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# #Studytalk in marketised higher education: student influencers as emerging support providers

Rille Raaper <sup>a</sup>, Mariann Hardey <sup>a</sup> and Samar Aad <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>School of Education, Durham University, Durham, UK; <sup>b</sup>Lebanese American University, Lebanon

## ABSTRACT

Within the marketised higher education context, where traditional support systems are strained, student influencers on platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube have emerged as unexpected providers of academic and emotional support for their peers. Utilising a Foucauldian framework and drawing on 13 in-depth interviews with UK-based #*studytalk* creators, this study investigates the construction of student influencer subjectivity and their strategies for navigating this complex space. Findings reveal how these individuals leverage their success as academically high-achieving students and digital acumen to build legitimacy, negotiate ethical boundaries within the influencer market, and even resist the pervasive toxicity of certain study cultures. We show that these students do not just thrive to be influencers, but they engage with forms of ethical reflection to set certain parameters for their practice. Through this analysis, we contribute to a nuanced understanding of how students negotiate support and self-making in a marketised context while offering theoretical insights into the subjectification processes within the burgeoning influencer economy. By doing so, the article extends the dominant scholarly understandings of student support that often position support provision as the domain of universities. Instead, the findings show that students themselves are highly resourceful in developing and delivering peer support, and their practices intersect with wider student and youth experiences in the digital age.

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## Introduction

Contemporary student experiences of higher education (HE) are mediated by technology where intersections between the in-person and digital experiences continue to evolve in new manners as technology develops (Dyer 2020; Timmis, Yee, and Bent 2016; Vincent 2016). The key aspect of this digital intersection relates to young people's use of social media (Brandtzaeg and Chaparro-Domínguez 2020; Uusiautti and Määttä 2014). Social media platforms have become places to find friends, maintain friendships and organise social life (Burgess and Green 2018; Bynner and Heinz 2021; Rosen 2022). For the tech-savvy generation, it is expected that social media plays a further important role in what it means to be a student. Research has shown that digital technologies help students to sustain existing social networks but also contribute to developing new peer groups, interests and identities (Timmis, Yee, and Bent 2016; Uusiautti and Määttä 2014). In marketised HE with a decreasing staff-student ratio, social media can also offer much-needed information,

**CONTACT** Rille Raaper  rille.raaper@durham.ac.uk  School of Education, Durham University, Confluence Building, Stockton Road, Durham, DH1 3LE, UK

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advice and support for those who plan and navigate their studies. In particular, the emerging research on *#studytalk* – the social media-based educational content – shows that social media use can inform young people's university choices as well as facilitate their sense of belonging once in HE (e.g. Ashour 2020; Hirst 2022; Pinyerd 2013; Timmis, Yee, and Bent 2016). This evidence raises important questions about the potential scale and scope of peer support that exists for students on social media platforms. The traditional research on student support views support as being 'provided' by universities to students (Brindley, Walti, and Zawacki-Richter 2004; Tait 2000, 2014), and it tends to underestimate the practices that extend beyond the formal university structures. While exploring the role of *#studytalk* in the experience of those students who produce it, we contribute to the ambitious HE scholarship that promotes a more situational understanding of student support where support is seen as dynamic, reciprocal and involving a variety of formal/informal actors (Jacklin and Le Riche 2009; Kanagavel 2019; Raaper, Brown, and Llewellyn 2022).

Using a Foucauldian approach to subjectivity, we focus on students who produce *#studytalk* and thereby develop an influencer status, sometimes referred to as student influencers, college/HE influencers, or content creators in the industry discourse. We opted to use the term 'influencer' in this article as this was commonly used, albeit also problematised (see Raaper et al. forthcoming), by our participants to describe themselves. By drawing on 13 in-depth interviews with UK-based student influencers from TikTok, Instagram, YouTube and the Little Red Book, we explore the nuances of how students develop their complex influencer subjectivity where student support provision intersects with their experiences of the social media industry. The findings demonstrate that the students interviewed skilfully navigated the opportunities produced by the market-driven HE and the influencer market industry to construct themselves as legitimate and valuable study support providers. Drawing on Foucault (1982), we also explore the technologies of the self and the ethical practice that the students interviewed engage with when making sense of their subjectivity and the risks of their practice for producing toxic study cultures.

## Setting the scene: market discourses and student support

It is undeniable that universities worldwide have been shaped by market forces. Marketisation as it applies to HE reflects in various ways, including public funding cuts to education financing, introduction of greater regulation of university practices and promoting competition between universities (Jones 2022; Naidoo and Williams 2015; Troschitz 2017). A key feature of the marketisation of English HE relates to offloading the cost of university education onto students. For example, the tuition fee limit for domestic students was tripled to £9,000 in 2012/2013 (DfBIS 2011), and the fees were further raised in line with inflation to a maximum of £9,250 from 2018/2019 (UCAS 2022). Alongside the fee increases, student loan debt has increased: according to the UK Parliament, around £20 billion is loaned to 1.5 million students in England each year, and the latest figures show that the average student debt among the graduate cohort of 2020 was £45,000 (Bolton 2021). However, it is also known that this tuition fee income is not sufficient for the high-quality functioning of UK universities. The Institute of Fiscal Studies (2024) has highlighted that the real-term value of spending per student has fallen back to the levels of 2011 when tuition fees were just £3,375 per year. Furthermore, according to Universities UK, British universities 'currently incur an annual £1bn loss in teaching domestic students and an annual £5bn loss in their delivery of research' (Adams 2023). In such a financially volatile context, it is unsurprising that the expansion of student numbers, both domestic and international, is seen as part of a solution to the HE funding crisis. The growing student population with limited staff numbers, however, has an impact on educational practices and academic-student relationships where the notion of value for money has come to the forefront (Kandiko Howson and Buckley 2020). Student frustration simmers as tuition fees climb, and they expect commensurate rewards – more support, richer resources, and engaging learning environments (Chalcraft, Hilton, and Hughes 2015). Universities, however, struggle to reconcile these demands with their shrinking real-term budgets.

One area that has received increasing scholarly attention relates to student support provision and the lack of it in many British universities that struggle financially. The prevalent approach to student support draws on Alan Tait (2000; 2014), explaining support in relation to its cognitive, affective and systemic functions. The cognitive elements include the development of course materials, while affective aspects emphasise supportive learning environments and systemic features that prioritise administrative processes for student-centred education (Tait 2000). Correspondingly, the priority is to develop formal structures and practices that enable universities to deliver support to their students (Brindley, Walti, and Zawacki-Richter 2004; Smit 2012; Tait 2014). However, there is also emerging research that problematises such a formalised view of student support and promotes a more situated approach to support (e.g. Jacklin and Le Riche 2009; Kanagavel 2019; Raaper, Brown, and Llewellyn 2022). For example, Jacklin and Le Riche (2009) define student support as ‘a socially situated, complex and multifaceted concept’, considering the intersection of student experience with their various other private/professional roles (Jacklin and Le Riche 2009, 735). More recently, Kanagavel (2019) and Raaper, Brown, and Llewellyn (2022) emphasise the network-like operation of student support that places the student at the centre of a set of personal connections and interactions. The focus on networks is vital as technology enables new ways for students to make connections and distribute various support, e.g. study resources, information or acts of kindness (Kanagavel 2019).

As the findings of this study will show, the student influencers have started to play an important role in mediating student needs and expectations by offering easily accessible study advice and support via social media. While this article is not about the scope and quality of the support they provide, it will shed some light on how the student influencer (as support provider) subjectivity emerges in a marketised context where the campus-based support has become less personalised. To be able to understand the student role within the social media industry, it is first important to explore the wider context of the influencer marketing industry and the role of *#studytalk* within it.

### Rise of the influencer marketing industry and *#studytalk*

Media discussions indicate that an increasing number of students have developed an influencer status (Aly 2022; Glenister 2022; Parker 2021; Sarraf 2023); however, it is less clear what this means in practice. It is known that many mainstream companies rely on social media influencers in their marketing campaigns (Abidin 2018; Abidin and Ots 2016; Chen, Yan, and Smith 2023). This relates to the prevailing quest for authenticity and relatability: brands have realised the strong emotional bonds the audience forms with their favourite influencers and the financial gain this can bring to corporations (Hudders, De Jans, and De Veirman 2021; Hund 2023; Taillon et al. 2020). Like celebrity influencers, numerous students work with brands for monetary returns. Those who become influencers tend to adopt ‘a specific tonality and morality’ which is built on ‘positive attention due to a talent or skill’ and can justifiably be monetised through advertisement work (Abidin 2020, 79). The emphasis on talent and achievement is particularly important for student influencers as the findings of this paper will show later. While students like any other influencers can produce a wide range of content, ranging from educational topics to lifestyle and fashion, the focus of this article centres exclusively on student influencers who produce educational content. However, all our participants engaged in advertisement work, promoting technology, banks, stationery and toys (see more Raaper et al. *forthcoming*).

The social media-based educational content – *#studytalk* – emerged from Tumblr and Instagram in the early 2010s (and spread to YouTube in 2015) where students would post aesthetically pleasing pictures of their study spaces and share effective study methods (Hirst 2022). Pinyerd (2013) argues that *#studytalk* has become increasingly popular in a context where a growing number of students are in search of skills and tips for managing constant pressure and stress resulting from university studies. Student influencers are going through a similar life stage as their viewers who are most likely to be university students or planning an entry to university, creating a stronger sense of

relatability between the content creator and their audience. Influencers also talk openly about their successes and setbacks, and such content is often seen as painting a realistic picture of the student life (Hirst 2022). They often use humour or other affective strategies to express and commiserate over their daily student struggles. Ask and Abidin's (2018) study of a Facebook student group indicated that humorous memes were used by students to express and cope with being overwhelmed with university life, but also to capture one's experiences of procrastination and self-blame. Humour, whether related to watching funny clips or producing humorous content, tends to have a function of stress relief while also facilitating social connection among the student population (Hendry 2020).

A rare insight into student influencers' experiences is provided by Hirst (2022) whose research engaged with Oxford and Cambridge students. The findings indicated that through their content these students normalised the Oxbridge student experience and encouraged applications from students who would otherwise self-exclude themselves from applying to Oxbridge. Hirst (2022) argued that by sharing their day-to-day life, the student influencers made non-traditional students feel less out of place in elitist universities.

It could therefore be expected that through informal peer networks social media plays a facilitative role in contemporary forms of student support. As limited research has shown, student influencers and their followers collaborate in co-constructing academic and emotional support to make sense of their academic experiences and expectations prior to and during their university studies.

### A Foucauldian theorisation of the subject

A Foucauldian framework, as it is applied in this study, helps us explore and explain how student influencers construct their subjectivity as new kinds of student support providers in marketised HE and social media industry settings. First, the framework encourages us to consider student influencers as entrepreneurs who capitalise their student experience and academic achievements for monetary gain and fame. For example, Brown (2015, 9–10) guided by Foucault, explains how the neoliberal logic centred around economic value (that informs marketisation of HE in the context of this study) influences the individual, 'transmogrify[ing] every human domain and endeavour, along with humans themselves, according to a specific image of the economic'. This means that while universities are increasingly governed based on economic interests – at least to make their ends meet in a context where the state funding to university education has fallen – individuals should also perceive themselves as self-interested human capital, aiming to maximise their advantage within the competitive market society. Hamann (2009, 37) argues in line with Foucault that *homo economicus* is 'a historically specific form of subjectivity constituted as a free and autonomous 'atom' of self-interest'. One could argue that the student influencer subjectivity is therefore an opportunistic behaviour where students utilise their academic capital to become entrepreneurs who fill study support gaps and gain economic benefit through advertisement work. From such a perspective, the student influencer is an ultimate neoliberal subject who develops an entrepreneurial mindset to exploit a niche field of #studytalk. They act as '(their) own capital' (Hamann 2009, 53) or the 'potential wealth creator' as Bansel (2015, 8) vividly argued. It could even be argued that the general mentality surrounding Generation Z, the current cohort of students, is entrepreneurialism: one is expected to sell their unwanted belongings on eBay, become a Deliveroo rider, rather than rely on state support in times of need (Raaper and Komljenovic 2022). It is the idea of freedom that provides the key condition for the formation of an entrepreneurial subjectivity of *homo economicus* (Foucault 2004).

Second, it is also known that subjectification – becoming someone or something – is a never-ending process. The student from a Foucauldian perspective is always 'subject to someone else by control and dependence [and tied to their] own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge' (Foucault 1982, 331). This means that students are shaped by dominant social practices and values that characterise society and universities at any given time (Raaper 2024), and therefore embracing an entrepreneurial mindset would be natural for many young people today. However, the Foucauldian

approach to subjectivity also draws our attention to ethics and the technologies of the self. Foucault's later work (Foucault 1982, 1984) emphasises that the formation of subjects involves an encounter between the techniques of domination and those of the self. The ethics of care reflects in critical self-reflexivity and noticing one's role in existing power structures and through this, practising care towards oneself and the other (Dean 2013; Foucault 1982). This article is set to unpack the complex intersection between neoliberal entrepreneurialism and ethical self-reflexivity in the experience of the student influencers interviewed as they construct themselves as student influencers.

## Methodology

This article is part of a larger qualitative research project, focused on examining student influencers' social media practices in the context of their wider student experiences and transitions. The overarching project involved the analysis of the influencers' online content through digital ethnographic methods and in-depth interviews; however, this paper is centred on interview data exclusively. Using purposive and snowball sampling techniques, 13 UK-based student influencers were recruited for interviews (see Table 1). The participants were from diverse student backgrounds (undergraduate/postgraduate, home/international), and they had follower numbers ranging between 2000 and 800,000. They used a range of platforms, particularly TikTok, Instagram, YouTube and the Little Red Book.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted between January and April 2023, using the Zoom platform; all interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interviews lasted between 30 and 90 min, and the semi-structured approach gave a degree of consistency across all interviews, but participants were able to discuss further topics that were relevant to their experiences. Interview questions related to students' experiences of developing an influencer status and their influencer practices but also their wider experiences of being a student and expectations for their graduate futures. Interviews were analysed using the inductive thematic analysis method (Braun and Clarke 2022; Clarke and Braun 2013) which was followed by a process of joint reflection to consider our understanding of the data (Robson 2002) within the context of a Foucauldian framework. Our analysis balanced between inductive and deductive coding until all initial codes could be adequately explained conceptually.

This project received ethical approval from the Durham University School of Education Ethics Committee, and it complies with the highest ethical standards on digital research (AoIR 2019; BSA 2017). To protect the anonymity of our participants, we do not reveal their names, social media handles or university names.

## Findings

The rest of this article introduces the key findings of this project, using a Foucauldian lens. We will start by outlining the ways in which participants constructed themselves as student influencers. The

**Table 1.** Overview of research participants.

Participant	Main platform	Study level: undergraduate (UG)/postgraduate (PG)	Study status: UK/international	Following
Interviewee 1	Little Red Book	UG	International	7000
Interviewee 2	TikTok/Instagram	UG	UK	53,000
Interviewee 3	TikTok	PG	UK	103,000
Interviewee 4	Little Red Book	PG	International	2000
Interviewee 5	Instagram	UG	UK	23,000
Interviewee 6	TikTok/Instagram	UG	International	74,0000
Interviewee 7	Little Red Book	PG	International	55000
Interviewee 8	YouTube	PG	International	800,000
Interviewee 9	YouTube	UG	UK	4000
Interviewee 10	TikTok	UG	UK	10,000
Interviewee 11	TikTok, Instagram	UG	International	60,500
Interviewee 12	TikTok, Instagram	PG	UK	370,000
Interviewee 13	Instagram	UG	UK	55,000

theme '*constructing the student influencer: from user to producer*' demonstrates that student influencer subjectivity is ultimately tied to the social media industry and social media consumption among young people. However, the theme also shows that student influencers situate themselves within a particular discourse community (Foucault 1969): academic excellence that legitimises their right to produce *#studytalk*. The second theme '*navigating the student influencer subjectivity: filling a gap in marketised HE*' demonstrates how students interviewed enact their influencer subjectivity. We show how such identity is constantly being produced in relation to the influencer market dynamics. Finally, the theme '*reflexivity and the technologies of the self*' draws on Foucault's later work to understand the critical reflexivity that students embrace when shaping their influencer subjectivity and practices. Through our analysis, it develops that becoming and being a student influencer are inherently interconnected with the technologies of domination (derived from marketisation of HE and the influencer industry) and that of the self (ethics and care aimed at providing support) in the participants' experiences.

### Constructing the student influencer: from user to producer

The student influencers interviewed explained that they had been active social media users prior to entering HE and before becoming influencers themselves, demonstrating the prevalence of social media use among today's youth (Brandtzaeg and Chaparro-Domínguez 2020; Uusiautti and Määttä 2014). This also means that the consumption of online content goes hand-in-hand with production, and the former often precedes the latter (Raby et al. 2018) but also inspires continuing content creation:

Yeah, I've always been following it, especially like the study side of TikTok. I find it really motivating. Like before I would start studying, I'd watch a YouTube video, something like that. [...] Like it helped me through my own A levels and GCSEs and everything. (Interviewee 2)

It is important to note, however, that producing *#studytalk* relates to one's positioning as an academically successful student (see Raaper et al. *forthcoming*). The phrases such as '*I'm always the, like, top three students*' (Interviewee 1) and '*I do do fairly well at [University]*' (Interviewee 6) illustrate how the students explain their high-performing student status. Further example is provided by Interviewee 2 who explains how being a successful student gives their educational content legitimacy:

And then also, I think it's about, like proving why what you're saying is valuable. So like, when I, whenever I post, I'll always say like, 'Oh, I got an A\* in Chemistry'. This is my tip. Because if you just say like, 'Oh, this is some study tips for Chemistry', people are going to be like, 'Yeah, but you might have got it D'. Yeah, so you have to show why. (Interviewee 2)

It could therefore be argued that it is not sufficient to be an active social media user nor just an HE student, but there is an element of legitimacy required to produce *#studytalk*. From a Foucauldian perspective, this means situating oneself in a particular discourse community where knowledge equates power (Foucault 1969). On the one hand, such process of becoming a student influencer relates to being actively engaged in social media consumption and thereby having *knowledge of the influencer industry* and social media practices. On the other hand, it means utilising one's *academic knowledge* and successes to establish a legitimate status as someone who produces valuable educational content. These knowledge frameworks or discourse communities become 'a space of positions and of differentiated functioning for the subjects' (Foucault 1969, 232) which can lead to becoming a popular student influencer with large-scale following and advertisement work.

### Navigating the student influencer subjectivity: filling a gap in marketised HE

The ways in which one enacts an influencer subjectivity demonstrate further connections to the market forces of HE and the influencer marketing industry. However, it also shows how student influencers and their users co-produce new forms of academic practices through their production and consumption of *#studytalk*.

First, there is a distinction in terms of how student influencers direct their content either to home or international student audiences. This indicates that the student influencers need to understand the intricacies of social media and HE markets to claim a segment of it. Within the context of this study, the domestic students tended to target other home students. In such cases, the dominant content related to providing advice on university admissions, GCSE and A level exams which most young people are concerned with when planning an entry to HE:

I made a YouTube video going line by line by line through my own personal statement, and I did a series in 2021 I think, talking students through the UCAS like system, which means that like, I do think like some of those videos have 100,000 or 200,000 views [...] or like even like 40k likes, but that's 40,000 students which, which is a huge amount in terms of the national demographic of students applying to university. (Interviewee 10)

A level and GCSE students will probably be doing mocks around about now [referring to spring 2023]. So I kind of know what they would be wanting to see at that time. (Interviewee 2)

In terms of the international student market, the university level study tips were the more prominent content. This was explained in relation to helping international students to adjust with academic expectations and study cultures in the UK. Most of this content was produced by international students themselves.

The definition of plagiarism is, you know, very, very different for some Chinese students, they're really confused about that. So I think most of them um, most of them are actually anxious about academic writing. My followers, they, they don't think academic writing is really easy, they think it's really hard for them to do. (Interviewee 7)

The findings indicate how relatability and legitimacy, which are essential to influencer marketing industry (Hudders, De Jans, and De Veirman 2021; Taillon et al. 2020), produce the different types of student influencers and therefore different types of support for different student audiences. This also allows student influencers to claim their market share on social media platforms. Such positioning of oneself based on market needs and developing their distinctive influencer brands demonstrates the ways in which the students interviewed align with the neoliberal mindset where they maximise their success as entrepreneurial beings (Brown 2015; Foucault 2004). The participants clearly utilise their academic capital and social background for their own advantage, demonstrating an entrepreneurial mindset characteristic of *homo economicus* (Foucault 2004).

Second, there is a tendency among student influencers to promote a particular understanding of university education which relates to making studying 'easier' (Interviewee 4) and 'smarter' (Interviewee 8).

But if you study smart, if you study strategically, then you can study just seven hours a day, eight hours a day. [...] That is a very, very, very popular topic. Because it's like, what student doesn't want to study less, but get the same grades? Right? (Interviewee 8)

From a neoliberal perspective where the ideas around the value for money thrive, there is a market for promoting a version of study skills that makes university studies easier for students. Interviewee 2 explains how she had struggled with the practice of 'critical analysis' and how she now advises other students on what it means:

I struggled so much in my first year, I tried to work out just how to write an essay that they wanted, like, like, even things like critically analyse, like, they would write in my feedback, like, 'Oh, you haven't done critical analysis'. And I'd be like, email, and I'm like, 'what is critical analysis?' And they're like, 'Oh, you just, it's something, I can't tell you what it is, you just have to know'. And like, I just wish someone had told me how to structure and all of this sort of stuff. (Interviewee 2)

It could be suggested that through #studytalk, students are producing new types of academic practices, where complex processes such as critical analysis become something that can be quickly mastered by detailed instruction. From such a perspective, mastering academic skills is less personal and cumulative, but something that can be accelerated and ticked off. It is less clear how effective these practices are, and future research should interrogate it further. However, the accounts above indicate



the ways in which marketisation of HE has opened a door for students to identify gaps in student study needs, where content relates to a wide range of topics from HE admissions to plagiarism and complex pedagogical processes of critical thinking and analysis. From a Foucauldian perspective, it is the market logic that endorses students to identify and fill these gaps through a neoliberal entrepreneurial mindset. By adjusting to the mechanics of the influencer marketing industry, students design their own brands associated with the *#studytalk* provision, and these distinctive practices help them to demonstrate the legitimacy of their status and content. It also appears that such content is highly popular in a context where students are in search of additional academic support and quick solutions to their academic development.

## Reflexivity and the technologies of the self

Based on the findings so far, it would be easy to conclude that students are just the products of the technologies of domination (Foucault 1982) that shape them into entrepreneurially minded influencers. However, the analysis also indicates an unexpected but important element of criticality in student accounts about their influencer role. First, the student influencers interviewed were highly aware of the toxic study cultures and the harm that their own *#studytalk* could entail, e.g. promoting competition and unrealistic expectations:

Because when you watch that content, and you see people getting really good grades, you compare yourself to them. And you look at like people studying, like, promote quite a toxic work culture. (Interviewee 2)

I personally don't want to walk down the street and have someone look at me and think, 'Oh, that's the girl that I use to fuel out of fear my academic work' (Interviewee 10).

To mediate such risks, the participants spoke about setting parameters for their content. In particular, they expected their content to be of value to other students: *'it's not just for personal gain, but also, like I personally do like to help people in some capacity'* (Interviewee 6), and *'A lot of what I talk about is kind of accessibility and higher education and kind of my own experiences of that'* (Interviewee 5). Interestingly, however, such an objective to support other students has led to self-censoring in terms of content that gets produced and published:

... because whilst I am achieving really well, you know, probably, you know, it'd be a good video of me to be like, 'This is what I got in all my exams', like, I don't feel that that's going to benefit anybody. That's, I don't think it's going to motivate anybody. I think it's just going to make people feel kind of bad about them not getting consistent First ... (Interviewee 9)

These critical accounts indicate that student influencers engage with the technologies of the self where they consider the ethics associated with their own practices (Foucault 1982, 1984). The interviewees perform the technologies of the self by embracing certain practices 'on their own body and soul, thoughts, conduct ... so to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness ... and wisdom' (Foucault 1988, 18) and to thereby endure and act against the toxic study cultures. They do so by working on 'the relationship that one has with the self, the choice about the style of existence made by an individual' (Oksala 2005, 159). The technologies of the self, leading to ethical practice, take place in relation to others (Foucault 1988), and in the context of this study, these take place in relation to other current and future students who consume the *#studytalk*. Interviewee 10 even explains how they recently paused their account as they have transitioned out from a particular stage of their student life and feel they *'don't really have anything else to add'*:

I just got to the point, I don't really have anything else to add, like I haven't formally retired the account. If I ever have a new video or a new insight to make, I'll go and make one. But I think like the whole, the whole purpose of it was education, activism, news and politics. I'm no longer a politics student in my course, so I am not an authority in politics anymore. (Interviewee 10)

Foucault's (1984) theorisation of subjectivity helps us understand the possibility of developing the techniques of the self, practices and strategies that enable students to navigate their

entrepreneurial practices without being completely absorbed by the influencer marketing industry. It offers a glimpse of how student influencers ‘confront oneself at the centre [their] discomforts’ (Ball and Olmedo 2013, 93). It may well be that it is the educational focus of their content and high-achieving student status that offer a reality check every now and then, and enable the student influencers to continuously return to their ethics, and adjust and reject certain forms of social media practices.

## Discussion

This exploratory research on the experiences of student influencers in the UK has opened a pressing discussion in two key areas. First, the findings of this study echo the need to revisit how we understand and define student support in HE. It has demonstrated that new forms of support practices are emerging within and outside traditional university boundaries, and many of these practices are student-led, as in the case of student influencers in this study. The student practices highlighted here align with the more alternative view of student support as being dynamic and situational and operating via formal and informal networks (Jacklin and Le Riche 2009; Kanagavel 2019; Raaper, Brown, and Llewellyn 2022). This peer support has emerged as part and in response to HE changes where student numbers have increased without an adequate response in formal support for students (Chalcraft, Hilton, and Hughes 2015; Harrison and Risler 2015; Kandiko Howson and Buckley 2020; Raaper 2024). It is also part of wider generational change among students where technology and social media have become a natural part of young people’s identity and social practices (Burgess and Green 2018; Bynner and Heinz 2021; Rosen 2022). With this article, we argue that the emphasis on support as situational practice and comprising social networks helps to recognise the interconnected patterns of relations between students and the support available and view students as resourceful and inventive. However, once we acknowledge that a large part of student support operates off-campus via informal social networks and practices, it raises a need to evaluate its quality for successful student progression in HE. As the indicative findings have shown, students on social media have started to produce new types of academic practices where the attention is placed on quick mastering of academic skills, i.e. ‘*what student doesn’t want to study less, but get the same grades*’ as vividly explained by Interviewee 8. From a Foucauldian perspective, there are new discourse communities emerging via #*studytalk* that advocate new types of academic practices: studying more strategically and instrumentally. This raises questions about the extent to which the advice offered by student influencers via #*studytalk* aligns and/or contradicts that of the formal university discourses and practices.

Secondly and in the context of the changing notion of student support, we were able to demonstrate how some students – particularly the high-achievers – develop an influencer subjectivity on platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube and the Little Red Book. They do so by producing educational content aimed at certain groups of current and future students. As the findings show the process of becoming a student influencer is intricately related to the technologies of domination and the self (Foucault 1982, 1984). The marketisation of HE and the influencer marketing industry creates an opening for students as #*studytalk* producers. Leveraging their digital literacy and lived experiences, these students fill the gap in support by offering academic and study skills guidance to their peers. This trend resonates with young people’s increasing reliance on social media for navigating educational choices and fostering a sense of belonging. From a Foucauldian perspective, students as anyone else, would always be drawn between the technologies of domination and that of the self, needing to make sense of and navigate the dominant societal discourses and one’s place within it. As the findings demonstrate, the student influencers interviewed do it rather successfully. On the one hand, they are skilful in defining their influencer brand and designing content for a particular student market, which in turn leads to lucrative advertisement work with brands (see more Raaper et al. forthcoming). They act as entrepreneurs, or *homo economicus* in a Foucauldian sense (Foucault 2004; Hamann 2009) and capitalise their own academic achievement and its relevance to certain student audiences, e.g. home and/or international students. This was vividly illustrated

by Interviewee 2 who argued '*I kind of know what they [domestic university applicants] would be wanting to see at that time*'.

On the other hand, student influencers demonstrated high levels of criticality in terms of how their content could contribute to toxic study cultures. This also makes them consider what content gets produced and published, and how to navigate one's influencer status. We argue that this is a prime example of Foucauldian technologies of the self (Foucault 1982, 1988) in practice where students consider the ethics associated with their own practices and reject becoming responsible for toxic study cultures. In the case of Interviewee 10, it even led to pausing one's account when they did not have '*anything else to add*'. Our related work (see Raaper et al. [forthcoming](#)) has demonstrated that the student influencers tend to be highly reflective of which advertorial work to say yes to, indicating their selective approach to working with brands. Beyond the practicalities of managing their online personas, this article delved into the ethical considerations student influencers navigate, particularly their evolving sense of moral duty to their peers. We showed how this sense of responsibility shapes their perspectives on university education and the value they place on their content. As the student accounts in this paper have demonstrated, the students interviewed are rather selective of what content gets produced in order to avoid harm and to assure the educational value of their content. Such positioning of oneself shows that the students interviewed did not just see themselves as celebrity influencers in the making, but as student support providers for whom the educational value of their content was essential. This once again confirms our argument that student support in itself is in transition of change, and students play an important role in it.

## Conclusion

Marketisation has significantly reshaped the HE landscape, posing multifaceted challenges for universities, students, and academics. One key challenge in the UK relates to growing student numbers without an adequate increase in staff numbers. Such changes have ultimate effects on contemporary student experiences of HE, and the campus-based advice and support that is available to them. As this study has shown, there is now an emerging group of students on social media – student influencers – who on the other hand, exploit the gaps in marketised HE, and on the other, fill these by offering a new type of student-centred support via *#studytalk* medium. This trend resonates with young people's increasing reliance on social media for navigating educational choices and fostering a sense of belonging. While not a comprehensive solution, this peer-to-peer support network offers potential benefits, while raising questions about its quality and sustainability in a marketised environment.

Above all, the findings of this study invite the readers to reflect on the ways in the influencer marketing industry and the contemporary student needs and expectations intersect, and how some students claim their space within it as student influencers who produce easily accessible and student-to-student educational advice and support. We also invite HE researchers and practitioners to consider how we understand and develop student support practices: student support is and should be seen as a situational practice that encompasses both formal and informal sources of support, while crossing the conventional university boundaries. We expect future studies to interrogate the role of *#studytalk* in the experience of both the producers and users. The latter would be particularly helpful to evaluate the impact of *#studytalk* on addressing common challenges that students encounter during their university journeys. It would also help the HE community to understand the extent to which *#studytalk* aligns with or contradicts the formal support and advice from HE institutions.

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## ORCID

Rille Raaper  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7098-0241>

Mariann Hardey  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1027-0165>

Samar Aad  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9493-4899>

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