and other expenditures.

These findings echo existing research on the effectiveness of influencer marketing for businesses and its competitive edge over traditional advertising channels (Brown, 2019; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). This trend exemplifies the growing dominance of social media influencers in the advertising landscape, posing significant challenges to the sustainability of traditional media outlets.

Furthermore, blurring the lines between influencers and journalists raises ethical questions about editorial independence, credibility, and the potential spread of

misinformation (Olaajo, 2019; Lopez, 2022). This calls for further research into the impact of influencer journalism on core journalistic values and democratic principles. The rise of citizen journalism among influencers underscores the evolving media landscape in sub-Saharan Africa, where social media platforms have become primary sources of news for many citizens. However, the study also highlights the ethical dilemmas associated with influencer reporting, including potential biases, conflicts of interest, and spreading misinformation. For instance, during the 2021 Zambian presidential elections, influencers like @KopalaRichman openly advocated for political candidates, blurring the lines between objective reporting and partisan advocacy.

As the findings suggest, @KopalaRichman, through his seemingly parody openly asked people to vote against one candidate over the other for a paycheck. While there is no evidence that @KopalaRichman had bribed people to vote against a particular candidate, many would argue that the possibility is not far-fetched in an environment where people do not vote on ideology or policy but on the campaign messages of political candidates, or simply on tribal affiliations (Gondwe, 2025). Similar studies have presented cases in which people are bribed to vote against a particular candidate over a piece of cloth, called *Chitenge*. (Chulu, 2012; Harf & Schmuck, 2024). Ultimately, his trend could impact democratic values as people would vote based on incentives.

Study Implications: Some Lines of Inquiry

The practical implications of this study are manifold and extend to various stakeholders, including media practitioners, policymakers, businesses, and civil society. They cascade outwards, impacting media practitioners, policymakers, businesses, and civil society organizations. Traditional media outlets in Zambia and elsewhere face a stark reality – adapt to the engagement strategies perfected by influencers, or risk irrelevance. The research suggests collaboration with influencers or mirroring their tactics to enhance audience reach and trust. However, such convergence raises concerns about maintaining journalistic integrity (Harf & Schmuck, 2024). Can the established boundaries between advertising and news withstand the influx of influencer practices? Collaboration might inadvertently blur these lines, eroding audience trust in traditional media's objectivity. Policymakers must grapple with this very tension – regulating influencer content to

ensure transparency and accountability, while fostering an environment conducive to innovation (Hirsh, Stevic, & Matthes, 2022). Striking this balance is a delicate act. The study proposes media literacy and critical thinking initiatives as a potential alternative. Empowering citizens to evaluate influencer content critically could prove a more sustainable approach to combating the spread of misinformation within the digital media ecosystem.

For businesses, the rise of influencer marketing presents a golden opportunity. This research confirms its potency as a rival to traditional advertising channels. Collaboration with influencers and a nuanced understanding of this dynamic can significantly enhance brand visibility and engagement, maximizing return on investment. However, ethical considerations remain paramount (Goodwin et. al., 2023; Mackay, 2021; Wellman, Stoldt, Tully, & Ekdale, 2020). Therefore, businesses must navigate the ethical complexities of influencer endorsements, prioritizing authenticity and avoiding deceptive advertising practices. Civil society organizations are crucial in advocating for media ethics and transparency. Raising awareness about the ethical dilemmas inherent in influencer reporting is essential. Furthermore, civil society initiatives fostering media literacy and digital citizenship can empower citizens to become discerning information consumers in the digital age.

In conclusion, this study's implications extend far beyond social media influencers. It compels a multi-stakeholder analysis and collaborative action across the media landscape. Media practitioners, policymakers, businesses, and civil society organizations must critically re-evaluate their roles and responsibilities in this evolving media ecosystem. By fostering collaboration and prioritizing ethical considerations, we can navigate the challenges and harness the opportunities this burgeoning influencer culture presents.

While highlighting influencer journalism's ethical dilemmas, the study offers limited solutions. The proposed regulatory frameworks, while seemingly straightforward (disclosure guidelines, content labeling), face practical challenges. Enforcing such regulations across diverse platforms and influencer types is a hurdle. Media literacy initiatives, though valuable, require long-term investment and may struggle to keep pace with evolving influencer tactics. On the other hand, collaboration between media and

influencers, while potentially beneficial, hinges on upholding journalistic integrity. The "strict editorial standards" suggestion lacks specifics on addressing inherent biases within influencer content.

Furthermore, relying on social media platforms for "algorithmic transparency" seems optimistic. These platforms prioritize engagement over objectivity, making them unlikely champions of diverse viewpoints. A more critical approach is necessary. Therefore, future research should explore the potential for regulatory bodies to be overwhelmed by the vast and ever-changing influencer landscape.

Additionally, it should acknowledge the limitations of media literacy initiatives in a culture increasingly accustomed to "bite-sized" information. The collaboration proposition could be strengthened by suggesting concrete mechanisms for ensuring adherence to ethical guidelines within influencer-media partnerships. Finally, future research should invest in how to incentivize social media platforms to prioritize algorithmic transparency, recognizing the inherent tension between such transparency and their profit motives. The study, while comprehensive, is not without limitations. Firstly, the sample selection process, which excludes individuals categorized as celebrities, may introduce biases and overlook influential figures whose fame intersects with traditional media. Reliance on social media APIs for data collection may limit access to certain content types or engagement metrics, despite attempts to mitigate this through alternative methods.

Moreover, the study's focus on Zambia's media landscape may restrict the generalizability of findings to other sub-Saharan African contexts. Additionally, the analysis primarily highlights the blurring of lines between influencers and journalists, raising concerns about transparency, objectivity, and misinformation spread. Despite these limitations, the study offers valuable insights into the changing roles of social media influencers and their impact on traditional media systems. Overall, while the study effectively highlights the key issues in the findings, it also acknowledges the limitations in sample selection and data collection methods. Future research should expand the approach to incorporate potential solutions for the ethical dilemmas identified. We suggest exploring regulatory frameworks, media literacy initiatives, and concrete mechanisms for establishing ethical guidelines within influencer-media partnerships.

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Online Connections

To follow these authors on social media:
@GregoryGondwe