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

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The term "influencer" has become a mainstay of contemporary public culture and debate. Recent estimates put the value of the global influencer industry at around $16.4 billion (Leung, Zhang, Gu, Li, & Palmatier, 2022), while a survey of young people in the United States and United Kingdom indicated that substantial numbers now name "influencer" as a preferred career (Young, 2019).

Despite this, there have been few attempts to map the rise of the influencer industry over this period. Therefore, Emily Hund's book, **The Influencer Industry: The Quest for Authenticity on Social Media**, is not only timely but also provides an excellent opportunity for her to draw together some of the key arguments she has been developing over the past decade and, in particular, showcase the experiences and attitudes of some of the main protagonists.
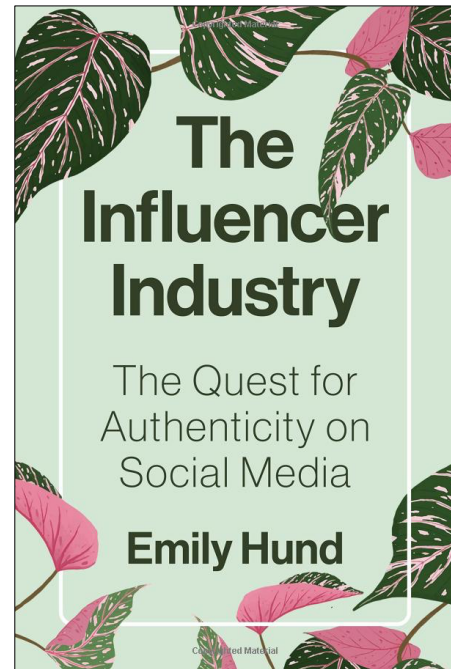
The first chapter sets the scene by providing useful discussions of key concepts and some context for the subsequent empirical chapters. In the first case, Hund highlights the history of ideas around influence and, to a lesser extent, persuasion, which includes the hypodermic needle and two-step theories, emergence of the public relations industry, and rise of media and celebrity culture. The rise of the influencer industry is linked to a number of technological and economic transformations in the 2000s, including the popularization of digital technologies changing work patterns and conditions, and a growing emphasis on the individual and the personal.

Influencers are defined as "people who earn income as independent workers providing 'authentically' curated content to carefully cultivated online audiences" (p. 29). Indeed, authenticity is viewed as the "oil" that greases the wheels of this new industry but is seen to be at the heart of a curious tension. On the one hand, authenticity is valued for challenging the idea that everything is for sale in a consumer economy. On the other hand, being seen as authentic generates engagement, which in turn attracts the interest of the commercial operations that allow the industry to both develop and expand. How the emerging industry, and its main actors, deal with this conundrum fires many of the subsequent discussions.

Chapter 2 emphasizes the significance of two key processes, turning popular content producers into brands that can not only attract but also engage audiences over time and transforming said audiences into assets that can be measured and, above all, monetized. Here again. this means balancing the competing

demands of being seen as "authentic" ("someone who actually shares their real life" or, at least, "enough truth" [pp. 58–59]) with the needs of sponsors, who demand "predictable, reliable and measurable" (pp. 58–59) content.

Chapter 3 traces the transformation from a "haphazard ecosystem of actors into a more smoothly functioning industry with clearer goals and roles for participants" (p. 63) and focuses on attention on the particular people (female, White but "ambiguously ethnic" [p. 91], young, pretty), performances (pose, clothing, makeup, activity), and places that generate "maximum metric benefits" (p. 96). Ironically enough, given the promise of access to the "authentic," the cultivation of a particular Instagram aesthetic to attract audiences and sponsorship leads to greater homogeneity and, perhaps inevitably, a backlash, which is the subject of the following chapter.

In chapter 4, three public controversies are used to highlight both the growing success of the industry but also its "wild west" nature. First is the U.S. Federal Trade Commission's interventions concerning sponsored content and the efforts to make influencers disclose the commercial relations they have with sponsors. Second is the Fyre Festival, which is seen to represent the ultimate disjuncture between the fantasy lifestyles that influencers promote and the "reality" of, in this case, a badly planned, underfunded, and shambolic "cultural" event. Third is the issue of fake followers and the way influencers and the industry that supports/exploits them respond to these critiques. From an industry perspective, these responses included new pricing structures, tighter regulation and monitoring of accounts, and more overt declarations of commercial partnerships. Influencers, themselves increasingly subject to attacks on their "picture perfect lifestyles" (p. 122), began to pivot toward more confessional content, revealing their struggles and insecurities, and/or away from single-issue content (fashion, travel, cookery, makeup, etc.) toward a more all-encompassing "lifestyle" presentation (p. 127).

The penultimate chapter "explore[s] the industry's present and potential futures" (p. 131) and addresses several important issues, including digital burnout, misinformation and political polarization, the racial pay gap, and the increasing capture of the influencer industry by corporations. However, it feels fragmented and somewhat tacked on and does not fit with the overall thrust of the rest of the book. Moreover, like the rest of the book, it is very United States–centric, at times painfully so. This is a shame, and one wonders if it might have been better to have looked at brief case studies from other parts of the globe and/or addressed, in more detail, the impact of newer digital platforms such as TikTok (pp. 146–149). This would have provided an opportunity to explore the relevance (or otherwise) of key concepts and debates on different platforms and for different cultures, political regimes, and regulatory frameworks.

Having highlighted the rise, expansion, and reformulation of the industry, the final chapter asks the question, "What now?" (p. 157) and makes a few suggestions as to how things might be improved. These focus on the need to regulate the major social media companies while organizing workers, emphasizing creativity over efficiency, and offering greater transparency to users. There is also a final reflection on the key concept of "authenticity" that offers a more nuanced approach than in other parts of the book. Hund writes, "There has not, nor has there ever been, one true meaning or embodiment of authenticity, as its existence is always dependent on the idea of the people invested in it at any given time or place" (p. 169).

For someone who spent the best part of two years thinking quite a lot about and getting quite frustrated by the term "authenticity," I could not agree more. As we wrote in the introduction to our edited collection, *Cultures of Authenticity* (Heřmanová, Skey, & Thurnell-Read, 2022), the concept is difficult to pin down or define, because its meaning and value are tied to the contexts in which it is articulated, represented, and debated (Thurnell-Read, Skey, & Heřmanová, 2022, pp. 2–4). This might seem obvious, but Hund's writing around authenticity is, *at times*, one-dimensional and does not do enough to acknowledge the extent to which debates around authenticity in the contexts she is interested in may not apply elsewhere. Furthermore, beyond a brief nod to the work of Gunn Enli (2014), there is relatively little about the hierarchies or power relations that are involved in making, supporting, and resisting claims to authenticity and the consequences of this for different groups (Thurnell-Read, Skey, & Heřmanová , 2022, p. 10).

In short, there is not *that* much about how key social categories such as gender, class, age, and ethnicity inform or shape perceptions of authenticity and the consequences of this for different, in this case, women. This is not to say that Hund does not discuss them at all—she certainly does. But what is perhaps missing is the really critical edge that some of her other published work (Duffy & Hund, 2019) offers.

In conclusion, then, this is a thoughtful, engaging, and well-written overview of the development of the influencer industry (with a particular focus on fashion and lifestyle) in the United States. For those already familiar with the work of Hund and some of her contemporaries, it may not offer that much. However, it is eminently readable and so will be a useful resource for students who are interested in these topics—and many of them are. Second, it will also appeal to audiences who are not academics but follow contemporary academic debates around topical issues. This is not to damn the work with faint praise, far from it. Engaging students and nonacademic audiences is a skill that not enough people working in academia possess. We should celebrate those who are both able to produce cutting-edge research over a sustained period, as well as communicate their findings to a range of different audiences.

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