



Influencers under the microscope: How to avoid being manipulated?

Lesson plan

Target group

Primary and secondary school (ages 13 and above)

Scenario developed as part of the DigiPatch project: Moving from a networked to a patchworked society.

Title: Influencers under the microscope: How to avoid being manipulated?

This scenario was designed based on both online and in-person sessions.

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Scenario was consulted with:

- *Teachers from the International Network of the Young Explorers Club
(network organized by the Copernicus Science Centre)
- Teachers from Poland, Armenia, Ukraine*
 - *Teachers from Spain, United Kingdom*
 - *Learning Communities Department (Copernicus Science Center, Poland)*
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Keywords

Influencers, social media, online manipulation, critical thinking, hidden advertising, digital education, digital skills

Lesson duration: 75 - 90 minutes (Two combined lessons)

Introduction

The internet is not only a space for social activities for today's youth but also a source of entertainment and knowledge. However, using the web also presents various challenges and risks. In the era of social media, young people increasingly follow the opinions of influencers, who set trends, promote products, and shape attitudes. Unfortunately, they do not always critically evaluate the content presented to them or distinguish facts from marketing manipulations.

The teacher's role is to raise awareness among young people about the potential risks associated with uncritical reception of content from such sources. It is essential for youth to understand how hidden advertising works, the impact of manipulation mechanisms, and the importance of maintaining their autonomy of thought.

During the lesson, topics will include:

- distinguishing reliable content from misleading information,
- safety rules for using social media, including a critical approach to offers and opinions.

Education in this area is a step toward conscious and responsible internet use, enabling young people to navigate the digital world with greater confidence.

Additional materials:

Report: Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online

<https://datasociety.net/library/media-manipulation-and-disinfo-online/>

Article: Influencer-Centered Accounts of Manipulation

<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10677-024-10458-9>

Article: (Online) manipulation: sometimes hidden, always careless

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00346764.2021.1894350#d1e132>

Lesson Information

General Objectives

The student:

- Develops social skills such as communication and teamwork, participation in team projects, and project management.
- Observes laws and safety principles. Respects information privacy, data protection, communication etiquette, and social norms, and evaluates technology-related risks to ensure personal and collective safety.

Specific Objectives

The student:

- Understands the risks associated with internet use.
- Utilizes smartphones to expand their knowledge.
- Knows methods to prevent online threats.

Key Competencies

- Competence in understanding and creating information online.
- Language skills.
- Digital skills.
- Personal, social, and learning-to-learn competencies.

Methods/Techniques

- Discussion.
- Practical method.
- Presentation.

Forms of Work

- Group work.
- Forum-based discussion.

Teaching Aids

- Worksheet: "Influencers under the microscope" – examples of worksheets in Attachment #1.
- Smartphones.

Lesson Outline

Part 1 (20 minutes) - Introduction and Discussion

The teacher begins the lesson with the question:

"Do you know who influencers are and what role they play in social media?"

The teacher waits for a moment for students' responses, encouraging them to share their thoughts freely.

After a brief discussion, the teacher continues:

"Today, we're going to address a very important topic — the impact influencers have on our lives, decisions, and attitudes. We'll consider whether their actions are always positive or if they sometimes encourage wrong or socially harmful behaviors. Let's start with a few questions to help us dive into the subject."

The teacher asks the students the following questions*:

- Do you think influencers have a significant impact on your life? Why or why not?
- Do you have any favorite creators, and have you ever disagreed with them?
- Do you know someone in your circle who is strongly influenced by someone else's behavior or decisions?
- Do you sometimes make decisions based on what you heard or saw during a livestream? Have you ever bought something because of it?
- Have you ever heard influencers mock others? How do you react to that, and what does it depend on?
- Do you know people who criticize other influencers or public figures online? What impact might this have on someone who hears it?
- Have you ever liked a post that could have offended someone? Why did you do it?

After each question, the teacher encourages students to share their thoughts and experiences, creating an open and welcoming atmosphere for discussion.

The teacher summarizes responses and introduces the term manipulation:

"As you can see, the influence of influencers can be both positive and negative. You also mentioned instances of unfair or harmful behaviors. During today's lesson, we'll work together to understand how to consciously interpret the content presented to us and how to resist manipulative tactics. Your experiences will be key here, so feel free to share your thoughts. So let's focus on the definition of manipulation."

**An alternative approach could involve using an online platform like Mentimeter, where students would answer questions on their smartphones, and the teacher would discuss the results for each question. This method could help encourage more honest responses.*

Part 2 (30 minutes) - Group Work

Teaching Aids:

- Worksheet: "Influencers Under the Microscope" – examples in Attachment #1.
- Smartphones.

Group Work – Case Analysis

Activity Outline:

The teacher divides students into small groups (3–4 members) and provides each group with a scenario. Each group analyzes their assigned scenario by outlining key messages that might appear during a video featuring an influencer. Groups can use the proposed scenarios or create their own:

- **Scenario 1:** An influencer promotes a healthy lifestyle by encouraging a "special" diet, promising quick results.
- **Scenario 2:** An influencer discusses a new technology they purchased, adding, *"If you don't have this, you're falling behind!"*
- **Scenario 3:** An influencer showcases expensive clothing, claiming, *"If you want to look fashionable, you must have these."* They emphasize that the clothes are worn by celebrities and available only for a limited time.
- **Scenario 4:** An influencer promotes a subscription service, such as access to exclusive content, highlighting that only subscribers can join *"elite"* events or receive unique advice.
- **Scenario 5:** An influencer advertises a digital mystery box with undisclosed contents, encouraging purchases due to potentially valuable items inside. The video includes an unboxing, revealing high-value rewards.

Preparation for Group Work:

Before starting the group activity, the teacher asks the class to brainstorm other examples of such short messages, like *"If you don't have this, you're falling behind!"*.

The teacher emphasizes that the analysis should focus solely on the content, not the individuals delivering it.

Use of Smartphones:

Students can use smartphones during the lesson to watch a video of a similar theme and critically analyze the language used.

Group Task:

Each group analyzes their assigned scenario and answers the following questions:

1. What messages might appear during the video?
2. What could be the potential outcomes of such language (positive/negative)?
3. How could the analyzed content be presented in a non-manipulative way?

Part 3 (35 minutes) - Presentation of Results and Summary

1. Presentation of Analysis Results (30 minutes)

Proposed Flow for Presenting Results

Group Presentations:

Each group presents the results of their work, discussing the following:

- Messages identified in their scenario.
- Potential outcomes of those messages (positive and negative).
- Suggestions for presenting content in a responsible and non-manipulative way.

Teacher Moderates the Discussion

Questions to encourage participation:

- *"Have you ever encountered a similar situation?"*
- *"How can we distinguish harmful content from valuable content?"*
- *"What warning signs might indicate that someone is trying to influence us?"*
- *"Did you observe any other nonverbal actions that might have suggested something as well?"*

Capturing Key Points:

The teacher writes the students' suggested warning signs on the board, highlighting the differences between conscious promotion and manipulation.

2. Summary (5 minutes)

General Conclusions:

- *"Today's lesson demonstrated that the language and format of messages have a significant impact on how we perceive content on social media. Influencers hold considerable power to shape our decisions and worldview."*
- *"The analyses we conducted showed how easily manipulation can hide in everyday messages."*
- *"It's always worth asking: Is this content credible? Is someone trying to influence my decisions?"*
- *"Conscious use of social media is essential to avoid manipulation."*

This summary reinforces the key insights gained during the lesson, emphasizing the importance of critical thinking and informed decision-making in navigating digital environments.

Attachment #1 - "Influencers under the microscope" - Worksheet

Scenario 1: An influencer promotes a healthy lifestyle by encouraging a "special" diet, promising quick results.		
Messages that might appear during a stream	Analysis of risks and potential harm	Proposal for unmanipulated content

Attachment #1 - "Influencers under the microscope" - Worksheet

Scenario 2: An influencer discusses a new technology they purchased, adding, "If you don't have this, you're falling behind!"		
Messages that might appear during a stream	Analysis of risks and potential harm	Proposal for unmanipulated content

Attachment #1 - "Influencers under the microscope" - Worksheet

Scenario 3: An influencer showcases expensive clothing, claiming, "If you want to look fashionable, you must have these." They emphasize that the clothes are worn by celebrities and available only for a limited time.		
Messages that might appear during a stream	Analysis of risks and potential harm	Proposal for unmanipulated content

Attachment #1 - "Influencers under the microscope" - Worksheet

Scenario 4: An influencer promotes a subscription service, such as access to exclusive content, highlighting that only subscribers can join "elite" events or receive unique advice.		
Messages that might appear during a stream	Analysis of risks and potential harm	Proposal for unmanipulated content

Attachment #1 - "Influencers under the microscope" - Worksheet

Scenario 5: An influencer advertises a digital mystery box with undisclosed contents, encouraging purchases due to potentially valuable items inside. The video includes an unboxing, revealing high-value rewards.		
Messages that might appear during a stream	Analysis of risks and potential harm	Proposal for responsible influencer content

Attachment #1 - "Influencers under the microscope" - Worksheet

Scenario:		
Komunikaty, jakie mogą pojawić się podczas streamu	Analysis of risks and potential harm	Proposal for unmanipulated content

The above scenario was developed as part of the DigiPatch project: Moving from networked to patchworked society.

The objective of the work undertaken under the Knowledge exchange (KE) component of the DigiPatch project is to develop innovative KE solutions that address the mechanisms involved in the functioning and isolation of narrow social groups on the Internet, and efforts to make their members more open to contacts, relations, and cooperation with others.

The Copernicus Science Center, together with societal stakeholders in the project — including educators involved in formal and informal education (such as museums, NGOs, cultural institutions, and think tanks) — collaborate in developing the DigiPatch research and utilizing the findings, among other means, through:

Innovative KE solutions for the DigiPatch project. As part of this action: (2a) The Copernicus Science Centre will hold an international workshop for prototyping KE solutions that address the mechanisms involved in the functioning and isolation of narrow social groups on the Internet and, efforts to make their members more open to contacts, relations, and cooperation with others. The workshop participants will consist of 10–12 representatives of societal stakeholders of the project: educators, artists, researchers, and social activists from Poland, Germany, Sweden, the UK, and Spain. During the workshop, they will develop prototypes of KE solutions that will make it possible to incorporate the outcomes and findings of the research project into educational efforts and social initiatives.

More information about the project is available at: www.digipatch.eu