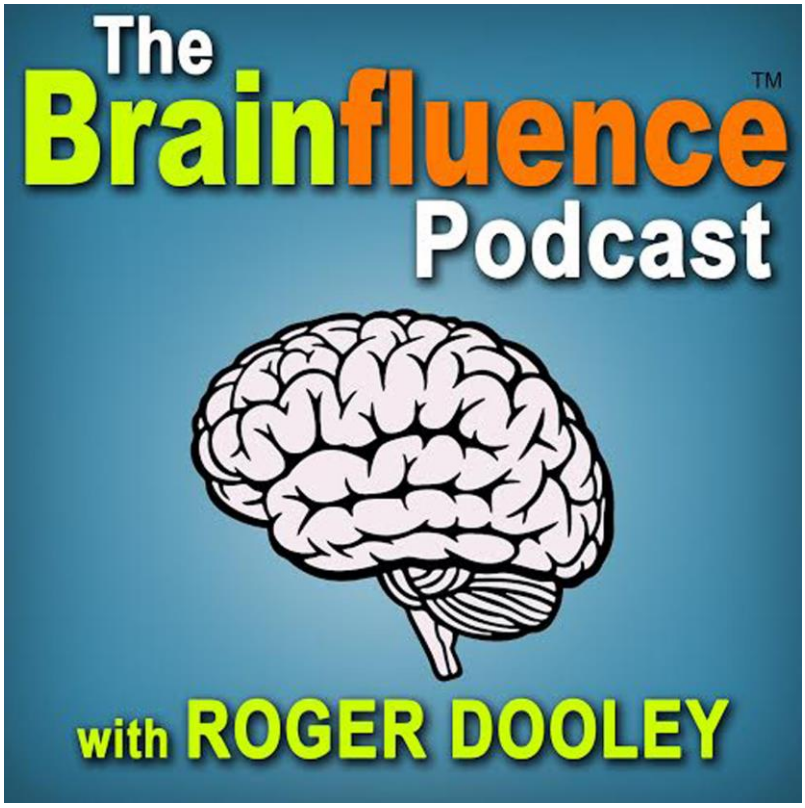
Ep #120: Interview with Jonah Berger



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Roger Dooley

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Welcome to the *Brainfluence Podcast* with Roger Dooley, author, speaker and educator on neuromarketing and the psychology of persuasion. Every week, we talk with thought leaders that will help you improve your influence with factual evidence and concrete research. Introducing your host, Roger Dooley.

Roger Dooley: Welcome to the *Brainfluence Podcast*. I'm Roger Dooley. My guest this week is a marketing professor at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. Unlike many academics, he has a great understanding of real-world consumer behavior and how products, ideas, and behaviors catch on. Also unlike many academics, he writes in an engaging way that readers actually enjoy.

His first book, *Contagious: Why Things Catch On* was a *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* bestseller. It's been translated into more than 30 languages. His new book is *Invisible Influence: The Hidden Forces that Shape Behavior*. Welcome to the show, Jonah Berger.

Jonah Berger: Thanks for having me.

Roger Dooley: Great, Jonah, it's wonderful to have you on the show. I think you translate social science research into something that marketers and others can really understand and use. So you're definitely in the sweet spot for our audience.

I have to begin by telling our listeners about the cover of *Invisible Influence*. This is one of those times when I wish we weren't audio only and could do some video because the cover has a traditional paper dust cover but almost the entire front of it is filled by a lenticular printed sheet. In simpler terms, it's one of those

grooved plastic thingies that if you move your head back and forth the message that you see changes.

So one view gives you the sort of traditional title and author info that you expect on a book cover but as you move it shifts to a bright yellow starburst and the words "everybody is reading it." So, Jonah, you're really eating your own dog food here. You talk a lot about social influence in the book and your cover has a very eye-catching social cue. What was the origin of that design?

Jonah Berger: I think a good cover should do two things. One, it should get your attention.

Roger Dooley: Boy, yours is one of the few that really does do that, depending on the way you look at it.

Jonah Berger: That is true. One is obviously get attention but the second is ideally carry the message of the book. A really good cover isn't just eye catching. You can look at the cover and get a sense of what's inside. It's almost like a Trojan horse or a carrier for the ideas of the book.

So in this case, we wanted to show that influence is often invisible. We often can't see it happening in the world around us. So we spent a while trying to figure out how to do that and came up with this particular idea. But for me it's very powerful because, again, as you said, when you look at it from one angle all you see is the cover. But if you look at it from another angle, if you look underneath, that's when you see influence.

So once we understand influence, once we recognize it in the world around us, often it non-consciously happening, we can take control of it more effectively.

Roger Dooley: There's certainly a signaling effect too I think that a really unusual cover like this must mean the book content is important. So I can say well done on that.

Jonah Berger: Thank you, appreciate it.

Roger Dooley: Before we get into some of the fascinating content in the book, I'd like to bring up an issue that I've been asked about by my readers and listeners. My writing and yours both draw on a large body of social science research. The assumption is that if a study gets published by a solid journal that the data is reasonably reliable.

Then last year a group decided to try and replicate I think almost 100 social science experiments and they were able to replicate fewer than half of them, I think 39. Then earlier this year a Harvard study kind of debunked the earlier study. What's your take on all this? Is there a major problem with reproducibility in social science research, and if so, how do you sort the good from the bad?

Jonah Berger: Part of how science addresses reproducibility is not just replicating the exact same study but similar studies over time. So if one person, for example, studied how social influence affects restaurant purchases, another researcher might not study restaurant purchases but they might study cars. Someone else might study what we buy at the grocery store. Someone else might study what movies we watch.

So while each of those are not technically replication of the initial study, by looking at the same phenomenon across different domains and finding a similar effect, they all point to the same underlying cause. That's exactly what I think good science does. It doesn't necessarily just rerun the exact same study, it reruns different studies and shows the same underlying causes across a number of situations.

As you nicely noted, there was a study a few years ago trying to say, okay, what if we tried to do direct replications of some existing experiments? Unfortunately, that's not what they did. They didn't do exact replications. In some cases, they followed some of the things but not all of them. So it's not surprising that under certain situations one thing appears but under other situations it might not.

Indeed, much of social science and much of probably what we'll talk about today is when one thing happens versus another. People don't always conform to others, for example. Sometimes they do the exact opposite. Understanding when one happens versus the other, that's not a failure to replicate the phenomenon, that's understanding the behavior.

So I think good science, again, does exactly that. It doesn't just try to replicate. It tries to understand the moderators of when things go one way versus another.

Roger Dooley: I think that's a great explanation. Although yesterday I saw a study from some folks at UC Davis. They use sort of an evolutionary theory-based model to analyze the problem of bad science. They weren't talking about social science in particular. They were looking across a whole range of areas of science and what they found

was that there were powerful forces that just like evolutionary pressure sort of encouraged good scientists to employ sometimes not the best research methods.

One of their findings was that in the last 40 years use of the words “innovative,” “groundbreaking,” and “novel” in research abstracts increased by 2500 percent. So there’s more of that pressure to post. But I think the important thing for our listeners is that a lot of the things that we talk about aren’t one-off experiments that have shown some really exciting little factoid about human behavior but things that have been tested in a whole variety of ways and not even just by academics.

I know that for instance social proof has been commonly used on many commercial websites for example. So there have been literally thousands and thousands of A/B tests and other types of commercial experiments that have shown that most of the time social proof works. But as you mentioned, Jonah, probably, I don't know, five percent of the time, it doesn’t for whatever reason. Either the social proof isn't convincing or it’s distracting or something and it doesn’t work. But across this huge body of work, it almost always does.

Jonah Berger: Indeed. I think another thing to remember is the other thing, we’re not looking at science it’s rely on intuition. Intuition is right many fewer times than science is. So I see science almost like chipping away at an ice sculpture. You start with a block and the first few chips don’t get you to the answer right away but they get you closer to the answer. That’s really what we’re trying to do.

We're trying to better understand human behavior, when one thing happens and when another. It may not always go one way. Sometimes it may go the opposite and in five years we may learn something new that sheds further light. But the goal is to work towards that solution so that we can predict how people behave and we can harness the power of influence.

Roger Dooley: So let's talk about some of the great content in *Invisible Influence*, Jonah. For our listeners, if you liked *Predictably Irrational* by Dan Ariely, a past guest here, or my own book *Brainfluence*, you're really going to enjoy *Invisible Influence*.

Jonah, one of the points you make early on is that people actually believe that influence factors like social proof as we just talked about can change behavior. They don't dispute that those effects are real but oddly enough, they see them as real for other people, not themselves. Why is that?

Jonah Berger: I was talking to my dad a couple of years ago and mentioning I was doing some research on social influence. He was lamenting its effect on his peers. He's a lawyer in Washington, D.C. and he was complaining that all D.C. lawyers are the same. The first thing they do when they become partner, when they hit it big, is to buy a new BMW. I said, "But dad, that's really interesting, but you know, aren't you a D.C. lawyer and don't you actually drive a BMW?" He said, "Yeah, but they all drive grey ones and I drive a blue one."

What I found so interesting about his approach to this was two things. First, as you said, we do see influence sometimes. We see people dressing the same way or

driving the same car. In fact, if we look around the one place we never seem to see influence is ourselves. We never seem to think it affects us even though it actually does.

Second, influence isn't just as simple as doing the same thing as everyone. Usually when we think about social influence we think about one flavor: imitation. But just like when you go to the ice cream store, there are multiple flavors of ice cream, there are multiple flavors of influence. Sometimes you do the same as others. Sometimes you do something different. Sometimes other motivate us. Sometimes others demotivate us. Sometimes we mix and match these. We're similar and different at the same time.

So really that's what *Invisible Influence* is all about. How do we understand these often competing influences and how they shape our behavior often in subtle and sometimes surprising ways.

Roger Dooley: What determines whether it's a good thing to be the same or a good thing to be different? Is it a demographic thing or is it the domain that you're dealing in? What drives that?

Jonah Berger: I think many folks, particularly in America, tend to think of influence as a bad thing. You say, "Well hold on, if someone is influencing us, that's bad. I want to be independent. I want to be a rugged individualist. I want to be completely different than everybody else."

Roger Dooley: Just one step shy of manipulation.

Jonah Berger: Yeah. That said, imagine you had to pick a new car mechanic for example. You moved to a new city, have

to pick a mechanic, or you have to figure out what book to read by never asking anyone else. By picking it solely by yourself. Life would be pretty difficult and very complicated. So often others help us make faster and better decisions. So social influence certainly helps sometimes.

Now there are other times that it leads us astray. You know we're in a meeting, we have differing opinions. Someone goes first and everyone follows that person rather than sharing their own opinion. They end up jumping on the bandwagon and becoming susceptible to groupthink.

So there are certainly cases where influence is bad, but it's not bad all the time. So really it's about understanding what kind of situation am I in? How is influence working in this situation? How by understanding that can I choose my own influence? Can I take advantage of its upsides and avoid the downsides?

Roger Dooley: Yeah, and you know, I think that even people who think about this stuff all the time can be fooled. By that, I mean me. I went through a process not long ago, my trustee carry-on bag. I travel a fair amount and after 400,000 miles or so my carry-on died. So I had to buy a new one. This should be a really simple process, almost a quick sort of emotional decision. And, "Gee, this one really looks nice and it seems to meet my characteristics and my needs."

Instead, it turned into what I called in a blog post a System 2 nightmare, to use Kahneman's terms for System 1 and System 2 thinking where System 2 is that hard work, logical analysis type thinking. It was

due to things like the airlines conflicting requirements, the sort of implementation versus stated requirements. Then the luggage manufacturers have wildly inaccurate dimensions.

So it entailed a massive amount of research just to get something that would meet my criteria. In this category, I'm definitely not a satisficer, I'm an optimizer or maximizer. But I finally made a decision and you think that, wow, it took hours of research looking at dimensions and things, a totally sort of left-brain—if you'll excuse the term—decision.

But in fact, when one of my readers said, "Well, was it really all conscious decision-making?" I looked back and started thinking about it and I said, well, no, actually it wasn't. Because I ended up with a rather expensive bag that certainly met the criteria that I had set out. I knew that it would work in the United sizer because my research showed that it would but it was probably eight times as expensive as the least expensive alternative that I could have gotten.

I decided that probably there was some part of my brain that was saying this is a symbol of status that certainly the average passenger isn't going to recognize, but those elite 100k mile fliers are going to know that it's a Briggs & Riley. So it's one of those little subtle signals to others.

Plus, it's one of the best in the category, certainly not the most expensive, but satisfying some other need to have that. And sort of an irrational cool feature of compression so you can squish your stuff down and it locks in place. So after thinking about it, I said, no, this

was not a totally rational decision. Do you find yourself ever self-analyzing your own decisions that way?

Jonah Berger: I am the worst person to go shopping with. I've been told many times by family members, by friends, because I spend a lot of time on every decision and part of it is thinking about what is influencing me and why I'm thinking one thing versus another.

My grandma will tell if you ask her, a great story about how I was a kid and for my birthday they took me to Toys "R" Us and they said, "Okay, you can pick out one toy." I first went through the aisles and I picked out three or four toys to form a consideration set. Then once I had those toys, I sat and I thought about the pros and cons of each.

I wish I could say that as I've gotten older, I've studied this area, it's gotten better. I've certainly been able to harness influence in some ways in my personal life to motivate myself and in my work life to be able to influence others and get ideas to catch on. But when it comes to making decisions, I'm just like you, I often fall prey to the foibles of influence.

Roger Dooley: Yeah, and it really depends a lot on the domain. For certain things I can make a snap decision but in other areas where, in travel hacks, that is something that apparently I take really seriously, needing to do the research. That's where Amazon is both a boon and a problem. Having their reviews is great where if you're trying to pick a product that you really don't understand, find one that's got mostly five star reviews, you can just say, okay, that's it. But, when you get into an analysis thing, suddenly you've got to read through

all those hundreds of reviews to see what they really said about it.

One of the topics that you bring up is mimicry. That's sort of a long-standing technique for negotiators and salespeople, mirroring the movements of your counterpart. But you cited some research that I hadn't read before in the chameleons paper that showed really remarkable increases in negotiation outcomes. Why don't you explain about that?

I thought that work was really pretty startling when often a lot of these social science experiments show a five percent boost or something that's statistically significant but from a practical standpoint maybe not all that useful, but these were huge increases.

Jonah Berger: Imagine you're stuck in a tough negotiation. I definitely don't like negotiating, I'm sure many of your listeners feel the same way. It's something they have to do but they don't necessarily enjoy it. What helps us become more successful negotiators, more likely to reach an outcome that first of all happens but also good for us?

Some researchers looked into this. They looked over 100 negotiations and they found that one simple trick, as you noted, led negotiators to be about five times as successful. That trick very simply was mimicking or mirroring their negotiating partner. So if one person crossed their legs, the other did the same. If one person tilted their head sideways, the other did the same. Not obviously, but subtly imitating the language, the mannerisms, the nonverbals of their partner.

As you pointed out, it's not just negotiating. In a sales context, waiters or waitresses that mimic an order. So

if you say, “I'd like the steak, medium rare, and a side salad,” the waiter or waitress says, “Okay, you’d like the steak, medium rare, with a side salad.” Not just the same words but in the same order in the same way, they get a 70 percent higher tip. The reason very simply is that mimicry creates trust and liking.

If you and I found for example that we went to the same high school and we had the same birthday in common, we’d feel sort of a kinship. Like, oh yeah, we’re part of the same tribe. What that would do is that would make us trust each other more. It would make us like each other more. That’s really important in a negotiation, right? Where part of a success in negotiation is about giving information out.

Usually when we’re negotiators, the last thing we want to do is give out information, right? We want to keep ahold the information ourselves. We can extract the most value from our negotiating partner. But it turns out that that’s not the only thing that makes negotiations successful. Sometimes the only way to reach a successful negotiation is to reveal some private information. But if no one trusts anyone, that’s not going to happen, particularly in a one off negotiation.

So this idea of mimicry or being a chameleon, not just listening or emulating, is really important. It plays out in a host of different domains. We talked about negotiating, we talked about sales, plays out in a dating context. First daters that mimic each other more are more likely to go on a second date. So really across a host of domains, being a chameleon, subtly

mimicking others is a powerful tool to gain liking, affiliation, and increase your influence as well.

Roger Dooley: Yeah, the waiter thing is interesting. Because again, that's a fairly sizable difference in measured tips. I think if you combine that and Cialdini's putting a couple mints on the bill, boy, waiters could double their income.

Also along the lines of food, yesterday, I wrote about a study that was done at Chicago's Booth School that showed that people who ate the same food had better negotiation outcomes. It increased trust and cooperation if they had identical food. Do you think that is a mimicry effect?

Jonah Berger: I think at its core, it's what we've been talking about where if you and I are eating the same thing, what does that make us think about each other? It makes us think that we have more in common. It creates a sense of similarity. It creates a sense that we have things in common and we're more likely to trust someone that we think we have something in common in.

So it's not just mimicry that does that, right? Having the same birthday, we're not necessarily mimicking each other, or going to the same high school, we're not mimicking one another. But we feel like we have something in common and that similarity increases trust.

Roger Dooley: Interesting. Yeah, that same study showed that even people watching product testimonials found the products more attractive if the testimonial giver was eating the same food that they were. Although trying to replicate that in the real world I think would be pretty

difficult to coordinate the viewer and the testimonial giver eating. Plus, it would seem a little bit weird to have somebody giving a testimonial and be eating at the same time.

We were talking about the need to be the same and different. One study that I think you actually conducted yourself was on college campuses about backpacks and car choices and how people were influenced kind of in both directions by what they saw someone else do.

Jonah Berger: Yeah, and again, we tend to think of influence almost like an imitation, but it's really more of a magnet. Sometimes it attracts but sometimes it repels. When we're out to dinner for example if someone picks the same entrée we were getting, well maybe we pick something different.

Or you know, if our neighbor bought the same car we were thinking of buying, would we still buy that car? A chunk of people would say, "Man, that car no longer makes me unique. I don't want it anymore." So just like people imitate or have a motivation to fit into a larger group, we also have a competing motivation to be different, to stand out, to feel unique and special and separate from others.

You even see this play out a lot with birth order for example. You'd expect that kids that grow up in the same family would be very similar. They have not only genes in common, they also have the environment in common, both nature and nurture should point in the same way and make them similar.

Yet, some data suggests that siblings have just as much in common personality-wise as people picked at random. Why might that be? Why wouldn't siblings be more similar? It turns out that siblings not only follow one another but they also have that powerful motivation to differentiate themselves.

If your brother or sister is the funny or the outgoing one, that spot is already kind of taken. So while it may encourage imitation, it also encourages differentiation. Finding your own position or role within the family.

Turns out this even affects athletics. Research shows that elite athletes tend to have older siblings, older brothers and sisters. But it's not as simple as that older brother and sister played the same sport. It actually happens even when older brothers and sisters played a different sport. Part of it is those older brothers and sisters encourage you to play a sport but to do a different one to separate yourself. That's really where differentiation comes into play.

Roger Dooley: One of the other really interesting pieces of work that you talked about was one that evaluated the, again, social influence effect on people's music choices where various groups were given a set of basically unknown artists and asked to rate their music. They were subjected to different kinds of social influence. You use that to explain why maybe J.K. Rowling or Britney Spears was successful. Why don't you explain a little bit about that research because I found that fascinating.

Jonah Berger: Yeah, when we think about influence we tend to think about dyadic influence, so one person influencing another. But could this influence have a larger effect?

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Could it shape what things become popular or unpopular? Usually when we think about what becomes popular we think that those things are just better than other things.

So why did *Harry Potter* become so successful? It was just a better book, it was better written, better prose. It succeeded because it was higher quality. Well that makes sense in some ways but that doesn't explain why people who are experts in the industry—so publishers for example, can't pick the good stuff from the bad stuff.

Publishers are notoriously bad at figuring out what books are going to be successful. In J.K. Rowling's case for example, it wasn't that she pitched it to one publisher and they took it. She pitched it to dozens of publishers, everyone turned her down until finally one publisher's kid actually looked at the book, liked it so much and told their parent, "You've got to get this book. It's great." And finally they went ahead and did it.

So if even experts can't tell why does something succeed and others fail, is it just random? So some researchers looked at this and found that it's not just random. Part of it is about patterns of social influence.

If you think about it, a group meeting is a good case of this. Imagine a group that's split 50/50 on whether to do one thing or something else. So let's say hire candidate A versus candidate B, or whether we should work with one firm versus another firm. People are split sort of 50/50. Many people are on the fence but they have one side versus another.

Well imagine the first person that talks and they say, “Look, I think we should do A.” Well, now the next person, the person who’s listening, they might have been on the fence but if they were thinking, they were tending a little bit towards B, the fact that someone else said A will make them a little more likely to go to A.

So they may say A, which increases the chance that the next person says A, which increases the chance that the next person says A. So the group may end up deciding A. Where if they reran that meeting and instead of the first person picking A, they picked B instead, the group might have gone in a completely different direction and picked B instead.

So these researchers showed that this shapes what songs become popular for example. They have people listen to songs online and show that the first couple people who like songs and download those songs really shapes what everyone else ends up doing.

The *New York Times* most emailed list for example or even *The New York Times* bestseller list, part of that is shaped by who reads the articles first or who reads the books first and everyone else looks to those people which shapes their own opinions which then shapes the next generation of the list. So we can really think about why things succeed and fail not just based on quality but by subtle effects of social influence.

Roger Dooley: Yeah, and of course in some cases those are algorithmic effects too, where if something gets a little bit of an early start, then it will get positioned more prominently on websites and in apps and so on. Then you’ve got sort of a self-fulfilling prophesy going.

Were there any study results that really surprised you? Either your own work or somebody else? I think that typically most studies in the social sciences start off with a hypothesis and often maybe it's demonstrated to be true or maybe the results are not so good but is there anything that maybe you say, "Wow. I really didn't see that coming."

Jonah Berger: We did a big analysis of motivation. So obviously, we've been talking a lot about how influence affects choices that we make, but what about how it affects motivation? Can it motivate people to do things they might not do otherwise? This is obviously really key in a marketing or in an organizational context. How do we motivate people to take action—from changing their mind to getting them to put more hours in at work?

Some researchers went around door to door trying to get people to save energy. They tried one of a couple different approaches. Some people they said, "Look, use fans and these other energy efficient things, they'll help you save money." Other people, they said, "Look, use these fans, energy efficient solutions, they'll help you save the environment." A third group, they said the same thing, they said but, "It will help you be a good citizen."

They asked all these people, "Would you change your behavior?" Everybody said, "Yes, these appeals are great." But then they followed up with them a few months later and they actually looked at their energy use, not what people said they were going to do but what they actually did. What they found is that people didn't change their behavior. All of these appeals sounded great when people heard them. No one

actually did what they said they were going to do. It was almost as if the researchers hadn't even come to the door at all.

Yet a fourth appeal worked quite well. That fourth appeal was simply saying, “Look, your neighbors are using fans. Your neighbors are using these energy efficient solutions.” That was enough to motivate people to take action and some follow up work has shown very nicely similar things.

There’s a company called Opower which not only gives you your energy use on your energy bill, but it gives you information about people in your neighborhood’s energy use as well. So if you're using say 3,000 kilowatt hours, they might say, “You know, your neighbor is using 2,800 kilowatt hours.” Merely exposing people to what their neighbors were doing led them to be much less likely to use energy. Decreased the energy use significantly.

We did some follow up, related work to this, looking at how the gap matters, whether you're close behind or far behind. We looked at NBA basketball games for example. This is really interesting because you would think out of all the people who should be motivated to play hard, NBA players would be those people, right? They're paid tens of millions of dollars to win basketball games. They should be really motivated.

Roger Dooley: You would think.

Jonah Berger: These psychological biases shouldn’t matter, right? But we looked at the score at half time and the score at the end of the game and what we found is if you're a betting person, not surprisingly, you want to win. You

should bet on the winning team. Every two points a team is ahead, it's about 8 percent more likely to win the game. That makes sense.

But there's one place that being behind is actually a good thing. If you were betting money and there's a team that's behind by one versus a team that's ahead by one, you should bet on the team that's behind. Teams behind by one point at half time are more likely to win. The reason is that being behind makes them more motivated. It gets them fired up.

They come out of the locker room, even though they're paid tens of millions of dollars a year, the fact that they're a little bit behind fires them up and makes them work harder. Not being a lot behind, right? Being really far behind others can cause you to give up. But being behind by just a little bit increases motivation and boosts performance.

Roger Dooley: We're just about out of time but let me remind our listeners that we're speaking with Jonah Berger whose new book is *Invisible Influence: The Hidden Forces that Shape Behavior*. To repeat myself, if you find my content here or on my blog interesting, or if you enjoyed *Brainfluence*, you'll definitely like *Invisible Influence*. Jonah, how can our listeners find you and your content online?

Jonah Berger: The best place to find me is my website which is just JonahBerger.com. The book is there but there's also a bunch of free resources that particularly for folks that are interested in influence, I think they'll find really useful. So everything from how to increase your influence, how to use others as a motivational tool, how to make better decisions, as well as group

decisions. So that will be great, really helpful stuff for your audience. People can also send me questions at @J1Berger on Twitter.

Roger Dooley: Great. We'll have those links as well as links to Jonah's books and any other resources we mentioned on the show notes page and we'll have a text version of our conversation there too. You'll find that show notes pages at RogerDooley.com/podcast. Jonah, thanks for being on the show. Really enjoyed the book.

Jonah Berger: Thanks so much for having me.

Thank you for joining me for this episode of the *Brainfluence Podcast*. To continue the discussion and to find your own path to brainy success, please visit us at RogerDooley.com.