

**The Commodification of Femininity: Gender Performance and Aesthetic Entrepreneurship
on Social Media**

Maggie Leaf

School of Media and Public Affairs, George Washington University

SMPA 4199: Senior Seminar

Professor Karpf

December 14th, 2022

Introduction

In the depths of 2020, I spent the majority of my time completely alone, left to my own devices. Literally. My only hobby seemed to be consuming media through my phone, my laptop, and the television. I watched hours-worth of 60-second videos, scrolled past countless pictures of “Insta-worthy” food, and browsed every fast-fashion retail website available. My existence was defined by the content I saw on Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, Youtube, etc, etc. Like most people during this time, I was so desperate to feel connected with the outside world, and social media provided me with that connection. My perception of self became conflated with my consumption habits. Owning the white tennis skirt that appeared in nearly every TikTok at the time meant that I was part of the in-crowd, I was trendy. Never mind the fact that I never actually wore it out of the house. To keep myself busy that summer, I spent an unreasonable amount of time experimenting with makeup and—with intent to post them on Instagram—taking pictures of the sequins I glued to my face in the name of “self-expression.” I was acting under the assumption that by conforming to the disciplinary practice of self-improvement, I would earn the praise of my peers (if Instagram followers can be considered “peers”). Had I not posted these pictures on social media, would the blue, sparkly eyeshadow outlining my retinas still be considered self-expression?

Social media has turned the body into a business. As Jia Tolentino writes in her 2019 article for *The New Yorker*, “For those born with assets—natural assets, capital assets, or both—it can seem sensible, even automatic, to think of your body the way that a McKinsey consultant would think about a corporation: identify underperforming sectors and remake them, discard whatever doesn’t increase profits and reorient the business toward whatever does.”¹ This

¹ Tolentino, Jia. “The Age of Instagram Face.” *The New Yorker*, (2019).

concept—the commodification of femininity, or the idea that feminine notions and practices are economic goods to be bought and sold—allowed for mainstream liberal feminism to teach women that self-objectification is progressive because it is profitable. If it is the woman's *choice* to plump her cheeks, chin, and lips with filler, then it must be a form of empowerment.

The definition of womanhood, as it's bought and sold within American media today, represents a changing dynamic in the way we use technology and the way it uses us. Sentient algorithms have resulted in a symbiotic relationship with the average media consumer. We put our data up for sale in exchange for the convenience of hyper-personalized content, entertainment, advice, recipes, social interaction, etc. For women, this consumption is often denoted by an emphasis placed on stereotypically feminine ideals. The commodification of femininity is not a new phenomenon. However, the ways it's manifested now are starkly different than in the mid-twentieth century. Print publications no longer explicitly portray Norman Rockwell-esque depictions of a doting housewife kneeling before her husband in an advertisement for Budweiser. Corporate entities embed gender codes into modern media with more subtlety. The emphasis on aesthetics, the disciplining of the female body, and a culture defined by digital media facilitate how both corporations and women brand themselves in society. My research examines the degree of power that technological institutions wield over female users and how that power is exerted. Though gender is not a rigid concept, by delineating between the masculine and feminine binaries, I am calling attention to the ways they interact and conflict at a societal level. This paper takes a neoliberal, postfeminist approach to examining social media's effects on consumption and gender identity.

Literature Review

An analysis of gender performance in the digital age requires an in-depth examination of the foundational knowledge in both feminist and media studies. Historical perspectives provide context to define culture with respect to the digital age.

Modern culture is defined by our interactions with, our dependence on, and our consumption of media. We rely on technology as if it were an extension of our limbs and shape our personalities around the music we listen to or the shows we watch. Broadly speaking, technology provides access to culture unlike any point in history. According to Raymond Williams, culture is ordinary. He notes that “A culture is common meanings, the product of a whole people, and offered individual meanings, the product of a man's whole committed personal and social experience.”² Humans’ personal and social experiences are inextricably linked to the influence of media. Williams orients culture as the connection between the working class and the bourgeoisie. It reflects the commonalities of the people, despite class separation. While Williams admits that the bourgeoisie is largely responsible for the products, ideologies, movements, and aesthetics to which we ascribe cultural value, he argues that contemporary culture is not bourgeois culture. According to Williams, certain meanings and values derived from particular societies are universal, in the sense that when they are taught through social inheritance “they can contribute radically to the growth of man's powers to enrich his life, to regulate his society, and to control his environment.”³

Williams’s predictions for the evolution of communication technologies take an anti-deterministic approach, advocating that technologies are bound up in social contexts. He emphasizes the importance of analyzing technological developments in relation to how

² Raymond Williams, "Culture is ordinary (1958)." *Cultural theory: An anthology* 5359 (2011).

³ Ibid.

populations use them, not how they will shape the population. Above all, Williams disregarded this “formalism.” But as Des Freedman notes, this perspective downplays “who has developed the technology, in whose interests, for what purposes, for which audiences, and with what consequences.”⁴ The “predetermined” nature of technology, with which Williams disagreed, is not in its development or dissemination, but in how the most powerful groups in society decide to use it. The wealthiest among us have direct access to the flow of capital, information, and therefore, power. The “ordinariness” of culture Williams discussed in 1958 was naive in the sense that “he situated culture and capitalism as related but not determined by each other.” Williams challenged the notion that relations of production could somehow direct culture because culture is something made “by living.”⁵ There was no way he could have predicted how the technological developments of an advanced capitalist society would soon define global networks of production, consumption, and distribution.

Henry Jenkins’s work theorizes on culture in an environment of media convergence, defining it as more than a technological shift and arguing that it alters “the relationship between existing technologies, industries, markets, genres, and audiences.”⁶ The expansion of franchises across virtually every media channel saturates us in a domain governed by profit incentive. However, Jenkins notes that “convergence is more than a corporate branding opportunity.”⁷ It reconfigures media power and reshapes media aesthetics and economics. By engaging with media, we are consumers in nature. He advises against the anticonsumerism approach, though, as he posits that it surrenders too much power to advertisers and withdraws power from consumers.

⁴ Des Freedman, “A ‘Technological Idiot’? Raymond Williams and Communications Technology.” *Information, Communication & Society*, 5:3. (2002). 425-442

⁵ Sarah Banet-Weiser, “Authentic(tm) : The ambivalence in a brand culture”. *New York University Press*. (2012), 9.

⁶ Henry Jenkins, “The cultural logic of media convergence.” *International journal of cultural studies* 7, no. 1 (2004): 33-43.

⁷ Ibid.

However, his notion that technological media is both a “top-down corporate-driven process” AND “a bottom-up consumer-driven process” wrongly asserts an equal level of agency between consumers and producers. The assumption that consumers wield an equal amount of power in the media ecosystem fails to consider how divorced they have become from the means of production. As Sarah Banet-Weiser notes, “Power clearly does not function on an equal playing field within advanced capitalism, so that a singular focus on who has more power—the corporate brand or the consumer—misses out on how power is created as a dynamic, often contradictory force, and similarly maintains a pristine definition of the authentic.”⁸

Jenkins frames the “new consumer” as active, migratory (declining loyalty), *more* socially connected, noisy, and public.⁹ With the fragmentation of the market, consumption as a collective process relies on users’ wants and needs, *to an extent*. As media companies learn more about their audience’s usage patterns, they can better “accelerate the flow of media content across delivery channels to expand revenue opportunities, broaden markets and reinforce viewer commitments.”¹⁰ However, Jenkins’s assumption that consumers are conscious of this dynamic and use it “to bring the flow of media more fully under their control” miscalculates the *subconscious* effects media companies have on their users.

The work of Williams and Jenkins provided a foundation for feminist media scholars to build a gendered framework around their theories of culture, technology, and performance. It is impossible to discuss gender performance, regardless of where it’s manifested (online or otherwise), without the work of Judith Butler. In her 1988 article on “Performative Acts and Gender Construction,” Butler writes that gender performativity stems from the absence of a

⁸ Banet-Weiser, “Authentic,” 12.

⁹ Henry Jenkins and Mark Deuze, “Convergence culture.” *Convergence* 14, no. 1 (2008): 5-12.

¹⁰ Jenkins, “Cultural Logic,” 6.

stable gender identity. She argues, “Rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts.”¹¹ Gender is not an inherent fact. It is displayed through the artificial orientation of the body and “must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.”¹² Social media serves as the perfect vehicle to carry out gender performance. Because the institution of gender occurs through “internally discontinuous” acts, Butler notes, this *appearance* of substance is a constructed identity. Social media ceases to exist without a mode to construct one’s identity. The very nature of sites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc. requires their users to determine, whether consciously or subconsciously, how they want to portray themselves to an audience. In formulating what image of the self to publicize, women are incentivized to adhere to the “historical situation”¹³ of the female body, and existing cultural constructions are enacted on a large political scale. Most significantly, Butler writes that “Gender is not a radical choice or project that reflects a merely individual choice, but neither is it imposed or inscribed upon the individual... The gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives.”¹⁴

Butler’s emphasis on the *act* of gender contrasts Erving Goffman’s gender display framework which posits an assuming and exchanging of self in various ‘roles’ according to the complexities of the ‘game’ of modern social expectations. Further, this framework is “a typology of nonverbal posing codes that connote the subordination of women in commercial imagery and

¹¹ Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.” *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Simone de Beauvoir, “The Second Sex”, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage, 1974), 38.

¹⁴ Butler, “Performative Acts,” 526.

a prominent tool for assessing visualizations of gender stereotyping in mass media.”¹⁵ According to Butkowski et. al, young women use the selfies they upload to social media to subtly perpetuate normative feminine cues that are popularized and reiterated through mass media.¹⁶ Within these stereotypical cues, posing behaviors (outlined by Goffman) delineate a power imbalance between men and women. Through their content analysis, Butkowski et. al found that women who incorporate and exaggerate gender displays receive more feedback (in terms of likes, comments, and follows), thus determining the post “successful.” This feedback is the bedrock of social media use. It serves as an incentive to not only post but post content specifically designed to appeal to one’s audience. Butkowski et. al demonstrated that this parasocial behavior led to a “loss of control, body display, and canting” and higher quantities of “positive or reinforcing” feedback.¹⁷ These specific Foucauldian-style disciplinary practices of the body are unique to women and the presentation of femininity. Bartky reveals that they are part of the process by which the ideal feminine body-subject is constructed.¹⁸ While men and women are subject to many of the same disciplinary practices on a general societal level, there are certain behaviors that “produce a modality of embodiment that is peculiarly feminine.” Overlooking these forms of subjection that engender the feminine body, Bartky writes, perpetuates “the silence and powerlessness of those upon whom these disciplines have been imposed.”¹⁹ Social media requires women to engage in a particular form of self-surveillance that is not expected of men. Within the Panopticon of Instagram, Tik Tok, Facebook, etc. we exist in a state of conscious and

¹⁵ Chelsea P. Butkowski, “Quantifying the feminine self(ie): Gender display and social media feedback in young women’s Instagram selfies.” *New Media & Society*, 22(5) (2020): 817–837.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Sandra L. Bartky, “Foucault, femininity, and the modernization of patriarchal power.” *The Politics of Women’s Bodies: Sexuality, Appearance, and Behavior* (1998): 25.

¹⁹ Ibid, 27.

permanent visibility. For Bartky, in our perpetual self-surveillance lies “the genesis of the celebrated ‘individualism’ and heightened self-consciousness that are the hallmarks of modern times.”²⁰ Her gendered analysis of Foucauldian disciplinary practices contends that women produce a body recognizably feminine in gesture and appearance in adherence to an increasingly dispersed and anonymous disciplinary power. Women are conditioned to perform by an abstract authority:

The woman who checks her makeup half a dozen times a day to see if her foundation has caked or her mascara has run, who worries that the wind or the rain may spoil her hairdo, who looks frequently to see if her stockings have bagged at the ankle or who, feeling fat, monitors everything she eats, has become, just as surely as the inmate of the Panopticon, a self-policing subject, a self committed to a relentless self-surveillance.²¹

This standard of visibility is only exacerbated by the use of social media.

Within the confines of the internet as an institution, gender scripts are embedded into the code of social media, according to Friz and Gehl.²² They note that the gendering of technology takes place at many key loci, including “advertisements, displays at market, and in ‘domestication’ processes.” Despite creating Pinterest for a gender-neutral audience, the majority of its users are women. Friz and Gehl illustrate how the designers of a certain technology, product, site, etc. create with an ideal user in mind, often one that conforms to “an array of gender images or stereotypes.” Similarly, algorithms are not immune to bias, as they are created by humans. Pinterest occupies a unique space in social media—it places emphasis on curation of the self over creation, cooperation over competition, and aesthetics over technical knowledges,

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid, 42.

²² Amanda Friz and Robert W. Gehl, "Pinning the feminine user: gender scripts in Pinterest's sign-up interface." *Media, Culture & Society*, (2016).

aligning it closer to the feminine on a feminine/masculine binary.²³ Contrary to the cyber-enthusiasts broadcasting the “democratic” nature of the internet, “digital media sites tend to reproduce—rather than challenge—problematic gender relations,” according to Duffy.²⁴

Intrinsic to the use of social media is the concept of branding: both at the personal and commercial levels. In 1997, Drèze and Zufryde noted how the utility of the internet and web environment for advertising has distinguishing characteristics from those of standard advertising media.²⁵ Their methodology provided a structural framework for tracking and measuring the effectiveness of reaching consumers through web advertising. They concluded that the web “will eventually come closer to fulfilling its potential and promise as the ultimate medium for market segmentation at the individual consumer level—that is, for targeting unique individual surfers with individually-designed promotions, content, products, and services on the Web.”²⁶ Drèze and Zufryde’s study proved how individuals’ user experience would come to be defined by custom, personalized algorithms. It’s difficult to ignore an ad that has been specifically tailored to one’s interests. Corporate entities fully embrace the pervasive nature of web advertising and utilize it not only as a marketing tool but as an identity-shaping method. Most corporations use social media accounts to interact with consumers more directly. These big-name companies adopt a specific “personality” to better connect with their target demographic of customers. Posting memes, issuing statements of condolences after national and global tragedies, commenting under users’ posts as if they were mutuals, and engaging in ‘Twitter beef’ with other corporations are all done in an effort to humanize themselves and protect corporate personhood. This dynamic

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Brooke E. Duffy, “Gendering The Labor Of Social Media Production.” *Feminist Media Studies*, 15:4 (2015): 710-714.

²⁵ Xavier Dreze and Fred Zufryden. "Testing web site design and promotional content." *Journal of Advertising Research* 37 (1997): 5.

²⁶ Ibid, 28.

presents an interesting reciprocal phenomenon: corporations use social media to appear as individuals, and individuals use social media to brand themselves in the same manner that a corporation would.

Sarah Banet-Weiser outlines the significance of branding as a cultural phenomenon throughout history in her book *The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture*. She notes that brand cultures refer to the way “brand relationships have increasingly become cultural contexts for everyday living, individual identity, and affective relationships... brands are about culture as much as they are about economics.”²⁷ Corporations will pay attention to what their consumers value, socially or culturally, and attach those same values to a commodity, making it resonate personally with their customers. The cultural value placed on commodities is the result of mass production in the industrialization era, accompanied by new technologies. In this era of late-stage capitalism, it is impossible to exist without attaching our reality to the means of production. Who we are is what we create, and our creation is capital. For production to be meaningful, one must assign value to certain commodities. As Banet-Weiser notes, our culture centers “the making—and selling, and using—of things” which cannot be detached from “the ways that we make our own lives.”²⁸ This is true for activist principles in addition to commodities. However, the two are often conflated in this current reality, as social and political activism through social media is no

²⁷ Banet-Weiser, “Authentic,” 4.

²⁸ Ibid, 9.

more an agent of change than a marketable commodity, otherwise known as commodity activism.²⁹ Examples below:

Women were once understood as passive consumers, told what to buy by the men in advertising firms on Madison Avenue. These “mad men” designed a product’s aesthetic around the way they wanted women to use it. This specific idea of marketing, though seemingly outdated, has merely shifted so that it takes into account the role social media plays in facilitating consumers’ choices. Modern consumer culture is recognized as a form of liberation and a source of agency for young women—commodity feminism, in other words. These ideals are attached to products as a selling point. Having the power to ‘self-brand’ has become perpetually linked with liberal feminist sentiments of empowerment and freedom. Defining one’s *own* aesthetic tastes, one’s *own* sense of style, one’s *own* unique personality traits are marketed to young women as a vehicle to true freedom of self-expression. Under neoliberalism, individuals are best equipped to portray their purest form of self only if it deviates from the norm. As Banet-Weiser puts it, “For



²⁹ Ibid, 16.

the contemporary virtuous self, individual entrepreneurship is the conduit for self-realization, and online spaces are a perfect site for realizing this entrepreneurship.”³⁰

Embedded in this argument lies the existence and omnipresent nature of “the influencer.” Influencers have carved out an intensely individualized niche in society. They are not ‘normal people,’ nor do they occupy the realm of celebrity, for the most part. Their existence is defined by the ability to appear marketable and interesting; to simultaneously appeal to a hyper-specific audience, yet one large enough to create a profit. Daily, mindless activities such as getting ready or making dinner are generated for content and then monetized, usually by the companies who pay these individuals to promote their products. The cultural significance placed on commodities cannot exist without these actors. Influencers act as an agent of the corporations that sponsor their content. According to McIntyre, “Digital media devices have made the production of a distinct female self possible; a self that relies on re-configuring the relationship between production and consumption through the commodification of intimate spaces, ties, acts, and (not least) the feminine body.”³¹ By adopting the ‘entrepreneurial self,’ influencers are able to assign monetary value to nearly every aspect of their lives. Their personal experiences are transformed into assets that can be commodified. For women blogging about consumer goods, McIntyre argues, traditional notions of femininity are reinforced by engaging in practices of care, beautification, and mothering. According to Rodner et. al, women are taking on the role of aesthetic entrepreneur—constantly working on the body and the self. Because their personhood revolves around the creation of content, we see how influencers “endorse (local) cosmetic services; commoditize cosmetic procedures through the conspicuous display of their ongoing

³⁰ Ibid, 61.

³¹ Magdalena P. McIntyre, “Ageing femininity: digital Mrs. Consumer in intra-action”, *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 13:1 (2020): 54-72.

body projects whilst masking the labor and pain involved; and how face-filters that use augmented reality (AR) technology foster new forms of digitized body dysmorphia.”³² Their principal duty in society is to curate a currency of aesthetics, just out of reach enough that people will shape their lives around chasing an unattainable standard of living. Fashion, lifestyle, beauty, food, etc.—women are constantly exposed to outside influences telling them what to wear, look like, eat, and how to spend their money. In a society where watching and being watched are the cultural norm, how do we exercise autonomy, if it still exists? According to Marshall McLuhan, “Once we have surrendered our senses and nervous systems to the private manipulation of those who would try to benefit by taking a lease on our eyes and ears and nerves, we don’t really have any rights left.”³³

³² Victoria Rodner, Amy Goode, and Zara Burns. ““Is it all just lip service?”: on Instagram and the normalisation of the cosmetic servicescape.” *Journal of Services Marketing* (2021).

³³ Marshall McLuhan, “Understanding Media; the Extensions of Man.” *New York: Signet Books*, (1966).

Research Design

Research Questions & Hypotheses

As discussed above, the internet was instrumental in providing alternative ways for brands to paradoxically expand and restrict what constitutes femininity. For example, the stereotypically feminine practice of applying makeup is no longer a ritual that only women engage in. Some of the most popular beauty bloggers are men (James Charles, Manny Gutierrez, Jeffree Star). However, to be perceived as feminine, one must still partake in this ritual, and that means purchasing specific products and services intentionally branded as feminine. As media channels grow, femininity is commodified through new mannerisms and consumption habits, and influencers play an integral role in its profitability. For content producers, rewards lie in both their engagement metrics and financial compensation. I'm embarking on this research to shed light on the effects of being constantly and completely immersed in the mediascape, as they remain largely undiscovered. We have to process information faster than at any point in history, with little moderation to the volume and type of content we are exposed to. Instagram was a defining platform in launching the exponential trajectory of 'the influencer.' Content that upholds standard definitions of femininity seemingly reaches larger audiences and provides more opportunities for creating revenue streams. Accelerating trend cycles, the fleeting nature of relevance, and the potential to achieve internet fame create an environment that encourages people to take whatever measures necessary to avoid obsolescence. That said, I predict:

H: Influencer culture rewards individuals who uphold gender norms on Instagram.

In this context, I contend that 'influencer culture' is an extension of my previous analysis of Williams's framework. Attaching a gendered lens, the way influencers brand themselves and the products they promote sustains multiple binaries: producer versus consumer, masculine versus

feminine, and wealthy versus poor. Therefore, this dynamic's ubiquitous presence across virtually every media platform serves a capitalist patriarchal society.

Methodology

There are two main actors of social media today: the influencers and the influenced. To test my hypothesis, I will conduct a content analysis on the former. This content analysis will study some of the most recognizable content creators in the beauty, fashion, and lifestyle industries. I'm using Instagram in this study because successful posts (in terms of engagement) require pre-existing audiences. For the sake of my research, I am limiting the definition of 'influencer' to individuals who rose to fame from content creation alone. Celebrities (the Kardashian-Jenner family, Beyoncé, Selena Gomez, or Zendaya, for example) occupy a separate, though similar, space in the realm of influential people on social media. While they often reap the same benefits as influencers, their status and fortune originated from endeavors outside of content creation. The influencers included in this analysis primarily produce content across three visually engaging media channels: Instagram, Youtube, and TikTok, and for largely female audiences. Additionally, they have audiences of over 1 million on each respective platform. These influencers are:

Beauty: Jackie Aina @jackieaina (1.8m Instagram, 3.55m Youtube, 1.6m TikTok)

Fashion: Ashley Rous @best.dressed (1.6m Instagram, 3.78m Youtube, 1.2m TikTok)

Lifestyle: Hannah Meloche @hannahmeloche (1.8m Instagram, 2.08m Youtube, 1.3m TikTok)

My decision to study these specific influencers hinges on a few key factors: their active posting on all platforms, consistent engagement numbers, audiences built through Youtube, and their appeal to women. In my research, I will compare their three best and three worst performing

Instagram posts between January 2021 and the collection date in November 2022, noting the commonalities in their presentation of self, and assess them through Goffman's gender display framework³⁴ with modifications added by Butkowski et. al.³⁵ The framework's variables include: **feminine touch** (image subjects' hands used to feature objects or their own body delicately and passively) with indicator variables of *self-touch* and *caressing object*; **ritualization of subordination** (image subjects that appear to be yielding, unstable, and physically low to the ground) with indicator variables of *canting*, *low posture*, and *imbalance*; **licensed withdrawal** (image subjects that appear distracted, confused, or psychologically removed from their surroundings) with indicator variables of *withdrawing gaze*, *loss of emotional control*, and *faceless portrayal/hidden eyes*; and **body display** (deliberate exposure of the body through clothing choices). I will measure these variables through an inductive coding scheme that examines whether or not they are present in each picture, assigning a code of 1 if present, and 0 if not. This way, intercoder reliability is not needed. If the indicator variables associated with feminine touch, ritualization of subordination, licensed withdrawal, and body display are all present, the photo will receive a score of 9. If their best-performing posts score higher on average than their worst-performing posts, according to Goffman's framework, my hypothesis will be proven correct. For my analysis of the top-performing posts, I am only taking into account still pictures (not videos) of the creator posing individually. I believe my coding system best applies when examining the subject alone, not in relation to friends, family, significant others, etc. For the worst-performing posts, I will include the still images with the lowest overall engagement. I am not applying the same criteria for two main reasons. First, in my hypothesis, I include the notion that these influencers capitalize on the fact that their audiences want to see their

³⁴ Erving Goffman, "Gender display." *Studies in Visual Communication* 3, no. 2 (1976): 69-77.

³⁵ Butkowski, 824-827

expression of femininity through their body. If they do not receive the same engagement numbers on posts that deviate from content of their person, their compensation decreases, thus incentivizing an explicit portrayal of femininity. Secondly, I want to see the subjects these influencers choose to focus on when they're behind the lens. I believe it is relevant to take into account how engagement numbers shift when the main focus pivots from the creator.

Pilot Study

To guide my research, I pose the question: Do these influencers uphold gender stereotypes through the images they post on Instagram?

Jackie Aina (@jackieaina)

Highest: Average = 5

Likes: 342k	Code
Feminine Touch	
- Self-touch	1
- Caressing object	1
Ritualization of Subordination	
- Canting	1
- Low posture	0
- Imbalance	0
Licensed Withdrawal	
- Withdrawing gaze	1
- Loss of emotional control	1
- Faceless portrayal/hidden eyes	1
Body Display	1



Likes: 233k	Code
Feminine Touch	
- Self-touch	1
- Caressing object	0
Ritualization of Subordination	
- Canting	1
- Low posture	0
- Imbalance	1
Licensed Withdrawal	
- Withdrawing gaze	0
- Loss of emotional control	0
- Faceless portrayal/hidden eyes	0
Body Display	1

Likes: 208k	Code
Feminine Touch	
- Self-touch	1
- Caressing object	0
Ritualization of Subordination	
- Canting	1
- Low posture	0
- Imbalance	1
Licensed Withdrawal	
- Withdrawing gaze	0
- Loss of emotional control	0
- Faceless portrayal/hidden eyes	0
Body Display	1



Lowest: Average = 2.66

Likes: 7.48k	Code
Feminine Touch	
- Self-touch	0
- Caressing object	1
Ritualization of Subordination	
- Canting	0
- Low posture	0
- Imbalance	0
Licensed Withdrawal	
- Withdrawing gaze	1
- Loss of emotional control	1
- Faceless portrayal/hidden eyes	1
Body Display	0



Likes: 7.53k	Code
Feminine Touch	
- Self-touch	0
- Caressing object	1
Ritualization of Subordination	
- Canting	0
- Low posture	0
- Imbalance	0
Licensed Withdrawal	
- Withdrawing gaze	0
- Loss of emotional control	0
- Faceless portrayal/hidden eyes	0
Body Display	0

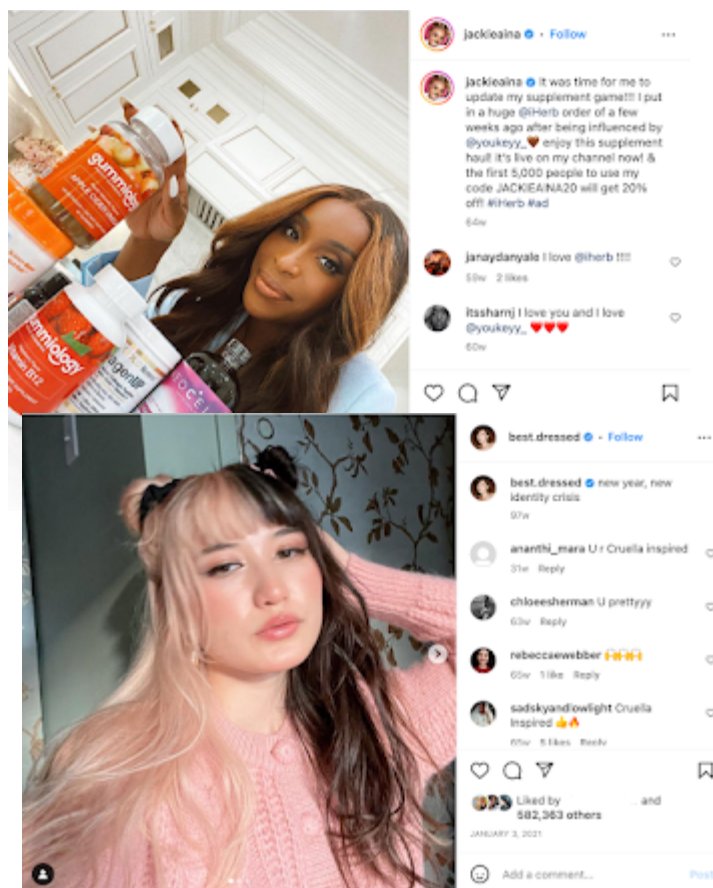


Likes: 11.6k	Code
Feminine Touch	
- Self-touch	0
- Caressing object	1
Ritualization of Subordination	
- Canting	1
- Low posture	1
- Imbalance	0
Licensed Withdrawal	
- Withdrawing gaze	0
- Loss of emotional control	0
- Faceless portrayal/hidden eyes	0
Body Display	0

Ashley Rous (@best.dressed)

Highest: Average = 5.33

Likes: 582k	Code
Feminine Touch	
- Self-touch	1
- Caressing object	0
Ritualization of Subordination	
- Canting	1
- Low posture	1
- Imbalance	0
Licensed Withdrawal	
- Withdrawing gaze	1
- Loss of emotional control	0
- Faceless portrayal/hidden eyes	0
Body Display	0



Likes: 485k	Code
Feminine Touch	
- Self-touch	1
- Caressing object	1
Ritualization of Subordination	
- Canting	1
- Low posture	1
- Imbalance	0
Licensed Withdrawal	
- Withdrawing gaze	1
- Loss of emotional control	0
- Faceless portrayal/hidden eyes	1
Body Display	1



Likes: 468k	Code
Feminine Touch	
- Self-touch	1
- Caressing object	1
Ritualization of Subordination	
- Canting	1
- Low posture	1
- Imbalance	0
Licensed Withdrawal	
- Withdrawing gaze	0
- Loss of emotional control	0
- Faceless portrayal/hidden eyes	0
Body Display	1

Lowest: Average = 3

Likes: 47.4k	Code
Feminine Touch	
- Self-touch	0
- Caressing object	0
Ritualization of Subordination	
- Canting	0
- Low posture	0
- Imbalance	0
Licensed Withdrawal	
- Withdrawing gaze	0
- Loss of emotional control	0
- Faceless portrayal/hidden eyes	0
Body Display	0



Likes: 95.7k	Code
Feminine Touch	
- Self-touch	0
- Caressing object	1
Ritualization of Subordination	
- Canting	0
- Low posture	0
- Imbalance	0
Licensed Withdrawal	
- Withdrawing gaze	0
- Loss of emotional control	0
- Faceless portrayal/hidden eyes	1
Body Display	1



Likes: 100k	Code
Feminine Touch	
- Self-touch	0
- Caressing object	1
Ritualization of Subordination	
- Canting	1
- Low posture	1
- Imbalance	0
Licensed Withdrawal	
- Withdrawing gaze	1
- Loss of emotional control	0
- Faceless portrayal/hidden eyes	1
Body Display	1



Hannah Meloche (@hannahmeloche)

Highest: Average = 6

Likes: 368k	Code
Feminine Touch	
- Self-touch	0
- Caressing object	1
Ritualization of Subordination	
- Canting	1
- Low posture	0
- Imbalance	1
Licensed Withdrawal	
- Withdrawing gaze	1
- Loss of emotional control	0
- Faceless portrayal/hidden eyes	1
Body Display	1



Likes: 365k	Code
Feminine Touch	
- Self-touch	1
- Caressing object	1
Ritualization of Subordination	
- Canting	1
- Low posture	1
- Imbalance	0
Licensed Withdrawal	
- Withdrawing gaze	1
- Loss of emotional control	0
- Faceless portrayal/hidden eyes	1
Body Display	1



Likes: 329k	Code
Feminine Touch	
- Self-touch	1
- Caressing object	0
Ritualization of Subordination	
- Canting	1
- Low posture	0
- Imbalance	1
Licensed Withdrawal	
- Withdrawing gaze	0
- Loss of emotional control	0
- Faceless portrayal/hidden eyes	1
Body Display	1



Lowest: Average = 2.33

Likes: 39.5k	Code
Feminine Touch	
- Self-touch	0
- Caressing object	1
Ritualization of Subordination	
- Canting	1
- Low posture	1



- Imbalance	0
Licensed Withdrawal	
- Withdrawing gaze	1
- Loss of emotional control	1
- Faceless portrayal/hidden eyes	1
Body Display	1

Likes: 50.3k	Code
Feminine Touch	
- Self-touch	0
- Caressing object	0
Ritualization of Subordination	
- Canting	0
- Low posture	0
- Imbalance	0
Licensed Withdrawal	
- Withdrawing gaze	0
- Loss of emotional control	0
- Faceless portrayal/hidden eyes	0
Body Display	0



Likes: 52.5k	Code
Feminine Touch	
- Self-touch	0
- Caressing object	0
Ritualization of Subordination	
- Canting	0
- Low posture	0
- Imbalance	0
Licensed Withdrawal	
- Withdrawing gaze	0
- Loss of emotional control	0
- Faceless portrayal/hidden eyes	0
Body Display	0



Discussion

Through my research, I found that influencer culture does reward individuals who uphold gender norms, proving my hypothesis correct. All three influencers' top-performing posts scored higher on average than their lowest. Future research, with similar methodologies, would benefit from coding an algorithm that individually assesses each picture instead of just examining the best and worst-performing posts. This would offer a clearer summary of the accounts studied. However, among this conclusion, there were a few other key discoveries I found.

- First, there was a smaller discrepancy than I anticipated between the most and least-liked photos according to the framework. At a glance, all of the top-performing posts appear outwardly feminine. But, when applying the methodological framework, it reduced the appearance of femininity. Although body display was present in almost every most-liked image, it did not significantly influence a photo's average score. In future studies, researchers should weigh the categories of the framework differently because body display is such a defining factor of what constitutes femininity. These women enjoy the unique privilege of making a living on their bodies. As evidenced by my research, when the lens is shifted away from their body, they receive fewer rewards. When they adapt the lens to their own perspective, their audiences do not engage.
- Initially, I found it interesting that sponsored and promotional content received the least engagement. However, after further consideration, I realized people don't like to be reminded that their consumption habits generate someone else's income. If an influencer's best work is sponsored, that typically indicates that the rest of their content lacks widespread appeal. The power one wields over their audiences directly correlates to their relationship with corporate sponsors. The more companies that bankroll their content and send them free promotional products, the better-equipped influencers are to brand themselves to their audiences.

- Overall engagement is trending down. All three influencers' most liked posts were from early in the adopted time frame. This phenomenon could be attributed to two main factors: First, people are getting bored of repetitive content. If every post an audience sees is a slight variation of the one before, they lose interest. Second, due to the oversaturation of the influencer market, audiences are fragmenting. Individuals are not captivated as easily as the mass audiences in years prior.
- Influencers used to be the "more relatable" alternative to the glamorized extravagance of celebrities, but the two identities are merging. Today, they occupy similar realms as content creation's profitability has skyrocketed. Now that influencers have access to the lifestyle of the rich and the famous, people are getting bored with outwardly expressions of wealth and want actual substance in the content they consume.
- Lastly, and perhaps most relevant to the study, these influencers have predominantly female audiences, as I mentioned in my methodology. This means that women are the ones rewarding this hyper-feminized content, contradictory to assumptions that men reward the body display and ritualization of subordination expressed by these particular accounts. Women's internalization of gender performance is common in a patriarchal society that values docile bodies above all else.

Future Research

There is a research gap in current social media analysis. TikTok's swift but steady rise has completely shifted the digital media ecosystem. Its interface and algorithm are unique technological developments. Unlike other creative platforms, virality does not come with prerequisites—no existing fan base is needed for views and engagement, though it can help. TikTok's built-in editing features, appeal to the public's decreasing attention span, and hyper-

individualized “for you page” orient it as the perfect platform to exploit users' impulsivity and value of aesthetics. Finally, the rapid pace of content produced alters the way we behave in relation to the media and products we consume. The “democratization” of TikTok (in an interactive sense, not as a form of collective power) gives people the sense that they reserve the *right* to partake in trends; or through a neoliberal lens, inclusion through consumption. As I mentioned in my research design—there are two main actors on social media: influencers and the influenced. This study would examine the latter.

H: Women are more inclined to define themselves by aesthetics and their associated products and services.

As I discussed in my literature review, there are certain behavioral and beauty standards that exclusively apply to women. The societal pressures to conform to these standards often result in reckless spending and physically altering one's appearance. If proven correct, I think that continuing on this current track will lead to more debt, cosmetic surgeries, and overconsumption.

RQ: Are young women's perceptions of self bound up in the consumption of mass-market pseudo-luxury goods and services?

It is easy to market new things to women when society keeps altering the definition of womanhood. Rapid trend turnover and increased accessibility to luxury provide young women with the tools to sell themselves in a marketplace of aesthetics. The self-production value of content across Instagram, Youtube, and TikTok gives off the illusion that self-expression is inherent to the nature of the platform, even if self-expression is merely a subterfuge encouraging increased consumption.

This content analysis would collect data from Tik Tok alone, not specific to individual creators. It would examine eight of the most popular aesthetics that dominated social media in

the past two years. Specifically, I would find the videos with the most engagements under each hashtagged term and analyze the consequences of the patterns in this content. My hypothesis will hold true if the majority of this content is produced by women and includes links, mentions, or references to specific products available for purchase. These aesthetics include:

“**That Girl**” consists of someone who has her life together, in a seemingly unattainable manner. “**Cottage Core**” refers to the peace and pleasures one derives from escaping urban life. The “**Coastal Grandma**” aesthetic plays into the wealthy, New England style of muted-preppy minimalism. “**Dark Academia**” has a “deep appreciation for creature comfort” and gives the pursuit of knowledge a “sense of levity.” The “**Indie Sleaze**” era popularized in the late 2000s incorporates the same effortless chaos of their style into their behavior. “**Normcore**” is merely the act of dressing normally; something that is seemingly so basic has been labeled as its own niche. “**Gorpcore**” focuses on the utilitarian: clothes that are functional and could be worn to summit a mountain. Finally, “**Y2K**”: the resurgence of the glaringly feminine era of the late 90s and early 2000s.

Regardless of the varying aesthetics or to which group people assign themselves, there are influencers for every demographic and an endless amount of products to market to each niche. Aesthetics are not merely a fashion decision, they determine one’s behavior.

Conclusion

Through this research, I sought to examine how influencers, as corporate actors, affect women’s behaviors and consumption habits through social media. The ritual of claiming an identity in this digital age requires young women to either adopt or reject popular discourses around feminine ideals.³⁶ As I outlined in my literature review and research, the external,

³⁶ Connie Morrison, “Creating and Regulating Identity in Online Spaces: Girlhood, Social Networking, and Avatars.” In *Girlhood and the Politics of Place*, edited by Claudia Mitchell and Carrie Rentschler, (2016): 244.

abstract, and disciplinary forces facilitating that decision hold more power than expected. Our culture is dictated by society's obsession with aesthetics, the compulsory construction of a recognizably feminine body, and the consumption of digital media. As Kimberly Lamm notes in her essay on images, sounds, and words in neoliberal cultures of femininity, girls are "coerced into performing forms of symbolic work within neoliberalism that displace and contain the corrosive effects of capitalism unbound."³⁷ Therefore, "bodily freedom" can only be achieved under the stipulation that our time, attention, and capital are monopolized by corporate actors. Intrinsic to the nature of the internet, constructing a gendered appearance on social media is as routine as engaging in a regimen of maintenance on the physical appearance or doing a double-take in the mirror as you pass by. Influencers are an apparatus of capitalism. Their societal purpose hinges on their ability to promote disciplinary practices that "produce a body of a certain size and general configuration, that bring forth from the body a specific repertoire of gestures, postures, and movements, and that are directed toward the display of this body as an ornamented surface."³⁸ Social media's contribution to the commodification of femininity has further entrenched us in a reality where gender performance and aesthetic entrepreneurship are the norm. And as media channels continue to converge, we are left with nothing but mere illusions of autonomy.

³⁷ Kimberly Lamm, "Texting girls: images, sounds, and words in neoliberal cultures of femininity." *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory*, 25:2 (2015): 111.

³⁸ Bartky, "Foucault, femininity, and the modernization of patriarchal power," 27.

Bibliography

- Banet-Weiser, Sarah. "Authentic(tm): The ambivalence in a brand culture." *New York University Press*. (2012).
- Bartky, Sandra L. "Foucault, femininity, and the modernization of patriarchal power." *The Politics of Women's Bodies: Sexuality, Appearance, and Behavior* (1998): 25–45.
- Butkowski, Chelsea P. "Quantifying the feminine self(ie): Gender display and social media feedback in young women's Instagram selfies." *New Media & Society*, 22(5) (2020): 817–837.
- Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519.
- de Beauvoir, Simone. "The Second Sex", trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage, 1974), 38.
- Dreze, Xavier, and Fred Zufryden. "Testing web site design and promotional content." *Journal of Advertising Research* 37 (1997): 5.
- Duffy, Brooke E. "Gendering The Labor Of Social Media Production." *Feminist Media Studies*, 15:4 (2015): 710-714.
- Freedman, Des. "A 'Technological Idiot'? Raymond Williams and Communications Technology." *Information, Communication & Society*, 5:3. (2002). 425-442
- Friz, Amanda, and Robert W. Gehl. "Pinning the feminine user: gender scripts in Pinterest's sign-up interface." *Media, Culture & Society*, (2016).
- Goffman, Erving. "Gender display." *Studies in Visual Communication* 3, no. 2 (1976): 69-77.
- Jenkins, Henry. "The cultural logic of media convergence." *International journal of cultural studies* 7, no. 1 (2004): 33-43.
- Jenkins, Henry, and Mark Deuze. "Convergence culture." *Convergence* 14, no. 1 (2008): 5-12.
- Lamm, Kimberly. "Texting girls: images, sounds, and words in neoliberal cultures of femininity." *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory*, 25:2 (2015): 111-127.
- McIntyre, Magdalena P. "Agencing femininity: digital Mrs. Consumer in intra-action," *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 13:1 (2020): 54-72.
- McLuhan, Marshall. "Understanding Media; the Extensions of Man." *New York: Signet Books*, (1966).
- Morrison, Connie. "Creating and Regulating Identity in Online Spaces: Girlhood, Social Networking, and Avatars." In *Girlhood and the Politics of Place*, edited by Claudia Mitchell and Carrie Rentschler, 244–58. Berghahn Books, 2016.
- Rodner, Victoria, Amy Goode, and Zara Burns. "'Is it all just lip service?': on Instagram and the normalisation of the cosmetic servicescape." *Journal of Services Marketing* (2021).

Tolentino, Jia. "The Age of Instagram Face." *The New Yorker*, (2019).

Williams, Raymond. "Culture is ordinary (1958)." *Cultural theory: An anthology* 5359 (2011).