

Generation cynic?

Young people's trust in the media, brands and influencers

AUGUST 2020



HYPE
COLLECTIVE

**the
Park**



Some introductions.

Hype Collective is a student marketing agency. But it's run by two people whose student days are, sadly, behind them. That's why we conduct research several times per year to learn and share what today's students actually want.

It's been said that this is Generation Cynic. The new adults of 2020 are seen – or at least depicted – as being sceptical towards the media and wary of brand activism, smelling bullshit on Big Corporation Inc.'s support for a popular social cause. Older generations respond with either encouraging nods or rants about 'the youth of today'.

But is the presumption even true? Are students cynical? We interviewed young people and conducted nationwide surveys to find out, with

the help of The Park, experiential agency and creators of Brand Proof: working on campaigns that stand for something, and deserve a wide audience. Students told us whether they trust brands, the media and influencers, and if escapism still feels possible in the 21st century. That answer, in particular, surprised us.

Nearly a third (32%) of young people would call themselves a cynic, while 43% say they're an optimist. Across every question, there was almost no difference in responses between students and non-students.

Generation Cynic? Some of them. But then there's no narrative mileage in Generation Well-Informed-But-Mostly-Positive-Or-Even-Idealistic-If-Perhaps-A-Little-Sceptical.



CHAPTER ONE


Fake news?

Believing stories in the media and on social

There isn't a great deal of trust in the news media right now. Fake news, and the contradiction in terms that is 'alternative facts', is arguably the defining concept of the past five-to-ten years, even though disinformation has existed since the years BC (and that's not Before Clickbait). Whatever one's personal politics, that simple term – fake news

– has bred doubt in all of us in recent years, and the UK's student body is seemingly no exception.

While it'd be easy to interpret their lack of trust as cynical, it should be said that young people are actually pretty savvy in their approach to consuming news. Nearly two-thirds (64%) told us they'll actively look for

A photograph of a protest. In the foreground, a man with a beard and glasses is speaking. In the background, a large sign reads "I WISH WE WERE THE NEWS".

a second source to confirm a story they see on social media, which is a cause for optimism – not to mention surprise – while 40% will seek a second source for news reported by a media organisation. (Of course, these figures reflect what people say they do, and not necessarily what they actually do.)

Peers are a major influence: 11% of respondents said they trust media stories only if they're shared by someone they know, and 21% trust most things their peers share on social media.

Encouragingly, less than 1% say they trust everything the media reports. Less encouragingly, 12% don't trust anything the media reports. That's even more than the number of students who don't trust anything shared by a peer on social media (11%), and social media is the modern home of the hoax. Even worse, 15% don't believe that the media tell the truth when reporting on social causes.

Still, a part of this is simply expecting high standards, with one in five believing that the media should remain strictly neutral and objective. Cynical? Some would call that naive...

“I’m thinking ‘how come you don’t have cosmetics for our skin tones but when Black Lives Matter comes on you’re supporting it?’”

Olivia, University of East Anglia.

“Looking at something on... face value from the media and then watching these documentaries where it compares what was said at the times vs what actually happened is like completely different things”

Kate, University of Leeds.

The case for brand activism


Doing the right thing for the wrong reasons

Is it cynical, or merely realistic, to think a brand's support for a cause isn't genuine? The majority of people aged 18-24 seem to fall into one of those brackets.

When we asked this demographic if they think brands' public support is genuine, 59% said, "Some, but not most", while a further 25% think they do it either to avoid criticism or to make money. That is quite the majority. Just 16% think most brands – not even all brands, but most – genuinely care about the causes they support.

So, what should companies do? Give up any pretence, pivot to evil and invest in dalmatian fur coats?

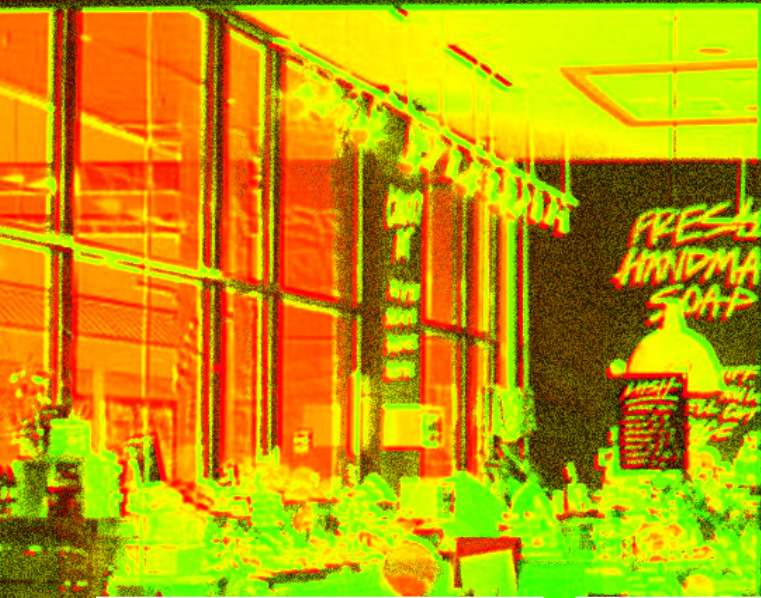
No. Especially not the coats thing. Nearly three-quarters of students (72%) think brands should show support for social causes even if they personally believe it's for commercial reasons. Only 7% don't want to see them supporting social causes in public at all, either because they feel it's insincere or because... well, they just don't think they should.



Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything.

LUSH

FRESH HANDMADE COSMETICS



“Minds are made up through different factors than they were 10 years ago,” says James Kirkham, Chief Business Officer at Defected Records. “What brands say and do matters to many, but audiences and consumers are wary they aren’t always in it for the right reasons.”

Again, the words ‘Generation Cynic’ appear before us. However, this interpretation conflicts with the idealism in other responses. Young people want brands to show support for causes. And it’s low-risk: contrary

to everything you’ve ever heard at youth marketing conferences, just 6% would boycott a brand whose social values don’t align with their own – barely more than the proportion who won’t buy from companies that don’t stand for something (5%). It’s very surprising indeed to learn that in a class of 30 or 35 young people, only two would boycott a label that thinks or acts contrary to their own preferences. Meanwhile, 47% are more likely to buy from a brand that supports a cause.

There’s also little danger of being called opportunistic. Four in five students agree that, “Brands should support good causes even when they’ve nothing to do with the sector they work in”, against 15% who’d rather they focus on their sector.

This does come with expectation, however: a brand should put its money where its mouth is. When it comes to how corporations can support a charity or social organisation, public (70%) and private (72%) donations were

common answers, although the most popular suggestion (80%) was using its platform to promote the cause in question. Only 20% recommended handing over control of their social media channels to the cause’s supporters.

In other words: stand up, front up.



CHAPTER THREE

The influence of an influencer

What characterises the most trusted personalities on social media?

Influencers matter – when they use their platform for the right reasons. They’re most impactful as good social citizens who can mobilise their audience.

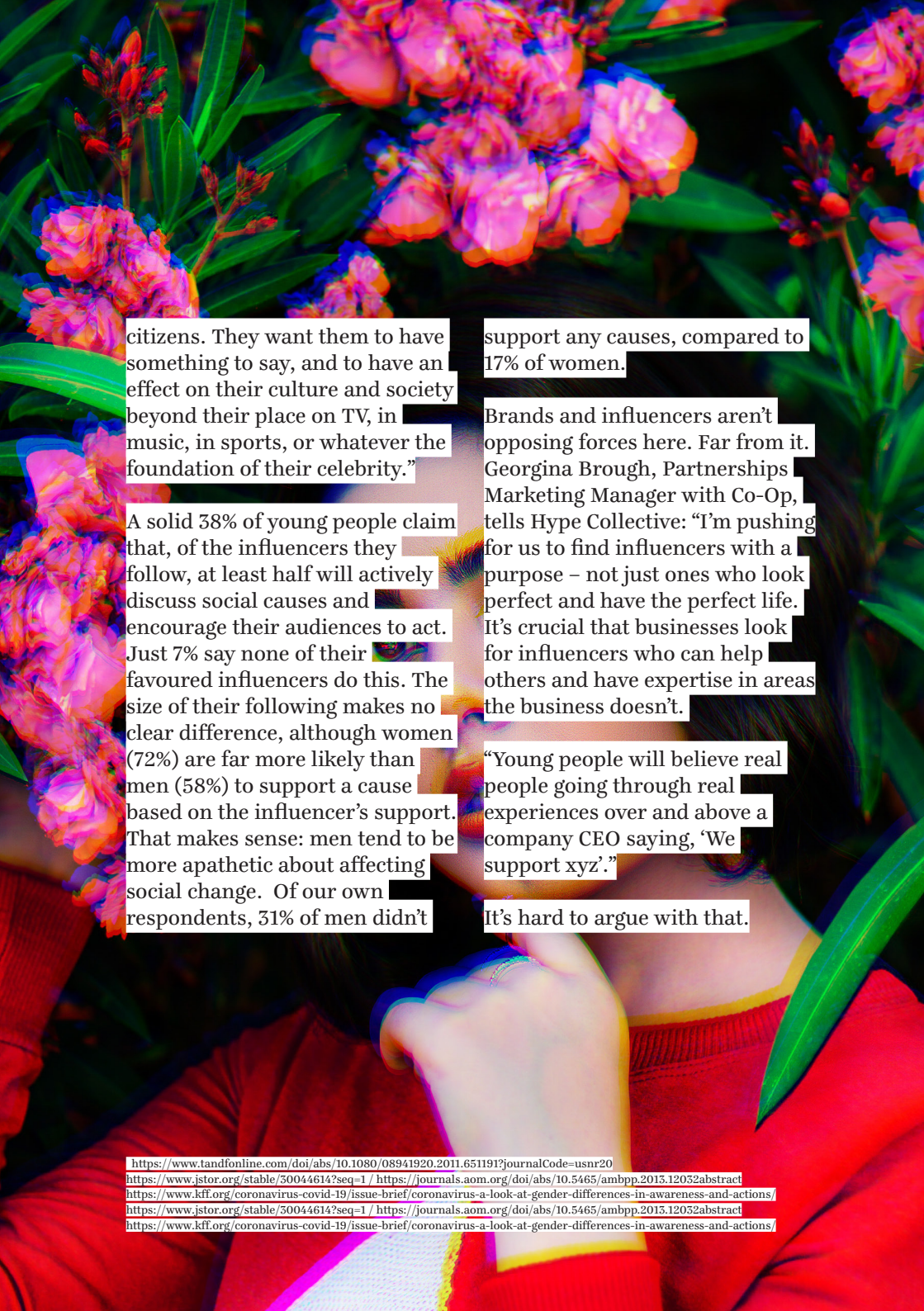
Asked to select traits that make an influencer’s voice worth hearing, our students picked ‘the issues they discuss’ (78%) and ‘their knowledge and expertise’ (71%). Fame, and insights into their personal life, were seen as unimportant.

So, it follows that two-thirds of people aged 18-24 are more likely – and only 3% are less likely – to back a cause that’s supported by an influencer they follow. Influencers influence. The other 30% don’t care what they have to say about social causes, and we

shouldn’t ignore that this is a significant minority.

As with brands, there’s no disadvantage in an influencer supporting a cause, with regards to younger followers. More importantly, they’re a powerful tool for good causes to garner support. Naturally, authenticity helps.

“Peer-to-peer trust is vital, as influencers and their followings are now at a pivotal moment,” says James Kirkham at Defected Records. “With under 1% of people trusting everything in the media, we’re in an entirely new era. And influential personalities are now less one-dimensional; less focused on selling. People want to listen to the good social



citizens. They want them to have something to say, and to have an effect on their culture and society beyond their place on TV, in music, in sports, or whatever the foundation of their celebrity.”

A solid 38% of young people claim that, of the influencers they follow, at least half will actively discuss social causes and encourage their audiences to act. Just 7% say none of their favoured influencers do this. The size of their following makes no clear difference, although women (72%) are far more likely than men (58%) to support a cause based on the influencer’s support. That makes sense: men tend to be more apathetic about affecting social change. Of our own respondents, 31% of men didn’t

support any causes, compared to 17% of women.

Brands and influencers aren’t opposing forces here. Far from it. Georgina Brough, Partnerships Marketing Manager with Co-Op, tells Hype Collective: “I’m pushing for us to find influencers with a purpose – not just ones who look perfect and have the perfect life. It’s crucial that businesses look for influencers who can help others and have expertise in areas the business doesn’t.

“Young people will believe real people going through real experiences over and above a company CEO saying, ‘We support xyz’.”

It’s hard to argue with that.

“I prefer something a bit more upbeat, just humourous and stuff like that, but I do follow a few influencers who are a bit more like, informative.”

Chloe, University of Plymouth.

“Some of them don’t always feel like it’s their place to but I think because the influencer’s main goal is to make you feel like they’re a real person and to show you something interesting I think it makes them more realistic when you know them more personally through [their activism].”

Kamil, University of Birmingham.

“Influnecers now, they do too many products essentially. If every post is an ad, then it doesn’t tell you much about them as a person”.

Kate, University of Leeds.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/08941920.2011.651191?journalCode=usnr20>
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/30044614?seq=1> / <https://journals.aom.org/doi/abs/10.5465/ambpp.2015.12032abstract>
<https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/coronavirus-a-look-at-gender-differences-in-awareness-and-actions/>
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/30044614?seq=1> / <https://journals.aom.org/doi/abs/10.5465/ambpp.2015.12032abstract>
<https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/coronavirus-a-look-at-gender-differences-in-awareness-and-actions/>

CHAPTER FOUR

Nobody's perfect

Own your mistakes and students trust you

Once upon a time, Hype Collective were planning a student marketing strategy with a new contact at our longest-standing client, Co-op. After a scintillating yet detailed pitch, we proudly landed the devastating final blow: this campaign would, we believed, be pound-for-pound the best way to boost Tesco's sales. Wait, not Tesco – Co-op. We meant Co-op. Damn it.

We mention this because nearly three-quarters of young people trust an authority more if they discuss mistakes they've made, and we hope you're of the same mind.

It seems that where you've come from matters as much as where you're going. Some 72% of people

aged 18-24 are more likely to trust a creator or entrepreneur if they talk about their backstory and past failures; only 4% find their trust diminished. Most of the remainder just aren't bothered either way.

This applies to influencers on social media, too. Speaking honestly about their personal lives helps them to build trust, whether that's in revealing their own mental health issues (67% of followers say this would increase their trust in the influencer), discussing issues that are important to them (72%), sharing inadequate attempts at producing some creative work (61%) or simply sharing information about their past (57%).

A consequence of this more open and forgiving landscape – or perhaps merely a reflection of changing attitudes and priorities – is that only one in five young people say their trust in influencers is impacted by flaws such as spelling mistakes or a messy working environment. That distant rumble you just heard was a collective turning in Victorian graves.

“Transparency is vital for all,” says Defected’s James Kirkham. “People don’t care now about a typo or a stumbling monologue. In fact, they want the warts-and-all authenticity. They’re seeking

this out, and moving away from people and places that appear fake or overly honed.”

The important takeaway is this: brands can afford to be upfront about past failings. Remember: one in four young people think corporations support causes just to avoid criticism or make money. If brands were transparent about their shortcomings, the so-called Generation Cynic may be more inclined to forgive and support them.

By the way, we still work closely with Co-op. *[note to subs: check this says Co-op and not Tesco.]*

“It will be interesting to see whether this generation’s approach to imperfections and mistakes will usher in a softer, more understanding approach to the mistakes of public figures (if they acknowledge their mistakes). An environment with more nuance than the current blunt tool of ‘cancel culture’.”



Will Worsdell
Strategy Director
The Park



Does escapism exist?

*Discovering if winding
down winds us up*

There's a general consensus, or at least a media narrative, that says today's young adults can't enjoy their spare time. Oh, they should, no question. But a combination of financial worries, social expectation and a hectic 21st-century lifestyle – not to mention all that time spent joylessly campaigning and calling for anything problematic to be cancelled – means they're unable to relax without feeling guilty. It's sad, really.

It's also not true.

That's what our research seems to suggest, anyway. Asked a straight question, our student respondents gave a straight answer: yes, there's such a thing as guilt-free entertainment. Three in four replied that they're happy to spend their downtime watching Netflix or browsing Instagram, with only 9% feeling guilty if they aren't doing something productive, and 15% deciding that the downtime needs to be an activity such as reading

or watching a documentary (in which case they shouldn't worry: they can watch documentaries on Netflix).

The most popular forms of downtime mentioned were watching YouTube (77%), chatting with friends (67%) and playing videogames (56%). Drinking with friends (46%) got some traction; drinking alone (14%), less so.

"It's interesting, and heartening, to hear there is plenty of room in young people's lives for light-hearted entertainment," says Aoife Owen, Controller of Marketing, ITV Entertainment and Comedy.

Contrary to what the popular mainstream myth would imply, relatively little time is taken up by supporting social causes. Half of the students dedicate between one and four days per month to it, and 22% no time at all. However, 15% do so on a weekly or even daily (2%) basis, which is not insignificant.

That's your lot.

Thanks for reading. We consider ourselves lucky in that we actually enjoy putting these research papers together, as we find the results so interesting, and we can only hope that you enjoy – or at least tolerate – the time spent reading them. We appreciate you giving us your attention for a short while.

To that end, if you have any burning questions on this issue, or bright ideas about any other potential topics, we would love to chat. We're planning to run one more research piece this year, on travel – perhaps you'd like to get involved.

Drop Hype Collective MD Simon Lucey an email (simon@hypecollective.co.uk), and be sure to mention his Co-op/Tesco boo-boo. Or you can email The Park's Strategy Director, Will Worsdell (will@thepark.london), who would also love to hear from you.



The numbers

This report was written following a four-month research project which involved nationwide surveys of young people aged 18-24, in-depth interviews with students, and workshops with industry professionals.



Workshop:

*Number of workshop participants: 8
Who attended: A mixture of marketing leads from a variety of the UK's biggest brands, bodies and organisations.*



In-depth interviews:

*Number of students interviewed: 5
Who we interviewed: Students studying in the UK, aged 18 - 24.*



Survey

Number of respondents: 1000 young people aged 18 - 24 in the UK. 525 qualified students / 475 non-students.

All research was carried out by both Hype Collective and The Park.

Steering group

Special thanks go to our steering group, who gave up their time and shared industry insights to help give direction to this report.



SONY MUSIC



Please note that our steering group helped us by offering up their time for interviews at the start of the project. This helped us to decide how to structure the rest of the research.

They do not endorse the findings themselves.

HYPE

COLLECTIVE

**the
Park**