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## Negotiating authenticity: experiences of student influencers on social media

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### ABSTRACT

Research has shown that contemporary youth face a variety of challenges, ranging from social belonging to striving towards perfection in body image and personal achievements in all areas of life. Student life is expected to add further complexities, reflected in a need to negotiate new social connections, spatial environments and academic and future-oriented challenges. This project engaged with a unique and hard-to-reach group of students who define themselves and are defined by others as social media influencers. The objective was to explore the ways in which the participants' experiences of the influencer marketing industry and its pressures for authenticity intersect with the experiences of being a student. The article draws on 13 in-depth interviews with UK-based student influencers with profiles on different platforms (including TikTok, Instagram, YouTube and the Little Red Book) and discusses how these students navigate the increasingly complex field of monetisation of their content, while maintaining a sense of authenticity and success as a student. It reveals the moments of transition encountered by students when constructing oneself as a successful student who produces content that has strong educational value, and the intricate processes entailed in preserving one's brand on social media platforms.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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## Introduction

In the competitive landscape of UK universities, high tuition fees, mounting student loan debt, and uncertain graduate prospects cast a long shadow on young people's identity and sense of belonging (Bolton 2021; Chalcraft, Hilton, and Hughes 2015). Young people navigate a myriad of anxieties within this environment, mediated heavily by technology. From financial and academic pressures to social expectations, the pressure to achieve 'perfection' in both body image and accomplishments across all areas of life is pervasive (Eriksen 2022; Krogh and Madsen 2023; Låftman, Almquist, and Östberg

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2013). In this context, researchers express concern about young people's heightened academic, social, and personal stress (Eckersley 2011; Krogh and Madsen 2023).

Social media has become a taken-for-granted part of contemporary adolescents' lives, and youth experiences of themselves as well as higher education (HE) are increasingly digitally mediated (Dyer 2020; Timmis, Yee, and Bent 2016; Vincent 2016). Research has primarily shown that social media can act as a sanctuary in which young people feel they can express themselves, offering the most far-reaching social network that has ever existed (Burgess and Green 2018; Rosen 2022). From such a perspective, digital platforms have become staples for finding friends and organising social life, indicating new ways of developing one's belonging and mediating the challenges that youth face in contemporary market-driven societies (Bynner and Heinz 2021). Furthermore, the emerging studies on *#studytalk* – the student-led social media-based educational content – indicate that the search for academic advice has also become prevalent on social media platforms (Ask and Abidin 2018; Hirst 2022; Pinyerd 2013). This has resulted in the emergence of new types of social media influencers: students who produce educational content on academic studies and university life, sometimes referred to as student influencers, college influencers, or HE influencers in the industry discourse. Student influencers are going through a similar life stage as their followers 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. They 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). When producing this content, the students can use humour or other affective strategies to express and commiserate over their daily student struggles (Ask and Abidin 2018; Hendry 2020), but they are also seen to popularise certain types of student experience, e.g. making non-traditional students feel less out of place in elitist universities (Hirst 2022).

This article explores the experiences of those students who develop a social media influencer status through their production of educational content. We use the term 'influencer' (over the related terms of content creator or vlogger) as this was commonly used – albeit also problematised, something we will return to in our analysis – by our participants to describe themselves. The article draws on 13 in-depth interviews with UK-based student influencers using a variety of platforms (TikTok, Instagram, YouTube and the Little Red Book<sup>1</sup>) and discusses how these students navigate the increasingly complex field of monetisation of their content, while maintaining a sense of authenticity as a student. Through our analysis, we explain how social media practices and student experiences intersect in a context where young people are already under pressure to take responsibility for their own livelihoods, academic achievements and futures.

Conceptually, our analysis is guided by the notion of authenticity, specifically how it is operationalised within influencer studies that highlight its importance for marketing industry. Authenticity, as it is applied in this article, is reflected in the individual's continuous negotiation over one's self-presentation with an aim to 'appear real' to one's audience (Hund 2023). In this article, we extend this conceptualisation of authenticity, and show how the practices of authenticity intersect with the experiences and pressures of academic life for student influencers. We contribute to HE and youth research by offering a nuanced exploration of how students as young people interact with technology and how they position themselves within the influencer marketing industry to enable (rather than hinder) their successful student and graduate journeys. The article takes

seriously young people's agency and emergent literacies while remaining mindful of the unique vulnerabilities that studenthood entails and how those intersect with social media's attention economy and increasing platformisation (Nieborg, Duffy, and Poell 2020; Valtysson 2022).

## Studenthood and digital spaces

Studenthood is an important life stage for many young people, allowing them to grow as learners, experience university life and prepare for future transitions to working life (Lairio, Puukari, and Kouvo 2013). It is well known that student journeys throughout the university are a complex process, reflected in new social possibilities and connections, academic challenges and spatial environments that require negotiation (Dyer 2020). In the UK, the student life has become increasingly tied to financial risk and value for money concerns. Alongside the fee increases<sup>2</sup>, the 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). In addition to financial challenges, finding and keeping a job after graduation looms large for many students (Mok and Jiang 2018). Growing numbers of families invest heavily in their children's education, lured by the illusion of better job prospects and enhanced social mobility, yet these hopes often fail to materialise for graduates facing a challenging job market. The heightened uncertainty and individual responsabilisation for their success in market-driven society can cause heightened levels of stress for young people (Krogh and Madsen 2023; Låftman, Almquist, and Östberg 2013; Raaper 2024). Furthermore, the focus on one's success enforces comparison and competition among peer groups, often isolating young people and affecting their sense of belonging in universities.

In an already challenging context, it becomes important to question the role of technology in student experience. While research on the role of digital technologies and social media in young people's life often highlights risks (Rosen 2022), existing research in the context of HE experiences has primarily illuminated the positive role of technology and social media. For example, research emphasises that social media helps to make friends and build support communities. Thomas et al. (2017) explain that those at the start of their study often use social media to develop relationships in the new place but also to keep in touch with family and friends. During the university life, digital technologies have a role in sustaining these networks but also developing new peer groups, interests and identities (Timmis, Yee, and Bent 2016; Uusiautti and Määttä 2014).

Research has also looked at how social media is used for academic purposes in terms of enhancing student learning (Hussain 2012; Neier and Zayer 2015). The social media based educational content – *#studytalk* – first became popular on platforms like 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). Students turn to *#studytalk* to cope with pressures resulting from university studies; these new forms of networked publics help them to release stress (Boyd 2010, Pinyerd 2013). Student content creators tend to talk openly about their successes and setbacks, and such content is often seen as painting an authentic picture of student life (Hirst 2022). They often use humour or other affective strategies to express

and commiserate over their daily student struggles. For example, 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 and studies, but also to capture one's experiences of procrastination and self-blame. Research has also shown that social media can support young people in their university choices. Hirst (2022) argued that by sharing their day-to-day life, student influencers can normalise elitist universities such as Oxford and Cambridge and make non-traditional students feel less out of place.

While *#studytalk* has expected benefits for the student audience, it is less clear what student content creators gain from sharing their academic and university experiences, and how their experiences relate to the wider challenges that students face. While some are remunerated for their efforts by brands, most are not, nor is the financial gain the sole or the dominant motivator for content creation. Students who produce content inhabit a variety of roles; simultaneously seen as producers, consumers and entrepreneurs who construct their own experiences and identities (Raby et al. 2018). To better understand the field within which these students operate, the next section will explore the influencer industry and its complex relationship with authenticity.

### **Influencer industry: the chase for authenticity**

The influencer marketing industry is worth 21.1 billion USD (Statista 2023), and the use of social media influencers in marketing practices is common (Abidin and Ots 2016; Balaban and Szabolcs 2022; Chen, Yan, and Smith 2023). Corporations have realised the persuasive power influencers hold over their followers: audience members can form strong emotional bonds with their favourite influencers (Luoma-aho et al. 2019; Taillon et al. 2020), who produce advertorials in exchange for payment and/or sponsored products and services (Abidin and Ots 2016; Taillon et al. 2020). It is common for influencers to have financial relationships with several brands simultaneously (Abidin and Ots 2016), and the type of work can range from a single mention (e.g. via photo and recommendation) to a long-term co-operation across various digital platforms (Taillon et al. 2020). In the analysis, we explore the degree to which influencer marketing dynamics intersect specifically with student life and experiences.

The growth of the influencer marketing industry is co-constitutive with internet celebrity culture. Similarly to professional influencers, many young people develop their own brands to gain visibility in the increasingly competitive marketplace of social media (Theodoridis 2021). 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 which can justifiably be monetised through advertorial work (Abidin 2020, 79). The emphasis on talent is particularly important for student influencers as the findings of this paper will show later. It is known, however, that integrating advertising with personal content means constant risk management to protect one's brand and maintain follower numbers (Taillon et al. 2020). This is where the question of authenticity is key.

In her recent book on authenticity in the influencer industry, Emily Hund (2023) quotes Gunn Enli (2014, as cited in Hund 2023) in saying that authenticity is ultimately 'about socially constructed notions of what is real,' but adds that its meaning is time – and context-specific. Today, Hund (2023, 7) argues: 'authenticity is not just a social

construction, but an industrial one', where 'those who learn to construct and exploit the ever-shifting language and aesthetic of 'realness' online hold immense commercial, political and ideological influence, but they also show how fraught, contingent and transactional authenticity has become'. Yet, even in this seemingly cynical context of influencer industry, authenticity continues to be a symbolic construct that has cultural value (Benet-Weiser 2021). It has become 'a crucial requirement for both the self and commodification processes in late modernity' (Reckwitz 2017 as cited in Blasch 2021, 37), and is 'inextricable from the commercialism that now ensconces digital interactions' (Hund 2023, 169). Authenticity, thus, is inherently riddled with tensions.

For influencers, authenticity is complicated. Most social media rewards a more 'intimate confessional production format', built around the capacity to recognise others and a need to be recognised by others as being of value (Balley et al. 2020, 1). Existing research shows that on social media, perceptions of authenticity hinge on carefully curated, normative and situation-appropriate performances, which the audiences read as relatable (Abidin and Ots 2016) and consistent (Faleatua 2018) rather than unfiltered, unadorned 'truths' (Uski and Lampinen 2016). Being authentic on social media is thus 'entangled with how people want to present themselves to others and what kinds of interactions they are looking for' (Tiidenberg 2018, 84). Authenticity in the context of online content creation is subjective, personally defined (Balaban and Szambolics 2022), constantly negotiated and performed for an audience with the goal of being perceived as true or credible (Wellman et al. 2020).

While appearing authentic is desirable across platforms and practices, it is accomplished through a diverse set of tactics. User perceptions of influencer authenticity are based on their presumed sincerity, endorsement transparency, visibility, expertise, and uniqueness (Lee and Eastin 2021). Stakeholders of the influencer industry enforce authenticity while evaluating each other's authenticity 'as a means of judging whether they are, or could be, influential' (Hund 2023, 168). Influencers themselves start exercising pressure on each other to conform 'to certain implicit standards, norms, and ethics, when it comes to the publication of commercial content' (Abidin and Ots 2016, 156). Being transparent about sponsorships and advertorial work is increasingly seen as an expression of honesty, which according to Balaban and Szambolics (2022) positively associates with the influencers' self-perceived authenticity. This is because working with brands puts influencers at constant risk of breaking trust with their followers (Abidin and Ots 2016; Chen, Yan, and Smith 2023). It is relatively common for influencers to turn down commercial brands when they do not align with their personal brands and audience expectations (Hund 2023; Wellman et al. 2020). Influencers also rely on a variety of authenticity strategies to manage the tensions involved in negotiating brand collaborations: Audrezet, De Kerviler, and Guidry Moulard (2020) elevates passionate (creating enjoyable content) and transparent (providing fact-based info about a products) authenticity strategies, while Abidin and Ots (2016) talks of porous authenticity strategies (intentionally showing 'behind-the-scenes' details to prove they are genuine). Being authentic may therefore mean adjusting one's self-presentation or modifying the work one does, following one's principles and values, even if this results in the loss of advertorial work (Balaban and Szambolics 2022). Such loss is seen marginal, given that influencers who are perceived to be experts and who share authentic information tend to attract more followers and have a stronger impact on those followers' decision-making (Hudders, De Jans, and De Veirman 2021).

Finally, the perceptions of authenticity within the influencer industry have changed over time (Hund 2023). There has been a shift from cultivated-but-authentic visibility that focused on earning income without selling out (Duffy 2017) to a version of authenticity that relies more on (performances of) accountability, self-reflection and personal disclosure (Abidin 2020; Hund 2023). Even with the focus on disclosure, however, influencer authenticity is always curated. Adhering to the current norms of authenticity allows individuals to construct themselves as credible experts who are worthy of the audience's trust (Wellman et al. 2020).

It is evident that the construction of authenticity is of central importance within the influencer marketing industry and the experiences of content creators. It can be expected that the student influencers engaged in advertorials are shaped by similar forces and are required to constantly consider authentic representations of themselves. However, this chase for authenticity in student influencer experiences is likely to intersect in complicated ways with wider experiences of studenthood, which the rest of this article focuses on.

## Methodology

This project used a qualitative approach to examine student influencers' social media practices in the context of their wider experiences of studenthood. While our project involved both the analysis of the influencers' social media content through digital ethnographic methods and in-depth interviews (see Raaper, Hardey, and Aad 2024) this paper is centred on interview data exclusively. Interviews were conducted with 13 student influencers enrolled in UK universities (see Table 1). These influencers were selected through using purposive and snowball sampling techniques with an aim to capture a wide range of student influencer experiences across different social media platforms and student backgrounds. To maintain ethical and professional boundaries, we reached out to these students via their email addresses that they have made publicly available for brands seeking to collaborate with them. We reached out to 35 students with an initial invitation, followed by one reminder if needed. On one occasion, our interview request was declined by a marketing agent working with them, and on two occasions, the student initially agreed, but later became unavailable. In most cases, however, there was no reply to our interview requests.

Given the hard-to-reach nature of this group, we believe that 13 participants were sufficient for this exploratory study. We benefitted from the final sample being diverse

**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	55,000
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

in ways specific to the overall research question: *how do students (from diverse social backgrounds and platforms) construct and negotiate their student influencer positioning?* Our participants' follower numbers ranged from 2000 to 800,000, and the sample involved both undergraduate and postgraduate students from UK and international backgrounds. Within the influencer industry, it is common to talk about nano, micro, macro and mega influencers based on their follower numbers. However, what the ranges are for each category differs by topic (e.g. fitness influencers are more mainstream and can be expected to have more followers than student influencers, whose experiences are relevant to a smaller potential audience). Further, follower numbers are platform specific as TikTok algorithms enable individuals to gain larger followings within a shorter timeframe. Finally, even within the industry discourse a mega-influencer (someone with millions of followers) is not necessarily more sought after than a nano-influencer (someone with fewer than a 1000 followers), as the latter may have more influence over their followers purchasing decisions, or be a better investment for brand collaborations for specific types of products. All our participants created #*studytalk* and identified as influencers as becomes evident from findings. They used a range of platforms: TikTok, Instagram, YouTube and the Little Red Book. These platforms are all image-rich social media sites where posts range from images and memes to short videos and live streams. This also means that the participants' experience of content creation involved an important element of visual representation of the self which will be further explored in our consequent publications.

The interviews were conducted between January and April 2023 by three authors of this paper who all worked (or fourth author studied) in the same university, but across Education and Business disciplines which enabled important interdisciplinary synergies. To ensure consistency across all interviews, we established a semi-structured interview template which included 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 to their graduate futures. All interviews were conducted via Zoom, and they lasted between 30–90 min.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed using the inductive thematic analysis method (Braun and Clarke 2022; Clarke and Braun 2013). Each interview was first analysed by the researcher who conducted the interview, followed by collective discussion and comparison of codes across all interviews (Robson 2002) to develop overarching themes. Then, for different publications and in an argument-specific way, we followed with a process of joint reflection to consider our data within the context of specific conceptual frameworks. For this article, we focused on participants experiences of authenticity as both a social and an industrial concept, as operationalised by Hund (2023), and worked closely with the third author who has significant expertise in social media research, including theorisations of authenticity. Authenticity had emerged as an important theme in the initial analysis, and for this article, we revisited all data coded for authenticity, doing another round of more detailed coding to see what, specifically, our participants were saying about it. Our analysis balanced between inductive and deductive coding, until all initial codes could be adequately explained conceptually. Such analytic process was an opportunity for us to co-learn and work across disciplinary boundaries when conducting research on under-researched youth group such as student influencers.

The project received ethical approval from the School of Education Ethics Committee at Durham University, 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 social media handles, nor their personal details or university names.

## Findings

The rest of this article introduces the key findings of this project. We will start by outlining the ways in which students interviewed made sense of their role as student influencers and their strategies for monetisation of their content. The theme *'constructing the student influencer positioning'* outlines how the participants spoke about themselves as both students and influencers. Through our analysis, it becomes evident that being an academically successful student and creating #studytalk are inherently interconnected in the participants' experiences.

We then move on to trace and discuss the themes related to authenticity and its intersection with students' understandings of their university studies, successful graduate futures and influencer practices. The theme *'working with brands'* provides a snapshot of brand work the interviewees do and the decision-making that underpins the advertorial work that is taken on. This theme illustrates how authenticity is practised in a rather conventional way and within the remit of the influencer marketing industry, to assure one's success as a student influencer (in this context: popularity and continuity of advertorial work). The theme *'intersections of authenticity and studenthood'*, however, demonstrates the critical reflection in student accounts of themselves as high-achieving students who assess the value of their social media content through educational lens and successful graduate trajectories. By exploring the intersections between studenthood and social media practices, the theme advances existing scholarship on authenticity, as well as how we think about students' use of social media.

### *Constructing the student influencer positioning*

Most participants agreed that they are influencers, although with caveats, illustrated by phrases such as *'I guess you can call me an influencer'* (Interviewee 11), and *'I don't love the term influencer, but if someone calls me an influencer, it's absolutely fine'* (Interviewee 8). The complexities of our student interviewees negotiations of their influencer status become more evident below:

I obviously have done brand deals, I've influenced people, I've influenced people's university choice like I have some sense of you know, influence over people. I think I prefer like 'content creator' more than an influencer as like a phrase just because of the connotations that's attached to influencer. (Interviewee 9)

This discomfort with the term 'influencer' has been noted by other researchers. Cunningham and Craig (2019, 105) pointed out that the content creators they studied viewed it as 'a marketing term that connotes a one-way relationship, precisely of influence on a relatively passive receiving audience', which can overwrite the creative and communal aspects of the practice. Our participants limited their influencer status to the realm of providing academic support on university choices and life at university. Being a student and an influencer is therefore entangled in their experience, and the student identity is articulated as taking precedence. The student influencers interviewed described themselves as academically successful students. The phrases such as *'I'm really good at science'* (Interviewee 1), *'I*

*do fairly well at X University'* (Interviewee 6) and *'I just have a strict rule for myself that social media is not my first priority, because that is my degree'* (Interviewee 11) were common. Such positioning of oneself as an academically successful student may reflect the wider societal shift where academic achievements are seen as an important part of young people's self-value (Krogh and Madsen 2023). However, we argue that in this case, academic achievements also legitimise the production of social media content, as they are framed as something that allows one to authentically share academic advice. Interviewee 12 vividly illustrates how their academic success is the key reason for why the student audience should follow them and trust that their content is 'valuable':

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)

These students, as any other influencers, used their talent (Abidin 2020) – in this case their academic achievements – to construct their influencer legitimacy and positioning. On the other hand, our participants articulated a desire to live up to the label and embrace the entrepreneurial mindset expected of young people today (Raaper 2024; Raby et al. 2018):

I always have so many ideas and like aspirations and things like monetising things to do extra ... like I really wanted to create like a tutoring platform [...] It's just finding the time to do it. (Interview 2)

Such positioning of oneself based on individual talents demonstrates the ways in which the students interviewed conform with the neoliberal mindset where they use their academic achievements to maximise their success as entrepreneurial beings (Brown 2015). Being a smart and high-achieving student gives reliability to their content and lends credibility to their influencer status. From the intersection of the two, an authentic student influencer identity emerges, and it is precisely that, which the students monetise.

### **Working with brands**

The influencer marketing industry is a rather lucrative sector (Statista 2023) and could possibly provide the best paid part-time job for students in times of financial insecurity (Bolton 2021; Raaper 2024). However, our interviewees were reflective of the meanings of their work and prioritised a sense of authenticity over income, or rather a sense of authenticity *with* their income. Our interviewees articulated authenticity as it is common among influencers across the sector: authenticity was cast as central in maintaining trust with the audience and therefore protecting their long-term follower numbers (Abidin and Ots 2016; Balaban and Szambolics 2022; Chen, Yan, and Smith 2023). In this context, authenticity means being reflective about how they want to be perceived by their audience, and carefully curating their performances to provide some perceived consistency (Abidin 2018; Faleatua 2018; Tiidenberg 2018).

And I mean, if someone spends their hard-earned money on something that I say is great, and it turns out to be really terrible, and they are obviously going to lose their trust in me. (Interviewee 11)

The considerations for authenticity were negotiated with more detail when students needed to make decisions about which brands to work with. Many had gone through

extensive thought processes and had clear parameters for which brands to say yes to: *'I'm usually like having the brands that I have used before'* (Interviewee 1) and *'I've only ever agreed to brand deals with brands that I use myself or would recommend'* (Interviewee 9). In addition to knowing the products, some had criteria related to advocating certain causes, e.g. *'I want to know that the brand values disabled people'* (Interviewee 5) and *'There are certain products I would just never put on my page. So those being, you know, subjects related to vaping, smoking, more provocative items, drinking'* (Interviewee 6). Being careful about advertorial work helps to keep one's legitimacy as an influencer and to remain authentic in the eyes of the audience (Hund 2023). In this case the choices were shaped by personal values, but also a basic normative assumption of what a good student would or would not 'put on their page'. Here, again, an enactment of a good student identity authenticates the influencer role.

Despite of their carefulness when it came to monetisation, students in this study had extensive experience of working with brands. It ranged from creating content to promote technology, banks, stationery and toys. The interviewees indicated that they would earn between £1,000 to £2,000 for short video content; many had contracts with reputable corporations, leading to £15,000-20,000 a year from producing advertorials. Our participants suggest that brands and marketing companies reach out to them because they can offer an authentic student voice. Interviewee 12 explained that they are being approached *'definitely every month, if not every week'*. Interestingly, however, the brands reaching out to student influencers are not just the providers of study products and services, but they include mainstream corporations attempting to reach young people. Interviewee 2 provides an example of working with a bank to advertise financial services for young people:

I'm working with XXX bank. They like, they want three videos, it's £4200, which like is quick. Like, I think the videos are 30 s each [...] like crazy money that, like I will be working a full-time job to earn that normally. (Interviewee 2)

The most profitable example of advertorial work among those we interviewed included production of video content for a car manufacturer for £25,000. The student found this to be a large enough sum to warrant reflection, which they offered by highlighting the effort it took, situating it in the broader context of often-aspirational labour of influencing (Duffy 2017) and grounding it in a narrative of certain disdain for the dominant actors of capitalism popular on social media:

25,000 pounds and it was XXX car manufacturer. So, I know, I've never had anything close to that [...] but like, I also did a whole big campaign for free the other day. So, I think what happens is, when a company like that gets in touch, you're like, 'Well here, I'm not going to charge you £500, because you've got thousands in the bank'. Yeah, I may as well charge it. But also, I'm doing six speaking engagements this week for free. (Interviewee 12)

The slight tension evident in Interviewee 12's narration, and their desire to explain the sum, indicates that not only are the specific brands and products one collaborates with a possible risk to one's experienced and perceived authenticity as a student influencer, so is the size of the fee. We see, in our participants' articulations a variety of discursive strategies of maintaining authenticity, where a choice of a collaboration is authenticated via what is appropriate for a good student to be associated with. Furthermore, working for a large fee for a seemingly 'random,' brand is also justifiable within the broader context of

one's student influencing work, where it pays, in a sense, for one's ability to do more mentoring and advising for free.

Similarly to existing research (e.g. Balaban and Szabolcs 2022; Hudders, De Jans, and De Veirman 2021; Hund 2023), the student influencers explained risks to authenticity as '*brand suicide*' (Interviewee 9). They highlighted the importance of being transparent by disclosing when they are working with commercial brands (Wellman et al. 2020). A particularly vivid example of such rationale is provided below:

And I've been approached by like, laptop like HP and like different companies like that offering to like send me laptops and things. But I kind of ultimately made a decision that I don't use a HP laptop. Nobody has ever seen me use HP laptop in any of my YouTube videos. This would be like, like, personal brand suicide, why would I choose to like promote it? (Interviewee 9)

It could therefore be suggested that student influencers approached authenticity in ways that cohere with the practices and risk management calculus of career and celebrity influencers; which brands to work with is carefully considered to remain trustworthy and consistent for one's audience. This, however, is not the only way to think about authenticity in the context of students' use of social media, especially as the participant group defined themselves as high-achieving students with aspirations for academic and graduate success. The next section will explore how being a successful student and authenticity intersect when producing *#studytalk*.

### *Intersections of authenticity and studenthood*

Student influencers interviewed introduced an important layer of complexity in their practices of authenticity when reflecting on their student life. Their academic knowledge, often in areas relating to Social Sciences, provided a critical lens through which to make sense of their influencer work and to evaluate the content they produce. This could be considered rather unique within the context of the influencer industry.

So it's quite meta in a way to like, so for example, like about how, you know, relationships between social media and capitalism. So I obviously, recognise that I am probably being exploited, but also being part of that. (Interviewee 6)

While the sample is not sufficient for any disciplinary conclusions, it can be expected that those studying Social Sciences regularly discussed themes related to digital technologies and contemporary economic-political order as part of their studies. In addition to high levels of reflexivity regarding influencer marketing as such, the students (including those beyond Social Sciences) set high expectations for their content needing to have value for their audience: '*My rule of thumb for myself is, I only make content as long as I have something to say, because like I said, I don't want to waste my audience's time*' (Interviewee 11). Interview 9 goes further by explaining what they mean by valuable content:

And as I got older, I tried to have more of a conscious awareness of the type of content I was producing, like, especially now that I'm at university, I tried to just produce stuff that's going to kind of put uni in a good light, but also a realistic light, because I think there's a lot of people who really romanticise the university experience (Interviewee 9)

We interpret this attempt to create content that is valuable for other students, positive but also realistic about HE, as important for student influencers' sense of personal authenticity.

While student influencers have a significant impact over young people's university choices (see Hirst 2022), existing research also highlights a culture of academic pressures and toxic study cultures among today's youth (Krogh and Madsen 2023; Låftman, Almquist, and Östberg 2013). Our participants demonstrate an awareness of it and a desire to make responsible choices in this realm. Here one's authenticity as a student influencer hinges on one's loyalty, first and foremost, to the student subjectivity. Our participants speak of their attempts to mediate existing pressures, or at least not to cause further harm.

Relatedly, unlike professional celebrity influencers, students see their influencer role to be transitional, because their student status is transitional. Above all, they are focused on positive graduate outcomes and securing professional career outside the social media sphere:

But I think ultimately, I've had to make the decision, this isn't my career, I want a career outside of my own personal content, and I don't want my life to be kind of commodified and be the one thing that I make money from. I'd much rather, you know, do it when I feel like I can, like add value and enjoy making content and not feel like it's something that I really have to really like rely on, or not like feel like I have to do it. (Interviewee 9)

Furthermore, Interview 10 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. I do follow the news, but I also work as a journalist, which means that I am not in a position of public authority because I work for them. (Interviewee 10)

The participants demonstrated that while the student influencers are shaped by the influencer marketing industry and the self-branding trends, including those of particular performances of authenticity (Faleatua 2018; Hund 2023), they are also highly self-reflexive, literate and aware of the temporary nature of both their student and in particular their student-influencer status, and this self-reflexivity plays an important role in both, their experiences and their practices of authenticity and satisfaction as students and influencers. It is likely that there might be students who aspire to become professional celebrity influencers; however, the interviewees in this study positioned themselves as academically talented students who aspire for graduate jobs and currently use their academic capital to prove their value by advising and supporting other students. In other words, authenticity does not just reflect in appearing as successful students for their followers, but the student influencers interviewed desire to live up to it when transitioning through HE.

## Discussion and conclusion

This research has offered a novel analysis of how a selection of student influencers as young people navigate the pressures related to the influencer marketing industry while constructing themselves as academically successful students. It captures the pivotal moments of transition encountered by students when positioning oneself as high-achieving students with clear graduate trajectories in mind, and the intricate processes entailed in curating authenticity and preserving one's brand on social media. Above all, the findings show that the student influencers' experiences of authenticity are not just

grounded in the pressures and practices of the influencer market industry, although these play an important role in shaping the student influencers' engagement with advertorial work and followers, but also in the contemporary demands young people face when aspiring for academic success. The findings demonstrate the significance contemporary students place on academic success, and how social media can play a role in producing toxic study cultures that promote visibility and peer pressure on academic achievement (Krogh and Madsen 2023; Låftman, Almquist, and Östberg 2013).

Established research on social media has brought extensive attention to influencer marketing: the phenomenon of individuals earning a livelihood by leveraging their online profiles in return of advertorial work (Abidin 2020; Abidin and Ots 2016; Duffy 2017; Hund 2023). Starting from the 2010s, a group commonly referred to as 'influencers' have consistently generated content as part of this trend. While our research was aimed at understanding how some students develop their influencer status and practices, it more importantly revealed that being a student influencer is a rather unique position where the aspects of the influencer industry and studenthood are intertwined. The student influencers' experiences and articulations of authenticity were nuanced and often included negotiations of various tensions, illustrating the inherent struggle between authenticity and commodification in the influencer marketing industry (Hund 2023). On the one hand, our interviewees had internalised aspects of this industry and carefully considered how they protect their brand and follower-numbers (Balaban and Szambolics 2022; Hudders, De Jans, and De Veirman 2021). This was also seen in relation to acquiring and securing advertorial work, which may offer an important financial support to students in times of financial adversity (Bolton 2021; Raaper 2024). On the other hand, the findings demonstrate how the interviewees' practices intersected with their experiences of being academically successful students who produce not just any content but *#studytalk*. The intersection between authenticity, academic success and educational content offers an opportunity for youth, HE and social media researchers to extend our understandings of authenticity and its intricate practices in different contexts.

The findings indicate that our interviewees' understandings of authenticity were ultimately perceived through the lens of being a successful student who is doing academically well and aims to transition out of HE (and the influencer industry) into a successful graduate employment. Such approach to authenticity tends to differ from pre-established understandings that place significant emphasis on the economic incentives and prospects associated with influencer work. Existing research (see Balaban and Szambolics 2022; Hudders, De Jans, and De Veirman 2021; Hund 2023) has shown that most influencers promote the ideals of authenticity as they relate to one's consistent self-presentation and careful consideration placed on brands they work with to assure long-term follower numbers. Student influencers of course exhibit some similar traits due to the shared dynamics of individualisation and content amplification in social media's attention economy. Like celebrity influencers, the students interviewed were approached by a range of established brands, inviting them to do advertorials in return of payment and/or free products. Many were earning large sums of money: a prime example was provided by Interviewee 12 who made £25,000 from working with a car manufacturer. The important nuance we noticed, however, related to the ways in which the participants attached meaning to the content they produced and how this shaped their understanding and practices of authenticity. These meanings were clearly rooted in the educational value placed to their content and the presumed temporariness of their student-

influencer careers. In particular, our research revealed a scenario wherein student influencers strive to dissociate themselves from advertisement-driven content, at least in terms of how they perceive and portray their futures, instead prioritising the educational value of their content for their audience and successful graduate outcomes for themselves. The findings indicate that the participants reflect an inclination on their part for their content to be of value for other students and future cohorts of young people transitioning to universities. Such critical reflection may reflect the participants' attempt to reconcile their possible role in contributing to the toxic study cultures or placing further pressure on young people to aspire academic success (Krogh and Madsen 2023; Låftman, Almquist, and Östberg 2013; Raaper 2024). While these young people are aware of their own role within the already stressful study cultures, it does not mean that they themselves are immune to a neoliberal entrepreneurial mindset where perfection, success and competition are at the forefront. One could argue that these students have successfully capitalised their academic achievements for monetary return and social media fame.

When interpreting the findings of this study, it is important to recognise that student influencers are a distinct group of students and social media influencers. For example, they may have unique motivations and opportunities that differ from those of other students and influencers. As this study indicated, they are also a hard-to-reach group in terms of research endeavours, and therefore the findings of this study need to be read in the context of the small-scale exploratory nature of this project. What is important, however, is that this innovative study has demonstrated that student influencers tend to have high levels of reflexivity in their understandings of social media, the influencer marketing industry and their own role within shaping the experiences and aspirations of future students. Participants showed awareness of the social media practices and pressures that young people as students are experiencing today. The ways in which they understand and negotiate authenticity is a prime example of where the two worlds – social media industry and academia – collide, and rather successfully if we consider the follower numbers and brand engagement. The findings of this study, however, invite further research on the effects and outcomes of *#studytalk* to young people who follow it, so that we could also better understand the consumption element of *#studytalk* and any differences that may exist between the intentions and actual benefits. Furthermore, we encourage youth and HE researchers and practitioners to consider, examine and reflect on the ways in which student and youth experiences intersect with the influencer marketing industry, and how young people understand and navigate these intersections. For example, there is a clear potential to think about the ways in which student support and employability development are increasingly social media based, and the responsibility we have in understanding the spaces and practices that contemporary students engage with during their university journeys.

## Notes

1. Little Red Book is a popular social media platform in China, allowing users to share content through images and short videos. It is named after a book of statements from speeches and writings by Mao Zedong, the former Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party.
2. The tuition fee limit for domestic students in England was tripled to £9,000 in 2012/13, and the fees were further raised in line with inflation to a maximum of £9,250 from 2018/2019.

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