

#Studytalk: Student influencers as emerging support providers

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Research Domains

Digital University and new learning technologies (DU)

Abstract

Within marketised higher education, 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 students leverage their success as academically high-achieving students 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 ethical reflection to set certain parameters for their practice. 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.

Full paper

Context

Contemporary student experiences of higher education (HE) are increasingly mediated by technology where intersections between in-person and digital experiences continue to evolve in new manners as technology develops (Dyer 2020; Timmis et al. 2016; Vincent 2016). 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), providing a shared experience for many young people and students to define the sense of a 'we' (Balleys et al. 2020). 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 et al. 2016; Uusiautti and Maatta 2014). In marketised HE with decreasing staff-student ratio, social media can also offer much needed information and support for those who navigate their studies and prepare for challenging transitions out to graduate jobs. 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 (see Hirst 2022; Pinyer 2014; Timmis et al. 2016).

Theoretical and methodological approach

A Foucauldian framework is used to explore and explain the role of student influencers within the market driven HE. 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 the society and universities in any given time (Author 2024), and therefore embracing an entrepreneurial mindset characteristic of influencers would be natural for many young people today. However, Foucault's later work (Foucault 1982, 1988) emphasises that the formation of subjects involves an encounter between the techniques of domination and those of the self. The ethics of care relates to critical self-reflexivity and noticing one's role in existing power structures and through this, practising care towards oneself and the other (Foucault 1982, Dean 2013). This paper is set to unpack the complex intersection between the neoliberal entrepreneurialism, as it plays out in the influencer marketing industry, and the ethical self-reflexivity in the experience of the student influencers interviewed.

This paper is part of a larger qualitative project, involving the analysis of student influencers' social media 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. They were from diverse student backgrounds (undergraduate/postgraduate, home/international) with follower numbers ranging between 2000 to 800,000. They used a range of platforms, particularly TikTok, Instagram, YouTube and the Little Red Book.

Findings

The findings show that student influencers have started to play an important role in mediating contemporary student needs and expectations by offering innovative and easily accessible study advice and support via social media. In the experience of our participants, producing *#studytalk*, relates to one's positioning as an academically successful student. The phrases such as *'I'm always the, like, top three students'* (Interviewee 1) and *'I do fairly well at [University]'* (Interviewee 6) illustrate how the students explained their high performing student status.

However, the findings also demonstrate how student influencers engaged with critical reflexivity and the technologies of the self in a Foucauldian sense where they consider the ethics associated with their own practices (Foucault 1982, 1988). This makes them consider what content gets produced and published, and how to navigate one's influencer status. In the case of Interviewee 10, it even led to

pausing one's account when they did not have '*anything else to add*'. Further example is provided below:

...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)

This paper will invite the audience to reflect on the ways in which marketisation of HE intersects with the influencer marketing industry and the contemporary student needs and expectations. The paper will also demonstrate how some students – particularly the high-achievers - claim their space within it as student influencers who produce easily accessible and student-to-student educational advice and support.

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