

A good influence

Most influencers want to convince you to buy more things. Diana Wiebe wants you to think twice.

By Carla Sertin

Diana Wiebe, known on TikTok as DepressionDotGov, first appeared on my feed around three months ago. She was watching a video of someone loading up a shopping cart with assorted plastic knick-knacks. "Oh great, more garbage," she deadpanned. I hit follow.

I'm one of many. Wiebe has built an audience of more than 200,000 followers and amassed 7.7 million likes by genuinely urging restraint. "I don't do brand deals or partnerships or anything like that," she says. "I don't get paid that way. I did join the creativity program that TikTok has, so I'm paid for how well my videos do, [ones] that are over a minute long."

When the TikTok algorithm noticed my interest in "de-influencing", it started offering me more content in a similar vein. Only this time, I was being de-influenced from buying one product, and encouraged to buy another product instead. Influencers had latched onto the #deinfluencing trend to appear authentic while continuing to represent paying brands. "I think TikTok in particular has taken off [with influencers] because a lot of companies and brands saw [the platform] as an opportunity to be like, 'you know, this is as good as word of mouth between your family and friends,' which is the number one way that products get sold," Wiebe says.

Researchers have found that influencers are effective in advertising products and growing brand reputation in part because they create parasocial relationships. Parasocial relationships are one-sided, where one person is emotionally invested in the other, yet the latter is unaware of their existence. "People are almost in this trance, thinking an influencer is their friend, someone they can trust, because these influencers started off just like any other regular person, and then as they grew their platform, they started getting wealthier," she adds. "Then I think their consumption habits also changed. They're partly being paid to seem like a real consumer, but they're not. Not in comparison to your average person on TikTok."

There's a seemingly limitless supply of willing followers looking for direction – which skin cream should I buy? What will get rid of these wrinkles? Just as influencers tend to project a picture perfect version of themselves, they also appear to offer their followers the tools to achieve that perfection. While this appeals to people in general, society's most vulnerable are particularly affected – overconsumption can be linked to mental health issues. Wiebe

herself struggled with buying things she saw on TikTok (mostly skincare and beauty products), and says it was symptomatic of her own underlying issues. "I've been in the same boat, and you have to take other steps because no matter how much you consume, it's not going to fix your problems. In fact, it might create more problems," she says.

She points to a particularly low period in her life when her own overspending was at its peak. "I had dealt with sexual assault right before my senior year and nothing came of that – I didn't get the justice I felt was deserved." After graduating, she started a job that she didn't enjoy, and found herself seeking to fill that void. "I wanted something to distract me from my overall disappointment with how my life was going," she says.

The same was true for many people during the pandemic, she notes, when millions were quarantining alone at home, seeking a distraction from reality. "They welcomed TikTok influencers who were going through the same thing, but making the most of it," she says. "That spiraled into people seeking out more distractions by consuming stuff." For Wiebe, going into therapy in 2021 was a turning point. "It really helped me figure out other ways to not only take accountability for my own problems, but also find other ways to fill that void that I think a lot of people have."

Watching so many influencer videos for her own channel has helped Wiebe look at their content more critically, she says. Watching hundreds of these videos no longer pushes her to buy products in the way it used to. The real struggle is the influx of hateful messages she receives – not everyone is open to her efforts, and some



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people see her videos as an attack on their favorite influencer (or on their own lifestyle).

Yet Wiebe is clear that she doesn't scold her followers, or anyone struggling with overconsumption – she's been there and done that. Instead, she would rather inform with humor and encourage people to be more mindful about their purchases. While this has an obvious impact on personal finance, it's also an environmental issue. One of Wiebe's goals is to partner with environmental and sustainability groups. "I think there's an opportunity there to work with influencers in a more positive way," she says. "I think that environmental groups could really capitalize on that. For years, the message has been almost shaming people for not doing their part, and I want to come at it with the perspective that we can do better."

There have been waves of content pointing to corporations as the main culprits behind greenhouse gas emissions (rightfully so), yet this can also discourage individual action. "I would argue that if everyone were trying to consume less, then corporations would also produce less and that would create the collective change that I'm hoping for," Wiebe says. It's fair to say that most companies are more easily influenced by money, impacted by supply and demand, rather than by the desire to do the right thing.

From a mental health, financial and environmental point of view, restraint is beneficial. "Be more mindful when it comes to your consumption habits and really think about what will make you happy," Wiebe says. "At least being able to recognize that you're being advertised to is really important in terms of making a more informed decision about your purchases." ■