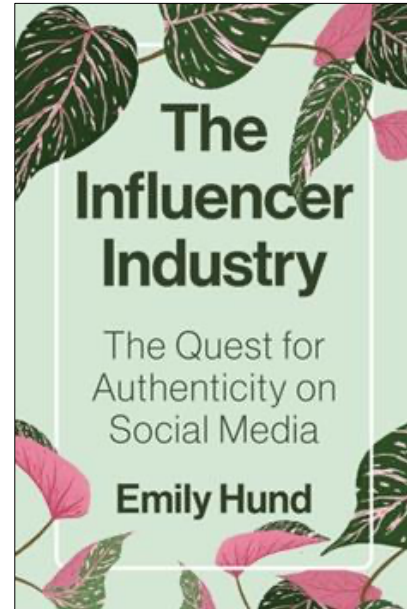


Emily Hund, **The Influencer Industry: The Quest for Authenticity on Social Media**, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023, 232 pp., \$29.95 (hardcover).

Reviewed by
Tyler Quick
University of Southern California

For the past decade, scholars of social media have labored to articulate the qualities comprising the blatantly insincere yet somehow supremely marketable “authenticity” that social media influencers perform for their fan audiences. At long last, Emily Hund, in her new book, ***The Influencer Industry: The Quest for Authenticity on Social Media***, achieves this, theorizing “authenticity” once and for all as the industrial operation by which social media producers are appraised, categorized, and ultimately rewarded based on their ability to create and maintain “engaged” audiences. *The Influencer Industry* is an exhaustive account of the industrialized meticulousness with which social media influencers’ performances of self are “contrived” (to use Crystal Abidin’s [2016] apt description) to sell products, promote brands, and even meddle in politics. But as thorough as it is, Hund’s account is likely to perpetuate concerns about academia’s apprehension of social media influencers as mere laborers.



Hund’s story is a parable. She summarizes in the introduction,

As bloggers and early influencers ceded independence for earning a predictable living—a perfectly rational and understandable choice, given the circumstances—they also helped create a growing digital media industrial machine interested in monetizing an authentic life, not embodying it. (p. 5)

In what follows, she contextualizes and historicizes this claim in detail. In the first chapter, Hund turns inward, toward our own academic enterprise, to explain the conceptual emergence of “influence” as a byproduct of social scientific thinking, assisted by cultural events that made such scientific, quantifiable notions of influence mainstream. In the second, she explains how a generation of “contingent” laborers in the digital economy turned toward social media platforms to commodify and eke a living out of popular “personal brands” against the backdrop of economic uncertainty and the 2008 financial crisis. In the third chapter, she documents how this nascent influencer industry was co-opted by professional advertisers and marketers, as well as algorithmic technology. The fourth chapter investigates subsequent controversy and discourse surrounding social media influencers during the last decade, while the fifth focuses on more recent times and influencers’ relationship to online misinformation. The sixth and final chapter summarizes the state of the influencer industry today and gestures toward future sources of hope and despair. All chapters were unified in their political-economic approach to the influencer industry and, as such, provide compelling evidence to support Hund’s thesis above.

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In truly painstaking detail, Hund documents the transformation of participatory cultures into culture industries on social media platforms and popular blogs. She pays particularly close attention to the individual stories of social media influencers themselves, and especially the competitive, economic pressures they confront in order to succeed in the influencer economy. Ultimately, she concludes (correctly, in my view) that “authenticity is an industrial construction” (p. 168), or perhaps a kind of capital:

Social influence is not just a process, but a commodity. It is something assessed and assigned material value by people and technologies. Authenticity is the means by which stakeholders value influence: it is an industrial construction leveraged for the benefit of different groups at different times. (p. 168)

What troubles me most about this book then is its emphasis on only one aspect of and perspective regarding this industrial process: influencers’ labor. This is certainly not Hund’s problem alone. In qualitative platform studies, inquiry has often myopically focused on “creators,” including, to be fair, “ordinary” creators (*viz.* not just “big name” influencers) who benefit from social media’s obvious technological affordances. But as the author herself points out, becoming a *successful* influencer or “creator” is always predicated on “preexisting social and economic capital” (p. 71). So why then do we, as scholars, continue to “platform” those with such privilege and capital when we know that “inconvenience sampling” (Duneier, 2011) the invisible, unheard, and underrepresented is a methodological and political exigency?

My greatest concern is thus that this book takes seriously, at least in part, the popular mythos of social media that it also contests. For example, consider that the Instagram come-up of a pretty, young White girl from one of Chicago’s wealthier suburbs is framed on the very first page an exemplar of “the influencer ethos:” “anyone can cultivate a loyal audience” (p. 1). The social distance between the influencer industry’s haves and have-nots is rarely remarked upon in this work, to my regret—as has any necessary and in-depth discussion about the influencer hierarchy’s relationship to systemic racism, neocolonialism and the uneven distribution of world resources, or even the broader gender dynamics that have animated much of Hund’s other work. For the most part, Hund does not consider intersectionality in this work. And, in large part, I think that’s because we as social media scholars are still often encouraged by this industry’s and discipline’s norms to seek the perspective of industry insiders who, as Hund points out in her fifth chapter, are always eager to align their brand with progressive political ideals like diversity without necessarily “picking a side.” In the end, even in critical histories of their work, influencers retain control of their public image, as well as the broader, cultural mythos of their work and social function.

Ordinary social media consumers/audiences, especially critics *outside* media studies, and their perspectives are missing in this work in a big way, except for within the final few chapters. I believe more and better-quality data from sources other than marketing professionals and influencers would have added much-needed context to Hund’s limited discussion of the “genderedness” of influencer labor. Following Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012) and Brooke Erin Duffy (2017) in emphasizing the central role of femininity in many influencers’ self-fashioning and labor, Hund notes that “influencers tend to be women, whose historically key position in the consumer cycle makes them both economically critical and easily dismissed” (p. 13), thereby delimiting her influencer informants’ agency and acknowledging its subjection to moderating forces (e.g., market and cultural

influences). In an interview, an influencer marketing professional tells Hund that self-misrepresentation, especially aesthetically, in influencer imagery is economically necessary and morally ambivalent:

I understand you need to look pretty when you take a picture because I don't want to see a picture of you after you've run two miles. You're not gonna look super cute, and it's not gonna make me want to buy this water. So I see why you lie [laughs] . . . (p. 59)

However, we already know from a preponderance of empirical research (e.g., Kleemans, Daalmans, Carbaat, & Anschütz, 2016; Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020) that what is framed here as a savvy business move is blamed by those without much voice in qualitative platform research for the perpetuation of harmful, unrealistic, and racist beauty standards for women, as well as the concomitant problems that come with it (e.g., eating disorders or body dysmorphia). Thus, what is often framed in this work as a matter of microeconomic decision making can be, in fact, a macroeconomic phenomenon with corresponding and often overlooked externalities.

In framing influencers as foremost laborers, this work in social media studies more broadly has largely neglected to apprehend the manner by which influencers both quantitatively accumulate and symbolically embody "human capital." While I must commend Hund for this well-researched, deeply historical, and critical account of the "influencer industry," it ultimately feels a little unmoored from truly political-economic analysis because of its relative disinterest in the endemic nature of inequality in influencer culture and digital media technology (see Noble, 2018). As social media audiences and users continue to bring up problems like the above, digital and social media studies will surely have to reconsider our methodological and theoretical priorities. For now, though, this book provides a preponderance of useful data upon which to build such a critique.

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