

Influencers and content creators. Investigating Side hustle degrees tooling the next gen.

Generation Z, Creator Economies, and the Reframing of Degrees in Marketing, Business, Computing, and Enterprise

C. Bushell

Abstract

Contemporary debates around employability, curriculum relevance, and graduate outcomes increasingly reflect a disconnect between traditional degree structures and how younger cohorts conceptualise work and income. While degrees in marketing, business, computing, and enterprise have historically been designed around assumptions of linear career progression and organisational employment, these assumptions appear increasingly misaligned with the realities faced by Generation Z. Rising graduate underemployment, platform mediated labour, and the normalisation of portfolio income have reshaped how students understand the relationship between education and economic security.

1 Introduction

This study explores whether degrees oriented towards influencer marketing and content creation are perceived by students as credible, valuable, and skills generating when compared with more traditional programmes in business, marketing, computing, and enterprise. Rather than treating influencer or creator work as aspirational or promotional, the study positions side hustle activity as a meaningful descriptor of how Generation Z articulates economic realism, autonomy, and income diversification. The paper adopts a cautious but open stance, asking not whether influencer or creator degrees should replace existing provision, but whether higher education risks losing relevance if it fails to engage critically with practices students already perceive as economically significant.

Conceptual context

2 Literature Review

The study draws on three intersecting strands of literature. First, strategic and digital marketing scholarship increasingly emphasises integration over channel specificity. Chaffey and Ellis Chadwick argue that digital capability is now a baseline expectation across marketing and business contexts rather than a differentiator in itself. From this perspective, practices such as influencer marketing and content creation should be understood as applied manifestations of strategy, analytics, and value exchange rather than narrow vocational skills.

Second, employability and signalling theory provides a framework for understanding degree choice. Spence's signalling theory highlights how degree titles function as market signals to employers and students alike. Holmes and Tomlinson further argue that contemporary students increasingly evaluate degrees through a pragmatic return on investment lens rather than through occupational identity or disciplinary tradition alone. This has implications for how

degrees in business, marketing, computing, and enterprise communicate relevance in platform driven economies.

Third, practitioner led marketing thought offers a useful interpretive lens for understanding student perceptions. Seth Godin's work on tribes, permission marketing, and value creation foregrounds audience trust, consistency, and meaningful exchange rather than fame or scale. While not academic in a strict sense, this body of work resonates strongly with how students describe influencer and creator activity as labour intensive, skill based, and contingent rather than glamorous or effortless.

Together, these perspectives support a cautious interrogation of whether creator oriented degrees represent a dilution of academic standards or a reframing of where value is created and captured in contemporary business ecosystems.

Research focus

The study investigates how students perceive degrees focused on influencer marketing and content creation in comparison with traditional degrees in marketing, business, computing, and enterprise. It explores whether such degrees are viewed as personally valuable, socially legitimate, and skills generating, and whether students believe they would provide greater or lesser capability development than more established subject areas. Particular attention is paid to how perceptions differ when influencer and content creation are framed as standalone degrees versus specialist pathways embedded within broader strategic programmes.

3 Methodology

An exploratory survey was designed and distributed using Google Forms, consistent with common practice in pedagogic and curriculum research where the aim is insight generation rather than statistical generalisation. The survey was circulated digitally via institutional mailing lists linked to marketing, business, computing, and media courses, alongside course level communication channels and closed student groups on platforms such as WhatsApp and Instagram. This distribution strategy was intentional, reflecting the everyday digital environments through which Generation Z typically engages with academic messaging and discussions of work and income.

Respondents were aged between 18 and 26 and identified as current or prospective students in marketing, business, computing, enterprise, or related disciplines. Participation was voluntary, anonymous, and non incentivised. A total of 214 valid responses were analysed. The sample is exploratory and not statistically representative, and findings are reported as indicative rather than generalisable.

The survey combined Likert scale items, comparative judgements, and open ended questions. Key questions asked respondents how positively they would feel about enrolling in a degree focused on influencer or content creation, how positively they believed people around them would view such a degree, whether they believed it would generate more or fewer skills than

traditional degrees in business, marketing, computing, or enterprise, and how they perceived the legitimacy and risk of influencer and creator careers.

4 Findings

The survey data reveal a marked scepticism among Generation Z respondents towards traditional career narratives. When asked whether a single long term career felt realistic, only 18 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed, while 41 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed. A further 41 percent expressed uncertainty. This suggests that confidence in linear career progression is limited, even among students currently engaged in or considering higher education. In contrast, attitudes towards portfolio income were notably more positive. When asked whether having multiple income streams felt more realistic than relying on a single job, 72 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed, compared with only 11 percent who disagreed. This indicates that income diversification is not perceived as exceptional or aspirational, but as a pragmatic response to contemporary labour market conditions.

Perceptions of influencer and content creator work further reinforce this pragmatic orientation. When asked to evaluate the legitimacy of influencer and content creator careers, the majority of respondents avoided both extremes of enthusiasm and dismissal. Sixty seven percent described such careers as legitimate but risky, while 21 percent viewed them as legitimate and realistic with the right skills. Only 12 percent regarded them as mostly unrealistic. Notably, open ended responses rarely framed influencer activity in terms of fame or ease. Instead, respondents frequently referenced workload intensity, algorithm dependence, income volatility, and the need for consistent optimisation and performance analysis. This suggests that interest in creator economies reflects economic realism rather than naive aspiration.

Attitudes towards degree level study in influencer and content creation were more nuanced. When asked how positively respondents would feel about enrolling in a degree focused on influencer or content creation on a five point scale, the mean response was 3.6, indicating moderate to positive personal interest. However, when asked how positively they believed people around them, such as family members, peers, or potential employers, would view such a degree, the mean score fell to 3.1. This gap points to a perceived issue of social or reputational legitimacy, even where personal interest is relatively high.

Degree credibility was strongly shaped by framing. Respondents expressed mixed views towards degrees titled solely around influencer marketing, often describing them as too narrow or socially risky in open ended comments. In contrast, degrees framed around strategy, monetisation, analytics, and enterprise within creator economies were evaluated more positively. When asked whether a creator oriented degree would generate more skills than traditional degrees in marketing, business, computing, or enterprise, 58 percent of respondents selected more or much more, while 27 percent selected about the same. Only 15 percent believed such degrees would generate fewer skills. These findings suggest that creator oriented study is not viewed as inferior in capability development, but that its legitimacy depends on integration with broader strategic and technical skill sets.

Preferences regarding degree structure further reinforce this point. When asked how influencer and content creation should be positioned within higher education, 64 percent of respondents preferred these areas to be taught as specialist pathways within a broader programme. Twenty three percent supported a dedicated degree provided it was framed around strategy and analytics, while only 13 percent felt influencer and content creation should remain outside degree level study altogether. This indicates a clear preference for integration rather than replacement, with students favouring degrees that combine contemporary practice with transferable foundations in marketing, business, computing, and enterprise.

Across the dataset, open ended responses consistently returned to themes of realism, hard work, analytics, and income literacy. Many respondents emphasised the importance of understanding how money is actually generated, sustained, and diversified, rather than relying on abstract career promises. Taken together, the findings suggest that Generation Z evaluates degrees less in terms of occupational identity and more in terms of perceived economic usefulness, adaptability, and honesty about risk.

5 Discussion

Across responses, there was a clear scepticism towards traditional career narratives. Only a minority of respondents expressed confidence that a single long term career felt realistic. In contrast, a strong majority agreed that having multiple income streams felt more achievable and sensible. This scepticism did not translate into rejection of education itself, but into a demand for economic honesty and skills perceived as directly applicable to real world income generation.

Influencer and content creation work was rarely described in aspirational terms. Most respondents characterised it as legitimate but risky, emphasising workload, algorithm dependence, income volatility, and the need for analytics and optimisation skills. Very few associated influencer activity with easy money or celebrity status. This suggests a pragmatic rather than naive understanding of creator economies.

Perceptions of degree credibility were strongly shaped by framing. Degrees titled purely around influencer marketing attracted mixed reactions, with many respondents expressing concern that such titles felt too narrow or socially risky. However, degrees framed around strategy, monetisation, analytics, and enterprise within creator economies were viewed more positively. When asked to compare skill generation, a majority of respondents believed that creator oriented study could generate equal or greater skills than traditional degrees in marketing, business, computing, or enterprise, but only if embedded within a broader strategic framework.

Importantly, most respondents preferred influencer and content creation to be taught as specialist pathways within wider programmes rather than as standalone degrees. This indicates demand for integration rather than replacement.

6 Conclusion

This synopsis advances a defensive but open argument. Influencer and creator oriented degrees should neither be uncritically embraced nor dismissed as academically unserious. The findings suggest that Generation Z evaluates degrees through a lens of income realism, adaptability, and perceived skill utility rather than career prestige. Marketing, business, computing, and enterprise education may therefore benefit from engaging critically with creator economies as contemporary contexts for teaching strategy, analytics, technology, and value creation.

The study does not claim that side hustle oriented degrees guarantee employability. Rather, it argues that ignoring these economies risks increasing misalignment between curriculum design and student realities. Academic legitimacy in this context lies not in topic exclusion, but in framing, scaffolding, and critical depth.

Future interest: side hustle degrees and jobs

Appendix A

Survey results summary

A total of 214 responses were analysed.

When asked whether a single long term career felt realistic, 18 percent agreed or strongly agreed, 41 percent were neutral or unsure, and 41 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed.

When asked whether having multiple income streams felt more realistic than relying on one job, 72 percent agreed or strongly agreed, 17 percent were neutral, and 11 percent disagreed.

When asked how they perceived influencer and content creator careers, 67 percent described them as legitimate but risky, 21 percent described them as legitimate and realistic with the right skills, and 12 percent described them as mostly unrealistic.

When asked how positively they would feel about enrolling in a degree focused on influencer or content creation on a scale of one to five, the mean response was 3.6.

When asked how positively they believed people around them would view such a degree, the mean response fell to 3.1, indicating perceived social risk despite personal interest.

When asked whether a creator oriented degree would generate more skills than traditional degrees in business, marketing, computing, or enterprise, 58 percent selected more or much more, 27 percent selected about the same, and 15 percent selected fewer.

When asked about preferred degree structure, 64 percent preferred influencer and content creation to be taught as a specialist pathway within a broader programme, 23 percent supported a dedicated degree if framed around strategy and analytics, and 13 percent felt it should remain outside degree level study.

Open ended responses repeatedly referenced realism, hard work, analytics, income volatility, and the need to understand how money is actually made rather than relying on career promises.

References

- Abidin, C. 2016. Visibility labour. *Media International Australia*, 161(1), 86 to 100.
- Chaffey, D. and Ellis Chadwick, F. 2019. *Digital Marketing*. Pearson.
- Godin, S. 2008. *Tribes*. Portfolio.
- Godin, S. 2018. *This Is Marketing*. Portfolio.
- Holmes, L. 2013. Competing perspectives on graduate employability. *Studies in Higher Education*, 38(4), 538 to 554.
- Hudders, L. et al. 2021. The commercialisation of social media influencers. *International Journal of Advertising*, 40(3), 327 to 375.
- Khamis, S., Ang, L. and Welling, R. 2017. Self branding and micro celebrity. *Celebrity Studies*, 8(2), 191 to 208.
- Maringe, F. 2019. Students as consumers. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 41(2), 151 to 164.
- Savickas, M. L. 2013. Career construction theory. In Brown and Lent, *Career Development and Counseling*. Wiley.
- Seemiller, C. and Grace, M. 2019. *Generation Z*. Routledge.
- Spence, M. 1973. Job market signalling. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 87(3), 355 to 374.
- Standing, G. 2011. *The Precariat*. Bloomsbury.