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Twitter's "Influencers"

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Ashton is undeniably handsome. His striking blue eyes stare at you from under bushy, dark eyebrows in his Twitter profile picture. He is a teenage heartthrob, followed mostly by young girls on the social network, but like most teenage boys he only has one thing on his mind.

All Ashton cares about is promoting the digital sales of the young adult romance novel *Just Friends* by Billy Taylor. “GIRLS U NEED TO READ THIS,” wrote Ashton on 25 January, followed by a crying and heart emoji. Two days earlier, on 23 January, he said the same. For months, Ashton has been posting the same tweet – and getting nearly a thousand retweets each time – about a 19-year-old author from Sheffield’s self-published book.

You do not need to have been on the internet for a long time to realise that Ashton is not real. His profile was designed by marketers to promote various products, and the tweets are then retweeted by prominent Twitter accounts in order to appear popular. “It makes the tweet look more natural and from an 'actual' person,” explains Jason Wong, a 19-year-old internet entrepreneur, who used this account and these methods – known as “influencer marketing” – to promote his own book. Despite being fundamentally fake however, Ashton’s tweets – and those of similar accounts reach millions of real people.

“I bought *Just Friends* based on an excerpt of the book that gained a lot of attention within the Twitter community,” Sofia Aguilar, a 17-year-old student from the United States, tells me. “Instead of reading the beautiful story that I had been promised, I instead read a book that was poorly written, unedited, and lacking in any complexity in the character, plot, and dialogue aspects. The excerpt that had first attracted me to *Just Friends* may have been the only gem of the story, and as such, I felt cheated out of my money and my time.”

Aguilar is not alone. The most recent reviews of the book on Goodreads paint a picture of hundreds of misled teen girls. “I was expecting a bit more from this book. It's a pretty big deal on Twitter,” writes Catherine, who rated it two stars. Sage, who gave the book two stars, writes: “I am writing this because I had been blasted with advertisements regarding this book and I thought all right fine let me give it a go... I had high hopes but there were so many mistakes in grammar ... - it is not worth the money.”

Since 2014, the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) have cracked down on internet influencers when they ruled that YouTubers had to be “up front and clear” when advertising a product. In practical terms, this means hashtags like #ad (advertisement) and #spon (sponsored) are now used across social media. A spokesperson for the ASA tells me: “If a social media influencer is paid to promote a product or service and the advertiser has control over the message then it should be clearly labelled as an ad.”

The use of “#ad” can therefore stop teenagers being misled by influencer marketing. Things get more complicated, however, if a brand or individual is not paying influencers to write a tweet, but simply to retweet one. “The act of paying someone to retweet but having no control over the message means that it’s unlikely to be classed as advertising under our rules,” says the ASA spokesperson, “[But] under consumer protection legislation and a requirement of the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) who have undertaken work in this area, it should still probably be labelled as being a paid promotion.”

It is not apparent whether Billy Taylor was involved in the promotion of his book via social influencer networks, or whether any laws were breached in these promotions, which may not have been paid for. It is clear, however, that Twitter influencers have misled teens across the social network by making the book seem artificially popular. A recent study by Stanford University revealed that 82 percent of students could not distinguish between a sponsored post and an actual news article. It seems vastly unfair that when teenagers log into their social media accounts, they have to navigate an online world where they will be tricked out of what little money they have.