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Are we all influencers now? Feminist activists discuss the distinction between being an activist and an influencer

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Abstract

Drawing on thirty qualitative in-depth interviews with a diverse group of feminist activists who are mainly active online, this article analyses how research participants construct and portray 'activists' and 'influencers'. One theme that emerged from the data is the commercial orientation of influencers, the monetisation of their activities online and how this differs from activist pursuits. Activism, by contrast, was constructed as focused on making social change, and not driven by commercial interests. This article argues that the research participants' discussion of the differences between 'influencer' and 'activist', and the attribution of monetisation to influencers, underplays the ways in which market logics help to structure contemporary forms of activism that take place in the digital economy. Second, the article places the investment in forms of activism that are uncompromised by commercial pursuits in the wider context of feminised and exclusionary cultures of perfection. Lastly, the article reflects on common constructions of influencing as a feminised as well as trivial pursuit and cautions against accounts that uncritically present influencing as trivial in contrast to activism, which is considered more serious.

Keywords

Activist, digital media, femininity, feminism, influencer, the perfect

As Brooke Duffy, Kate Miltner and Amanda Wahlstedt have observed, '[c]ritical attention to influencers – and the wider realm of social media celebrity – has abounded in

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recent years' (2022: 1661). In his critical analysis of the influencer economy *Get Rich or Lie Trying*, the journalist Symeon Brown (2022: 225) concludes that '[w]e are all influencers now'. Exploring several strands of the influencer economy, ranging from IRL streaming to political activism, Brown claims that contemporary forms of political activism are increasingly shaped by a concern with monetisation and visibility. In relation to activists on social media, Brown argues that 'the leading activists are set up more like private enterprises, with their own huge fan base of followers who buy into their brands' (2022: 196). Likewise, researchers have observed a 'growing convergence between politics and micro-celebrity/influencer culture' (Dean, in press: 26). Terms such as 'feminist influencers' (Novoselova and Jenson, 2019; Navarro and Villegas-Simón, 2022), 'activist influencers' (Semenzin, 2022), and analyses of how influencers engage in social justice ecologies (e.g. Abidin and Cover, 2019) attest to a growing interest in how contemporary protest cultures, including feminist activism, are shaped by the neoliberal digital economy. When I embarked on my research on digital feminist activism, I was equally intrigued by varying definitions and understandings of 'activists' and 'influencers', and I began to question the extent to which distinctions between 'activist' and 'influencer' hold up in the context of digital activism.

Based on in-depth interviews with a diverse group of feminist activists who were mainly, though not exclusively, politically active online, this article critically analyses how the research participants constructed 'activist' and 'influencer'. As I will show, many research participants drew a clear distinction between 'activist' and 'influencer', attributing a focus on making structural, political change to activists, whilst associating influencers with monetisation, which, for the purposes of this article, is defined loosely as referring to various ways of making an income from activism. By exploring how the research participants distinguish between 'activist' and 'influencer', and critically analysing this distinction from a feminist cultural studies perspective (e.g. Rottenberg, 2018; Kanai, 2020; Kanai and Gill, 2021; McRobbie, 2020; Kanai, 2021; Mendes, 2021), I argue that this is not an 'innocent' distinction but rather, at least in the context of this study, one that has political consequences. Specifically, the research participants' discussion of the differences between 'influencer' and 'activist', and the attribution of monetisation and commercial pursuit to influencers, underplays the ways in which market logics structure contemporary forms of activism that take place in the neoliberal digital economy. Second, I place the research participants' investments in forms of activism that are uncompromised by commercial pursuits in the wider context of digital feminist knowledge cultures (Kanai, 2021) and feminised cultures of perfection (McRobbie, 2020). Crucially, 'the perfect' is divisive as well as exclusionary (Kanai, 2020; McRobbie, 2020) and we therefore have to inquire about the political consequences of embracing an ideal of 'perfect' activism that is unaffected by capitalist dynamics. Lastly, I note the portrayal of influencing as a feminised and trivial pursuit on the one hand, and activism as more serious on the other. To what extent does this construction of influencing contribute to devaluing pursuits considered feminine or linked to femininity? In sum, I argue that we need to be cognisant of the implicit assumptions underpinning dichotomous constructions of 'activists' and 'influencers', especially if they contribute to upholding exclusionary ideals of 'the perfect' on the one hand, and a devaluation of the 'feminine' on the other.

In foregrounding the discursive and thus political effects of common constructions of 'influencers' and 'activists', I do not seek to argue that the distinction between 'activists' and 'influencers' no longer holds. Clearly, the terms have different provenances and histories. According to Crystal Abidin's (2015) frequently cited definition, influencers are 'everyday, ordinary Internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles, engage with their following in digital and physical spaces and monetize their following by integrating "advertorials" into their blog or social media posts, and making physical appearances at events'. The term 'influencer' is related to the digital economy, while activists clearly predate the internet, to name just one difference. Arguably, different forms of activism as well as definitions of activists abound. Levine and Nierras (2007: 1) define 'an "activist" as someone who tries to advance a substantive political or social goal or outcome', though the term activist has been variously defined by social movement theorists (e.g. Oliver and Marwell, 1992). Equally important, movement participants themselves understand 'activist' in different ways (Cortese, 2015) and more recent scholarship has coined terms such as 'digital activism' (e.g. Gerbaudo, 2017) or 'digital activist practices' (von Bülow et al., 2019) to capture the usage of digital media for political purposes. Rather than put forward definitions of 'activists' and 'influencers' to 'test' the extent to which the feminist activists I interviewed adhered to a particular definition, I was interested in how these two personas were constructed in my interviewees' talk. In devising this study, I therefore did not draw on a particular definition of activism, but instead approached feminists who self-identified as activists and who were mainly active online. As such, my critical analysis of the political effects of commonly made distinctions between 'activists' and 'influencers' is not a call to do away with such distinctions. Rather, in presenting my analysis, my aim is to highlight some of the perhaps less visible, but discursive and arguably politically consequential, effects of common portrayals of 'influencers' and 'activists'.

More generally, the article adds to recent scholarly debates on 'influencer creep' (Bishop, 2022) by exploring the extent to which influencing culture creeps into various practices and forms of work, including political activism. My analysis also adds to the growing scholarly and public interest in the entanglements between contemporary forms of political activism and influencer culture (Novoselova and Jenson, 2019; Brown, 2022; Navarro and Villegas-Simón, 2022; Semenzin, 2022; Dean, in press), which in turn sheds light on the interplay between digital feminist activism and neoliberalism (Baer, 2021; Scharff, 2023a). My approach to neoliberalism is Foucauldian and informed by analyses which have demonstrated that neoliberalism entails the expansion of market principles to all areas of life. As Wendy Brown reminds us, neoliberalism 'has economised everything and everyone, it's rendered everything as a market and it's rendered everything we do as market action' (Cruz and Brown, 2016: 72). This Foucauldian approach to neoliberalism helps us trace the ways in which market principles permeate digital culture.

In order to present this argument, this article proceeds in the following manner. After a brief overview of the study's research methodology, I discuss how the research participants constructed influencers and activists in the interviews. Influencers were associated

with monetisation, commercial pursuits and practices of self-branding, whilst activists were portrayed as intrinsically motivated to make structural change. I argue that this distinction brushes over the complex interplay between activism and market principles in the digital economy. As Kaitlynn Mendes has demonstrated, feminist activists 'have harnessed digital technologies to creatively generate income or earn a living from their activism' (2022: 693). Activism that takes place in the digital economy is not easily separable from economic pursuits. The second empirical section locates understandings of activism as motivated solely by political aims in more long-standing constructions of activism (Bobel, 2007), but also in digital knowledge cultures (Kanai, 2021) as well as feminised and exclusionary cultures of perfection (Dean, 2022; Kanai, 2020; McRobbie, 2020). The final, empirical section observes that influencing is frequently associated with women and trivialised. Research participants distanced themselves from influencing because they wanted their activist work to be taken seriously. It is important to underscore that my analysis does not seek to critique individual activists' stances in any way. What it seeks to highlight, however, is that the portrayal of influencing as a 'feminine' and trivial pursuit is problematic and needs to be interrogated in order to understand the kind of political work that this portrayal performs.

Information about the study

The empirical data analysed in this article stems from thirty qualitative in-depth interviews with feminist activists who were politically active online and based in Germany (fifteen) and the UK (fifteen). As already mentioned, the study recruited research participants who self-defined as activists. 'Activist' and 'activism' were not defined for the purpose of this research; instead, I invited the research participants to share their understanding of activism, and this article critically analyses prevalent constructions of 'activists' and 'influencers'. Interviews were conducted in early 2022 and I used Instagram as a recruitment tool. As such, most of the activists I spoke to were mainly active on Instagram (for scholarly discussion, see: Leaver et al., 2019).

The wider study that this article is based on explores the different forms of labour that are involved in doing digital feminist activism (for a more detailed discussion, see: Scharff, 2023a). Due to the focus on labour in the larger project, I approached feminist activists who were active in the field of care work and, more specifically, mothering/parenting. There are many overlaps between digital and reproductive labour (see: Jarrett, 2016), and I therefore wanted to recruit feminists who, through their activism, had reflected on and/or were living the highs and lows of doing care work. The emphasis on care work was particularly timely during the Covid-19 pandemic, when women did more care work than men (Bailey, 2022), which continues to be devalued (Care Collective, 2020). The focus on what I have termed 'care activists' thus made sense, theoretically, politically but also methodologically. Digital feminist activism is a vast and varied field; by speaking to care activists, I was able to focus on a particular sub-group of feminist activists.

When research participants expressed an interest in taking part in the study, I sent them an information sheet and consent form.[1] The consent form emphasised that participation

in the study was voluntary, that research participants had the right to withdraw up until two weeks after the interview and that participation was anonymous. All research participants consented to taking part in the research. The interviews took place on Zoom and lasted between forty-five minutes and two hours. Interviews were conducted in German or English and subsequently transcribed for data analysis. All statements discussed in this article that were originally in German were translated by the author. To protect the research participants' anonymity, I use pseudonyms and remain vague about the campaigns that individual activists were involved in. I provide information about the research participants' racial and class backgrounds, but not their age, location, sexuality, nationality or other markers of their identities.

The areas of care activism that the research participants were engaged in were: raising awareness about pregnancy and baby loss amongst black women and women of colour; providing financial and legal advice to single mothers/parents; supporting black and ethnically diverse parents in raising neuro-diverse children; educating about feminist parenting and parenting for social change; advocating for recognition of the importance of care work; offering advice on raising bi-racial children as well as living in multicultural families; and using art and other creative outputs to highlight the central but devalued role of care work. As this overview of the activists' areas of engagement illustrates, the activists were politicised, motivated to make change, and to highlight the links between individual experiences and wider sexist, racist and classist power structures. The activists were differently positioned in relation to making a living from their activism. Some made a living from the content they created online and thereby directly monetised activist activities, whilst others used the skills gained through their activism to develop their career and/ or skillset. An example of the latter is a journalist who gained a book contract on the basis of her activism on Instagram. Others did not benefit economically from their activism but many contemplated doing so, which is a point I will come back to when discussing the empirical data.

The research aimed to recruit women and non-binary people, who identified as a feminist and activist; were eighteen or above; and currently based in Germany or the UK. The sample that I arrived at was composed as follows: five research participants were black, three Asian, two bi-racial (Asian and East African, as well as white/black Caribbean respectively) and twenty white. Of those research participants who were white, three – all based in Germany – had 'Migrationshintergrund'[2] and had immigrated to Germany from Central and Eastern Europe in their childhood. Just over half (sixteen) described their class background as middle class, though several research participants emphasised the precarity of this status. Ten research participants described their class background as working class, three as lower middle class and one stated that her background was working class but that she is now middle class. Almost all (twenty-eight) research participants had children (between one and three), and they were evenly divided between metropolitan and rural areas. The youngest was thirty-one and the oldest sixty-two, with most research participants being in their late thirties / early forties. Six research participants identified as LGBTQ+, and all as women. Several research participants identified with other marginalised groups, such as living with a mental health issue.

The 'activist' and the 'influencer': common constructions

In her book *What White People Can Do Next*, Emma Dabiri refers to 'commentators/ "activists"/influencers', stating that 'the definitions are as amorphous as the aims' (2021: 26). Against this backdrop, as well as recent interest in convergences between 'activists' and 'influencers' (Novoselova and Jenson, 2019; Dean, 2022; Navarro and Villlegas-Simón, 2022; Semenzin, 2022), I wanted to find out how my research participants understood the terms 'activists' and 'influencers'. Their answers to my question about understandings of 'activists' and 'influencers' shed light on how 'activists' and 'influencers' were constructed in the interviews, and what these constructions achieve discursively. Perhaps unsurprisingly, and in line with Abidin's (2015) definition shared above, influencers were frequently associated with monetisation. According to Nina (black, working class), being an influencer is about 'building your platform with a view to being an influencer full time and earning money from it'. Likewise, Patricia (black, working class) thought of influencers 'as people who are using social media platforms as a way of making quick money quick' and Olga (white, immigrant background, lower middle class) stated: 'When I now hear influencer, this word, then someone springs to mind, who definitely makes money off it, for whom this is basically work, paid work'.

Echoing these statements, and making explicit the link between being an influencer, monetisation and capitalism, Judy (Asian, middle class) stated:

> I used to think that influencers were people on social media who earned a lot of money […] I used to think that's what an influencer was and then I realised that you can actually influence people's beliefs and values and hopes and desires. That's how I tell myself as an influencer, somebody who helps others make proper life choices. But capitalism doesn't see that as an influencer. Capitalism equates influencer with money, earning money.

Judy was not the only one to associate influencer culture with capitalism. Teresa (white, working class) told me: 'When I think of an influencer, what springs to mind are people who get money for it, who get other people to engage in capitalist nonsense'. In line with drawing links between influencers and capitalism, research participants associated advertising, business and commerce with influencing. Doris (white, working class) told me that influencers are 'usually people who advertise'. Nina described influencers as coming 'straight into it with a business hat on', Susanne (white, lower middle class) characterised them as 'profiting off the following they have', whilst Tina (white, middle class) associated being an influencer with 'money and commercial interests'. Samantha's (black, middle class) statement encapsulates how influencers were predominantly constructed in the interviews:

> The influencing I've come across, it's not necessarily educational. For me, I see it as quite commercial, it is very business-like, it is promotions, and big brands, this kind of work. So for me, it's not necessarily for educational purposes, I haven't seen much that is for educational purposes, it's more just making money, self-branding, promoting other brands, for example.

The construction of influencers as people who seek to monetise their content and engage in commercial and business-like activities such as advertising and self-branding contrasted with the portrayal of activists. According to Vera (white, immigrant background, working class), being an activist 'usually means that one doesn't make any money, that you do it on a voluntary basis'. Activism was portrayed as a practice that does not follow capitalist principles but that emanates from political beliefs and convictions. According to Judy, 'an activist is somebody who has a cause that is a political cause and only speaks or writes about that'. Sara (white, lower middle class) echoed Judy's sentiment by describing activists as people who are 'concerned about issues, about the content, about the messages, also, obviously, including political messages. Where it's also about critiquing the system and so on'. Likewise, Uchenna (black, working class) depicted activism as being 'about raising awareness or fighting a cause' and Silvia (white, middle class) stated that activists were not motivated by any 'thoughts about marketing'. Instead, to use Carola's (white, middle class) words, activists are 'intrinsically motivated and do not seek to earn money with their posts, but instead disseminate a certain message'.

In line with these contrasting depictions, research participants distinguished between influencers and activists, by attributing an interest in making money to influencers, and contrasting influencers' commercial focus with activists' political and change-making agenda. Sara, for example, stated that 'the ones want, somehow, fame, and influence, and earn money. They can do all of that. That's okay. And the others also want social change, they want to make change and build something up, whatever, and they are not about making money'. Anna (white, middle class) echoed this sentiment, arguing that 'there is a massive difference between using Instagram to make something good happen in the world or raise awareness of something bad that's happening in the world, and just literally using it to sell crap to people that they don't need and make money for yourself'. Put slightly differently, Silvia distinguished between influencers and activists using the following terms: 'If it's just about fashion and making money and "I go on holiday here", but it's not about an issue. It's not about a cause. There is no activist impetus. That's not an activist'.

The research participants' distinction between influencers and activists, and the attribution of monetisation and commercial orientation to influencers, struck me as interesting considering the wider findings from this study. As I have shown in detail elsewhere (Scharff, 2023a), the research participants became feminist activists because of deeply held feelings and convictions. At the same time and resonating with wider research on digital feminist activism (Novoselova and Jenson, 2019; Mendes, 2021), the monetisation of feminist activism was not a marginal but rather quite a central phenomenon. Monetisation was frequently discussed by the activists, and widely contemplated, as both an actuality and a potential. To be sure, the activists that I spoke to were differently positioned in relation to the ability to earn a living from their activism. Some were already making an income from their activism, such as Jessalynn (white, middle class), who devised educational materials on feminist parenting, ran coaching sessions as well as courses and, as such, had found a way to turn her interests into an income stream. Others were planning on doing so. Uchenna told me that her activism is based on issues she had

> personally experienced and it's something that I do think awareness needs to be raised about and also, there's certain gaps within this particular subject matter that I want to help bridge. Having said that, the more time that I spend on it, the more I would want to have some renumeration for it. Because it'll be taking the place of how I make my income.

The central role of monetisation in digital feminist activism and the research participants' self-identification as activists and attribution of monetisation to influencers thus raise the question of the rhetorical, ideological and political function of the distinction between 'activists' and 'influencers'. Crucially, my point is not to call out the research participants for making contradictory statements. It is commonly assumed in qualitative research that individuals contradict themselves in their talk (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Indeed, analysis of these contradictions often offers interesting insights. It is in this vein that I highlight the research participants' contradictory stances vis-a-vis influencing, activism and monetisation.

Arguably, and in line with recent analyses of influencer activism (e.g. Dean, 2022; Dean, in press), the distinction between 'activist' and 'influencer' more generally, and the attribution of monetisation to influencers more specifically, becomes easily blurred in the neoliberal digital economy. As Kaitlynn Mendes has argued in her research on 'fempreneurs', defined as 'enterprising individuals or collectives who identity as feminists' (2021: 421), fempreneurial activities are 'increasingly normalised and capitalised upon' (2021: 423). Digital feminists can leverage their activism in various ways to generate income (Novoselova and Jenson, 2019); rather than being a marginal pursuit, practices of monetisation permeate digital feminist activism in various ways (Repo, 2020). In my study, some participants had made money from their digital activism, be it indirectly by acquiring social media skills and/or networks that they could use to establish or further their careers, or more directly, by being paid for the digital content they produced and disseminated. Thus, the research participants' distinction between 'activists' and 'influencers' brushes over the ways in which market principles and, as such, neoliberalism structure digital feminist activism.

As I have demonstrated in detail elsewhere (Scharff, 2023), neoliberalism is at work on various levels when digital feminist activism is monetised: economically, due to intensifying trends towards making money from one's activism (as both actuality or potential); affectively, because activists' emotional investments and passion for making political change become linked to income generation; and on the level of subjectivity, as the digital economy calls upon digital workers, including activists, to engage in practices of self-branding, therefore performatively producing neoliberal subjectivities. Given the various ways in which neoliberalism permeates digital feminist activism, I argue that the distinction between 'activist' and 'influencer' underplays the extent to which this form of activism is structured by neoliberal rationality. This insight matters, empirically and theoretically. On an empirical level, it highlights the interplay between digital feminist activism and neoliberalism, foregrounding that neoliberal rationality is at work on various levels (economic, affective and on the level of subjectivity). Theoretically, my analysis of how neoliberalism structures digital feminist activism highlights that neoliberalism works not only on an economic level but also on an affective one (Kanai

and Gill, 2021). Neoliberalism has a psychic life (Scharff, 2016), and a consideration of the ways in which neoliberalism permeates digital feminist activism – even if this is brushed over by activists – brings to the fore the need to theorise neoliberalism broadly, as not just an economic but also an affective force.

In making this argument, my aim is, again, not to criticise individual activists for being insufficiently radical or for 'selling out'. Instead, I seek to highlight the extent to which neoliberal and market principles structure digital feminist activism. As such, my argument is also different from journalist Symeon Brown's analysis that '[i]nfluencers masquerading as activists have hijacked progressive social movements […]. Their end goal is not social change that benefits others, but a cheque …' (2022: 188). This reading seems to entail an unspoken investment in a 'pure' form of activism, one that is untainted by neoliberal and market principles. It is this stipulation – presuming that activism can exist outside structuring political forces such as neoliberalism – that I seek to contest. As Jonathan Dean has argued in relation to frequently made distinctions between '"proper" – i.e. materialist, solidaristic – left politics, on the one hand, and superficial individualistic influencer activism, on the other', 'in a neoliberal digital capitalist context, this distinction becomes hard to sustain' (in press: 1). Similarly, I argue that the distinction between 'activist' and 'influencer', as drawn by the research participants, takes insufficient account of the ways in which market logics underpin digital feminism activism.

Digital feminist activism and the perfect

Whilst the research participants overwhelmingly portrayed 'activists' and 'influencers' differently, with political aims attributed to the former and profit motives associated with the latter, some called these commonly made distinctions into question. Petra initially described influencers as 'persons... So, for me, it's always very, very associated with money', but then went on to state: 'But, at the same time, the term in a way only means that you influence somebody. So, in that sense, it would mean that I hopefully also influence people with my work. So, it's difficult'. Likewise, Olga first associated being an influencer with somebody who 'definitely makes money off it' (see above) but then said: 'To be honest, I find it difficult to position myself [as an influencer or activist]. Probably, we certainly influence people with our practice and our idea. And we are also, certainly, activist […] So, I have honestly not really thought about it. Probably, we are a bit of both'. Petra and Olga take the meaning of influencer literally and, on this basis, partially identify as such. Carola, too, distinguished between activists and influencers (see above) by describing activists as 'intrinsically motivated', but subsequently clarified that, 'if taking "influencer" literally, I am one, of course'. While these accounts complicate the meaning of 'influencer', they do not necessarily challenge the underlying logic of attributing commercial interests to influencers. Carola, for example, observed that 'there are obviously many, many people who are both, activists and influencers'. However, she subsequently clarified that she understood influencers as referring to those 'who earn money on social media'.

Anna also challenged the original distinction she had made between activists as 'using Instagram to make something good happen' and influencers using it 'to sell crap to

people'. Interestingly, she then said: 'Says me who's sold a photography book on Instagram. I need the money, man. Double standards, I admit, but I try to do a bit of both'. As I have mentioned before, my aim is not to call out research participants for having double standards. Indeed, as I demonstrate in more detail elsewhere (Scharff, 2023a), the research participants were aware of and critically reflected on the ways in which their activism was driven by market principles. Many, for example, discussed the felt need to self-brand on social media in order to gain visibility, but simultaneously shared their unease because they were critical of the capitalist logics underpinning self-branding. My conversations with the research participants showed that they were not 'duped', or suffering from false consciousness; on the contrary, they reflected on a wide range of political issues, including the ways in which practices of doing feminist activism online are informed by capitalist principles.

Why, then, did the research participants attribute commercial motivations mainly or almost exclusively to influencers? As Chris Bobel has demonstrated in her research on menstrual activism, activists might uphold what she calls a 'perfect standard' where activists are those who go to extremes in the service of the cause; 'only those who "live the issue", working very hard and at great personal cost over a longer period of time, merit the designation activist' (2007: 153). According to Bobel, the perfect standard begs the question of who satisfies the criteria for activist and the 'extent to which the "perfect standard" is gendered' (2007: 156). As she explains, women's background labour has supported and enabled activist work, but tends to remain unacknowledged (Bobel, 2007). Activists who perform the reproductive labour to sustain other activists may not be seen as living up to the 'perfect standard', but their work is nevertheless crucial, and the devaluation of their labour is rooted in gendered dichotomies of what counts as work. Bobel's research thus suggests that there is a longer history to the 'perfect standard', and that, even in the context of feminist activism, gendered assumptions may underpin understandings of the 'perfect' activist. Interestingly, feminist cultural studies scholar Akane Kanai (2020, 2021) has argued that 'the perfect' also characterises 'digital feminist knowledge cultures' (Kanai, 2021). As Kanai has observed in the context of digital feminist activism, an 'authentic feminist identity becomes entangled with practices of perfecting and disciplining the self' (2020: 25). Drawing on Kanai, I read the research participants' boundary-drawing between 'activists' and 'influencers' as well as their distancing themselves from commercial pursuits as one mode in which they attempt to perfect themselves as activists. This means that the research participants' constructions of activists as having solely political motivations can be located in a longer tradition of high and arguably gendered standards for feminist activists, the context of contemporary digital feminist knowledge cultures and, lastly, wider, feminised cultures of perfection, as described by Angela McRobbie (2020).

According to McRobbie, the 'feminine-perfect' works as a 'dispositive of contemporary biopolitics, operating almost continually at the everyday level of social media and popular culture, inserting itself within the localized and privatized spaces of young women's lives' (2020: 52). Discussing the interplay between three interconnected elements, the perfect, imperfect and resilience, the *p-i-r*, to make sense of the current conjuncture and the mainstreaming of feminism, McRobbie (2020: 49) positions the p-i-r as

managing change in light of the increased visibility of feminist activism. She argues that the perfect emphases meritocracy, fosters competition, constantly re-establishes division and results in a feminism that is 'infinitely divided' (McRobbie, 2020: 44) and akin to what Catherine Rottenberg (2018) has insightfully critiqued and labelled 'neoliberal feminism'. The imperfect, by contrast, is also informed by a feminist voice, and is a response to the unviability of the perfect's emphasis on success. Resilience, finally, figures as a bounce-back mechanism, showing that there is the possibility of recovery even if damage has been done. All three – the perfect, imperfect and resilience – are characterised by boundary-marking and, as McRobbie argues, enable feminism to 'replenish contemporary capitalism' (2020: 44).

As demonstrated by Kanai's empirical research, but also other recent studies such as Katrin Schindel's (2022) work on digital feminist activism in Germany and Dean's (2022) analysis of popular left politics, 'the feminine-perfect' seems to characterise contemporary forms of digital feminist activism. Constructions of 'proper' activism (Dean, in press: 1) as well as knowledge cultures where activists strive to have the 'correct' knowledge (Kanai, 2021) point to the ways in which 'the feminine-perfect' permeates digital feminist activism. Drawing on these insights, I place the research participants' investments in forms of activism that are untainted by commercial motivations in the wider context of feminised cultures of perfection. To be sure, Bobel's (2007) research demonstrates that the 'perfect standard' has characterised feminist activism before. As such, I do not evoke Kanai's work on digital feminist knowledge cultures and McRobbie's analysis of feminised cultures of perfection to suggest that the activists' investments in perfect forms of activism are new, or that other factors are not at play. Instead, I use Kanai's and McRobbie's conceptualisation of the perfect to explain the research participants' seemingly contradictory stance: their investment in forms of activism that exist outside capitalist principles on the one hand and awareness of the many overlaps between monetisation and digital feminist activism on the other. To put it differently, I argue that the notion of 'the perfect' can help us make sense of the research participants' attachment to activism (read political) as opposed to influencing (read commercial), despite their simultaneous awareness of the blurred boundaries between the two.

Crucially, the perfect exhibits 'boundary-marking and highly regulative dimensions' (McRobbie, 2020: 44); it is 'a class category' (McRobbie, 2020: 43–44) and there are 'connections between the notion of the feminist "perfect" and the ideals of white feminine "goodness" identified by critical whiteness scholars' (Kanai, 2020: 32). According to Kanai (2020), white feminist activists' investments in the feminist 'perfect' can get channelled into performances of idealised, white femininity. Investments in the perfect, therefore, can have race- and class-based exclusionary effects (Scharff, 2023b). If aspiring to be perfect is a way of doing femininity, the activists' investments in pursuing 'perfect' forms of activism can be read as a way of performing femininity. This form of femininity, as Kanai and McRobbie have argued, is connected to whiteness and middle-classness. Does this mean that exclusionary forms of femininity are reiterated in spaces that ought to question dominant constructions of femininity? More specifically: does the emphasis on perfection in the sphere of digital feminist activism reaffirm exclusionary modes of doing femininity? While to address these questions adequately, further

empirical exploration is necessary, my analysis of the construction of ‘activists’ and ‘influencers’ suggests that investments in the perfect may, indeed, reproduce rather than subvert dominant constructions of femininity.

The influencer: a feminised persona?

In addition to drawing a distinction between ‘activist’ and ‘influencer’, several research participants portrayed influencing as a trivial pursuit, one that was less valuable than being an activist. Having argued that influencing is not for educational purposes, Samantha stated: ‘Whereas activism, and the kind of educational work we do, I think is profession-based, it is based on education. I think really anyone can become an influencer. As long as you have the passion for it, and you have a certain look about you maybe, and you’re getting to the right connections, anybody can become an influencer’. By stating that ‘anyone can become an influencer’, Samantha constructs influencing as an activity that does not require much skill, know-how or expertise. Contrasting influencing with the ‘profession-based’, ‘educational work’ of activists, Samantha strengthens her depiction of influencers as doing less-skilled work. As such, her discussion of influencers establishes a hierarchy between activist and influencer work, attributing expertise and educational value to activism, and passion, certain looks and the right connections to influencing. Crucially, and as I have demonstrated in detail elsewhere (Scharff, 2023b), digital work, including activism and influencing, requires know-how, which in turn can foster classed exclusions by preventing those who may not have the necessary textual, graphic or design skills and, perhaps even more importantly, the relevant cultural capital from fully taking part. The construction of influencing as unskilled risks brushing over the know-how required to work as an influencer, and the exclusions that this know-how – and wider influencer culture – may reproduce (Duffy et al., 2022).

Resonating with Samantha’s depiction of influencing, but also attempting to question the distinction between being an ‘activist’ and an ‘influencer’, Ezichi (black, working class) stated:

> I think it [being an activist or an influencer] goes hand in hand. As in, by doing activism you also influence people, or at least you would like to. And that’s why I would not distinguish between the two. It’s just, I just think that activism is something, if I’m allowed to pass judgement, that is a bit more valuable, right? Which has more weight societally than just simple, banal influencing: ‘buy this lipstick and so on’. But, in a way, it’s the same, just different.

Taking influencing literally, as other research participants have done, Ezichi questions the distinction between being an activist and an influencer, arguing that activists endeavour to influence others. At the same time, Ezichi portrays activism, and the attempt to make social change, as something more valuable, thus also establishing a hierarchy of value between activists and influencers and describing influencing as ‘banal’. Ezichi’s going back and forth between drawing a distinction between ‘activist’ and ‘influencer’, and her subsequent challenge of this distinction, indicates that she feels uneasy about her value judgement.

Some research participants openly discussed why they felt uneasy about casting influencing as a less worthy pursuit than being an activist. Interestingly, they were aware that influencing was frequently constructed as a feminine pursuit and, at the same time, trivialised. In relation to influencers, Silvia observed: 'The big stories and the big success, it's mostly women. But it's not - they make money off it, but it does not get any recognition. It is being ridiculed. Again and again. And that applies to everything that has to do with women. Romance novels, dances, TikTok dances. Everything is being ridiculed. Everything that's feminine'. Similarly, Vera told me:

> I don't like the term influencer that much, because it has negative connotations …. And it's fatal that it has such negative connotations because they are incredibly smart women who, as we've already discussed … know about business plans, crafting texts, creative work, marketing, skilful negotiation […] And, at the same time, the term 'influencer' is so derogatory. It's like 'fashion-doll who only does make-up advertisement' […]. And, again, it's a patriarchal upf**ck. Women are successful in one medium, create a word for themselves and immediately, it's being talked down, and people distance themselves from it. I think, why? Because it is women, who have success? Aha.

Vera's observation resonates with scholarly analysis, which suggests that influencing is seen as a feminine and feminised pursuit: 'Not only do reports suggest that close to 80 percent of influencers are women, but cultural assumptions about this subculture – from their devalued status and caricatured frivolity to their championing of consumer culture – are unabashedly feminine' (Duffy et al., 2022: 1661).

The association of influencing with feminine and trivial pursuits meant that several research participants did not want to describe themselves as an influencer. Joanna (white, middle class) told me:

> I think I'd die from embarrassment at the thought of trying to position myself as that [influencer], but it has crossed my mind in a sense that if I want to monetise this, people have to buy into the brand, which is me […] It's interesting, we see influencers as low down the chain as reality stars. We don't have a huge amount of respect for them, but it's an incredible amount of work and it's no different to advertising really, which is an industry I've been part of for years. But just the thought of putting my face at the front of it like fills me with dread. I just cringe.

Joanna does not want to position herself as an influencer because of the level of self-branding that is involved, which sheds light on the research participants' ambivalent relationship with monetisation, as discussed earlier. Crucial to my argument here, Joanna also highlights the lack of respect for influencers, and expresses embarrassment at the thought of positioning herself as one. The trivialisation of influencers, and concurrent lack of respect, makes it difficult for the research participants to identify as such.

Vera shared similar concerns when she told me:

> I would definitely say I am an activist. And I am also a content creator. I would not describe myself as an influencer because, actually, it resonates too much -. I believe, when it comes to

> influencers, you strongly presume that she makes money off it, and I don't. And, I believe, if I did make money off it, I would still not like calling myself an influencer, exactly because it has such negative connotations and not fully, it's not being taken seriously.

While monetisation plays a role, Vera's statement shows that the lack of respect for influencers, and the negative connotations attached to it, prevent her from calling herself one. Interestingly, Vera had argued that being an influencer lacked recognition because of its association with women. Identifying as a woman, and seeking respect for her work, she preferred to see herself as an activist and content creator.

In discussing Vera's account, I do not seek to present her as insufficiently feminist. Such a critique would be unhelpful and individualistic. What I aim to highlight instead are two interlocking tendencies that need further, critical investigation: as I have argued in the previous section, the research participants' striving to be 'perfect' activists and their coterminous rejection of influencing may affirm, rather than challenge, exclusionary modes of femininity. This, I believe, is not immediately apparent and, therefore, tends to remain unquestioned. At the same time, and as I have argued in the preceding paragraphs, so-called 'feminine' pursuits, such as influencing, are trivialised. Arguably, then, there is an interesting dynamic at play where modes of exclusionary femininity may be affirmed through the investment in 'the perfect' and, at the same time, the devaluation of femininity and feminine pursuits remains unchallenged and is perhaps reiterated when the research participants distance themselves from influencers. If my reading is accurate, this is a disconcerting dynamic for a feminist space. To put it differently, it appears that, through the distinction between 'activist' and 'influencer', the attachment to being an activist and the subsequent rejection of the label influencer, exclusionary forms of femininity may be reaffirmed: as we have seen, the 'perfect standard' (Bobel, 2007) – in this case, activists who do not engage in capitalist pursuits – is not new, but seems to have intensified in the digital economy and the wider context of feminised cultures of perfection. At the same time, femininity is also devalued through the hierarchy between 'activist' and 'influencer'. Where femininity ought to be questioned, namely in the exclusionary striving towards perfection, it remains unquestioned. And where constructions of femininity require closer analysis and critique, namely in relation to the trivialisation of influencers, this critique seems limited. The question of how 'activist' and 'influencer' are constructed in feminist spaces is, thus, not a trivial one, but may bring to the foreground some of the ways in which problematic constructions of femininity may be reiterated in feminist spaces.

Concluding remarks

This article has taken as its starting point constructions of 'activists' and 'influencers' to explore the discursive and political effects of frequently made associations of influencers with commercial pursuits, and activists with political motivations. As I have argued, these distinctions seem difficult to sustain when activism is done in the neoliberal digital economy. They may also reproduce the 'perfect standard' (Bobel, 2007) which, if placed in the wider context of digital knowledge cultures and the feminine-perfect,

may reiterate exclusionary forms of femininity. At the same time, and as the last section of this article has shown, feminine pursuits, such as influencing, may be trivialised, leaving devaluations of femininity unchallenged. As I have stated at various points in this article, my aim is not to criticise activists for doing what they do, or saying what they say. In presenting this analysis, my aim has been to highlight the complexities that arise when activism is done in the digital economy, and to call into question the ability to draw neat distinctions between 'political' and 'capitalist' pursuits. As such, this article adds to ongoing scholarly analysis of the complex interplay between neoliberalism and digital feminist activism (Baer, 2021), and adds to theorisations of neoliberalism as not just an economic but also an affective and psychic phenomenon (Scharff, 2016; Kanai and Gill, 2021). At the same time, and as I have also pointed out, it is not my aim to do away with distinctions between 'activists' and 'influencers'. Rather, I hope that my analysis has shown that these distinctions may reiterate problematic constructions of femininity. As feminists we ought to be critical of investments in 'the perfect' due to the racialised and classed exclusions that the 'feminine-perfect' entails. At the same time, rejecting pursuits, such as influencing, because they are feminised and trivialised risks devaluing femininity. There is, thus, a need to think carefully about the assumptions that play into our positionings as activists and/or influencers, and the ways in which these assumptions may reiterate, rather than challenge, exclusionary and derogatory constructions of femininity.

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Notes

1. I obtained research ethics approval for this study.
2. Taking the research participants' lead, I reference their immigrant background here and elsewhere in the article.

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