Health education, social media, and tensions of authenticity in the 'influencer pedagogy' of health influencer Ashy Bines

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Health and wellness influencers are often criticised as dubious and unqualified sources of health education, presenting highly curated, commercialised lifestyles via social media platforms such as Instagram. While these critiques are important, they also present a narrow reading of complex digital cultures. In this paper, we examine a digital ethnographic case study of Australian entrepreneur and health influencer, Ashy Bines. We argue that Bines' pedagogical expertise is made possible through her seemingly contradictory media practices and messages, whereby she cultivates an 'authentic' personal experience for her followers. We frame these productive tensions in her social media practices as a form of 'influencer pedagogy'- the indirect, mediated processes of education produced through relatable interactions between influencers and their followers on social media platforms. We do not assess whether influencer pedagogy is 'good' or 'appropriate' but instead explore how influencers like Bines cultivate authenticity and expertise, and thus pedagogical potential.

Good evening, Gram Fam. I know I look ridiculous, but I am literally covered in oil head to toe, like [my] body's got body butter oil, [my] face has got face oils, my hair is a mix of three different oils, and a different hair treatment because I just feel like after a day of hairspray and makeup and just being out in the sun, my skin and body just loves oil. Anyways, today two things were pretty special. It's International Friendship Day, but it's also International Human Trafficking, like, Awareness Day, which I think is really, really important and I've been talking about it a lot and educating myself a lot, and sharing some pages that are doing some incredible things...

- Ashy Bines talking to her camera wearing pink flannel pyjamas with baby polar bears, Instagram Story, 31 July 2020

The global rise of social media health and wellness influencers has been met with both praise and scorn. Among critics, influencers are viewed as dubious and unqualified sources of health education, presenting highly curated, commercialised lifestyles. While these critiques are important, they also present a narrow reading of complex digital cultures. In this paper, we take seriously the educational potential of social media influencers and discuss the Australian health influencer Ashy Bines, examining how Bines establishes authenticity that in turn produces her brand as a form of health education or what we theorise as 'influencer pedagogy'. Here, influencer pedagogy describes the indirect, mediated processes of education produced through relatable interactions between influencers and their followers on social media platforms. We engage with a digital ethnographic case study (Pink et al. 2016) to illustrate how Bines' authenticity inherently relies on a series of tensions that make her relatable yet aspirational and, ultimately, educational.

To begin, we locate Ashy Bines at the intersection of social media and health education debates and discuss social media influencers and the role of authenticity in health education. Although there are likely other influencer traits that afford pedagogical capacity, we focus on mediated authenticity as it is a key concept in

influencer studies. We explore three interrelated tensions of authenticity afforded by Bines' social media practices. First, we consider how she remains relevant through continual transformation, while also maintaining a consistent media identity. Second, we consider the tension between her presenting the 'real' Bines, while also maintaining professional and aesthetic standards. Third, we consider how Bines offers health expertise while purposefully remaining on the margins without formal credentials. Rather than a deterrent, the paradoxes of her brand, we argue, are central to what makes her an engaging, 'authentic' source for health education. We conclude by proposing some possibilities for influencer pedagogy in the context of health education.

Health influencer, Ashy Bines

In the last decade, Australian health and wellness influencer Ashy Bines' brand has grown across media platforms including Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, Snapchat, and podcasting. Known variously as "lifestyle gurus" (Baker and Rojek 2020), and health or fitspo ("fit inspiration") influencers (Reade 2020), figures like Bines have gained popularity with their predominantly young followers for their relatable yet aspirational social media presence. Although her primary brand is about health and wellness, Bines' media content is diverse: from what skincare works best for acne, to what herbal tea to drink when you're bloated (she sells it), to her hospital visit when her son was unwell, to her excitement over a new product launch, to relationship advice, to posting a black square on Instagram to support the Black Lives Matter protests.[1] Her business, managed with her team and her husband, Steven Evans, has been subject to controversy and

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[1] In 2020, Instagram users posted blank black squares on their feeds as a gesture of solidarity with protests against the police killing of George Floyd in the US. This was in part associated with the Black Lives Matter movement, but critics of the trend questioned the sincerity and efficacy of the practice for activism and social change.

criticism, including claims of plagiarism and deception (e.g., Fairfax Media 2015). Yet her audience numbers have only escalated: she has over one million followers on her official Instagram account and over three million Facebook friends.

Bines was an entrepreneur prior to becoming a social media influencer, initially advertising her Gold Coast outdoor fitness bootcamps and selling digital copies of her 2012 'Ashy Bines Clean Eating Diet Plan' online. Since then, she has accumulated a range of products and services, including a restaurant and gym (both closed), numerous apps, a YouTube channel with her series 'Ashy Bines Raw', activewear clothing lines ('TONED' and 'Baseline'), sports supplements and nutritional snacks ('Clean Treats'), a magazine, a book, and podcasts, as well as collaborations with other health brands.

As an established and wide-reaching influencer, Bines is a useful case study whose brand and its mixed public reception emulate the practices of innumerable health and wellness influencers both in Australia and elsewhere (e.g., Baker and Rojek 2020). Importantly, we are not interested in determining if Bines' social media practices are 'good' or 'bad' but rather in examining how, despite regular public criticism, she remains pedagogically potent among her followers.

Health education and social media learning

Media cultures have always been spaces of pedagogy and learning. Popular media provide explicit *and* implicit health information on different issues and topics. For example, reality television is recognised as a key source of information about obesity and health surveillance (Rich 2011), just as *Dolly Doctor*'s now-defunct long-running question and answer columns once taught relationships and sexuality (Wilson et al. 2017). Social media research has examined how health knowledge circulates via celebrity cultures and how influencers establish expertise as part of their brand and commercial relationships. Influencers are not subjected to the same pre-publication

rigours or regulations as news journalists or health experts, instead it is platform users who primarily validate influencers' content via clicks, shares, comments, and likes. Subsequently, the pedagogical potential of influencers for health education is treated with suspicion. A useful example is the 2018 Australian government campaign, *Girls Make Your Move*. The campaign paid influencers to encourage their followers to engage in physical activities such as surfing, yoga and kickboxing, with relevant posts accompanied by the campaign hashtag #girlsmakeyourmove (Sweeny 2018). Regardless of the campaign impact, the advertising agency leading the campaign lost their government contract after questions arose about influencers' content unrelated to the campaign (e.g., paid alcohol endorsements) which Australia's Minister for Health viewed as "offensive" (Sweeny 2018). Such criticism of influencers as contradicting government-endorsed messaging ignores how influencers' practices of authenticity – as perceived by followers as relatable to their own lives – potentially *strengthens* rather than compromises their capacity for health education.

Young people are often ignored in debates about health education and media and are often assumed to be 'duped' or docile when engaging with influencers' health messaging about 'unrealistic' bodies (Fardouly and Vartanian 2016). Literature on youth health media consumption largely focuses on the problem of exposure to and regulation of advertisements in online environments that endorse alcohol, tobacco and energy dense food products (Dunlop, Freeman & Jones, 2016). A study of Australian high school students' health media knowledge suggested that students had limited awareness of how research produces health advice with only vague references to 'evidence' or 'experiments' in their responses (Crusak et al. 2017). Instead, the young people emphasised the perceived authority and connection of the person delivering the health information; traits that also mimic 'successful' influencers, as we will discuss in

the next section. Yet, school-based resources are often antagonistic to social media (Goodyear and Armour 2021), even though research stresses that 'authentic' and 'real world' pedagogy sustains student engagement (O'Connor, Jeanes, and Alfrey 2016), echoing Dewey's (1938, 89) position that "actual life-experience" underpins education.

Far from being removed from 'real world' pedagogy, other scholars demonstrate how social media offer productive, albeit complex, opportunities for public health pedagogy (Camacho-Miñano, MacIsaac and Rich 2019) and school-based health education (Goodyear and Armour 2021), positioning social media learning to occur through participatory cultures (Jenkins et al. 2009) or frameworks of public pedagogy (Burdick and Sandlin 2013; Rich and Miah 2014), where learning is experiential, influenced by culture, and distinct from formal education. Other studies of learning through social media also emphasise participatory digital cultures and practices, where learning occurs through 'doing things', playing, and communicating in online communities (Ito et al. 2018), such as YouTube (Tan 2013) or Snapchat (Kelly 2018). Described by Ito and colleagues (2018, 39) as 'online affinity networks', these communities are "sustained through interpersonal relationships, shared activities, and a sense of cultural affinity" (40).

We can interpret informal learning through digital technologies and social media using different theories including constructivist and experiential learning, however, informal digital learning may exceed these approaches. As Sefton-Green (2004) argues, digital technology experiences are rather "learning cultures" where young people "adopt teaching and learning roles in play" (22) or are motivated to learn through "wonder, surprise, feelings, peer and personal responses, fun and pleasure" (2). Greenhow and Lewin (2016, 7) propose that social media enable "learning with varying attributes of formality and informality" and distinguish but do not separate between structured or

directed (formal) learning and unstructured or non-directed (informal) learning, where

social media learning is peer-influenced or enacted through play or creation, and

informal learning is incidental learning within a group of interest (e.g., watching

television).

Influencers, authenticity, and authentic health education

Although definitions of 'celebrity,' 'microcelebrity' and 'influencer' are increasingly

blurred and culturally diverse, traditional celebrities are characterised by distance from

audiences and being known for their skills or global reach, whereas fame for

'microcelebrities' (Senft 2008), such as influencers, "is co-constructed through a

community of interested viewers on the internet" and relies on how they connect with

audiences as "real" people (Abidin 2018, 11; Senft 2008). Influencers' digital practices

are shaped by participatory cultures and interaction with their followers, where the logic

of participation follows microcelebrity, rather than peer, communication practices. How

learning happens not only depends on how followers or participants interact, but also

social media infrastructures, algorithms, affordances and vernacular, and broader social

and cultural contexts.

Platforms shape an influencer's visibility through algorithmic processes and user

engagement, which in turn digitally mediates and reshapes health knowledge.

Influencers work strategically with these algorithmic processes, different platform

affordances and vernaculars, and cultural trends to boost views and clicks, and thus

become successful within "attention economies" where value is based on being seen

(Abidin 2018, Marwick 2015). Influencers gain attention by providing a "textual and

visual narration of their personal, everyday [life], upon which paid advertorials–

advertisements written in the form of editorial opinions–for products and services are

premised" (Abidin 2016, 86). For example, teachers have adopted "edu-influencer"

microcelebrity practices to support and motivate other teachers online and promote products or their profiles (Hartung et al. 2020; Shelton, Schroeder, and Curcio 2020).

An influencer's success in gaining and keeping audience attention also relies on their engendering authenticity, or a perception of authenticity. Cultivating a perception of authenticity and establishing parasocial relationships (Horton and Wohl 1956) is critical to influencers gaining and keeping audience attention. Whether or not an influencer *is* authentic is not the point; authenticity is not an essential characteristic but "more of a performative ecology and parasocial strategy with its own bona fide genre and self-presentation elements" (Abidin 2018, 91). Different strategies produce authenticity in different ways and followers judge how sincere these mediated performances are (Tolson 2010). Digital content that champions amateur, rather than well-crafted or professional media production is one strategy for conveying authenticity to viewers, regardless of whether the content was professionally produced. Abidin (2017, 1) identifies this as 'calibrated amateurism' which is both "a practice and aesthetic in which actors in an attention economy labor specifically over crafting contrived authenticity that portrays the raw aesthetic of an amateur". This performative and calibrated amateurism gives followers the sense of a spontaneous and unfiltered life "despite the contrary reality" (7). For example, King-O'Riain (2020, 16) identifies how K-pop fans compile "corroborated authenticity" to evaluate whether their idols' performances, traits and actions are consistent across multiple platforms and apps, and subsequently authentic. This "mediated emotional authenticity" requires "the skill to be "on" at all times," while not showing "less attractive sides of themselves" (13, 16).

Cultivating authenticity is especially valued among 'fitspo' influencers (Reade 2020). As Reade (2020, 2) describes, attempts to be 'real', 'relatable', and 'raw' among these influencers provide "a counter narrative, pushing back against picture-perfect

fitspo imagery shown on a myriad of flawless Instagram accounts." Such raw digital intimacies produce perceptions of belonging for followers and influencers (often a blurred distinction) and promote commercial endeavours. Reade identifies how fitspo influencers and followers engage in "storying the everyday" (11) to consistently share both mundane and vulnerable life moments. Instagram Stories make this ephemerality possible; most Story posts typically disappear after 24 hours unless users save them automatically to their Highlights on their profile or manually as a post (Leaver et al. 2020). Practices like these cultivate authenticity by sharing vulnerability and consistent, everyday content that sustains potential or actual interaction.

Yet sharing one's vulnerability requires significant labour, especially for women. Duffy and Hund (2019, 4996) describe how influencers may encounter a gendered "authenticity bind" that requires balancing criticisms of being "too real" and conversely, not being "real enough". These accusations align to normative ideas about gender, with feminine and marginalised bodies more likely to encounter public scrutiny. As Reade (2020) argues women act within normative emotional boundaries that "modulate practices of 'real talk' such that Instagram users are emotional but not 'too' emotional." We might also consider how 'raw' fitspo practices, or 'real talk' not only promote products but also educate followers in particular health knowledges and practices (e.g., talking about mental health as "real talk" or going for a morning walk to lose weight). Similarly, Heizmann and Liu (2020, 2-3) suggest that 'successful' Instagram woman entrepreneurs portray an "idealised femininity that is discursively instantiated through the assertion of white, elite-class, heteronormative and able-bodied power." This points to how influencers and their performances of authenticity are highly gendered as well as shaped by their local and global contexts, and their race, ethnicities, sexualities, and (dis)abilities.

Women influencers, especially white women in the Global North context, are often the subject of popular and academic analyses because of, but not limited to, the feminised history of influencer cultures emerging from hobby and fashion blogging and the dominance of hyper-feminine (and hyper-surveilled) Instagram influencers (Abidin 2018). Not all influencers are women, however, gendered expectations remain central to informing how an individual is perceived as a successful influencer. For example, Chen and Kanai (2021) demonstrate that gay male influencers navigate expectations of femininity within beauty communities while at the same time re-produce privileged positions for gay men in postfeminist cultures.

Discussing authenticity in health communication and education, Petraglia (2009) identifies that the value of authenticity for learning is not whether health information is objectively true, but rather how learners perceive health information as authentic. People judge authenticity in a particular context; it is not an inherent quality of health information, a social media profile, or even a specific qualified health expert. But how does authenticity mediate educational outcomes? For Petraglia, narrative forms and stories "provide rich contextualisation" to persuade and convey authenticity, but "there is [also] a dialogic dimension to persuasion that aids in the process of authentication" (176). This moves away from rule-based behaviour change models to approaches that engage with the cultural, social, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of culture. Here, persuasion is a rhetorical and dialogical factor for authenticity that "emerges in the interaction of the rhetor and [their] audience… It is not controlled or predetermined… but it is co-constructed and constantly evolving" (179). Persuasion is mediated through rich narrative, not simple awareness approaches, *as well as* participatory dialogue and interaction. There are likely parallels here between these practices of persuasion and authenticity and influencers' work. Interaction is as important as (or more than) an

influencer's message, as audiences have an opportunity to hear and share 'authentic' experiences (e.g., invited to share their similar experiences in post comments).

Our discussion has highlighted how influencers perform an educative role by cultivating authenticity with followers, and yet influencer learning practices are too often narrowly read as branding or advertising practices. Subsequently, this paper contributes to closer analyses of the pedagogical potential of social media platforms and, specifically, how influencers' media practices represent a form of 'influencer pedagogy'. Our focus, and our ethical position for this project, is not to assess whether influencer pedagogy is 'good' or 'appropriate' but to understand how influencers, namely Bines, cultivate authenticity and expertise on social media and how this produces pedagogical potential.

Method

Our case study is from a broader project examining Australian social media influencers and entrepreneurs. All authors followed Bines' official social media accounts for three years to collectively develop a sense of the research field. Our digital ethnography project (Pink et al. 2016) uses a digital application of Altheide's (1996) "ethnographic content analysis" to collectively and iteratively contextualise and analyse our data, and to manage data 'overabundance' (Góralska 2020). Data collection and analysis were co-occurring, and analysis was supplemented by the conceptual frameworks about social media authenticity and influencer practices discussed earlier. We considered not only Bines' images and posts but also how Bines differentiates her practices between and within platforms. In the broader project, we undertook two data collection methods: manual, downloaded archives (newspapers and blogs) and social media content (image, text, and audio data); and within-platform collection of social media content (e.g., saved within Instagram as a 'saved post'). Saving data within platforms enabled us to write

iterative fieldnotes through digital participant observation of Bines' profiles and regularly review our findings in context.

Data for this case study was collected between July and December 2020 (including content uploaded prior to July), from Instagram (posts, Stories and Reels from @ashybines, @baseline, @balancebyashybines, @ashybinestc), TikTok (@ashybines), Facebook (Ashy Bines page), YouTube (user/ashybines), Bines' websites (ashybines.com, baselinebyashybines.com), and podcast ('Ashy Bines Raw and Real' and 'Lessons Podcast'). Themes were organised by individual and collective ethnographic fieldwork notes and hosted in shared digital documents. Ethics approval was granted by RMIT University. To manage the ethical implications of digital 'lurking' (see Góralska 2020), we only included content from other accounts that Bines reshared (e.g., Instagram posts from her influencer friends) but did not include private, group or children's (e.g., her son's) accounts or content from friends who were not influencers and/or entrepreneurs.

Results: Tensions of authenticity underlying Bines' 'influencer pedagogy'

The following section examines how Bines positions herself as authentic through three interrelated tensions of authenticity that produce Bines' mediated influencer pedagogy. The first tension concerns how she values consistency, but also strives for reinvention and transformation. The second tension concerns how Bines maintains an unpolished 'rawness' and relatability to her followers, but also produces an aesthetically pleasing and aspirational performance. The third tension concerns how Bines uses her personal experiences to give weight to her health knowledge, while simultaneously downplaying her authority and deferring to institutional expertise. We argue that the inherent contradictions in these tensions, far from undermining Bines' authenticity and pedagogical potential, produce her position as a popular and authentic health expert

among her followers.

Tension one: Be consistent but also embrace transformation

We're not meant to stay the same. Change is good.
- Instagram post, 12 November 2020

Bines' media practices discursively emphasise that being content with who you are *right now* is important. Various Instagram posts advocate for slowing down, self-acceptance, and letting go of expectations, including "Sometimes you just have to rest. The world can wait" (9 September 2020) and "Be enough for yourself first. The rest of the world can wait" (20 December 2019). Staying true to oneself and accepting things as they are mirror Bines' ideas about consistency and living your values. In a podcast episode, Bines reflects on what this means to her:

I was actually listening to a podcast this morning on the way up to a Baseline meeting, and it was all about consistency and it really is such a key word to achieve any result, like if you do things a couple of times, like if you eat healthy a couple of times and then expect to be healthy, or if you post on Instagram a couple of times and then you think it's not working, like it is about being consistent in all areas, isn't it?
- Ashy Bines Raw and Real podcast, 2 August 2020

The importance of consistency, slowing down, and focusing on the present are regular themes in Bines' health messaging, yet being authentic is equally framed as aspiring for personal growth. The expanding array of interests that Bines raises demonstrates her desire for reinvention and transformation; a mindset she also encourages in her followers. As reflected in the introductory quote, Bines' message is to embrace change, to keep trying new things and moving forward. This tension—between valuing things as they are yet also always 'growing'—speaks to Gill and Orgad's (2018) "bounce-backable woman" within popular culture. Typically targeting middle-class women, this

neoliberal rhetoric presents subjects as "an unlimitedly replenishable resource" (6) who are always learning and bettering themselves, while hiding the labour and resources required to achieve these aspirations. However, Bines *does* strategically reveal this labour as part of her performance of authenticity, carefully balancing the vulnerable *and* aspirational.

Likewise, Bines' visual aesthetic has slowly changed over time, in line with industry fashion and social media colour palette trends, but this transformation *reinforces* being 'on brand' rather than challenges her consistency. For example, 2012 images show Bines' 'sports model' aesthetic when she was promoting her fitness-focused Ashy Bines Clean Eating Guide—posing with dark eye makeup and shimmering, deep bronze 'unnatural' spray tans (e.g., McTavish 2015)—whereas in more recent Instagram images, Bines' displays more current visual tropes of health influencers: 'in-the-moment' fit and happy, typically dressed in a bikini or activewear from her own clothing line. These shots are interspersed with playful images with her family or friends at the beach, affirmations in her brand's pink palette on white backgrounds, photos with branded products, or stills from videos sharing her exercise routines. Her profile remains 'on brand'—always leading and following health trends—over her years of posting; much of this content is available within platform archives, consistently following the ever-changing visual aesthetics of digital fitspo culture (Reade 2020).

Moving between consistency and change enables Bines to be perceived to authentically engage with social and commercial trends; Bines remains the 'same old Ashy' even as her entrepreneurial initiatives change in response to market and industry trends. Changes in health and fitness cultures on social media in Australia and elsewhere have allowed Bines to move from focusing on physical fitness to wellness

and personal growth (Reade 2020; Toll and Norman 2021). Even through her frequent rebranding activities, Bines does not necessarily change what products are on offer, but how they are marketed, thus both being consistent *and* transformational. For example, her fitness app with workout and diet plans have included the *Booty Challenge* (focused on body transformation), *Squad* (focused on building community with other women), and now *Balance* (a more holistic reframing), although the exercises remain similar to her original PDF fitness guides.

By staying the same, yet always changing, Bines performs authenticity, relatability, and credibility to her followers. Yet her practices reflect broader cultural and market trends that champion 'personal growth' narratives thus conveying expertise by keeping up-to-date with rapid industry changes (something other health educators may struggle to do); she can model trends, offer something new, *and* remain 'true to herself'. The seeming impossibility of constantly changing while remaining the same, far from misleading or confusing followers, strengthens and broadens Bines' appeal among followers with diverse beliefs and situations. Followers can choose what is comforting or inspiring ("Yes! I need to slow down and be content with myself!" or "Yes! It's about time I got out of my comfort zone and embraced change") while ignoring the messages that do not serve their own lives.

Tension two: Be raw and relatable but still aspirational

> *Maybe life isn't about being happy all the time, maybe it's about being real*
> - Mark Groves quote, shared in Ashy Bines' Instagram Stories, 3 September 2020

> *We want to see things that are like, still raw and real, but, like, aesthetically pleasing as well. Or you know what I hate is when, like, someone is on Stories and it's, like, blurry, like they haven't wiped their camera or cleaned their camera... I*

prefer when it's like beautiful, natural lighting, you can see their face properly, it's nice and clear, it's just more enjoyable to consume the content.

- Ashy Bines Raw and Real podcast, 2 August 2020

Bines establishes and maintains intimate and emotional connections with her followers through interconnected digital practices. Like other influencers (e.g., King-O'Riain 2020; Reade 2020), this digital intimacy is essential to her work and performing authenticity, where her personal confessions intertwine with health advice and product promotion. This is strategic; it is not only about *what* content she shares, but *where* and *how* she produces, curates, and circulates posts, images, and videos.

Bines uses Instagram in different ways to share diverse images and videos. Her Instagram Stories are more often personal and candid—"raw" to use the fitspo vernacular highlighted by Reade (2020)—than her Instagram posts. In one Instagram Story, for example, she records herself directly facing the smartphone camera while wrapped in blankets in bed, tearfully confiding with her followers that she is exhausted. Such recordings are common in her Instagram Stories and Snapchat Snaps, where her confessions of her own perceived failings intertwine with content to inspire her followers and promote products. Bines' 'real' and ephemeral Instagram Stories are often recorded while lounging around and make-up free, sitting in contrast to the more stylised and made-up photoshoots that feature in her static Instagram posts. Ultimately, Bines' balance of 'real' Stories and polished posts allow her to perform authenticity and engage followers. This balancing act is reflected in other studies of Instagram users (Leaver et al. 2020), who carefully curate infrequent but polished posts on their main feed, saving the more frequent, less polished, and in-the-moment images and videos for their Stories.

The ephemerality of Instagram Stories, following Snapchat Snaps, produces a type of intimate conversation between influencers and their followers, one that

followers are more likely to pay attention to before they disappear (Leaver et al. 2020).

Through Bines' Stories, followers can access a direct, albeit mediated, sense of what

Bines is doing, two minutes ago, four hours ago, last night, etc. Due to the platform's

limits on length, Bines' Stories are often posted in several parts, often totalling more

than 50 parts over a 24-hour period. While some Stories may not be shared immediately

(but uploaded later), regular 'fresh' content across different platforms gives her

followers a cross-platform, intimate perception of seeing the 'whole Ashy,' cultivating

"mediated emotional authenticity" across platforms (King-O'Riain 2020, 16).

Bines' more unpolished or mundane thoughts and experiences are also shared on

YouTube vlogs or ephemeral Snapchats or Instagram Stories that favour amateur

aesthetics and afford performances of "calibrated amateurism" (Abidin 2017).

Arguably, amateur visual media practices, such as point-of-view videography, vlogging

(even those filmed by a skilled team member), or post captions with typographical

errors, establish her as sharing her authentic life (Abidin 2017). Indeed, amateur, or

'raw' media content and practices may be preferred by her fans. When Bines has got it

'wrong' and presents as too polished, scripted, or inauthentic, her fans notice and

criticise her authenticity. For example, initial iTunes reviews for her 2019 'Ashy Bines

Raw and Real' podcast were ambivalent as some listeners were thrown off by how

scripted and rehearsed Bines sounded.

The mundane settings within which Bines records her 'in-the-moment' daily

Instagram Stories, Snapchat Snaps and (later edited) YouTube vlogs play a significant

role in reinforcing intimacy and parasociality with followers. Followers, in a sense, are

invited into Bines' home and 'everyday' life like a friend visiting for a chat. Although

lacking Instagram's immediacy and visual imagery and requiring more production and

editing, Bines' podcast affords an intimate experience for followers, who can listen to

the podcast in their headphones 'on the go' and be digitally present with her as they engage in their everyday lives. At the same time, Bines' candid Stories also feature her well-resourced Gold Coast lifestyle: her spacious house with a pool, dinners out with friends, travelling overseas to boutique locations, and endless new clothes and expensive skincare products. Bines' aspirational lifestyle features as the background to her posts about more relatable struggles, for example, with anxiety or parenting. This enables, rather than contradicts, Bines' authenticity: Bines is both "just like you" and "just who you want to be." Bines produces a sense of authenticity among her followers; if she instead only showed herself at her 'best', she would arguably appear too 'perfect' and lack sharing 'raw' and 'real' dimensions of herself (Reade 2020). For health influencers like Bines, wellness culture vernacular requires her to balance vulnerability with success. This reflects Schreiber's (2017, 144) contention that "[w]hat is perceived as beautiful, interesting, and worth photographing, showing, and sharing is socially and habitually constituted." Rather than only showing followers what they should aim for, capitalising on the Instagram platform's Stories feature, Bines offers fleeting everyday moments of authentic humour and weakness. This models similar confessional practices to other influencers who use "Instagram's ephemeral Stories feature… to project mundane realness without disrupting the digital self-branded personae they had so carefully created on their static feeds" (Duffy and Hund 2019, 4992).

Tension three: Personal experience is your guide but always defer to institutional expertise

> *The 5 best doctors: Sunshine, exercise, water, rest, air*
> - Instagram post, 19 February 2020

Whenever recommending a product or practice, Bines stresses that what she shares is simply 'my experience', such as her opinions about early morning movement or a

favourite skin serum: 'I tried this, it could help you too; I'm not an expert, this is just my experience.' Centring her personal experience also encourages her followers, friends, and other influencers to share their opinions and experiences with different health practices and products. She shares her 'authentic' lifestyle choices without positioning herself as a formal expert, explaining that her recommendations are based on what 'feels right' for her body rather than evidence-based facts. In one Story, Bines films herself in her bathroom mirror, wearing activewear from her Baseline clothing line and confesses:

> *If I'm being completely honest with you guys, I definitely have not been eating my best the last week. I'm not eating unhealthy, it's all healthy like wholefoods, but I'm not sitting down for like proper meals and cooking a lot of vegetables and making my wraps and salads, and just proper meals, it's just so much snacking, like yoghurt, and nuts. Still healthy food, but too much of that type of food and not enough of the right food. I know some people wouldn't believe me but I feel best on a higher protein diet and just like a more paleo way of eating, but having solid meals and my snacks and just like, I feel like I know my body so well but I've just been a bit, I don't know, out of balance and I feel it like my cycle, I feel so bloated right now [shows stomach, laughing], I mean I can suck it in, 'heyyy', but if I relax, she [her stomach] just wants to chill down there, and I look like I'm in my early stages of pregnancy, which I'm not, I wish [laughs], no.*
> - Instagram Story, 2 Sep 2020

Bines' verbal confession is accompanied by text at the bottom of the screen that reads: "Back to @balanceashybines meals and consistency!!", with a link to her new fitness app. Sharing personal experiences produces a complicated relationship to learning and expertise that performs authenticity and relies on social media affordances. Making her inner dialogue public on social media aligns to Petraglia's (2009) argument that successful health education requires narrative *and* dialogue. Bines extends these parasocial dialogic practices (e.g., talking in her Stories as if she was with a friend) and

encourages interaction afforded by different platforms (e.g., sharing discount codes, linking to 'swipe up' to purchase a product, inviting feedback and post comments).

Similarly, bringing her friends into her business world enables Bines to talk about her (and their) businesses and products through the rhetoric of passion, relationships, and female support. Talking about new commercial endeavours and partnerships is normalised as they are all, ultimately, friends. She shifts between different forms of expertise through her blurry personal-professional relationships, exemplified in this quote from her podcast:

> *It's like in life, relationships, isn't it? Relationships, communication, and*
> *connection. We're all dying for more authenticity.*
> - Ashy Bines Raw and Real podcast, 2 August 2020

At times, her business relationships are obscured; it is often unclear which category people on her social media fall into, but regardless she always expresses strong attachments. Bines regularly refers to her employees as 'the best' and 'like family' to her. Her friends, Gretty (@grettyrose) and Sammy (@sammyleo), were originally personal training clients then promoted her products and are now influencers themselves. Bines' ex-personal assistant, Nat, now a freelance creative, 'remains friends' with Bines and was interviewed about her personal experience of miscarriage for Bines' podcast. By modelling dialogue with her friends (Petraglia 2009) and embracing these blurry personal-professional relationships to promote health knowledge and products, Bines performs an 'authentic' conversation between friends that is, equally, a marketing *and* pedagogical practice.

Ashy Bines Official content centres Bines' personal life and side-lines the company and team's labour. However, Bines also engages with expertise that relies on formal or traditional forms of expertise, where she calls upon her colleagues as

educational resources and 'experts' because of their qualifications. In a YouTube vlog from 11 April 2019, Bines cooks a lunch recipe (turkey mince, cheese and vegetables wrapped in lettuce leaves) and introduces business partner and naturopath, Levi Walz, to explain keto diets:

> Bines: [I should] properly introduce you guys because we've been in business together for close to ten years?
> Walz: Yeah. Nine with you and 15 with [Bines' husband] Steve, 16?
> Bines: Yeah, that's a long time. And I just wanted to introduce him properly and have a little chat because I think a lot of people forget that Ashy Bines is me as a person for sure, but it is also a brand. And behind a brand there's [sic] incredible team members that make everything roll and work. And you know, there's a lot of whispers out there in the fitness industry that Ashy Bines is not qualified, and Ashy Bines is doing this and that. And for sure, I'm not qualified in a lot of things, like being a nutritionist or being a naturopath but I have a pretty amazing team member here who is.

In the same video, Bines shares that she is regularly criticised for not being a qualified personal trainer, reflecting:

> …it blows my mind that this story was made up and it has just continued on and on and on [...] I just thought I'd clear up on here because it's absolutely not true… pretty sure it [the course] was a 12-week course, obviously I did it a long time ago now, that's where I got my Certificate III and IV in Fitness.

After praising Evans and Walz for influencing her health knowledge, Bines laughs saying the "whole qualifications thing is crazy to the point where I thought I'd show you my certificates." She shows her certificates and transcripts on her couch (they are absent on her website). It is clear that she recognises that these qualifications give weight to her health expertise, yet at other times Bines also frames her health education work as a critique of formal or school-based health education and public health messaging. For example, in an Instagram Story, Bines shares a meme originally posted

by @letstalk.mentalhealth distinguishing between two pie charts titled "What I learned in School" ("How to multiply 8 x 7" and "What 'H20 stands for") and "What I wish I learned in School" (including the "Importance of Mental Health" or "Sleep," "Self-Care," and "Reframing Negative Thoughts"). This critique of formal education further strengthens her authenticity among followers as somebody who understands what 'really matters' in life compared with the purportedly immaterial priorities of the formal curriculum.

Bines' media practices make different claims to expertise – both personal experience *and* formal qualifications – that produce perceptions of authenticity and credibility. Yet this mediated authenticity is a paradox. Her authenticity simultaneously creates her expertise as a lay authority while enabling her to avoid the pitfalls of 'institutionalised' or 'clinical' expertise that lacks personal resonance. Her authority comes with minimal responsibility and accountability as her social media practices perform multiple and at times contradictory health claims that sit seemingly comfortably alongside each other. Bines' rare acknowledgement of her (limited) qualifications highlights how credentialisation is less significant in relation to her influencer pedagogy and can even work against personal experience, which is a stronger truth for legitimacy, and ultimately pedagogical impact.

Conclusions

> *Unfollow anyone on social media and in real life who doesn't make you feel empowered, informed, or inspired*
> - Instagram post, 10 August 2020

Our intention in this paper has been two-fold. First, we have sought to make a case for recognising an 'influencer pedagogy' and taking seriously the educational work of social media influencers. Influencer pedagogy is distinct from how qualified teachers or

even 'edu-influencers' may operate online. Rather, influencer pedagogy implicitly embraces tensions between *being* and *not being* an educator. It is these tensions that we have also sought to examine in this paper and that establish influencers as 'authentic' to their followers. Drawing on health influencer Bines as a case study, we have identified three interrelated tensions in her performance of authenticity that build her pedagogical potential. Media studies and marketing scholars alike stress that authenticity underpins the value of influencers to affect consumers' interest, engagement and, ultimately, their buying decisions (Jun and Yi 2020). We extend this to argue that authenticity underpins the potential educational role of health influencers and is a key element of an influencer pedagogy.

Influencer pedagogies highlight practices of authenticity that rely on relatable narratives and parasocial relationships between influencers and their followers. This theory extends upon Petraglia's (2009) work on persuasion and authenticity in health communication into a social media context. However, influencer pedagogies may not necessarily rely on mediated authenticity but rather other mediated practices that are likely to vary for different influencers, audiences, and their local contexts. While women and feminine (or feminised) influencers may be more likely to enact influencer pedagogies given their prominence in influencer cultures, we suggest that other influencers will perform authenticity in different ways according to their personal context and identity, reinforcing their pedagogical capacity within their specific follower communities. Another possibility within our ongoing research is the role of mediated networks to produce relational expertise and influencer pedagogy. We can see this in Bines' videos talking about hormones or nutrients with Walz, or the invitations, often reciprocated, for other influencers to speak on her podcast, thereby validating her

circle of expertise. The next step in our work is to explore how fans, followers, and audiences understand and experience influencers as trustworthy and relatable educators.

Further work is needed to examine the blurred politics of knowledge playing out for the many people who engage with health practices on digital platforms. We see potential in a media studies-informed, socio-critical framework for health education, within and beyond schools, and closer engagement with the relational practices of 'authentic' influencer pedagogy. Research that brings together formal health education alongside the complexity of social media cultures is needed. This is not to suggest that health educators should 'compete' with this mode of mediated expertise, but rather that ignoring or criticising practices of influencer pedagogy is misguided. Without closer attention to how influencers offer potential opportunities for education, we suspect it is more likely that health influencers, like Bines, will be positioned as 'dubious' sources of health information despite their complicated influence and relatability.

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