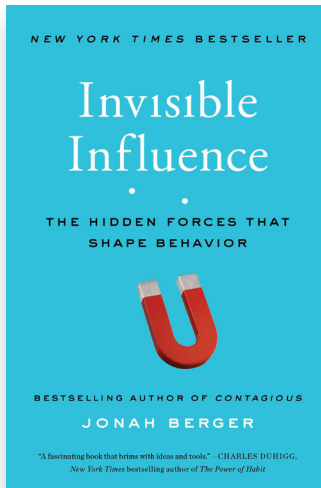


EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARIES

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Invisible Influence THE NUTSHELL

Simon & Schuster UK 2016

Ninety-nine-point nine percent of all decisions we make are shaped by others. It's hard to find a decision or behavior that isn't affected by other people. This book is about the simple, subtle, and often surprising ways that others affect our behavior.

CHAPTER ONE: Monkey See, Monkey Do

There are thousands of books, movies and songs vying for everyone's attention, but no one has the time to read every book jacket or listen to every sample clip. Most people don't have the bandwidth to check out even a small percentage of the options. So we use others as a helpful shortcut. A filter. If a book is on the bestseller list, we're more likely to skim the description; if a song is already popular, we're more likely to give it a listen.

Following others saves us time and effort and (hopefully) leads us to something we're more likely to enjoy. Social influence is effective because people mimic other people's choices and actions.

CHAPTER TWO: A Horse of a Different Color

Social influence also seems to push us to distinguish ourselves from others. If anything, we would expect people to imitate others, because other people's choices provide information. The more people who picked something, the better that thing must be, right? But sometimes people don't want to be the same as everyone else. Sometimes people want to be different.

Invisible Influence

People often avoid things when too many other people like them—the so-called “snob effect.” The more other people own or use something, the less interested new people are in buying or using it. Most of us don’t want to be the only one doing something, but if too many people are doing it, we do something else. When kale or quinoa becomes too trendy, there’s a backlash.

CHAPTER THREE: Not If *They’re* Doing It

Like an amateur Sherlock Holmes, we try to deduce things about the people around us based on their choices. Cars and clothes serve as a silent communication system, signaling information to others. We use people’s choices as signals of who they are and what they’re like.

We don’t just make inferences about others, we also choose things based on *who* they are associated with. People diverge to avoid being misidentified or communicating undesired identities. Students ate less candy when they saw an obese person eating a lot, and professionals stopped calling their children *Jr.* once the practice was adopted by the working class. Minivan sales tanked when they became associated with soccer moms, and tech CEOs wore hoodies rather than suits to avoid looking like, well, a suit.

CHAPTER FOUR: Similar but Different

When something is new, we initially feel negative or neutral. Then, after repeated exposure, things become more familiar and we start to feel more positive. Eventually, after too many exposures, boredom kicks in and liking declines. Too novel and it’s unfamiliar. Too familiar and it’s boring. But in between and it’s just right.

The right blend of familiarity and novelty drives what becomes popular. Hit fashion styles, such as skinny jeans, often take something we all know well (jeans) and add novelty (a new cut). Things that catch on, then, whether in music, fashion, or any other domain, often are similar enough to what is already out there to evoke the warm glow of familiarity, but novel enough to seem new and not just derivative of what came before. Similarity shapes popularity because it makes novel things feel familiar.

CHAPTER FIVE: Come On Baby, Light My Fire

The mere presence of others changes performance. People tend to do better when others are around. This phenomenon has been described as social facilitation, where the presence of others leads people to perform faster and better than they would otherwise. Even if people aren’t collaborating or competing, the mere fact that others are present changes behavior.

Invisible Influence

Interestingly though, other studies have found the opposite. That people do *worse* when others are present. If the task was easy, or something participants had done many times before, spectators would facilitate performance. But if the task was difficult, or involved learning something new, an audience would inhibit performance.

Conclusion: Putting Social Influence to Work

Social influence has a huge impact on behavior, and by understanding how it works, we can harness its power. We can avoid its downsides and take advantage of its benefits. We can maintain our individuality and avoid being swept up in the crowd. By understanding when social influence is beneficial, we can decide when to resist influence and when to embrace it. Understanding these often-invisible influences can make us all better off.