

SUMMARY

BY ALYSSA BURNETTE

INVISIBLE INFLUENCE

BY JONAH BERGER



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Summary of “Invisible Influence” by Jonah Berger

Written by Alyssa Burnette

Learn how other people impact our behavior.

Table of Contents

Introduction	5
The Invisible Power of Influence.....	6
Negative Influence	8
Why Human Beings Are so Susceptible to Influence	10
How to be Mindful of Your Relationship With Influence	11
Final Summary	13



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Introduction

If you're on any form of social media, you're probably familiar with the term "echo chamber" because you've seen it in effect. In the context of social media, an echo chamber is something that occurs when you're consistently exposed to the same type of information or the same viewpoint without any new or dissenting information to break the cycle or offer you a different perspective. For example, if the friends and new sources you follow all share the same social and political views that you hold, it's quite possible that you might see the same news article or political meme shared 70 times by different sources! And if you share those same resources to your own social media, you're contributing to the echo chamber whether you realize it or not. The author observes that social media echo chambers are a perfect example of the invisible power of influence. Because whether we want to admit it or not, when we share something because someone else did, we're allowing ourselves to be influenced by their posts, decisions, and beliefs. And that's just scratching the surface! So, over the course of this summary, we'll explore the invisible power of influence and learn what we can do about it.



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The Invisible Power of Influence

If you can think back to your experience in high school, you know that one person's opinion can affect change on a significant scale. In every high school, there are teens who are considered to be "cooler" than others, who set the standard for how to dress, how to speak, and what not to do. And whether you thought about it that way or not, if you copied that person's fashion choices, you were allowing them to influence you. But how does influence really work? What makes someone change their mind and follow another person's example? Why should someone listen to your opinions instead of their own? Many of us don't pause to ask these questions as we go about our daily lives. But the author posits that we should do so because our thoughtlessness allows our choices and viewpoints to be hijacked by the people who have power over us. That's why it's important to be intentional about the choices we make and the voices we listen to!

So, let's dive in and explore the role of influence in our daily lives. We'll start with a simple but fairly universal example: our relationship with social media. If you're on Instagram, there's a pretty good chance that you've looked at someone else's outfit, home decor, or choice of beverage and thought, "Oh, that's neat! I'd like to have that!" Maybe you've even asked that person where their sweater is from or clicked on the link they've provided so you can have that product yourself. In this respect, social media is kind of like a larger version of high school; we take cues from a host of different people whose styles and personalities we admire. In short, we're letting people on social media influence us. And that's where I come in. In addition to my job at QuickRead, I'm also an Instagram influencer. This means that brands literally pay me to wear or pose with their products. They do that because when I promote their brand on my Instagram, I'm giving them exposure to a new and different audience. In fact, I'm doing exactly what we discussed earlier in this paragraph: I'm giving other people a chance to look at my style choices and say, "I'd like to have that!" This in turn generates publicity and revenue for that brand. And in doing so, I'm quite literally influencing other people's choices.

Now, this example of influence isn't necessarily a negative thing; I'm not trying to shame, bully, or pressure anyone into emulating my choices. I'm not communicating that other people are "wrong" or "stupid" if they don't choose to dress or behave as I do. I'm simply posting pictures of things that I like and hoping other people will think it looks nice too. At the end of the day, anyone who sees the content on my Instagram still has the power to choose whether they do or do not want to wear or purchase the products I'm modeling. But the point of this example is to illustrate that that choice isn't always obvious to people. And, if I'm being totally honest, that's exactly why influencers exist.

Marketing specialists understand that many people blindly and thoughtlessly buy anything that is presented to them as the latest, coolest trend. So, influencers are effective marketing strategies because they can make a product appear cool and desirable. People always have the option to use their own heads and decide for themselves, but many people fail to keep that in mind. Instead, they simply buy everything that's marketed to them in the hopes that they'll look like the model on Instagram. But of course, most people aren't conscious of that fact. If you asked them, "Why are you buying that product?" they probably wouldn't say, "Oh, I'm buying it because I feel insecure about myself and I want to look like that model on Instagram!" Neither would they be likely to say, "I thoughtlessly buy everything that's marketed to me because I let other people tell me what looks cool." And that's exactly the problem! These examples perfectly highlight the power of invisible influence.



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Negative Influence

The author observes that influence works both ways. Just as people blindly allow advertisers and Instagram influencers to tell them what's cool, people can also fall prey to negative messages communicated by others. For a perfect example of this concept, we need only to consider the complexity of human sexuality. At its core, sexuality shouldn't be a complex or divisive issue; the objective fact of the matter is that sexuality exists on a wide and varied spectrum. Some people are gay, some people are straight, and some people are both (in the case of bisexual people) and some are neither (asexual people). As a result, you would think that each individual person would be tasked with only one simple issue: identifying their own personal sexuality. But the reality is often far more complex and tragic.

Because some people have grown up in homophobic households, they internalize the belief that being gay is wrong or bad. They might also believe that gay people are doomed to eternal damnation or that gay people deserve to be physically or sexually assaulted. Therefore, many people who are gay may suffer silently in unsupportive or discriminatory environments. Or, conversely, they might attempt to hide their sexuality and avoid facing discrimination themselves by actively harassing gay people in order to gain acceptance from their homophobic peers. Similarly, straight people who grow up in this environment may believe that their sexuality is better or morally superior and this belief may motivate them to discriminate against gay people. They may also feel justified in voting for policies that attempt to strip gay people of their rights. Each of these scenarios are tragic and they perfectly illustrate the power of influence. Because in each example, we can plainly see how the opinions of people around you can have a profound impact on your worldview.

By contrast, we can also see how positive representation can counteract the negative messages we absorb. For example, let's say that someone grew up in a homophobic household and internalized negative messages about their budding sexuality. But maybe later, in the context of a high-school or college

class, they encountered a positive message from a teacher or a classmate. The contrast of this positive representation might influence them in a different way and encourage them to embrace positive thoughts about the varied spectrum of sexuality. Whether this representation motivates a straight person to support their gay friends or encourages a closeted gay person to be comfortable with their identity, this positive impact makes a tremendous difference! Just as negative influences can cause us to be depressed and conflicted, positive examples can influence us to change our minds, expand our worldview, and explore things that make us happy! So, as we can see from these examples, influence has the power to impact us in both positive and negative ways.



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Why Human Beings Are so Susceptible to Influence

So, now that we've learned about the power and impact of influence, let's take a moment to understand why people are so susceptible to influence in the first place. The short answer is that our relationship with influence literally goes back to the beginning of our existence. Human beings learn by watching others. And although there are multiple scientific and sociological studies which confirm this fact, you can easily identify a personal example if you think back to your own upbringing. Because you watched your caregivers as a child, you learned how to walk, talk, eat, dress yourself, and look after your personal hygiene. You learned social cues through the examples of your caregivers, your teachers, and your peers. You discovered social norms by being told, "We use our inside voices in a restaurant!" or "No one likes stuff like that, that's dumb!"

Some of these messages-- like acceptable standards of behavior-- were helpful, while others-- like value judgments made by your peers-- were toxic and unnecessary. But one way or another, you absorbed a wealth of information by watching the people around you. In fact, without you even realizing it, this information shaped your understanding of what is and is not acceptable in a variety of ways. This well-known fact also helps us to spot warning signs when we see children displaying unusual levels of violence or aggression in the classroom. When we see these behaviors, parents, teachers, and social workers immediately understand that they need to investigate the child's home life because there is a strong chance that that child is imitating what they see modeled at home. So, the key takeaway from this chapter is that people are susceptible to influence because human beings are social creatures; we learn by watching others. But, as we've seen in the two previous chapters, we are also susceptible to influence because peer pressure can make us do things that we don't really want to do in order to fit in.



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How to be Mindful of Your Relationship With Influence

So, now that you know about the impact and origin of social influence, the next step is to ask yourself: what can I do about it? What does a healthy relationship with social influence look like? And how can you be mindful of your relationship with influence? The author observes that your personal relationship with influence can differ greatly depending on circumstances such as your birth order and socioeconomic background. For example, if you have an older sibling who was a successful athlete in high-school, you might feel compelled to carve out a niche for yourself as a successful academic. In this case, your desire is not to conform but to stand out and avoid the appearance of being the same as everybody else. Likewise, you might find comfort in your identity as a fan of an obscure band that no one else listens to. Or, by contrast, you might enjoy the sense of community that comes from being part of a large mainstream fandom. Similarly, if you come from a lower-income background, you might embrace such traditional values as togetherness and community, which predispose you to privilege conformity over individuality.

All of these personal factors can impact your relationship with influence. They might also impact your gullibility or the degree to which you are inclined to believe other people's opinions. But no matter where you fall on this spectrum, the most important thing about your relationship with influence is mindfulness. Start by thinking critically about the impact that other people have on you. Ask yourself hard questions like, "Am I making this decision because I want to fit in?" or "Do I really like this style or am I only wearing it because it's trendy?" The desire to belong is a universal facet of the human experience, but it's important that we keep this desire within the confines of a healthy balance. So, look for the ways in which your tastes and opinions have been shaped by external factors. Ask yourself what you really like and what's really important to you. And don't

be afraid to do the hard work of standing up to peer pressure and removing unhealthy influences from your life!



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Final Summary

Whether we realize it or not, we are constantly being influenced by the opinions, choices, and tastes of other people. We wear things because they're trendy. We feel pressured to listen to the "right" music or say the "right" things to avoid being ostracized by other people. And even though we'd like to think of ourselves as free-thinking individuals, the harsh reality is that that isn't always quite as true as we think. *Invisible Influence* invites you to think critically about your relationship with influence, to learn about the origins and impact of peer pressure, and develop a roadmap for cultivating your own healthy relationship with influence. It's okay if other people's choices give you food for thought or if you buy a cute sweater because you like the one your friend has. But it's also important to think for yourself and develop a solid sense of personal identity.



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