

South African influencers push back on unpaid deals, signal market shift

The influencer economy in South Africa has reached a clear turning point, as creators across Instagram, TikTok and X have started publicly declining trade-exchange deals, sharing screenshots of unpaid briefs and questioning why their work continues to be treated as optional while brands allocate budget to micro-influencer campaigns.

By Kgothatso Tema ^{23 Apr 2026}



Source: www.unsplash.com

Online strict

What initially felt like isolated complaints has quickly evolved into what many are calling an “online strike” as a moment that is shifting how the industry operates.

At the centre of this shift is the reality that influencer marketing in South Africa is no longer informal, having evolved into a structured part of the marketing ecosystem with clear expectations around performance and return on investment. Global insights from Influencer Marketing Hub show that brands are continuing to increase spend in this space, signalling just how critical influencer marketing has become.

However, compensation models have not evolved at the same pace. Trade exchange deals where influencers are paid in products, experiences or services once played an important role in helping creators enter the industry.

Trade exchange only works when both sides are getting equal value, and right now, brands are running full campaigns on influencer work, while the creator carries most of the cost.

Behind every post is strategy, production, editing, and audience management. Increasingly, influencers are questioning why that level of work is still being compensated with product rather than payment.

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This frustration is further amplified by how brands allocate budgets. Many are willing to pay micro-influence for scale, while offering more established creators' product instead. From a campaign perspective, this may be driven by reach, but creators argue that the approach overlooks the importance of trust and audience connection. Reach without trust doesn't convert; creators are not shelves but are brands themselves.

What has accelerated this shift even further is the growing scrutiny from the South African Revenue Service. As conversations around influencer tax compliance increase, it has become clear that income from influencing including trade exchange can carry tax implications. This means that gifted products, sponsored experiences and unpaid campaigns may still need to be declared as income and, as such, influencers are being asked to pay real money for work they were never actually paid for.

Legitimate business

Influencing is no longer viewed as a side hustle, but as a legitimate business with financial and legal responsibilities.

In response, creators are becoming more structured in how they operate. Many are setting clear rates, formalising agreements and being more selective about the partnerships they take on. The focus is shifting towards long-term sustainability rather than short-term exposure.

For brands, this moment presents both a challenge and an opportunity. Influencer marketing is no longer experimental, and the way brands engage with creators needs to reflect that reality. Continuing to rely heavily on trade exchange risks damaging relationships and limiting the quality of collaborations.

On the other hand, brands that adapt by being transparent, fair and intentional stand to build stronger and more credible partnerships.

South African influencers are not rejecting collaboration. They are pushing back against a system that no longer reflects the value they bring, especially in an environment where regulators already recognise their work as economic activity.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kgothatso Tema is a PR account executive at Tribeca Public Relations.