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Women Supporting Women: Lifestyle Influencers and Branded Femininity

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Women Supporting Women: Lifestyle Influencers and Branded Femininity

by

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Abstract

Influencer is a term used to refer to a digital content creator who has successfully monetized their social media brand. These individuals are self-branders who see social and economic returns in exchange for their supposedly authentic self-presentations (Abidin 2015; Duffy 2017; Hearn 2008). These self-presentations often rely on hegemonic logics in order to gain popular attention, reproducing existing discourses about gendered social life. This thesis problematizes the branded femininity of beauty and lifestyle influencer, Estée Lalonde. With over 1.1 million YouTube subscribers and 700,000 followers on Instagram, Lalonde uses the postfeminist credibility she established through performing hegemonic femininity to position herself as an authority on the subject of everyday life (Abidin 2015). Through feminist textual discursive analysis, I argue that Lalonde uses the popular social media sites Instagram and YouTube, as well as her podcast and non-fiction book, to perform a hegemonic white femininity emblematic of a postfeminist media culture (Gill 2016). Further, this project explores how Lalonde engages with neoliberal feminism to solidify her self-brand centered around female empowerment, contributing to ongoing scholarly discussion of feminist visibility in our current media moment (Keller and Ryan 2018).

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The Power of Influencer Marketing

In December 2016, users noticed a sudden influx of posts geotagged with ‘Fyre Festival’ being uploaded to Instagram. More notably, these posts were being shared by some of the social media platforms top performing users: influencers and supermodels. As more images of beautiful women partying on white sand beaches started to surface online, the general public speculated that ‘Fyre Festival’ could be a viral marketing tactic. Soon after, the mysterious social media presence shared a promotional video featuring beautiful young women each with hundreds of thousands of Instagram followers. The video marketed Fyre Festival as a transformative, immersive luxury music festival on a private island in the Bahamas. Attendees were to be flown in on chartered flights and eat catered meals throughout the weekend. Organizers promised luxurious accommodations with ocean views. Even Kendall Jenner of Kardashian fame endorsed the festival in an Instagram post (Vargas 2019). Tickets for flights and hotels ranged in price from US\$1500 to USD\$25,000 (Blair 2019). Despite the hefty price tag and the festivals’ relative obscurity aside from a prolific social media presence, people were willing to pay for the experience promised by internet celebrity endorsement. Fyre Festival sold out within 24 hours, exceeding the organizers’ expectations (Blair 2019).

A month before the festival, news outlets and a Twitter account called @FyreFraud began to share stories raising concerns about the festival’s organization. The featured artists had not yet been paid and photographs suggested the festival would not be held on a private beach let alone a private island, but instead in an empty lot next to a commercial resort. VIP ticket holders had yet to receive their travel itineraries. Kendall Jenner was criticized for her failure to disclose that she was in a paid partnership with Fyre Festival, reportedly receiving \$250,000USD to

promote the event, leading the internet to question whether or not her endorsement was trustworthy (Alvarez 2017). The day before guests were to arrive at Fyre Festival, a headliner cancelled their performance citing issues with the quality of the venue. The first groups of guests arrived to find hurricane relief tents in place of luxury cabanas, no running water, no security, and no catering. The demise of Fyre Festival played out in real time on social media, with attendees sharing photos and complaints. Organizers cancelled the event in the early hours of the morning (Blair 2019).

Media coverage of Fyre Festival's spectacular failure has focused heavily on the young women paid to promote the event. In April 2017, as the festival was playing out in real time, *Refinery 29* shared an article titled "Bella Hadid-Backed Musical Music Festival Descends Into Chaos" (Gil 2017). Similarly, Kendall Jenner was often cited in articles as an active brand partner, despite the fact she only ever shared a single Instagram post. Jenner and the other Instagram influencers are facing possible subpoenas in Fyre Festival's bankruptcy case (Helmore 2019). Youth culture site, *The Tab*, published a list of all the A-list influencers involved in the festival's promotion (Soen 2019). *Wired* argues that "The Fyre Festival Fiasco" should be blamed on the plague that is influencer marketing (Richardson 2017). This is not to say that the media has not covered Fyre Festival's organizers. Streaming services Netflix and Hulu released documentaries in early 2019 that provided insight into what the public had not seen play out on social media. The documentaries instead focused on the criminal role the organizers played and the deception that allowed the festival to advance as far along as it did. But Fyre Festival was an important cultural event in the sense that it arguably marked the introduction of social media influencers into the public consciousness. More specifically, media was concerned with the amount of money influencers, but more specifically attractive young women were receiving in

exchange for sponsored social media uploads. In turn, this led to discussions around the cultural power these influencers must possess in order to monetize their followings.

Recently, popular culture and business journalists have called influencer marketing at large into question. *The Sunday Times* writer Josh Glancy (2019) argues that the Fyre Festival documentaries not only exposed the festival's organizers but influencer culture more broadly as a corrupt, morally bankrupt business. Paris Martineau (2018) exposé on Instagram influencers outlined the thousands of dollars companies were willing to pay influencers to discretely disparage their competition. Some companies reportedly paid up to \$80,000USD per post. YouTube influencers faced criticism after numerous content creators promoted an online counselling app called BetterHelp. YouTube audiences were put off by a sudden uptick in video uploads focusing on mental health that happened to also be sponsored by BetterHelp (Alexander 2018). Followers and journalists alike questioned the ethics of promoting the app to young audiences because BetterHelp's terms of service clearly outlined that they could not guarantee the quality of care users would experience. Since the demise of Fyre Festival, popular media has covered influencer marketing in a variety of ways. Similarly, scholarly inquiry into social media afforded celebrity is a modest but growing body of literature.

Existing scholarship has focused on the labour of influencer marketing (Abidin 2015, 2016, 2018; Duffy 2017). My interest in influencers is not only in the labour and political economy operating behind the larger industry but instead in the supposedly attainable fantasy influencers rely on to maintain their self-brand. Fashion, beauty, and lifestyle influencers, in particular, have become synonymous with a particular feminized aesthetic that relies on displays of traditional femininity (Lorenz 2019). This project intends to intervene and contribute to a growing body of scholarly work by problematizing the discourses social media influencers help

circulate through the power of their cultural capital. To do this, I will focus on a particular case study, lifestyle influencer Estée Lalonde. While Lalonde may not have attended or promoted Fyre Festival, she has amassed a significant following, establishing herself as a voice of authority within her niche. Because of this, she is capable of receiving monetary compensation for her conventional good looks and supposedly attainable lifestyle. In this introductory chapter, I outline her rise to internet fame and how this privileged position allows her to produce and reproduce discourses surrounding femininity, gendered labour, and living a good life within a 21st Century context.

From Obscurity to Internet Celebrity

Estée Lalonde grew up in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. The then 19-year-old packed up her life after meeting her boyfriend on a now-defunct social media site. Shortly after relocating to London, England, she found herself in need of a hobby. Makeup and beauty were something she was interested in, though not particularly talented at. She decided to make that her angle when she started her beauty blog. Capitalizing on her amateur application skills and limited knowledge, Lalonde established a niche for herself on her blog “Essie Button” (Lalonde 2016a). As she started to gain traffic in early 2011, her boyfriend pushed her to start a YouTube channel. For the next four years, she created content under the screen name Essie Button, a nod to a nickname he gave her when they first started dating. Initially her channel focused mainly on skincare favourites, makeup hauls, and hair tutorials. In the summer of 2015, Essie Button reached one million subscribers on YouTube (Lalonde 2015). By this point in her career, Lalonde had not only her blog and YouTube channel, but accounts on Twitter, Instagram,

Tumblr, and Pinterest. She had established herself as a beauty ‘influencer’ with a multi-platform reach and a large fanbase.

Later that same summer, Lalonde announced a major rebrand in a video titled “LET’S MEET AGAIN” (Lalonde 2015). In an interview with *Yahoo Style*, she explained that Essie Button no longer felt authentic:

I never thought it was something I’d be known as but as I’ve grown up, I began to feel like ‘Essie Button’ was something separate from myself and I didn’t like that as things began to really grow. I felt like Essie Button as an impression of who I was and it was really beginning to feel like a character, rather than myself,” says LaLonde. “I also feel like I’ve done a lot of my growing up online and I wanted it to be authentic and real to who I am. (Chapman 2016)

The announcement included more than just a name change, but a change in focus for her content. Lalonde would no longer be *just* a beauty influencer – her content would now be considered ‘lifestyle’. This announcement was met with mixed reviews from her fans (See Figure 1). Some were excited for the change in focus because it opened up the potential for new content, while others were concerned about a shift in perceived authenticity having already detected something amiss in a few of her newer, sponsored videos. The comment section read as though ‘Essie Button’ and Estée Lalonde were two completely different people, despite the fact Essie had always been Lalonde.

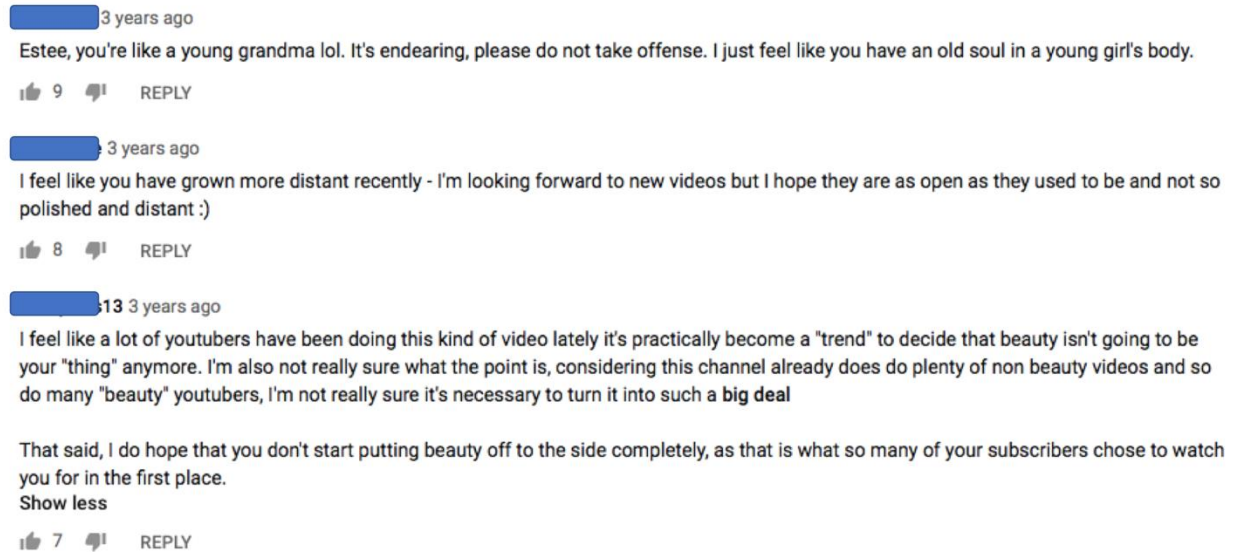


Figure 1 YouTube subscribers' comments on Estée Lalonde's video, "LET'S MEET AGAIN" (2015).

Lalonde released her book *Bloom: Navigating Life and Style* in late 2016, joining a growing list of YouTube-famous content creators releasing print titles. According to one American publisher, YouTube stars were a contributing factor to the sudden boom of print book sales in 2015 (Ingram 2015). Not only were internet celebrities able to monetize their content within the digital sphere, but in a previously suffering print market. Even in 2018, influencers continued to enter the publishing industry with other popular British lifestyle influencers Lily Pebbles and Anna Newton announcing their own non-fiction titles (Pebbles 2018, Newton 2019). As the title suggests, *Bloom* is a non-fiction lifestyle book that chronicles Lalonde's 25-year-long journey to discovering herself and her style. Throughout the novel she tells anecdotes about her childhood and teen years, using these stories to emphasize how much she has grown since moving to London and finding success in creating digital content. There are seven chapters: Life, People, Work, Beauty, Fashion, Home, Travel, and Food. Each of these chapters recounts one aspect of what she calls her 'Bloom Story,' or her journey to self-discovery (Lalonde 2016a).

Admittedly, I am an avid consumer of beauty and lifestyle content online. As a feminist researcher, I recognize that the pleasure we receive from feminized texts is important because of the subsequent cultural value these texts have as a result (Levine 2015). The cultural value of influencers affects purchases I make in my everyday life. When curious about a makeup product, my instinct tells me to navigate my browser to YouTube in search of product reviews. During the course of this project, I actively participated in a local lifestyle influencer's product giveaway – tagging my sister and friends in a sponsored Instagram posts with the hopes of winning a free lotion (I actually won). This project emerged from a specific interest in beauty and lifestyle content creators and a general interest in the state of influencer culture. This active interest in the online community also highlighted the importance of this research. Before this project I thought I had an understanding of the influencer marketing industry. Through my research, I came to understand Lalonde differently. For many years, she was a reliable source of information and a voice of authority on makeup products. I understood that she received monetary compensation for some of her posts, but generally, I felt as though she was someone I could relate to and rely on – an authentic online presence.

As a researcher, I first became interested in her branded persona in early 2017 following the release of *Bloom*. In particular, I was drawn to the ways in which she navigated her self-presentation, translating her online brand to traditional print media. Following the book's release, Lalonde's brand shifted from strictly hair, makeup, and skincare to include her personal interests such as reading, thrift shopping, and feminism. It was her sudden focus on female empowerment that sparked this research project as I began to problematize how her social position as an 'influencer' contributed to existing discourses of traditional femininity. This project highlighted that Lalonde's self-presentation was based on an authenticity that was constantly in-flux and

constructed with the purpose of furthering a self-brand. I refer to this as a branded femininity because I understand Lalonde as less of an internet persona and more of an internet salesperson, using her cultural capital to receive monetary compensation.

Self-branding in the Digital Age: Scholarly Context

Within contemporary neoliberal culture, “the making of the entrepreneurial self is a dominant trope”, and “a multitude of media formats across divergent national contexts showcase the contemporary obsession with the attainment of celebrity status as the most aspirational form of social mobility” (Abidin and Gwynne 2017). Social media platforms are prolific sites for self-branding practices, allowing their users to gain both social and cultural capital (Hearn 2008). These platforms can be understood as political stages and performative infrastructures that shape performances of social acts (van Dijck 2013). Conventions such as liking, sharing, and friending are “powerful ideological concepts whose impact reaches (...) into all corners of culture, affecting the very fabric of sociality” (van Dijck 2013 66). Yet, social media architecture encourages users to monitor each other’s activities under the guise of pursuing social connection (Senft 2013, 347).

Circulating and updating one’s likeness commodifies self-image, making surveillance the norm and a validation of worth (Shields Dobson 2008). Self-representations are circulated as commodities and personal success measured in views, likes, followers, subscribers, and shares (Maguire 2015, 77). Within contemporary feminized culture, exposing one’s supposedly true, authentic self through digital surveillance is not only expected but valorized (Shields Dobson 2008; Gill 2017). By extension, surveillance has become entrenched in what Rosalind Gill (2017) identifies as a persistent postfeminist media culture. Broadly, postfeminism prescribes a

definition of femininity based on the assumption that all women are motivated by a common set of desires, fears, and concerns (Negra 2009). On social media, this manifests in the form of homogenized self-presentations that commodify feminine self-presentation in the name of properly performing femininity.

Visual social media platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube maintain consistent popularity, further entrenching themselves into the practices of everyday life (Highfield 2016). The purpose of this project is to problematize portrayals of branded femininity on two social media platforms in particular: Instagram and YouTube. Owned by Facebook, Instagram is a photo-sharing social media application that has maintained a steady-level of increasing popularity since 2012. The app has over 1-billion monthly active users, making it one of the most popular social networking sites worldwide (Statista 2019). In the United States, 64-percent of Instagram users are between the ages of 18-29 (Statista 2019). Users are able to upload photos and one-minute videos with captions to their ‘grid,’ the feed other users see when visiting their profile. In 2016, Instagram added Instagram Stories, allowing users to upload 15-second video clips that disappear after 24-hours. Introduced in the summer of 2018 as a way to compete with video-sharing giant YouTube, IGTV allows users to upload long-form videos (BBC 2018). YouTube is a video sharing social media site owned by Google (Alba 2015). Content on the platform includes music videos, vlogs (video blogs), product reviews, short-films, feature-length films, instructional videos, and film trailers. This list is in no way exhaustive. YouTube does not dictate the kinds of content users create, just that they be uploaded in video format. Both platforms allow a select-few individuals to monetize their carefully curated self-brands, gaining social media afforded celebrity with access to brand deals, paid vacations, free products, and social status. This fame is not egalitarian, instead reinforcing existing social

hierarchies in which connections, wealth, and conventional attractiveness are “reinscribed in a visual digital medium” (Marwick 2015, 141).

Scholars have paid particular attention to the rise of social media afforded celebrity. This thesis uses Theresa Senft’s (2008, 2013) term “microcelebrity” to help make sense of how women engage with femininity in digital spaces. Broadly, Senft (2013) defines microcelebrity as the branding of one’s online identity. Microcelebrity relies on the curation of a persona that feels authentic to the audience (Abidin 2016). Senft’s early research on camgirls (which I explore at length in my literature review) foregrounds discussions of feminized self-branding, gendered digital labour, and the power of intimacy between content creators and their audience (Senft 2008).

Alice Marwick and danah boyd (2011) found that the social media platform, Twitter, allowed for seemingly unmediated access to celebrities’ lives. Their paper was specifically concerned with the ways in which intimacy was established through the revelation of seemingly personal information online and publicly acknowledging fans. They argue that these interactions are inauthentic and contingent on an established power difference between the celebrity and fans. While Marwick and boyd (2011) were specifically interested in conventional celebrity, microcelebrities rely on similar techniques of self-disclosure in order to foster feelings of intimacy among their followers.

Digital anthropologist and ethnographer Crystal Abidin (2015, 2016) further explains the complicated relationship between microcelebrities and their fans in her extensive research on social media influencers. Her research builds on the concept of microcelebrity while specifically referencing the popular cultural phenomenon that is the social media influencer. Abidin defines influencers as:

Every day, 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 blogs or social media posts and making physical paid-guest appearances at events. (Abidin 2016, 3)

The digital engagement with their following occurs within social media spaces in the form of photo and video uploads, likes, comments, and replies. Sometimes influencers will host meet ups with their audience in the ‘real world,’ solidifying the cultivated, intimate relationship between influencer and follower (Abidin 2016). These meetups can be both formal, such as a book or autograph signing organized by the influencer’s management company, or an informal meetup organized by the influencer themselves when visiting a city while on holiday, for example. The “advertorials” Abidin (2016, 3) refers to in her definition, are uploads the influencer receives compensation for in exchange for a social media post. Marketers decide whether or not an influencer is worth partnering with based on the number and demographics of the influencer’s following (Luvaas 2017).

Abidin (2015) argues that all of an influencer’s content is created with the sole goal of creating feelings of intimacy. This intimacy is contingent on an influencer’s ability to portray a supposedly authentic persona online. Authenticity within this context is understood as how genuine the influencer’s lifestyle and content feels to their followers (Abidin 2015). In this sense, authenticity is an illusion, concerned with convincing an influencer’s following that the images they see are consistent with an overall self-brand (Bergen 2017). Brooke Erin Duffy (2015, 2017) uses this notion of authenticity to characterize what she calls aspirational labourers, who use their ordinariness and realness to appeal to an audience. Aspirational labour is characterized by the pursuit of creative activities with the promise of economic and social capital as reward (Duffy 2015). This labour is typically undertaken by young, middle-class women and obscures

“problematic constructions of gender and intersectionality with class” (443). Influencers who have successfully mobilized aspirational labour “end up reaffirming the already-tight bond between consumption and femininity” (Duffy 2017, xii).

In this thesis, I refer to my case study and other digital content creators who benefit from aspirational labour, as influencers. More specifically, I use the term ‘lifestyle influencer’ for two reasons. First, this is the term Lalonde uses to describe herself. Second, according to Abidin (2016), a lifestyle influencer is a creator whose posts are concerned with “their everyday lives as lived” (3). To build on this definition, lifestyle content can include the sharing of anything from beauty products, home décor, self-care tips, romantic relationship advice, financial advice, fitness, and cooking. This particular genre is quite broad, leaving influencers with plenty of ground to cover in terms of content. Within this genre, all aspects of an influencer’s life are able to be converted into clicks, views, and interactions. By extension, this creates more opportunities for the monetization of their self-brand.

As I argue in my literature review, this project adds to a growing body of critical media studies scholarship concerning social-media afforded celebrity. I outlined Abidin’s (2015, 2016, 2017) work on perceived authenticity and intimacy, and Duffy’s (2015, 2017) extensive work regarding social media afforded gendered labour. While these two approaches to the study social media influencers are valid and important, I am interested in the ways postfeminist media culture is circulated through lifestyle influencers. I pay particular attention to the way femininity is discursively constructed within the confines of my case study’s brand, which is contingent on the conventions of microcelebrity and gendered labour (Abidin 2015, 2016; Duffy 2015, 2017). Using postfeminism as a lens through which we can understand media phenomenon (Gill 2007, 2017), I problematize how the types of femininity Lalonde is able to produce are constrained by

the current cultural moment. Informed by Elana Levine's (2015) assertion that femininized media cultures are worthy objects of study, I contextualized my research by the media moment we are in, while recognizing the ubiquity of using a hegemonically feminine image with the goal of economic and social success, as well as creative self-actualization (Shields-Dobson 2008; Duffy 2017).

“Everyone is a Feminist”: Branded Femininity on Social Media

In late 2017, Lalonde launched her podcast, *The Heart of It* (Lalonde 2017b). The podcast marked a significant turning point in Lalonde's brand. In the episode entitled “Feminism,” aligning herself with a larger cultural movement in which feminism was not only present in the public consciousness but accepted as “cool” identity for young women to assume (Gill 2016; Keller and Ryan 2018). She identified the ubiquity of feminism in our current media moment: “When I think about the people I look up to, the people I admire, everyone is a feminist” (Lalonde 2017b). After listening to the episode, I became increasingly concerned with how feminism may be co-opted in order to sell a feminized self-brand within lifestyle influencer culture. Because these influencers are established as authorities on the subject on living life well (Abidin 2016), problematizing how they were selling a feminized self-brand reliant on digital platform conventions was of particular concern. As such, my research question for this project was: “How is femininity branded and performed by lifestyle and beauty influencers on Instagram and other social media platforms?”

In order to answer this question, I use a feminist cultural studies approach to perform a discursive textual analysis of a set of purposefully selected media examples (Gill 2009, 2018). Over the course of six months, I collected more than 200 photos and videos from Instagram and

YouTube. I also included an episode from her podcast, *The Heart of It* (2017b) and her print book, *Bloom* (Lalonde 2016b). After thematically coding my data, I identified five analytical themes relating to performances of femininity. The themes are as follows: female friendship, commodity feminism and gendered consumption, the interior psychic life, heterosexual romance, and gendered labour.

My thematic analysis was informed by the literature review included in chapter two. This review considers how communication and media studies scholars approach the study of social media platforms more broadly, including their conventions and affordances, and how scholarship understands social media afforded celebrity (Abidin 2016; Van Dijck 2013; Gibbs et al. 2014). I follow this with an overview of work concerning gendered labour in digital spaces (Duffy 2017). I conclude the chapter with an extensive discussion of postfeminism as an analytical framework (Gill 2007, 2017), and how feminist visibilities in the current media moment inform popular feminisms (Rottenberg 2013; Keller and Ryan 2018; Renninger 2018). Chapter three outlines feminist cultural studies, the theoretical lens through which the media texts in this thesis are problematized. Also, I outline my methodological approach. In chapter four, I discuss the results of my textual discursive analysis which problematizes how Lalonde engages with a white, middle-class branded femininity framed by postfeminist logics, and informed by neoliberal discourses of empowerment. Finally, chapter five concludes with a discussion of my findings and considerations for future research.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of my research is to interrogate how social media influencers contribute to notions of what it means to properly perform hegemonic femininity in our current media moment. As such, I situate my research within two bodies of scholarly literature: internet celebrity studies (Abidin 2015, 2016; Duffy 2015, 2016, 2017; Marwick 2013, 2015; Senft 2008, 2013), and feminist media studies, particularly scholarly writing concerned with postfeminist sensibilities (Banet-Weiser 2017; Gill 2007, 2016, 2017; Gill and Orgad 2018). The subject of my case study, Estée Lalonde, discursively constructs her femininity in online spaces using platform conventions. While she also uses some traditional print media to bolster her existing narrative, the majority of her branding efforts occur in the digital sphere. As such, I focus on digital media platforms as key spaces where performances of gender are frequently played out.

This chapter is comprised of three sections. In the first section, I discuss how online celebrity is achieved through the cultivation of authenticity and intimacy. Next, I outline how social media platforms play an integral role in the types of gendered self-branding that occur within digital spaces, paying particular attention to the ways in which engineered or coded limitations enable and constrict internet users (Gibbs et al 2014, van Dijck 2013). I discuss how self-branding occurs on the social media platform Instagram. Then, I describe how the phenomenon of influencer marketing operates through the perceived feelings of authenticity and intimacy social media celebrities cultivate (Abidin 2015, Duffy 2017). The final section of this literature review will explore the ways in which feminist media studies scholars write about postfeminism in relation to performances of femininity. I discuss how gendered labour functions within influencer marketing and how this gendered labour contributes to notions of traditional femininity (Duffy 2017, Gill and Orgad 2018). Through this, I position this research project

within the larger field of critical media studies concerned with social media influencers and explore how I intervene by focusing on the feminine identity of lifestyle influencers.

Microcelebrity and Influencers

Digital media scholar Crystal Abidin (2018) defines internet celebrity as “a product of performance and perception” (19). Navigating fame online is a self-branding exercise that relies on maintaining a balance of perceived attainability and authenticity (Hearn 2008, Abidin 2015, Duffy 2017). Self-branders are concerned not only with gaining cultural capital but seeing economic return as a result of their popularity (Hearn 2008). They are in constant control of their image, working to maintain a socially acceptable version of self-presentation which will allow them to further their brand (Hearn 2008). Successful self-branding within the digital sphere results in a specific type of online fame called microcelebrity (Senft 2008, 2013). Before further discussing how perceived authenticity and intimacy allow for microcelebrities to monetize their following, I will first outline how gendered practices of self-branding online are understood.

Theresa Senft’s (2008, 2013) work concerning camgirls, and later self-branding, is foundational to understanding the concept of microcelebrity, and by extension, my case study. In her own words, Senft (2013) defines microcelebrity as a “commitment to deploying and maintaining one’s online identity as if it were a branded good, with the expectation that others do the same” (346). This celebrity is afforded through social platforms that encourage users to monitor one another through the acts of following and subscribing as a way to establish a semblance of social connection (Senft 2013). Camgirls were early adopters of webcam technology who used the devices to livestream from inside their homes in the late 1990s. Along with their camera setups, they often had accompanying websites with blogs and forums. By

blurring the public and private spheres (Jerslev 2016), these women opened themselves up to the internet, and invited viewers into their most intimate moments. They relied on an affective relationship bolstered by exclusive fan pages and forums that allowed for their viewers to chat *with* them, not just about them (Senft 2008). Much like the reciprocity afforded by social media platforms such as YouTube and Instagram, this helped create a sense of authenticity and a down-to-earth persona that felt attainable but still enviable.

As the title would suggest, being a camgirl was a distinctly gendered practice. The most successful camgirls were not only conventionally attractive (Senft 2008), but they relied on their femininity to further their self-brand. Camgirls used their “feminine image as a tool to be used towards the goals of economic and social success, power and self-actualization” (Shields Dobson 2008, 125). Their content was routinely sexualized, sometimes even broadcasting sexual acts between themselves and their partners. Cameras were set up in multiple rooms of their homes so that viewers could observe all aspects of their home-life, including cooking, cleaning, sleeping, and using the washroom (Senft 2008). Often, camgirls claimed their websites were “created for their own personal fulfilment, rather than for an audience” (Shields Dobson 2008, 127). Similarly, contemporary microcelebrities, or influencers, assert that they are not in the business of content creation for the money, but rather creative passionate work (Duffy 2017). They rely on hegemonic femininity to further their self-brands in an industry that capitalizes on their ability to perform femininity well. Thus, we may understand beauty and lifestyle influencers as an extension of camgirl culture based on the ways in which both practices rely on performances of femininity, the cultivation of authenticity and intimacy, and the monetization of lifestyle.

Building on Senft’s (2008, 2013) work, Abidin (2015) conceptualizes influencers as a specific type of microcelebrity. She defines influencers as internet users who narrate their

personal lifestyle to a relatively large following. They are able to monetize their following with brand partnerships and sponsored content (Abidin 2016). Influencers often fit within a niche genre, such as lifestyle, beauty, gaming, or even activism. An influencer's success is not measured by the genre they occupy but instead, by whether or not they can share branded content with a sizeable following, resulting in economic gain for both themselves and the brands they work with (Abidin 2015; Friedman 2017). Earlier scholarly work regarding microcelebrities suggested that they would not see returns for their online social capital in the same way that conventional celebrities do (Marwick and boyd 2011). But, in many ways, these influencers are eclipsing traditionally celebrities, specifically in the fashion industry when bloggers have millions of followers across various platforms and are gifted designer clothing and expensive holidays (Burgess et al. 2017).

I argue that classifying influencers as microcelebrities, as media studies scholars do (Abidin 2015, Abidin 2016, Jerslev 2016), becomes complicated considering the current moment in influencer marketing. By definition, influencers are considered such *because* they monetize their followings. Research also suggests that influencers who have reached a certain level of success see returns from their social capital in a similar way conventional celebrity does (Burgess et al. 2017). For example, in 2018, Lalonde attended the British Academy of Film and Television Awards (BAFTAs) as a brand ambassador for Lancôme. In their post-event write-up, she is listed on their website alongside Lupita Nyong'o, an Oscar-winning actress, and Emma Roberts, another Hollywood actress with a reoccurring role on the television series *American Horror Story* (Lancôme Paris 2018). Positioning Lalonde alongside these women suggests that her cultural status is on par with traditional celebrities such as Hollywood actors. As such, I refer to my case study as an influencer rather than microcelebrity throughout this thesis because she

has successfully monetized her online following, receiving social and economic gains.

Establishing Intimacy and Authenticity

In order to be successful, influencers rely on the “curation of a persona that feels authentic” (Abidin 2016, 3). This is achieved through establishing a sense of intimacy that narrows the gap between influencers and their following. Intimacy is used to gain their followers’ trust, appeal to their emotions, and create a sense of exclusivity (Abidin 2015; Abidin 2016; Kanai 2017). The closer and more familiar followers feel to an influencer, the more intimate their relationship. Intimacy allows for a perceived interconnectedness between the influencer and their fanbase (Abidin 2015). A distinguishing feature of influencers from traditional celebrity, who are much more difficult to get close to, is the sense of intimacy they foster with their fans. For influencers, this means that presence becomes an important aspect of their self-brand. They are expected to always be ‘on,’ posting constant streams of content that allow for their followers to respond in the form of likes, follows, and subscriptions (Jerslev 2016). Intimacy is also encouraged through the ways in which influencers talk to and about their fans. Influencers will profess their love and affection for their followers, addressing them in a way that feels as though they are best friends (Jerslev 2016).

Abidin (2015) found that influencers would refer to their followers as fans or readers as a means to generate feelings of authenticity. A word like ‘follower’ implies that the influencer leads or has an elevated status. Kanai (2017) discusses influencers inviting their followers to participate in digital friendships by sharing memes, creating a sense of intimacy through shared jokes. Sometimes, influencers and their fanbase will collaborate to create a name for a fanbase. For example, beauty influencer ThaTaylaa refers to her followers as the “Baeritto Family,” a

play on the word burrito and the term of endearment, ‘bae’ (ThaTaylaa 2017). The added ‘family’ reinforces a sense of closeness and affection (Jerslev 2016).

Intimacy and authenticity are understood as two distinct phenomena, though both are necessary to successfully attaining influencer status (Abidin 2016). Within the context of this project, I understand authenticity as an influencer’s ability to be perceived as genuine (Bergen 2017). This implies that authenticity is not a permanent state or end goal an influencer can achieve, but instead an illusion that is constructed based on how their following perceives them. An example of this is how beauty influencers on YouTube film their content; speaking straight into the camera while sitting in their bedrooms or living room. By using their homes as the setting for content, they reinforce that what the audience seeing is ‘real.’ While filming makeup tutorials, they often acknowledge their lack of expertise or formal training. They will make application mistakes or forget the name of a product. Their performances seemingly lack rehearsal and are done “off the cuff.” This is an appeal to ordinariness and a celebration of realness (Duffy 2015). These performances are considered authentic because they are carefully constructed in a way that feels genuine to the audience. Traditional celebrity is marked by exclusive distance from the mundane and ordinary (Jerslev 2016). In contrast, influencers engage in reciprocity with their followers meaning they will like, comment, and share their posts, emphasizing that they are ‘just like us’ (Abidin 2015; Duffy 2015). Confessional discourse also plays in to feelings of authenticity. Influencers share intimate details of their lives with subscribers including but not limited to struggles with mental illness, asking for life advice, and breakups (Jerslev 2016).

The ability to portray a seemingly authentic persona online is also what allows influencers to monetize their following. By successfully achieving a sense of intimacy and

authenticity with their followers, their interactions with branded goods are by extension also seen as authentic (Duffy and Wissinger 2017). The sponsored or paid product posts are framed as genuine acts of disclosure between an influencer and their audience, rather than a business transaction; they are sharing these products with their following not because they are getting paid, but because they genuinely love them (Duffy and Wissinger 2017). This tactic is successful because the influencer has already established intimacy and authenticity, therefore, they are considered a trustworthy authority on the subject of everyday life (Abidin 2015). In the following section, I further discuss the role social media platforms themselves play in the self-branding practices of lifestyle influencers. Also, I expand on how influencers monetize their followings specifically through branded content.

Social Media Platforms

In our current cultural moment, social media platforms are considered valuable not only to social life, but to neoliberal practices of self-presentation and optimization. Social media platforms are defined as Internet-based web applications that allow for the creation and exchange of user generated content (Kaplan and Haenlin 2010 in van Dijck 2013). This definition encompasses the sharing of a variety of content including: longform videos on YouTube, photo and text exchanges on Instagram, and alternative formats such as ASKFM, a Q&A site which allows users to ask anonymous questions, eliciting responses from the larger ASKFM community (ASKFM 2019). As digital technologies, these websites are products of their social, economic, political, and cultural context, meaning they mirror the ‘real’ world in the ways in which they maintain existing social norms and inequalities. These sites are specifically designed to intermediate communication and interaction with a following (Gillespie 2010; van Dijck

2013). As such, users are encouraged to see themselves as commodities to be exchanged for social capital through the structures of the profile pages (Hearn 2008).

The connectivity of social media platforms has evolved from a space for digital community-building into a valuable resource for corporations as technological advances allowed for more sophisticated data collection with the specific goal of targeted, optimized advertising (Helmond 2015, van Dijck 2013). In the following section, I consider how platform affordances and vernacular work together, enabling and constricting the way users navigate their online world. More specifically, I refer to Instagram, a photo-driven social media site, as an example of how platforms are co-opted and monetized by influencers.

Coded constraints: Platform Affordances and Vernacular

Social media was once thought to be a democratic space in which users could flex their creativity through posting original content (van Dijck 2013). Yet, more recently, critical scholars have discussed at length the ways in which social media content and our online experiences are standardized through engineered limitations (Abidin 2016; Gibbs et al. 2014; Gillespie 2010, Highfield 2016; Maguire 2015; van Dijck 2013). This standardization includes restrictions such as maximum video lengths or character minimum and maximums in text fields. While there are ways to work around these limitations, and social media influencers in particular often do (Abidin 2016), users are constrained by engineered parameters. These coded limitations are referred to as platform affordances. Platforms affordances dictate what users can and cannot do on social media platforms.

For example, when the site launched, Facebook users were only offered two options when selecting a gender: male or female. It was not until 2015 that the platform rolled out an update allowing for users to choose from 56 different gender options (O’Kane 2015). This is just

one of the ways that platform affordances dictate the way users are able to self-present. Another example of a coded limitation is the ways in which platform algorithms “prompt users to rank things, ideas, or people in relation to other things, ideas or people” (van Dijck 2013, 62).

Engineers build websites in such a way that users are prompted to follow prescriptive paths when navigated them. Jose van Dijck (2012) describes these paths as “hegemonic logics” which encourage users to follow, like, and subscribe to certain predetermined pages, profiles, or people. Hegemonic logics affect industries such as influencer marketing, a term I will define at length later in this section.

Traditional media coverage of influencers often emphasizes the “meritocratic potential of social media platforms,” in which anyone can secure a career online, though critical scholars emphasize that this discourse is problematic (Duffy and Wissinger 2017, 4653). This is due, in part, to the platform affordances that privilege certain content. For instance, YouTube has been idealized as a platform allowing unmediated access to traditional understandings of fame, but the site’s hierarchal system based on subscription numbers and views forces content creators with established fanbases to top of the recommended videos page (van Dijck 2013). Instagram was once considered one of the more democratic social media platforms in terms of self-expression (Marwick 2015). In 2016, the social media site announced they would be moving away from a reverse chronological order timeline to personalized feeds based on users’ interests and relationships. This meant that users would no longer see all posts from every account they followed, but instead an algorithmically curated feed based on their previous Instagram interactions (Luckerson 2016). Following this change, popular opinions of Instagram’s algorithm were less than favourable. Most recently, small businesses and smaller influencers circulated and

shared posts suggesting their content only reaching 7% of their followers (Kircher 2019). In response, Instagram tweeted the following message:

We've noticed an uptick in posts about Instagram limiting the reach of your photos to 7% of your followers, and would love to clear this up. What shows up first in your feed is determined by what posts and accounts you engage with the most, as well as other contributing factors such as the timeliness of posts, how often you use Instagram, how many people you follow, etc. We have not made any recent changes to feed ranking, and we never hide posts from people you're following – if you keep scrolling, you will see them all. Again, your feed is personalized to you and evolves over time based on how you use Instagram. 🙌 (@instagram 2018)

While the algorithm was not hiding content from 93% of users' followers, it does favour posts that receive more engagement (Kircher 2019), suggesting that those with larger followings stand to benefit most from the curated timeline.

These algorithmically-curated timelines rely on stored social media user data. Concerns about the ethics of these algorithmic changes are not limited to user engagement, but how users' data is being used by social media platforms. Perhaps the largest data-ethics scandal of 2018 was Facebook allowing voter-profiling company, Cambridge Analytica, access to user data. Demographic information was collected from a third-party application owned by Cambridge Analytica called "This is Your Digital Life." Through the game they designed and hosted on Facebook, the voter-profiling company was granted access to more than 87-million individuals' public profiles, page likes, birthday, and current city (Hern 2018). The controversy raised questions about how users' data was being stored, as well as bought and sold to third party companies. Facebook has denied directly selling user information, instead saying they only conduct targeted marketing. Within this business model, Facebook acts as a mediator, showing advertisements to the advertisers' desired demographic set. User data is then accumulated when they click on targeted advertisements, revealing their demographic information to the advertisers

(Kosinski 2018). Many companies, including social media influencers, are able to use this collected data to tailor their online experiences.

Despite the controversy surrounding the ethics of engineering social media, these platforms do create a space in which users are able to construct self-presentations (Cover 2013). These self-presentations are facilitated by what Gibbs et al. (2014) refer to as platform vernacular, which allows for some creativity and individual expression. Each site has a popular genre of communication referred to as vernacular, which encompasses the language, grammar, logic, and conventions co-opted by the social media users. Typically, it emerges from platforms affordances but can also come into being when users appropriate aspects of existing affordances with shared convention (Gibbs et al. 2014). The use of certain vernacular can cross platforms such as hashtags, which are used on sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Because technology is constantly evolving, platform vernacular is fluid, changing as social media sites update and users find new ways to communicate (Gibbs et al. 2014).

Gibbs et al. (2014) argue for the continued study of platform vernacular as it allows for the consideration of creativity within the coded limitations of platform affordances, assuming users have agency and will in social media usage. The scholars point to the photographic filters used on Instagram as a method through which users are able to express creativity and individuality (Gibbs et al. 2014). These filters are also an example of platform vernacular co-opted by influencers in order to convey a sense of perceived authenticity. Hilary Bergman (2017) argues that certain filters, photo compositions, and backgrounds on Instagram can convey a sense of authenticity, by creating a cohesive, branded experience. The filters influencers use become part of their branded persona, and more recently, they are selling photo-editing pre-sets so that followers may emulate their favourite influencer's aesthetic on their own feed (Harris 2019). As

previously discussed, branded content works best coming from a supposedly authentic source (Abidin 2016), and an influencer's ability to navigate platforms according to their conventions contributes to their success at eliciting feelings of authenticity.

Lifestyle Influencers and Instagram

Instagram is a photo-centric, youth-oriented social media platform owned by Facebook. Because of the relatively non-restrictive structure to users' profile pages, Instagram is considered one of the more open-ended social media platforms, allowing for more unique self-presentations to emerge (Marwick 2015). Each post can be a combination of one to ten photos or one-minute-long videos with a caption. In 2016, Instagram launched the 'Story' feature (Constine 2016). Instagram Stories are 15-second video clips uploaded to a user's profile in chronological order. These videos can be shot in real-time and uploaded instantaneously, or users can access existing videos saved to their camera roll to upload at their leisure. IG Live, a live-stream function within the platform, allows users to connect "in the moment," broadcasting themselves in real-time (Instagram, December 18 2018). Affordances like IG Live and social media conventions more generally, facilitate a "you could be here with me" style of photography that helps foster feelings of intimacy (Zappavigna et al. et al et al. 2016, 272). Because of the many ways Instagram affords instantaneous sharing, it considered ubiquitous with everyday life within our current media moment (Highfield 2016). As such, the site has gained scholarly attention as an object of study (Abidin 2015, 2016; Duffy 2017; Gibbs et al. 2014; Highfield 2016; Luvaas 2017; Marwick 2015).

Brooke Erin Duffy (2017) argued that Instagram was crucial to the mobilization of what she calls aspirational labour: a gendered labour specific to digital media producers that emerged from neoliberal discourses surrounding 'doing what you love'. Informed by the existing research,

I understand Instagram as an integral aspect of self-branding within our current media moment. For this project, I am interested in how Lalonde's Instagram profile acts as a space in which platform vernacular is used to further self-branding practices, allowing for branded femininity to emerge (Gibbs et al. 2014; Banet-Weiser 2017; Hearn 2008). In this section, I outline how lifestyle influencers use aspects of Instagram's platform vernacular in order to monetize their following through influencer marketing.

Influencer marketing

Increasingly, the capitalist marketplace has become entrenched in online life (Senft 2013). Every like, comment, share, subscription, and follow acts as currency within the digital market that translates to revenue in the offline world. The cultural content that occupies platforms allows for insight into what users are interested in buying, the products they have already bought, who they follow, the terms they search for, and the types of people they associate with. According to van Dijck (2013), this insight can then be used to determine both social trends and consumer preferences making social media a space from which advertisers can collect demographic data. Engineers are able to measure advertising performance online far better than more traditional forms of advertisement such as TV's Nielsen ratings (van Dijck 2013). As such, social media sites are coveted areas for marketing professionals because users typically spend many hours on the platforms (Hearn 2008). In 2012, influencer marketing was still in its infancy but Jose van Dijck (2013) notes that "ad culture is gradually turning into a recommendation culture, as new tactics still appear every day" (40). With the increased efficiency of user data collection, influencer marketing emerged as a way to better target niche audiences and provide a tailored internet experience.

Broadly, influencer marketing refers to an influencer accepting monetary compensation in exchange for a social media post, though it can take a variety of forms. I discuss specific examples of influencer marketing in my analysis chapter when discursively analyzing Estee Lauder's Instagram content. The value of influencer marketing is that it does not necessarily look like traditional advertising. For example, a lifestyle influencer may mention a certain brand of mascara in her "Monthly Favorites" video. This is a popular video genre on YouTube in which beauty influencers make recommendations based on the products they used over the course of the month. In this example, the paid promotion may not even be explicitly stated but instead framed as a genuine recommendation. Alternatively, the brand affiliation may only be mentioned in the video's description box, with links to buy the product through an affiliate link. Affiliate links are hyperlinks which allow the influencer to receive compensation for any online purchases made using it. These partnerships can also include discount codes for audience members, offering them 10-50% off depending on the company.

This type of marketing blurs the line between labour and leisure online, with product endorsements disguised as recommendations fitting in seamlessly with non-sponsored content (Duffy 2016). It is also reserved for those with a large following, enforcing a social hierarchy in which followers are indicative of success (Abidin 2016). Companies seek out influencers with measurable popularity who are relevant to current trends. Because this process thrives on recommendation culture, influencers use their position of authority within their niche market to leverage advertising. As previously discussed, an influencer's ability to foster feelings of authenticity and intimacy with their audience is crucial (Abidin 2016; Abidin 2016; Duffy 2015; Jerslev 2016). Influencer marketing occupies considerable space on platforms like Instagram and media studies scholars have only begun to critique how this advertising model operates (Abidin

2015; Abidin 2016; Bishop et al. 2018; Duffy 2015; van Dijck 2013). Influencer marketing is a career reserved for select individuals who have successfully mobilized aspirational labour (Duffy 2017), a term I discuss at length in a later section of this literature review.

Curated Content

As previously stated, social media platforms are commercial spaces that track online social activity for the purpose of monetary gain (van Dijck 2013). The sites are coveted marketing opportunities because users spend a considerable amount of time on the platforms (Hearn 2008), with users visiting the most popular sites on a daily basis (Pew Research 2018). In order to successfully market themselves on Instagram, influencers contribute to the development of a platform vernacular that emphasizes heavily curated, staged feeds. Often, photos are edited and staged in such a way that they come across as authentic representations of the influencer's life as lived (Abidin 2015; Bergen 2017; Duffy and Hund 2015). Images and videos uploaded by influencers are not typically "point and shoot" but instead maintain a certain aesthetic, routed in perceived authenticity (Zappavigna et al. 2016; Bergen 2017). Rather than uploading memories and capturing moments of spontaneity, as the platforms themselves promote, influencers instead circulate advertisements and curated content (Abidin 2015). The photographs uploaded to the platform come across as presentations of a unique personal style (Zappavigna et al. 2016), rather than carefully curated content. In order to create a supposedly unique aesthetic, influencers circumvent certain aspects of the platforms, such as editing photos in expensive software such as Adobe or Lightroom rather than using the built-in platform editor. Because Instagram includes in-app editing, these are examples of a platform vernacular as users appropriated existing affordances and circumvented them in order to create a new aesthetic standard. Influencers then take the new aesthetic standard and sell it for a profit in the form of

editing pre-sets, a marketing tactic I discussed earlier in relation to platform vernacular (Gibbs et al. 2014). This is a practice reserved for those influencers who have achieved a sizeable following on Instagram or ‘Instafame’ (Marwick 2015), because it requires an audience invested in a certain aesthetic.

Lifestyle Influencers and Instagram

According to Alice Marwick (2015), being Instafamous refers to “the condition of having a relatively great number of followers on the app” (137). These users tend to be conventionally attractive, are employed in interesting industries (she lists modeling and the tattoo industry) and emulate the visual iconography of traditional celebrity culture by posting glamorous self-portraits, designer goods, and luxury cars (139). Instagram perpetuates existing hierarchies of celebrity in which glamour, wealth, beauty, and social capital are “reinscribed in a visual digital medium” (141). Their audience, or social capital, is the most important symbol of all. Instagram influencer has become a career path for select privileged individuals, legitimized by those who have successfully mobilized what Brooke Erin Duffy calls aspirational labour, a term which refers to a gendered digital labour specific to our current media moment which I define at length later in this chapter (Luvaas 2017; Duffy 2017). For the purpose of this research, I will focus on one type of Instagram influencer: the lifestyle and beauty influencer. The two genres were once considered distinctly separate, though I intend to make a case for the two genres being intertwined.

Lifestyle content refers to posts which are premised on everyday life as lived (Abidin 2016), meaning it encompasses many aspects of the influencer’s life including their relationships, hair and skincare routines, home décor, fitness, and anything else that their viewership may demand. Prior to the emergence of influencer culture, celebrities were heralded

as lifestyle gurus (Negra 2009, 123), though I would suggest that influencers hold their own within this space as experts. Unlike traditional celebrity, the power of the lifestyle influencer is that the image they portray seems attainable (Abidin 2015), though this lifestyle exists within the confines of aesthetics and commercial brands (Duffy and Hund 2015). Beauty influencers typically only create content related to makeup, skincare, hair, and nails. They profile beauty treatments such as hair extensions or facials, but rarely delve into more intimate discussions of their private lives. Instead, they focus on product reviews, brand partnerships with makeup and skincare companies, and tutorials for application techniques. Users on the Reddit forum, r/BeautyGuruChatter define a beauty influencer as a content creator whose social media profile consists of 70% or more beauty-related content (Beauty Guru Chatter 2019).

I argue the line between lifestyle and beauty influencers has become increasingly blurred, as the demand for more lifestyle-centric content from viewers has pushed beauty content creators towards generating content that does not fit neatly in the beauty category. For example, there is a natural progression in Lalonde's content from her first video, "My Everyday Skin Routine!" (Lalonde, 2011a) to "The Boyfriend Tag!" (Lalonde, 2011b) – a video featuring her and her boyfriend answering questions about their relationship. The boyfriend tag video remains one of her most watched on YouTube with more than 600,000 views – ranking alongside various makeup tutorials, skincare routines, and a video from her #FEMTALK series about periods (Lalonde, n.d.). While her beauty content still accounts for the majority of her views, it's hard to deny the popularity of the lifestyle videos. This is a trend among many of the larger beauty gurus. It is also reflected in the trend of YouTubers having multiple channels: a main channel and a channel dedicated specifically to vlogs (video blogs) (Jerslev, 2016).

Certain platform vernacular, especially those of YouTube and Instagram, demand a level of professionalism when it comes to creating successful content (from a self-branding perspective). This professionalism acts as a vernacular barrier, rather than engineered limitation, to the types of people who find success online. Influencers' Instagram grids are heavily edited, polished, staged, have a cohesive colour-scheme, and build on an existing cohesive brand that must translate across multiple platforms. Alice Marwick and dana boyd's (2011) earlier work investigated how traditional celebrities use Twitter as a way to give "the illusion of 'backstage,' giving the impression of uncensored glimpses into the lives of the very famous" (140). I argue that Instagram Stories function for lifestyle influencers in a similar way, allowing for a behind-the-scenes look into their lives in an effort to counter-act the heavily-curated content. Instagram Stories allow for a behind-the-scenes glimpse into the lives of influencers. These looks into the ordinary lives of influencers are incredibly important because they lend to a sense of exclusivity which in turn promotes intimacy (Abidin 2016). Lifestyle influencers often appear on Instastories bare-faced, in their pajamas or workout clothes, truly displaying their "mundane recounts of their lives as lived" (Abidin 2016, 3). This also acts as a way to disguise the gendered labour they engage with in order to maintain their branded image, a topic to which I pay considerable attention in the following section.

Gendered Labour

In scholarship there has been much discussion of how the platforms themselves generate income and exploit workers, and how these advertising models affect information dissemination (Burgess et al. 2017; Franklin 2014; Helmond 2015; van Dijck 2013). Attention to how influencers generate income through the mobilization of what Brooke Erin Duffy (2017) calls

aspirational labour requires further interrogation. Aspirational labour is a distinctly gendered, digital labour that reinforces the already tight bond between femininity and consumption (Duffy 2017). It is important to note that while there are influencers that are men, they often pursue very different activities online. For example, PewDiePie is a Swedish influencer known for his comedy YouTube channel and video game commentary. With over 84 million subscribers, he has the second-highest subscription numbers on YouTube (Social Blade 2019). His fame is dependent on a different kind of gendered labour that emphasizes hegemonic masculinity (Maloney et al. 2018). For the purpose of my research, I am interested in how feminized digital labour operates within the influencer industry. Women and girls occupy considerable space in the digital world of lifestyle, beauty, and fashion (Duffy 2015). As such, Duffy's framework provides a valuable lens through which we can understand how femininity is portrayed through lifestyle content online.

Aesthetic and Aspirational Labour

Aspirational labour includes pursuing creative activities under the promise of economic and social capital as reward, which has become more commonplace with the emergence of a 'Do What You Love' entrepreneurial market. According to Duffy (2016) The 'Do What You Love' ideology hides inequalities of class, ability, and education, while continuing to perpetuate gender disparity in media industries. It perpetuates existing stereotypes of women being responsible for consuming branded goods, rather than producing them. These laborers seek to "mark themselves as creative producers who will one day be compensated for their talents" (Duffy 2016, 444). Affiliate marketing is reserved for those with large followings, and by extension, those who have successfully navigated aspirational labour. Thus, aspirational labour perpetuates a social hierarchy in which more followers indicate social and economic success (Duffy 2016). The ease

of uploading to sites such as YouTube and Instagram led to a glut of content (Maguire 2015). Despite this oversaturation, aspirational labour insists there is room for anyone to succeed in the influencer market if only they try hard enough. However, effort is meant to remain invisible, disguised as “fun, pampering, or self-indulgence and must never be disclosed” (Gill 2007, 155). The current trend for influencers is to label this labour as self-love and self-care, and an important aspect of managing their psychic life in attempts to ward off inconveniences such as anxiety, stress, and depression.

The undisclosed, and often unrecognized labour influencers engage in can be considered immaterial labour (Rocamora 2018). Broadly, immaterial labour involves creative endeavours that are not typically recognized as work (Gill and Pratt 2008). This creative labour can help define certain cultural standards through the production of art or fashion (Terranova 2000). More recently, scholars Alison Harvey and Stephanie Fisher (2013) included activities such as building social networks, communities, and connections within the parameters of distinctly feminized immaterial labour. Both creative activities and building networks are important aspects of building an influencer brand. The cultural content influencers produce often includes the consumption of goods in order to reach a desired aesthetic, with the ultimate goal of social and economic success (Lascity 2018; Rocamora 2018). Within a distinctly feminine digital media economy, masking the labour behind doing what you love is imperative to staying ‘on brand’ (Duffy 2017). Angela McRobbie (2010) argues that as feminist media studies scholars, when we do not mention the gendered and classed nature of certain immaterial labourers, we can group wealthy, predominantly white women in with working-class women. In her example, she points specifically to supermodels being framed as both creative labourers in precarious working conditions, while also being extremely wealthy entrepreneurs (70). As such, I should note, for

successful aspirational labourers, the brand they are trying to maintain is distinctly upper-middle-class, afforded by access to social and economic capital.

In order to start a personal brand, lifestyle influencers require start-up investment (Abidin 2016; Duffy 2015). They need to own nice clothing, shoes, and accessories. They should also have the disposable income to purchase new makeup, skincare, and hair product launches. YouTube's current market demands professional grade photography equipment, editing software, wireless internet connection, and a smartphone in order to stay connected (Duffy, 2015). Laptop and desktop usage has dropped significantly (Abidin, 2016), and certain social media platforms such as Instagram only allow users to upload new content through their mobile application. In addition, a certain amount of leisure time is necessary in order for vloggers to practice using their technology effectively. There is the expectation that a vlogger will invest in their channel before seeing any sort of return (Duffy 2017). Public relations packages and free brand trips are seen as a reward for months or even years of dedication to the building of a personal brand (Duffy 2017). Because these products and trips make up a significant portion of lifestyle content, newer influencers often pay for these out of pocket. Having a talent management team to mediate the reception of PR packages and brand deals is also a relatively new, under-discussed phenomenon. For example, agencies such as INF Influencer Agency and Gleam Features are influencer-specific management firms that mediate and facilitate influencer/brand relationships (Bishop 2018).

These brand relationships are problematic, especially when considering the tension that exists between corporate messages of empowerment and the popularity of beauty vloggers (Banet-Weiser 2017). Acknowledging this tension is especially important when considering an influencer like Lalonde, whose brand revolves around being an empowered woman. Corporate

brands sponsor young women to create content that promotes hegemonic femininity, emphasizing external beauty, while simultaneously releasing advertising campaigns that emphasize self-love. This dichotomy extends further within the influencers themselves who often engage in acts labelled as self-love or self-care, while simultaneously promoting consumer goods, and a work culture that emphasizes providing free labour with the hopes of future economic return (Duffy 2015, 2017) all while performing an aesthetic vigilance that requires self-governmentality (Dosekun 2015).

Due to the performative nature of their careers, influencers must constantly work on their bodies in order to maintain a near-impossible standard external appearances but avoid framing it as such (Duffy 2017). This constant tension is emblematic of postfeminist tendencies within the online beauty and lifestyle community. Aesthetic vigilance refers to a “calculated and self-governmental labour of risk managing” in hopes of attaining beauty (Dosekun 2015, 169). With beauty comes the promise of self-confidence and success. Beauty is commodified and external; with enough “effort, skill, and disposable income, beauty is attainable, albeit iteratively” (170). Dedicated aesthetic labour is necessary to achieve the beauty these vloggers possess (Banet-Weiser 2017). Even ‘me-time’ is scheduled and is an important aspect of engaging in aesthetic vigilance, which can also be categorized as a form of postfeminist governmentality (Dosekun 2015, 176). I will return to the topic of self-care in the following section, while making connections between gendered digital labour and a postfeminist media environment.

Postfeminism and Contemporary Femininity

Postfeminism as Analytical Framework

For the purposes of this project, I position myself alongside critical scholar Rosalind Gill (2007, 2016, 2017) in understanding postfeminism as a productive lens through which we can understand media phenomenon. Within this context, postfeminism is a sensibility that circulates through mainstream media texts, suggesting a privileged type of femininity within our current cultural moment. Postfeminism prescribes a definition of femininity that assumes all women are motivated by a common set of desires, fears, and concerns. Typically, these motivations revolve around the postfeminist life cycle that instils panic in its subject around aging, marriage, and childbearing (Negra 2009). Within influencer media, these fears manifest in the form of self-optimization, including the promotion of anti-ageing skincare regimes, and content focused on a prescriptive path of femininity that valorizes the maintenance of an aspirational self-brand. Postfeminist media culture “naturalizes tenets of feminism, like women’s ‘choice’ and ‘empowerment’ while simultaneously disregarding feminist politics or community because the work of feminism is perceived as finished” (Rossie 2018, 26). This logic depoliticizes gender inequality by claiming that women achieve equality through individual power and liberation (Dosekun 2015). Rather than participate in feminist activism, the postfeminist subject is encouraged to participate in feminine consumption as a route to empowerment (Butler 2013).

Gill (2007) identifies several reoccurring themes that emerge in postfeminist media texts: self-surveillance and discipline, individualism, choice and empowerment, natural sexual differences, sexualization of culture, and emphasis on commodification and consumerism. In a later revision of her work, Gill (2017) further refined these characteristics to reflect a resurgence of feminism within the popular consciousness. For the purpose of this literature review, I will

emphasize three components of postfeminism particularly pertinent to my case study and performances of hegemonic white femininity. These include femininity as bodily property, self-surveillance and discipline, and individual choice and empowerment. In relation to femininity as bodily property, I consider how race operates within postfeminist media culture, hailing a white feminine subject (McRobbie 2009). Postfeminism is not a type of feminism but instead a way to describe a general sentiment towards feminist politics produced and circulated through consumer culture (Gill 2017). With this in mind, the second half of this section outlines how feminism has re-emerged in the current media landscape, and how scholars make sense of these ‘popular feminisms’ working alongside postfeminist sensibilities (Gill 2017; Keller and Ryan 2018; Banet-Weiser 2018).

A key feature of postfeminist culture is the focus on women’s feminized bodies as a source of power requiring constant monitoring, surveillance, and discipline. Women’s bodies are presented as objects to be controlled, branded, and mobilized for social and economic return within a neoliberal economy (Gill 2017). Because the body is a defining feature of womanhood, women are at risk of failing at properly performing femininity if they are unable to maintain a hegemonically acceptable body (Gill 2007, 2017). Processes such as weight gain or loss, and even ageing and pregnancy are met with scrutiny. Rigorous beauty regimens lead to a homogenized version of beauty, implying there is only one acceptable form of attractiveness (Dosekun 2015). Through disciplining their bodies, women are able to achieve their discursively framed ideal selves (Bae 2011; Gill 2017; Gill and Orgad 2018).

The imperative to maintain an acceptable body manifests within influencer culture in many forms. “What I Eat in a Day” videos on YouTube feature young women showing how much (or little) they eat over the course of a day in order to maintain their current figure.

Sometimes these videos are sponsored by meal-planning services or juicing diets. Lifestyle influencers will also upload their fitness regimes. These videos are always shared with a disclaimer that they have no formal training but that this is “just what works” for their bodies. Because influencers often embody hegemonic beauty standards (Duffy 2017), these videos are prescriptive in the ways they encourage young women to discipline themselves through diet, exercise, and consuming beauty products.

Recently, scholars have problematized how race operates within a postfeminist media culture, and whether or not this was an explicitly white or “western” phenomenon (Butler 2013; Dosekun 2015; Gill 2017; Rossie 2018). Simidele Dosekun (2015) argues that these feminine standards are “transnational,” meaning they exist not only within the “Western” world but globally, therefore requiring an intersectional understanding of how race, class, and geographic location come into play within these discourses. Postfeminism travels across borders as a “thoroughly mediated, commodified, and consumerist discourse (...) via the media, commodity, and consumer connectivities that today crisscross more borders more densely and more rapidly than ever before” (965). Jess Butler (2013) asserts that the body of literature concerning postfeminist media culture privileges a white, heterosexual subject. She calls for an intersectional approach to postfeminism that emphasizes the ways in which postfeminist discourses reproduce racial, sexual, and gender inequalities. As such, I consider how race operates within my case study’s media content, celebrating whiteness and individual experience (McRobbie 2009). My intent is to problematize how Lalonde’s whiteness allows her to embody postfeminist sensibilities while contributing to contemporary discourses of femininity that “reinforce gender and racial hierarchies and ensure that the systems of compulsory heterosexuality and white privilege remain intact” (Butler 2013, 46).

The postfeminist subject achieves self-optimization not only through the maintenance of external appearances but through acts of neoliberal self-care. The body is merely a physical manifestation of a well-kept mind (Gill 2016). An inability to lose, maintain, or gain weight, for example, is framed not only as a failure of the body but of the mind as well. Here, the “female body is constructed as the window into the individual’s interior life” (150). This is a form of self-optimization routed in consumption that implores women to practice self-discipline (Gill 2017). In order to achieve their “true” or “ideal” self, the postfeminist subject must engage in strict self-surveillance and self-discipline (Bae 2011; Gill 2017; Gill and Orgad 2018). Postfeminism favours happiness and a positive mental attitude, encouraging women to shy away from divulging painful emotions, instead focusing on permissible emotions (Gill 2017). Engaging in these self-optimization practices is framed as an act of self-love or self-care (Gill 2016). As such, purchasing consumer goods in order to participate in these practices becomes a tool for self-optimization rather than mindless consumption. For example, Lalonde uses this logic in her sponsored YouTube video “MY BEAUTY MEDITATION MOMENTS” (Lalonde 2017a). The video is a paid partnership with a skincare brand but throughout she emphasizes how not only does the skincare improve her outer appearance but helps her relax through a process she calls “beauty meditation.” Here she reaffirms the postfeminist imperative that is a well-maintained body and a well-kept mind.

Ultimately, the ability to engage with embodied femininity and self-optimization through consumption is being empowered to make the individual choice to do so. I outlined in brief how postfeminism assumes that social inequalities such as racism or sexism have been solved (Gill 2007; Rossie 2018). This suggests that a woman’s inability to overcome certain socially-constructed barriers is a personal failing, rather than a structural issue. Instead, a woman’s value

is defined by her supposed freedom and ability to harness that freedom in the form of self-improvement (McRobbie 2004). Postfeminist media culture fetishizes female empowerment, while at the same time constraining women by dictating the ways in which they engage with this empowerment (Negra 2009).

Thus, the solution to gender inequality is proposed as a “one-size-fits-all” solution (Gill 2016 617) and a consumer-based logic that “conflates feminism and femininity, individualism and liberation, and consumption and activism” (Butler 2013 46). As consumers, women are compelled to purchase consumer goods that will not only elevate their social status but demonstrate just how liberated they are. Because the contemporary woman is both “self-reflexive and gender-aware,” she pays for things such as manicures and bikini waxes not because she must, but instead because she has the choice to do so (46). The notion that women should please themselves and engage in activities that bring personal fulfilment is central to postfeminist discourse. Women are not asked to change themselves for men, but instead for their own well-being. Lalonde demonstrates this in her book *Bloom* when she attempts to justify her career: she cannot help that she likes lipstick. It is just a part of who she is, so she may as well make a career out of talking about it (Lalonde 2016). Postfeminism does not answer as to why personal fulfilment and pleasing oneself often results in hegemonically acceptable feminine activities (Gill 2007).

Popular Feminisms: Problematizing Postfeminism

The growing visibility of feminism in recent years has led to discussion of the validity of postfeminism as an analytical tool within our current media moment (Gill 2017; Keller and Ryan 2018). Earlier scholarship argued that postfeminism often refuted the need for feminism because equality had been achieved (Gill 2007), which complicates identifying postfeminist sensibilities

in a media culture that popularizes feminism. In response to critiques of the relevance of postfeminism within a media culture in which feminism is at the forefront of public consciousness, Gill (2017) points to the naturalized nature of postfeminist sensibilities, insisting it has become the “new normal, a taken-for-granted common sense that operates as a kind of gendered neoliberalism” (610). She proposes that feminist scholars approach new feminist visibilities with a critical lens because these ‘popular feminisms’ often engage with discourses antithetical to activist feminism (Gill 2017).

Popular feminisms are an integral aspect of the current cultural landscape, but “the media offers contradictory, but nevertheless patterned, constructions” of what feminist politics look like (Gill 2007, 161). The celebration of a very specific type of feminism is understood as a new postfeminist logic (Gill 2017). Recognizing that mediated feminisms emerge in many iterations, for the purpose of my research, I focus on two manifestations of mediated popular feminisms: neoliberal feminism and contemporary celebrity feminism (Rottenberg 2013; Gill 2016, 2017; Renninger 2018).

Unlike postfeminism, neoliberal feminism recognizes that gender inequality exists. Yet, this mediated feminism is “predicated on the erasure of issues that concern the overwhelming majority of women in the USA and across the globe” (Rottenberg 2013, 419). The neoliberal feminist subject is “individuated to the extreme” but remains aware of structural inequalities that perpetuate the division between the men and women (420). Rather than engaging with collectivist feminist activism to remedy these inequalities, she instead focuses on optimizing herself in order to overcome social, structural, and economic forces. She is entrepreneurial – constantly “optimizing her resources through incessant calculation, personal initiative and innovation” (422). This discourse urges “‘progressive’ ambitious women (...) to pursue

happiness through constructing a self-tailored work-family balance” (429). These women may delay marriage and childbearing in order to establish a successful career but ultimately, they are compelled to eventually seek motherhood. Prescriptive ideals assume that all women are driven by a desire to possess both a career and a family. These discourses re-signify feminist politics as the ability to find “balance” between the domestic sphere and the corporate world (Gill 2016). This suggests that “certain choices can bring women in closer proximity to well-being and true feminist consciousness” (Rottenberg 2013, 429). Echoing postfeminist sensibilities, women are urged to “turn inward,” by engaging in acts of self-care framed as a form of liberation or emancipation. Not only are women expected to maintain a work-life balance, but they are expected to do so happily (Rottenberg 2013).

Popular feminisms, like neoliberal feminism, are considered “on trend” within the current media moment (Gill 2016). While “feminist” was once a dirty word, the term has taken on new life with celebrities like Beyoncé, Emma Watson, and Taylor Swift proudly claiming themselves as feminists (Gill 2016; Keller and Ryan 2018). Bryce Renninger (2018) discusses a relatively new phenomenon in celebrity media coverage in which feminism becomes a topic of conversation in celebrity discourses. Within these discourses, feminism becomes less about feminist politics and more about focusing on feminism as an identifier (43). This limits understandings of feminism as a political movement and reduces feminism to an answer to a mere yes or no question rather than collective action (50).

I argue this extends to the discourses surrounding microcelebrities and influencers. Traditional media outlets do not provide the same high-profile coverage of social media influencers, but their status as feminists is called into question on online forums and in the comment sections, especially if the influencer has previously identified themselves as a feminist.

This is demonstrated in a thread about Lalonde following her breakup with her long-term boyfriend and users debating whether her post-breakup weight loss made her any less of a feminist (bubblelicious, 2018 April 26) (See Figure 2). I understand “feminist” as a label or identifier that allows certain public figures, like influencers, to align themselves with the movement while avoiding engaging with feminist politics. I also agree with Rosalind Gill (2016) when she says, “that claiming a feminist identity—without specifying what that means in terms of some kind of politics—is problematic” (619). As such I intend to problematize how these popular feminisms manifest within my case study’s media.



Figure 2 Users on gossip forum, Guru Gossiper commenting on Lalonde’s merits as feminist. April 27, 2018.

Young women are implored by a general sentiment in popular media culture to sell their self-brands online (Maguire 2015). These brands are often structured around postfeminist ideals that implore women to perform femininity properly within neoliberal discourses (Banet-Weiser 2017). Because media texts have the ability to be simultaneously embedded in postfeminist media culture while still dealing with feminist issues (Rossie 2018), I think it is important to outline how the aforementioned popular feminisms work in tandem with postfeminist

sensibilities. My goal with this project is not to discount the moves towards feminist politics my case study attempts to make, but instead to call in to question the larger issue of general postfeminist sentiments espoused by the beauty and lifestyle influencer industry and how they shape the performances of femininity visible on their social media profiles. I call into question ‘acceptable’ forms of popular feminism in collective consciousness (Renninger 2018), and how this might affect the portrayals of femininity influencers are able to enact. As I outline in the next chapter, Lalonde often grapples with feminist politics on her lesser known platforms, but as I discuss throughout this literature review, continuously produces content that implores young women to see themselves as commodities to be optimized through self-governance.

Influencer Self-branding Practices and Femininity

By tracing out how digital media scholars have approached the study of influencers, I establish how my case study can be understood within a larger tradition of feminized self-branding practices. These practices are sustained and enabled through platform affordances and vernacular that privilege certain users and corporations (Gibbs et al. 2014; van Dijck 2013). The gendered labour these young women engage in reaffirms the connection between femininity and consumption (Duffy 2017), by building a brand around self-actualization through the purchasing of consumer goods, work of the body, and the assumption that all women should be motivated by a particular set of goals (Gill 2007, 2016, 2017; Gill and Orgad 2018). In outlining the general postfeminist nature of our current media environment, while acknowledging the “in” status of feminism within the public consciousness, I attempt to demonstrate how certain lifestyle influencers embody postfeminist ideals while attempting to grapple with feminist politics. In reviewing the existing literature regarding digital self-branding practices, I argue for the

continued study of branded femininity in digital spaces, particularly in the lifestyle influencer industry. Through platform vernacular (Gibbs et al. 2014), influencers gain not only economic but social capital which allows them to assume a position of authority when it comes to what it means to perform femininity well. Because of this, I hope to attend to Gibbs et al.'s (2014) call for further study of platform vernacular because it places emphasis on social conventions and practices, and how users circumvent engineered affordances in order to participate in online spaces. In doing this, I contribute to a growing body of literature concerned with complicating a postfeminist media culture (Keller and Ryan 2018), while contributing to new methodological considerations for studying digital practices.

CHAPTER THREE: THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

For this project, I adopt a feminist cultural studies approach. Feminist cultural studies emerged from the larger social theory of cultural studies (Kellner 1995, Gill 2009). In this section, I will first outline the theoretical tradition of cultural studies more broadly, before discussing feminist cultural studies specifically. I rely on Rosalind Gill's (2009, 2018) assertion that theory and methodology, especially in critical media studies, are difficult to separate from one another. As such, following my discussion of feminist cultural studies, I outline how textual discursive analysis was used as both a methodological approach, while providing theoretical context to my research. Feminist cultural studies, and by extension, textual discursive analysis provide a useful way to understand my dataset and attempt to explain how social media influencers contribute to creating and circulating discursive constructions of femininity.

Theoretical Framework

According to Douglas Kellner (1995), our culture is a media culture. This definition implies the media is a primary vehicle for dissemination of cultural knowledge. Broadly, cultural studies can help map out how significant change takes place at a cultural level. The theory assumes that culture helps shape social values and goals, and by extension, is concerned with how these are shaped and informed by prevailing power structures. Kellner (1995) explains that "cultural studies delineates how cultural artifacts articulate social ideologies, values, and representations of gender, race, and class and how these phenomena relate to each other" (25). As a critical theory, one of the goals of cultural studies is to provide a cognitive map that helps us to understand how social phenomena function to perpetuate and maintain existing power structures. I use cultural studies as a framework to understand how the abstract concept of

femininity gets taken up, reproduced, and perpetuated through media texts, and by extension, maintains existing power structures in relation to gender. As such, I am operating not only within the cultural studies tradition, but specifically feminist cultural studies. Engaging with feminism enhances cultural studies as it allows for more depth and understanding of the nuances of cultural production. This is because feminism insists class, gender, race, sexuality, and ethnicity be considered when discussing how people formulate their identities through cultural practices (Kellner 1995).

Kellner (1995) proposed a reworking of British cultural studies in an attempt to engage more efficiently with media production and political economy, but also to include positions of postmodern, multicultural and feminist theory. Historically, cultural studies adapted in response to the political and social climate of the moment. Feminist cultural studies was first influenced by the feminist movement in the 1960s, responding to a need to problematize how women fit in to the social world, and how these gender roles were being reproduced through media texts (Gill 2009; Kellner 1995). Early feminist critique focused on the inundation of media representation through films and television, which at the time, was unprecedented (Gill 2009). The tradition draws on poststructuralism, multiculturalism, queer and transgender theory (Gill 2009; Kellner 1995; Levine 2015). Broadly, feminist media studies researchers attempt to explore the relationship between a world saturated in media and information technologies, and a world unequally divided into socially constructed categories of perceived difference (Gill 2009). Cultural studies is interested in situating cultural texts within their social context in order to understand not only how cultural artifacts are produced, but how they in turn shape society (Kellner 1995). As a researcher, I situate the texts included in my dataset within the social,

political, and cultural contexts in which young women who consume them are experiencing them (Levine 2015).

Feminist cultural studies is useful to my project because of the ways it theorizes gender and gendered experiences within the social world. Social subjects are constituted in gender, but gender is not based in sexual differences. Instead, gender is experienced differently across race, class, and sexual relations, and is therefore culturally, socially, and historically produced (Butler 1988, 1999; hooks 2000, 2015). Judith Butler (1988) defines gender as “an identity tenuously constituted in time” (519). She argues that because gender is constituted, it can be constituted differently through a series of performances. Not only is gender performative in nature, but it is also constructive. Gender is the cultural means by which sexual differences are produced (Butler 1999). Further, Teresa de Lauretis (1987) argues that media are “technologies of gender,” meaning that through social technologies, gender is produced, reproduced, and circulated. Masculine and feminine are therefore not predetermined categories, but instead actively produced by media. We can understand femininity as an identifier subject to change (Gill 2009), and as an iteration of many gendered identities (Levine 2015). Femininity is conceptualized as an identity one can perform properly, within a social and historical context. Thus, the femininity Lalonde portrays is one specific instance of femininity, bound up in hegemonic notions of what it means to be a young woman within a specific 21st century media moment. Further, the femininity she discursively constructs is reproduced and circulated through the gendered technologies she uses.

Elana Levine (2015) explains that due to the expansion of media into digital realms, media users are segmented into specialized niches, including feminine popular spaces. These feminized texts are often dismissed by the larger culture as frivolous or silly because of the

overall attitude towards femininized popular culture. I understand the digital space that my case study operates within as distinctly feminized. She belongs to a group of internet users called ‘lifestyle influencers,’ often understood outside of their community as young women who take selfies for a living (Abidin 2015). As I discuss at length throughout my literature review and analysis, this could not be further from the truth. These influencers carry significant cultural and social capital (Abidin 2015; Duffy 2017). The serious consideration of feminized media texts allows for not only a better understanding of how and why women consume the products they do (Levine 2015), but through discursive analysis, we can arrive at a better understand how these texts discursively construct femininity (Gill 2009, 2018). Cultural studies, like other theories of culture following in Marxist traditions, is interested in the relationship between production, the economy, culture, and everyday life. But it is also specifically interested in popular forms of media culture rather than what earlier scholars had distinguished as ‘high culture,’ and therefore worthier of study. Cultural studies’ scholars understand all forms of media culture as equally worth of study (Kellner 1995). Following in a longstanding feminist cultural studies tradition of understand that these femininized media texts can be both pleasurable and problematic (Gill 2009, Levine 2015), I use this theoretical framework to understand how Lalonde engages simultaneously in feminist and postfeminist sensibilities.

As many feminist media studies scholars argue (Banet-Weiser 2018; de Lauretis 1987; Gill 2007, 2009, 2016; Keller and Ryan. 2018; Levine 2015; Rottenberg 2013, 2017), feminist ideas are constantly in flux. My analysis takes these shifting feminist ideas into account when evaluating not only the idea of essentialized femininity, but reoccurring themes of popular feminisms that I identified in my data (Banet-Weiser 2018; Gill and Orgad 2018; Rottenberg 2015). Throughout this thesis, I am influenced by Rosalind Gill’s (2009) working definition of

feminism that understands feminist politics as a “concern with enduring gender inequalities and injustices, among a matrix of other forms of oppression in relation to ‘race,’ ethnicity, class, age, sexuality, disability and health status” (25). I find this definition useful as it considers the contributions of black feminists’ critiques of earlier feminisms, as well as queer theory. Further, I also explore postfeminism as an analytical tool through which we can understand media phenomenon (Gill 2007, 2017). Gill’s working definition of feminism pairs well with her understanding of postfeminist media sensibilities, as well as Catherine Rottenberg’s (2014) neoliberal feminism, which I discuss at length in my literature review chapter.

Finally, before I discuss my methodological approach, I want to reflect on my experience as a feminist cultural studies researcher. As a junior scholar, I resonated with Gill’s (2009) assertion that contemporary feminist scholars are more tentative than the feminist researchers who came before us. She explains that this is due, in part, to the lack of unified feminist media studies methodology or critical vocabulary. At first, I found this lack of vocabulary challenging and intimidating. Now, I see that this to be what I find most valuable about feminist cultural studies as a theoretical approach: it allows for a tension of opposites. Feminist discourse analysis implores feminist researchers to involve self-reflection when analyzing their data (Gill 2018). I can be reflexive and considerate of my privileged position as a white, educated, cis-gender researcher, which in turn leads me to feel tentative. But I can also use this privileged position to problematize larger structural inequalities in a more visible way. In the following section, I will describe how I used textual discursive analysis in order to arrive at analytical themes to make sense of my data.

Methodology

As I am operating within the theoretical framework of cultural studies, I find it useful to consider Kellner's assertion that applying multiple perspectives to one object of analysis allows for a more complete interpretive observation (Kellner 1995). In order allow for the most interpretive possibility for my dataset, I chose to use textual discursive analysis. The term 'discourse analysis' applies to a variety of methodological approaches. For this project, I am informed by feminist media studies theory that understands discourse analysis as a powerful tool to analyze a variety of media texts (Gill 2009). I used this methodological approach to make sense of media texts and audience reception data.

Discourse analysis has been employed by feminist researchers and other poststructuralist traditions such as queer theory. Based in Foucauldian traditions, it is a methodological and theoretical approach interested in modern manifestations of power. Michel Foucault (1972) defines discourse as "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (49). Scholar Sara Mills (2004) adds to this by explaining Foucauldian discourse as "something which produces something else (an utterance, a concept, an effect), rather than something which exists in and of itself an which can be analyzed in isolation" (15). Through discursive production Foucault argued that knowledge is produced and circulated through discourse by those in power in order to regulate populations (Foucault 1978). As such, the knowledge discourse produces allows for us to categorize and measure the human experience based on discursively constructed groups (Gill 2009).

Rosalind Gill (2018) proposes a discourse analysis that draws on three contrasting traditions of discourse analysis historically used in media studies research. Broadly, these

traditions are social semiotics and linguistics, speech act theory, and poststructuralist traditions, including Foucault's notion of power-knowledge (Gill 2009). It is the latter that I employ in this dissertation. In relation to my project then, discourse refers to all forms of talk and text, including conversations, interviews, broadcast media, or social media posts (Gill 2009, 2018). Within feminist media studies, we can understand discourse as a social practice that is both constructive and persuasive. All texts include a rhetorical aspect and should be studied as such. Discourse is concerned with establishing "one version of the world in the face of competing versions" (Gill 2018, 26). Discourse analysis requires feminist media studies scholars be skeptical in their readings, interrogating the underlying social conditions that may have helped produce a text, and how that might affect the version of the world it is trying to create, particularly with regards to gendered power relations (Gill 2018).

My discursive textual analysis focuses on various media texts produced by one social media influencer, Estée Lalonde. These texts include her print book, Instagram feed, YouTube videos, website, and podcast. For the purposes of this project, I choose a singular case study. As I outline in the following paragraph, Lalonde posts once per day on average to her Instagram account alone. My research question was interested in a particular type of branded femininity that occurs across social media platforms and even offline. I was interested in how the discourses around femininity changed, or did not change, on different platforms. As such, I was only able to include a single case study in a project of this size. As a researcher, the goal of my discursive analysis was to provide a focused, wholistic discussion of how social media influencers use particular conventions and affordances. By choosing one influencer, I was able to focus my discussion. A limitation to choosing a singular case study is that my data only speaks directly to Lalonde's particular brand of discursively constructed branded femininity but as I note

throughout the thesis, her brand contributes to existing discourses of femininity circulated in media culture.

The original data set was collected between November 2017 and April 2018. In total, Estee uploaded 238 photos to Instagram within this six-month period and all posts were included as part of my data set. Over the course of those months, I also watched her Instagram Stories on a regular basis (15-second video clips uploaded in chronological order to her profile). Due to the ephemeral nature of these Stories, which I discuss later in this section, I chose to purposefully select Stories that mirrored her Instagram photo content to screenshot and save. In total, I saved 10 screenshots of Instagram Stories and used two for my final analysis. All of my data from Instagram was saved by screenshotting directly from Lalonde's feed. I saved these images in a Tropy document. Tropy is a free, crowd-sourced program designed for visual researchers (Tropy 2019). The program allowed for me to organize my data by tags and category or date, and search by keyword. This was particularly useful as I began categorizing my images in order to identify analytical themes. I accessed my other data through Lalonde's website. I also purchased a copy of her book, *Bloom* (Lalonde 2016).

At the beginning of this project, I only intended to include her book, Instagram feed, and a single YouTube video. As I began my analysis, I found this approach limiting for a few reasons. First, my original dataset suggested that Estee did not engage with feminist politics on her social media platforms, something that grabbed my attention. Indeed, discourse analysts pay attention to not only what is said, but what is omitted (Gill 2018). Throughout my research I remained engaged with her content more broadly and knew there was a podcast in which Estee discussed intersectional feminist activism (Lalonde 2017b). I wanted to problematize why she may include discussions of feminism on one platform and not another. In order to provide the

most holistic representation of Estee's branded femininity, I would need to consider how her self-representation functioned across various platforms, including the podcast episode, even if that did not necessarily further my argument for her as a postfeminist subject. Gill (2018) insists that discourse analysis must go beyond constructing an argument based on the data, but instead also accounting for variability (Gill 2018). Therefore, I purposefully selected media from her other accounts to provide a more accurate and comprehensive representation.

While this project is particularly concerned with Lalonde's discursively constructed femininity, historically, cultural studies is interested in audience reception. According to scholar Douglas Kellner (2017), cultural studies is "a threefold project of analyzing the production and political economy of culture, cultural texts, and the audience reception of those texts and their effects in a concrete, sociohistorical context" (10). In addition to including texts Lalonde herself created, I decided to include four posts from the gossip website, *Guru Gossip*, a reply to a Tweet, as well as a YouTube comment. These posts were purposefully selected as they illustrate the ways in which users engage with and respond to Lalonde's content. They also contribute to the discourses Lalonde circulates by reaffirming or questioning the content she posts. Including a small amount of reception data allowed me to consider how these discourses were being circulated and reflect on how her audience's interpretation contributed to these discussions surrounding femininity.

Through my textual discursive analysis, I identified five analytical themes based on the Instagram content from my data collection period. I arrived at these themes first through categorizing her Instagram images based on my discursive analysis. For example, if the photo was of her and her boyfriend, I would categorize it as 'boyfriend.' If Estee was modeling her 'outfit of the day,' I would categorize it as 'fashion'. Sometimes photos would cross categories

based on whether or not they were paid advertisements or organic (unpaid) content. An example of this would be a photo of Estee posing with a lipstick, but a caption indicating it was an advertisement. This image would then be categorized as ‘beauty,’ but also ‘sponsored content.’ Because she was generating a large amount of content, sometimes multiple posts per day, I chose to categorize the photos at the end of every month. This helped with my purposeful selection of Instagram Stories as well, because I had started identifying patterns in the content Estee shared.

In order to arrive at my analytical themes, I paid considerable attention to which topics reoccurred and how they might contribute to discursive constructions of femininity. How I understand these constructions of femininity is influenced by scholarly writing on postfeminist sensibilities in popular media culture (Gill 2007, 2017; Negra 2009). Postfeminism as an analytical framework helped to make sense of how gendered consumption and heterosexual romance, in particular, were operating within my dataset. I also considered how feminized popular culture within the 21st century media moment is largely focused on labour and the work women are expected to do (Levine 2015). As such, I drew heavily on Brooke Erin Duffy’s (2017) concept of aspirational labour to provide context as I analyzed my data. Because femininity is intricately linked with female friendship (Winch 2013), I noted how often Estee shared photos with her friends. I arrived at the following five themes: female friendship, commodity feminism and gendered consumption, the interior psychic life, heterosexual romance, and gendered labour.

These themes became the basis of further categorization of my remaining data. Any occurrences of the themes in Estee’s book were identified and bookmarked. Website content was used to provide context to discussions on her other social media platforms that assumed some background knowledge on why she may be using a product or discussing a brand. I also included

quotes from her website if I felt that my attempts at paraphrasing detracted from me conveying the general sentiment of what Estee was trying to say. For example, she discussed healing crystals in her book and in two Instagram posts. I included quotes from her website to explain her beliefs in the crystals' healing powers and to explain how these crystals fit into larger discussions of spiritual consumption (Williams 2014). For her podcast, I listened to the episode concerning feminism three times through before transcribing direct quotes and paraphrasing discussions that explored my analytical themes or contradicted preliminary themes I had previously identified. I compared how intersectional feminism was discussed on her non-monetized podcast in contrast to her print book. Once the entirety of my data was coded by analytical themes, I began my analysis. In conducting my analysis, I considered my research question, but also why her media texts might be read in the way I had categorized them, and what persuasive devices were being used to further her discursive construction of femininity (Gill 2018).

I will conclude this section with a discussion of the theoretical and methodological challenges I encountered while conducting my research. Discourse analysis can be particularly difficult because it can be a tedious and lengthy project. This is one of the method's drawbacks (Gill 2018). As I previously discussed, I found myself having trouble with my original dataset because omitting certain media examples, such as the podcast, would have meant not including certain findings. Practically, one of the main challenges I faced with this project was the ephemeral nature of Instagram Stories. These stories only remain on an Instagram users page for 24 hours unless the user elects to save it to their highlight. As such, I felt I should always be checking for fear I may miss an important finding. I was able to screenshot some very interesting Stories that were relevant to my analytical themes, but I am almost certain I missed just as many.

Also, I was concerned with experiencing Estee's social media brand in a similar way that her followers would. As a person who engages with the beauty and lifestyle community in my spare time, I knew that only looking at Instagram would not lead to the coherence that feminist discursive analysis demands (Gill 2018). Therefore, as a researcher, I found it difficult to narrow my focus to a certain number of media texts.

Finally, I should also discuss in brief the difficulty of ascertaining whether or not Estee's social media was coming from herself or her personal assistant. Over my months of observing her content, I noticed she would periodically mention an assistant. Of course, most social media content influencers create is highly curated (Duffy 2017), but I feel compelled to note that scholarship has not discussed how to approach discursive analysis of social media influencers that includes content from the influencer themselves as well as a management team. The most jarring example of this is when watching Estee's Instagram Stories, one short video of her talking directly to the camera would be uploaded, and it would then be interrupted with an affiliate link, suggesting there were two people signed in and running Estee's account at one time. As a cultural studies researcher, I asked myself how the methods of production and political economy operating behind Lalonde's brand might affect the kind of femininity she circulates (Kellner 1995). Despite these difficulties and considerations, discourse analysis allowed for a holistic overview of Lalonde's self-brand. In turn, I am able to comment not only on one specific social media channel, but instead problematize how factors such as sponsorship effect the content influencers create, and by extension, the gendered discourses they circulate.

CHAPTER FOUR: FEMALE EMPOWERMENT AND BRANDED FEMININITY

In this chapter, I use discursive textual analysis to explore how branded femininity is portrayed by social media influencers using Estée Lalonde as a primary case study. My findings show that despite the fact that female empowerment is a central theme across Lalonde's social media accounts, she nonetheless perpetuates notions of traditional femininity and reinforce existing gender roles through her branded content. In the first section of this chapter, I discuss how aspirational labour rewards women's efforts to discipline their bodies through aesthetic labour, and reinforces discourses emphasizing women as consumers of material goods (Duffy 2017; Gill 2007). Working in conjunction with the aesthetic labour, significant emotional labour necessitates the confessional discourses needed to establish intimacy with a social media following (Abidin 2016; Jerslev 2016). This was exemplified throughout my data, and was most apparent in Lalonde's book, *Bloom* (2016), which often relied on story-telling in order to perpetuate ideas about femininity while establishing her as relatable and attainable aspirational feminine figure (Abidin 2016; Duffy 2017).

Because Lalonde's brand is built around being a "girl boss," a term she refers to herself as in interviews (Bossy Women Podcast 2018), female empowerment and feminism are common themes throughout the analysis, a topic I consider in the second section of this chapter. However, I problematize how a particular style of "neoliberal feminism" Lalonde uses works to valorize a 'cool girl' feminist identity concerned with palatability rather than feminist activism (Gill 2016; Rottenberg 2013; Renninger 2018). This feminist identity is intricately linked with an entrepreneurial femininity concerned with 'having it all,' including independent financial success and a romantic relationship (Duffy and Hund 2015). In the following section, I discuss influencer couples as a commodity unit requiring self-branding and impression management (Marwick and

boyd 2011). These couple units are part of what makes an online persona feel authentic to their audience, allowing for the influencers to gain and maintain social capital in a space where being in a romantic relationship is valorized. Upon the dissolution of a romantic relationship, female friendships are often called up to take their place, as I noted in my case study. Through a “BFF co-brand” with another prominent UK-based influencer (Winch 2013), Lalonde cross-promotes a newly-single persona concerned with self-care and self-improvement, which I discuss further in the fourth section of this chapter. Here, I consider the gendered maintenance of the interior psychic life and how women are expected to demonstrate resilience in the face of adversity (Gill 2018). Finally, in the fifth and final section, I explore how Lalonde uses mysticism to achieve self-actualization while simultaneously promoting her femininized self-brand.

Gendered Digital Labour in the Lifestyle Industry

As an influencer, Lalonde generates an income through her social media posts. As such, it is imperative to understand her social media profiles as sites of labour practices. In particular, these are gendered labour practices that respond to and produce particular ideas about femininity. For example, she often sees an economic return from sponsored posts featuring beauty products like lipstick or mascara. In this section, I will demonstrate how Lalonde’s gendered labour practices function to perpetuate hegemonic ideals about femininity and the work expected of women. To do this, I will focus on Lalonde’s book *Bloom*, which acts as a step-by-step guide outlining the merits of aspirational labour. According to Brooke Erin Duffy (2015, 2016, 2017), aspirational labourers pursue creative activities with the promise of future economic and social gain as a reward. Within this narrative, creative producers will often work for free until they attain the necessary cultural capital allowing them to monetize their brand. Within this discourse,

“the *hope* of securing a fulltime career propels certain forms of participation in the online community” (Duffy 2017, 480). I also consider her YouTube video titled, “WORKING FROM HOME” (Lalonde 2018d), and select sponsored Instagram posts concerned with maintaining the aesthetics of the female body. Ashley Mears (2014) characterizes work of the body and maintenance of external appearances as aesthetic labour. These workers are compensated for their external appearances and the affect their bodies have on the viewer. By promoting these beauty products and treatments, Lalonde also validates their importance to the performance of aesthetic labour that is expected of women, and by extension the supposed rewards of aspirational labour. Finally, I will conclude this section with a brief discussion of the state of the beauty and lifestyle influencer industry as a whole, including current pushback against the narrative of aspirational labour.

Prescriptive Path of Success

Of the many ways an online business can take off, influencers valorize a hobby-to-pro narrative (Duffy 2017). This is a prescriptive path of success in which blogging starts out as a hobby and develops into a business; discussed as though it were a natural, unstoppable progression. Within this narrative, blogging is often framed as less of an economic need but instead an emotional one in which it acts as a form of “creative self-actualization” (Duffy 2017, 55). In the fashion and beauty industry, blogs and other social media profiles like Instagram are pursued because the creator either needed a break from the monotony of their desk job or wanted a creative endeavour outside of the restrictions imposed by being employed by someone else. In this case, generating an income is an afterthought, while having the creative outlet remains the most important aspect of the social media brand. Getting paid is framed as a bonus, with the actual reward being the opportunity to “do what you love” (Duffy 2017). Origin stories like these

are crucial to creating affective relationships with an audience and establishing legitimacy through authenticity. I argue that Lalonde frames her online presence as an outlet of creative self-actualization allowing her to take care of her interior psychic life. Her work acts as a creative outline that helped her to endure a difficult emotional time. The cultural and social capital she obtains through her line of work is always secondary to her brand's origin story.

At this point in her career, Lalonde is compensated for her creative endeavours, as evidenced by her paid Instagram and YouTube uploads, her role as brand ambassador for large companies such as Lancôme and Adidas, and her various brand collaborations. As she reminds her readers throughout her lifestyle book *Bloom* (Lalonde 2016a), this was not always the case. Lalonde uses *Bloom* as a way to establish an affective relationship with her audience. Throughout the book, she employs confessional discourse of traumatic events in her childhood, teenage years, and early adulthood in order to establish the supposed realness of the content she shares online (Jerslev 2016). The anecdotes she tells are an integral aspect of establishing her self-brand. The storyline within *Bloom* is not linear, but she divides the timeline mostly as “before meeting Aslan” and “after meeting Aslan.” Aslan is her boyfriend of eight years, whom she moved to the United Kingdom to enter a romantic relationship with. By extension, the timeline is understood as “before beauty blogging” and “after beauty blogging,” because she started her blog with his encouragement and financial support. The impression management of this romance will be discussed in greater detail in a later section of the analysis chapter. For now, I want to emphasize that Lalonde's career began after moving to the UK to live with him. Starting her beauty blog is associated with what Lalonde calls a very dark time in her life, during which she was homesick following a cross-continent move, and later diagnosed with anxiety and depression (Lalonde 2016a).

Underneath a photo of herself applying mascara, her luxury brand-named makeup products expertly included in frame, Lalonde opens the chapter, ‘Beauty,’ with the following passage:

Until that [sic] moment I went online to search for new make-up to cheer myself up, I had never heard of beauty blogs before, but I found them fascinating. I loved that they were blogs written by real people with real opinions. I started my own blog because I thought it would be a great way to meet new people with similar interests and it was a good distraction from the struggles I was going through at the time (Lalonde 2016a, 109).

This passage emphasizes two aspects of her line of work: blogging as a form of self-actualization and the emotional payoff of pursuing creative, passionate work (Duffy 2017). It is also a call-back to the previous chapter, ‘Work,’ in which Lalonde spends the first few pages establishing herself as a hard-worker, but someone who lacked an overall sense of passion in life. She discusses how her mother taught her that she had no limitations; “I had no rules or anchors holding me back,” but that she was never really sure what career path to pursue (Lalonde 2016a, 81). A letter from Aslan is also included. He writes: “Blogging also gave you the confidence boost that you needed during the first difficult year in the UK (...) You have changed and evolved so much from that nervous girl in a Cambridge daze [in reference to her initial move to the UK] (...) you faced those fears and anxieties head on and conquered them in your own way – a new and exciting digital way only possible in the twenty-first century” (Lalonde 2016a, 89). This quote adds further legitimacy to the claim that blogging was as a form of creative self-realization (Duffy 2017), and in Lalonde’s case, salvation.

She is careful to highlight the fact her blog was not an overnight success. As a university student, working part-time, she found that blogging was really only something she could do on the weekends. After gaining a small readership, starting a YouTube channel felt like a natural


progression to her. Truthfully, Lalonde (2016a) admits: “I had zero qualifications when it came to the beauty and fashion world, but I made that my angle. I made it clear from the start that I had absolutely no idea what I was doing, but I wanted to learn along with anyone who cared to join me and watch my videos” (92). Once her boyfriend finished his university degree, they were able to move from Cambridge to London. After a year, her blog and YouTube channel were getting enough traffic that she was bringing in an income. It was then that she decided to quit her job and university classes to dive “head first into everything blogging-related” (94). By emphasizing this hobby to pro narrative, Lalonde includes herself in the larger “Do What You Love” discourse in which she is able to pursue passionate work while making an income (Duffy 2017).

Beauty and Neoliberal Entrepreneurialism

Within neoliberal discourse, women’s bodies are presented as their main source of power and a key aspect of identity. They are constantly scrutinized and deemed ‘good enough’ through a culturally constrictive lens (Gill 2007). For lifestyle influencers, the female body is not only a source of power and identity, but income. As such, lifestyle influencers belong to a group that scholars have identified as aesthetic labourers (Banet-Weiser 2017; Dosekun 2017; Duffy 2017; Mears 2014). Aesthetic labour emphasizes the neoliberal idea that success is highly individualized and almost entirely dependent on self-will (Duffy 2017). Beauty functions as an investment strategy for economic return: “individuals are compensated, directly or indirectly, for their own body’s looks and affect” (Mears 2014, 1332). Maintaining one’s outward appearance is a result of the ability to engage in strict body disciplining as well as unrealistic standards of physical perfection (Duffy 2017). Beauty is framed as something that is “achievable through labour, and not just any kind of labour, but labour as dedicated repetition, and mastery” (Banet-

Weiser 2017 275). Aesthetic labour requires workers to channel emotional energy into their craft. This is a gendered practice that reinforces maintaining one's outer appearance as "women's work" (Duffy 2017). Further, it solidifies the link between the body and female subjectivity, valuing women as objects to be displayed.

Influencers must perform aesthetic labour in order to be successful. They are responsible for impression management through self-vigilance in the name of entrepreneurialism, normalizing neoliberal notions of individualism (Mears 2014). If we understand beauty as an investment, then Lalonde's returns are evidenced through her sponsored Instagram posts in which her physical appearance is the basis of the advertisement. In early November 2017, Lalonde uploaded three sponsored posts within five days; two of which were for cosmetic brands, the third for President Brie cheese. For the purpose of this analysis, I will focus on the two cosmetic ads in which her natural, apparently effortless beauty, takes the forefront. I consider how her aesthetic labour contributes to discourses that valorize certain beauty ideals, particularly those associated with white, middle-class femininity.

On November 2, 2017 she posted: "I'm having a metallic moment with the brand new @incrediblecosmetics Foiling Around Metallic Lip Paint in the shade "Kissing Strangers". Available for £8 in @theofficialselfridges and on incrediblecosmetics.com  #beyourincredibleself #ad" (See Figure 3). The image is a selfie cut-off just above the waist. Lalonde is wearing a white, ruffled t-shirt with her straight blonde hair framing her face. She is sporting her signature natural makeup look with muted tones on her blue eyes; her skin clear of blemishes with the exception of a light dusting of freckles on her cheekbones. She's half-smiling, her lips painted in what we can assume is the shade "Kissing Strangers" from Incredible Cosmetics. The brand's hashtag is #beyourincredibleself, a play on their name and a hint at the

ad's messaging: your incredible self can be unleashed, but only through the power of their lipstick. By association, Lalonde is also selling an ideal in which beauty is achievable through consumption. In relation to aesthetic labour, we can assume she is being paid for her beauty because of the inclusion of the hashtag #ad which posts must include if the creator has been paid for the content, as mandated by the British Advertising Standards Authority (ASA_2016).

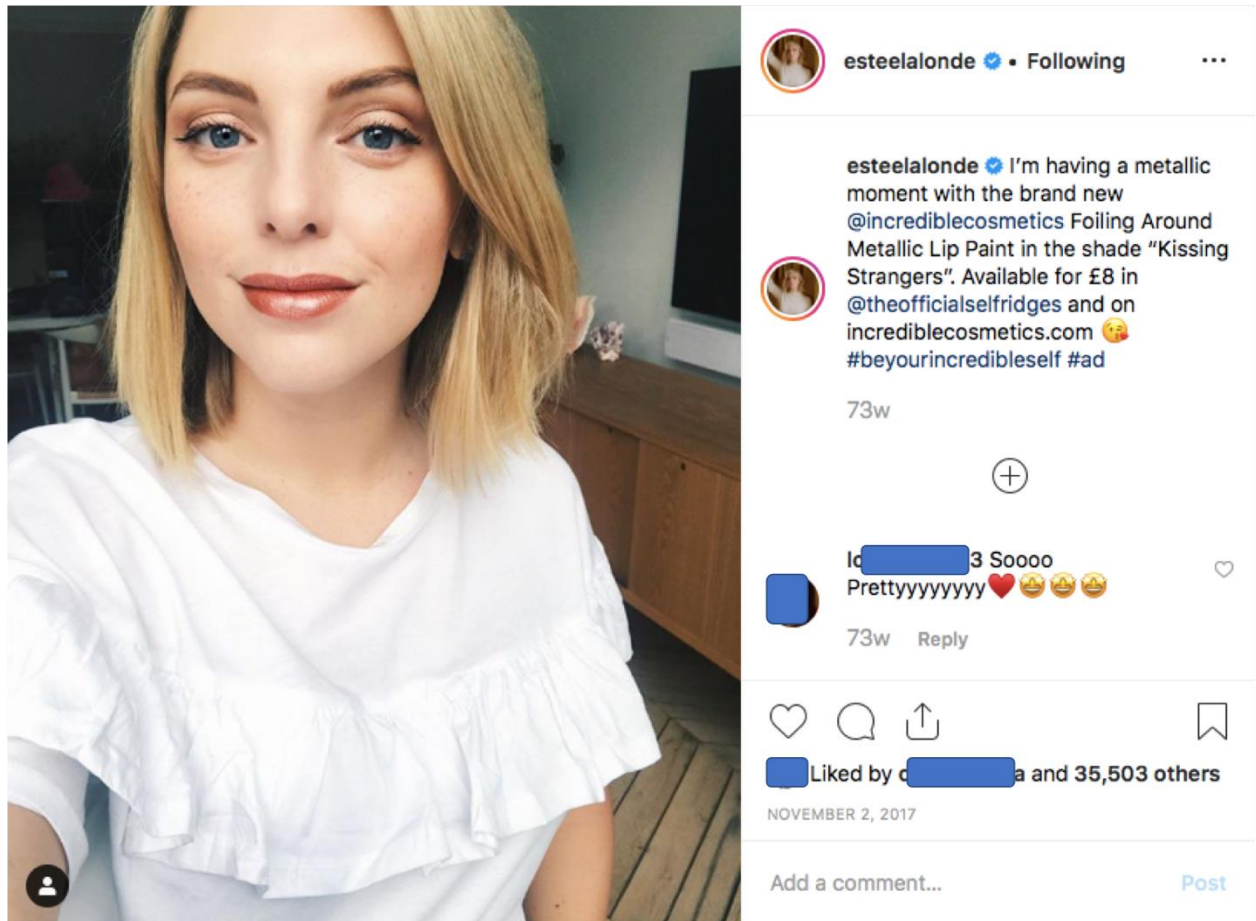



Figure 3 Incredible Cosmetics advertisement on Lalonde's Instagram account, @esteelalonde. November 2, 2017.

Similarly, on November 8, 2017, she directed her followers to Lancôme's website where she had partnered with them on a video featuring her makeup favourites: "Hey there! 🙋 Head over to the @lancomeofficial website (www.lancome.co.uk/discover-lancome/Lalonde-lalonde-natural-makeup-tutorial/) to get my look and shop my favourites! I also did an exclusive get

ready with me video  #ad” (See Figure 4). The image is another selfie cut off just above the waist. On this day, Lalonde is wearing a white turtleneck and light grey leather jacket. Her blonde hair is a little more tousled, but her makeup look is similar to that in the Incredible Cosmetics ad. As the copy reads, she is promoting her ongoing partnership with Lancôme. The video she links to is a tutorial, meaning it will provide viewers with a guide to achieving her makeup look in the photo.

Sarah Banet-Weiser (2017) theorized beauty tutorials as vehicles through which the merits of aesthetic labour are communicated. These videos emphasize that beauty is attainable through practice and mastery. Here, Lalonde is being both compensated for her own outward appearance and encouraging her audience to see beauty as something that can be attained by making the right choices in cosmetics and following the proper application techniques. This reinforces a beauty ideal in which women are expected to work on their bodies, but to have the work be invisible. Women are encouraged to “continue the work of femininity but still appear as entirely confident, carefree, and unconcerned about their self-presentation” (Gill 2007 155). Lalonde’s entire brand is built on her natural beauty and minimal makeup, making the work she does almost undetectable. Her brand engages in aesthetic pursuits reserved for the middle-class because it involves indulgent consumption contingent on disposable income (Lazar 2017).

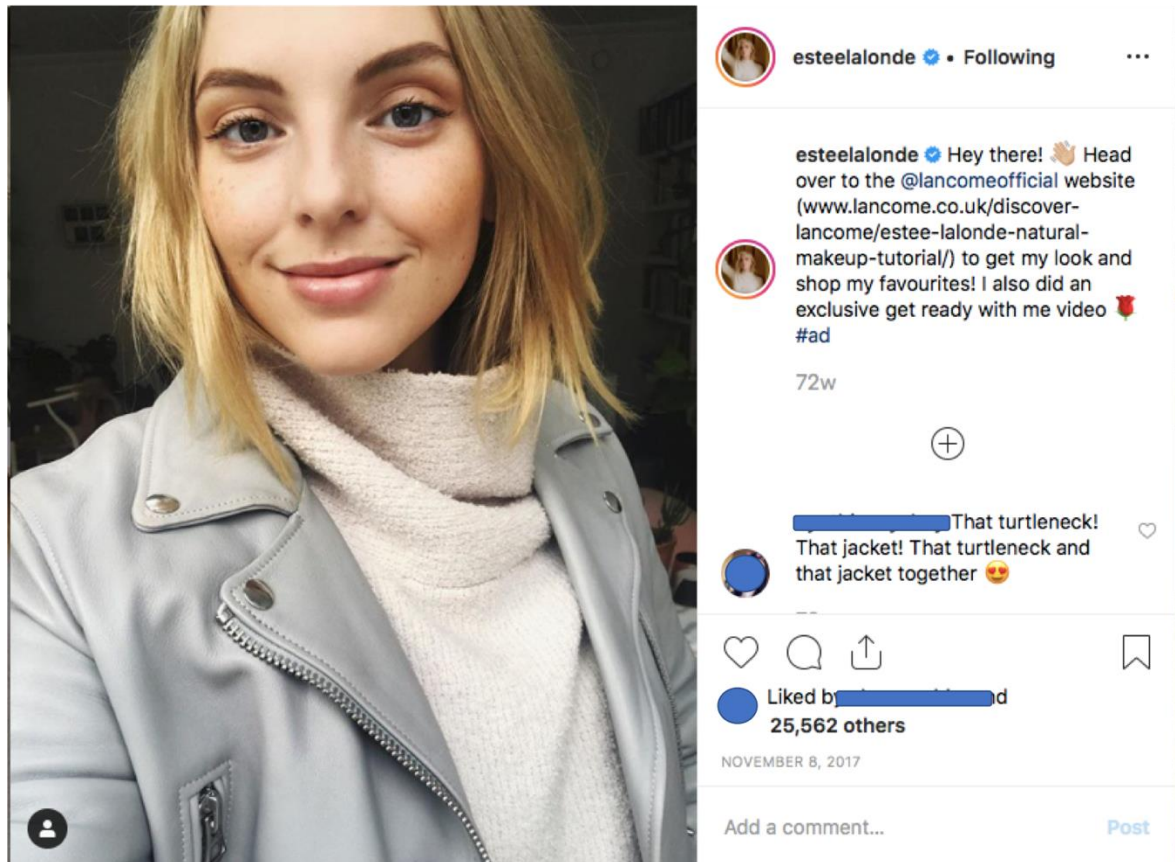


Figure 4 Lancôme advertisement on Lalonde’s Instagram account, @esteelalonde. November 8, 2017.

The vast majority of influencers who have successfully mobilized aspirational labour are white, middle-class, well-educated and “typify conventional beauty standards” (Duffy 2015, 711). The overwhelmingly white representation of young women who have made careers by performing their femininity online indicates that social media is inherently classed and gendered (Duffy 2015). A white, middle-class woman acts as an idealized object of display within the lifestyle and beauty influencer industry. As I discussed at length in my literature review, media technologies produce and reproduce ideas about race, class, and gender (diLauretis 1987). By using social media, influencers can reproduce existing discourses. Sarah Banet-Weiser (2017) asserts that the aesthetic labour of beauty vloggers is reproductive, “working to continually reproduce a conventional, idealised definition of beauty” (273). Her hypervisibility helps to reinstitute whiteness as a dominant cultural norm and racial standard (McRobbie 2009).

Therefore, not only does Lalonde embody conventional beauty with her blonde hair, blue eyes, slim figure, and clear complexion, but in engaging in her aesthetic labour, she reproduces a specific type of femininity marked by her whiteness.

Estée Lalonde Inc.

A key feature of aspirational labourers is that they are able to appeal to their audience through a sense of ordinariness by celebrating “realness.” These young women rely on being “just like us” in order to bolster affective relationships with their audiences (Duffy 2016, 446). Scholars (Duffy and Wissinger 2017; Duffy 2017; Abidin 2016) have identified the importance of the illusion that influencers’ work—specifically when it comes to brand partnerships—is done out of passion. Getting paid is an afterthought and added bonus. Brand work is often framed as an endorsement done out of genuine enjoyment of a product (Abidin 2016; Duffy 2017).

In the early boom of the influencer marketing industry, an integral aspect of success was hiding your labour to maintain a sense of authentic passion for your work (Banet-Weiser 2017), but there is a growing movement in the lifestyle and beauty industry to acknowledge the sheer amount of behind-the-scenes labour and the economic structures that allows for a self-brand like Lalonde’s to function on a daily basis. This manifests in confessional vlogs and behind-the-scenes Instagram Stories that emphasize the number of hours behind editing a video for YouTube, for example. I understand this is a pushback against claims that the immaterial labour influencers engage in is not “real work,” though it requires significant emotional and economic investment (Rocamora 2018). Within a distinctly feminine digital media economy, masking the labour behind doing what you love is crucial to maintaining authenticity (Duffy 2017). Yet, I argue that some influencers *attempt* to justify their labour and by extension their paycheques, by disclosing certain aspects of behind-the-scenes work using YouTube videos and Instagram

stories. I emphasize attempt because it is clear what Lalonde is trying to accomplish, but whether or not she achieves this is doubtful. To unpack this further, I will use Lalonde's recent video titled "WORKING FROM HOME" (Lalonde 2018d).

The video opens with Lalonde at a breakfast meeting with an unidentified person. It quickly cuts to Lalonde speaking directly into the camera from her kitchen: "I thought I would I show you how I like to work, and like, what I do when I work from home because I know it's a mystery!" (Lalonde 2018). She then shows her workspace – a large desk in the middle of her living room with her greyhound dog laying behind her seat. There are floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking London's skyline. She talks about her jam-packed schedule for the next few weeks in which every hour is accounted for, emphasizing that "I know it doesn't seem like my life is like that... I am usually working, and I have a lot of things to do" (Lalonde 2018d). Next, she discusses what her job actually entails, which is mostly answering emails from brands wanting to collaborate or send products. On this day, she's also writing personalized cards for people that bought a piece from the initial release of her collaboration with a London jewelry designer. After lunch, which she "forgot to vlog... I'm such a bad vlogger" (Lalonde 2018d), she calls her mom. They talk about work, and how Lalonde has always had a great work ethic, and has always had a job because "What else is there to do?" (Lalonde 2018d).

This video was a part of a larger series called Vlogtober, in which Lalonde was supposed to vlog every day of the month of October. On each day, she read a 'quote of the day.' She and her mother discuss the poignancy and supposed happenstance of that day's quote: "Dreams don't work unless you do," reiterating that, again, success is possible but only if you are willing to put the work in. The video ends abruptly with Lalonde taking her dog for a walk. The video reads as a rather shallow attempt at mitigating the criticism influencers receive in terms of the validity of

their work. This behind-the-scenes look highlights the labour she engages with, but also the privilege of her arguably upper-middle-class life.

The 'Truth' About Being an Influencer

I want to emphasize that videos like Lalonde's, "WORK FROM HOME," are not uncommon on YouTube. A quick search on the platform reveals thousands of videos with those words in the title, with some of the most popular videos (by view count) being produced by lifestyle influencers. These videos are often framed as a way to justify and provide legitimacy to the job title 'influencer.' As Lalonde mentioned, there is the misconception that her life is glamorous and that she does not work, but in fact she is "usually working" and very busy (Lalonde 2018). Recent backlash against the influencer industry attacks the legitimacy of the creator's supposedly authentic content. In November 2018, *Wired* published an exposé titled "Inside the Pricey War to Influence Your Instagram Feed" (Martineau 2018). The article raised questions about the ethics of large-scale influencers accepting upwards of \$60,000 for a video promoting a brand, and as much as \$85,000 by brands to take down their competitors in a video. These 'take downs' are typically disguised as poor product reviews (Martineau 2018). Influencers themselves has started posting videos 'exposing' the influencer industry by pushing the responsibility back on the brands, rather than the young women taking all of the criticism.

Some of these videos expose the larger implications of brand PR that influencers are sent in the mail. For example, a recent launch included a mascara arriving packaged in a box fitted with an LCD screen inside another box filled with packing materials to protect said LCD screen. Another Canadian influencer with just over 900,000 subscribers, Samantha Ravandahl, said in a recent video that she spends hundreds of dollars disposing of all of the packaging she receives (Ravandahl 2018). In the same video, she also stated she would no longer be accepting PR

packages from the over 40 brands that send product to her on a regular basis. Her reasoning was that she felt her reviews of the product were always clouded by the fact she received them for free even though she could afford to purchase them herself. She spoke at length about how fortunate she was to receive all of these gifts, but that ultimately it felt irresponsible to continue accepting them (Ravandahl 2018).

Earlier this year, Samantha also shared a video titled “THE PROBLEM WITH THE BEAUTY COMMUNITY...” (Ravandahl 2018b). The thumbnail features a fully-made-up Samantha crying into a Canadian five-dollar-bill. Throughout the video, she is applying her makeup while discussing the many problems with the beauty community, including the influencers themselves. She labels the honesty that influencers preach to their audience as a “marketable honesty,” a self-aware testimony to the merits of successfully establishing feelings of intimacy and authenticity with a following (Abidin 2016). She also posits whether or not the feelings of ill-will towards beauty influencers is worse because of the gendered nature of the beauty and lifestyle industry – calling into question why gaming influencers are not being ‘exposed’ in the same way (Ravandahl 2018).

In conclusion, I identify a pushback against earlier influencer narratives that framed their invisible labour as “fun” rather than work (Duffy and Wissinger 2017). Instead, some young women are attempting to legitimize the immaterial labour they once hid, especially because their self-brands are so wrapped up in their offline life and feminine identity. Women’s labour often goes unrecognized or underappreciated, and Ravandahl challenges this by going to far as to attribute the dismissal of her labour to a larger issue of gender inequality. Lalonde attempts to engage in these conversations, though I would argue not as effectively or with as much insight. Through her hobby-to-pro narrative, she establishes a brand built on happenstance

entrepreneurship while ignoring the privilege she was allowed by having the capital to start a beauty blog in the first place (Duffy 2017). The monetization of her following through sponsored posts is based on an established intimacy with her followers, afforded by discourses of aspirational labour which frame influencers as ‘just like us,’ and therefore trustworthy (Duffy 2017). Lalonde treads a line between the safety of her established brand and the appeal of legitimizing her immaterial labour disguised as passionate work in a volatile media moment for the lifestyle and beauty influencer industry at large, which questions these women’s legitimacy and meritocracy. In the following section, I further consider how Lalonde manages her established brand by discussing her relationship to popular feminist movements (Rottenberg 2013; Gill 2016; Renninger 2018), which allow her to engage with a feminist identity without comprising her established narrative.

Feminist as a ‘Cool Girl’ Identity

Catherine Rottenberg (2013) uses the term neoliberal feminism to refer to a re-emergence of feminism informed by neoliberal ideology within the public domain. In brief, neoliberalism is “a dominant political rationality that moves to and from the management of the state to the inner workings of the subject, normatively constructing and interpellating individuals as entrepreneurial actors” (Rottenberg 2013, 420). As such, the neoliberal feminist subject is aware of the inequalities faced by women but refuses to accept the societal factors that contribute to these issues. Instead, she turns inward and focuses on self-improvement in order to achieve equality, converting “continued gender inequality from a structural problem into an individual affair” (Rottenberg 2013, 420). Recognizing the emergence of neoliberal feminism within popular culture, Rosalind Gill (2016) discusses feminism’s current “in” status among celebrities.

As microcelebrities, lifestyle influencers engage in a form of ‘celebrity and style feminism’ by assuming the identity of feminist as a way to stay relevant (Gill 2016). This is “a feminism that is actually encumbered by its desire not to be angry, not to be ‘difficult,’ not to be ‘humourless’: it is positioned against the figure of the ‘feminist killjoy’” (618). It is a *consumable* neoliberal feminism rooted in individualism and focused on avoiding alienating potential audiences. Within this neoliberal feminist discourse, “the solution to injustice is to work on the self rather than to work with others for social and political transformation” (617). This particular iteration of feminism relies on accepting the label of “feminist,” but not necessarily engaging in the politics of the movement (Renninger 2018). Young women are expected to practice an acceptable form of neoliberal feminism through demonstrated support of their fellow females, adopting the feminist label, and consuming commercial goods (Bae 2011; Banet-Weiser 2017; Gill 2016; Rottenberg 2013).

Because the neoliberal ideology is concerned with “casting every human endeavour and activity in entrepreneurial terms” (Rottenberg 2013, 421), the neoliberal feminist subject must be in control of all aspects of her life: her career, her relationship, and her appearance, in order to maximize her entrepreneurial potential (McRobbie 2015). Lifestyle influencers exemplify this dedication to control and perfection in their social media feeds by sharing carefully curated, staged images of their aspirational lives (Duffy and Hund 2015). By extension, I argue that a large part of performing public femininity online in our current cultural moment, is identifying as a feminist. This identifier is important to an influencer’s self-brand due to feminism’s ‘cool’ status in our media moment (Gill 2016). The images paired with this cool-girl, feminist label are antithetical to radical feminist politics in the ways in which they glorify consumerism, overlook structural inequalities, and focus on individual resilience as a prescriptive pathway to success

(Duffy and Wissinger 2017, Gill 2018). To demonstrate this, I will consider how Lalonde's feminist politics become entangled with neoliberal individualism through a discursive analysis of *Bloom*'s discussions of feminism and a feminist-themed episode on Lalonde's podcast, *The Heart of It* (2017b).

Neoliberal Feminist Praise in Bloom

In *Bloom* (2016), nestled between discussions of her daily work routine and tips for overcoming self-doubt as an entrepreneur, Lalonde discusses feminism. She opens with an anecdote about learning about feminism from her step-sister, a women's studies major. Prior to their discussion, it had never occurred to Lalonde that women were something to be "studied," and she admits she really did not know what the feminist movement entailed. The self-titled 'Feminism' section is only two pages long, but within those two pages Lalonde positions herself as a feminist, albeit a consumable, neoliberal feminist concerned primarily with individualized female empowerment as recognized through participation in capitalist culture. Without providing her readers with a definition of how she understands feminism, Lalonde launches into a list of all of the women she admires: Oprah, Emma Watson, Tina Fey, Amy Poehler, and Sheryl Sandberg among others. Rather than referencing what these women have accomplished in terms of feminist politics, she instead supports them because they are "doing great things" (Lalonde 2016 100).

Rottenberg (2013) understands Sandberg's self-help book as "a site in which we can very clearly discern the processes by and through which liberal feminism is disarticulated, and the neoliberal feminist subject is born" (422). While liberal feminism underscores much of Sandberg's so-called feminist manifesto, she often offers contradictory advice. Sandberg provides credit to liberal feminists for creating the current cultural landscape in the United States

that affords infinite possibilities for women who are able to overcome their mental blocks. Neoliberal feminism places emphasis on women's individual will to fight against gender inequality, in contrast with liberal feminism which is concerned with mobilizing social and political reform (Rottenberg 2013). Lalonde mentions Sheryl Sandberg not only in *Bloom*, but again on her website promoting the book prior to its launch. In a list of books that inspired her writing, she includes Sandberg's infamous feminist manifesto, *Lean In*, because: "Sheryl Sandberg is the ultimate girl boss and I strongly believe that every woman should have a copy of 'Lean In' sitting proudly on their book shelf [...] 'Lean In' helps us to recognise the obstacles that face women on the path to leadership and tells us how to get over them. This book is without doubt an uplifting and inspiring read. Major girl power" (Lalonde 2016b). Lalonde aligns herself with larger neoliberal feminist discourses that ignore issues of race, class, and gender inequality by suggesting that Sandberg illuminates the path to success. She defines success as leadership, further solidifying the notion that feminism is linked to entrepreneurial aspirations.

Lalonde shares a palatable feminism grounded in consumable mentions of inspiring women, evidenced by the discussion of feminism in *Bloom* that reads more like a token mention than a radical manifesto. Discussion of systemic issues or racial injustices are avoided. Her list of aspirational women is overwhelmingly white. By including one black woman, Oprah, there is the suggestion that racial inequalities should be forgotten in favour of celebrating the successes of an individualized feminism (Rottenberg 2013). Neoliberal feminism assumes all injustices, even racial injustices, can be overcome with the right mindset (Rottenberg 2013). Rottenberg (2013) notes that Sandberg hails a privilege, white middle-class woman as an ideal subject for mobilizing neoliberal feminism and Lalonde is quick to answer her call. Lalonde aligns herself with Sandberg in the ways she neglects mention of social injustices or change when discussing

feminism, and again when she praises *Lean In* as a girl power manifesto. This further solidifies her brand within the constraints of white femininity, emblematic of a postfeminist media culture (McRobbie 2009).

The feminism in her book reads as acceptable because it is not encumbered by feminist politics and is geared towards the neoliberal feminist subject interested in understanding the human experience in entrepreneurial terms (Rottenberg 2013). The inclusion of feminism within the ‘Work’ chapter suggests that her career as an influencer is an integral part to her feminist identity. Through her work, she is empowered as a woman, much like the neoliberal feminist subjects she idolizes. She frames these women’s successes as feminist success and a testament to the merits of hard work and determination (Rottenberg 2013). As such, Lalonde is performing feminism well within the constraints of a neoliberal discourse that emphasizes individual success, and more specifically, professional success (McRobbie 2015, Rottenberg 2013).

The importance of consumable feminism

The decision to include an episode about feminism on her podcast, *The Heart of It* (Lalonde 2017b), was remarkably on brand given Lalonde’s current branding as an empowered, female entrepreneur. From 2011 to 2015, she avoided almost any political discussion on her social media platforms. *Bloom* (2016) was the first time Lalonde affiliated herself with any sort of political movement when she included a small section suggesting she may align with aspects of the feminist movement. Less than a year later, she uploaded a photo of herself attending the 2017 International Women’s March (Lalonde 2017c). In the photo, Lalonde is holding a homemade white sign reading: “NASTY FOREVER.” She is standing alone, with her back to her fellow protestors. The caption reads: “”It’s important to show up 🌟👊 #womensmarch #womensmarchlondon 💖 #useyourvoice” (Lalonde 2017c). This was

the first instance that Lalonde had used her Instagram account to promote anything remotely political. On a popular forum to discuss beauty influencers, Gossip Guru, opinions were divided on Lalonde's post. Some questioned whether she should have been more political in the captioning, calling attention to structural inequalities. Others thought that her showing up, with a homemade sign was better than nothing, especially in comparison to other influencers who made no mention of the Women's March at all (See Figures 5, 6 and 7).

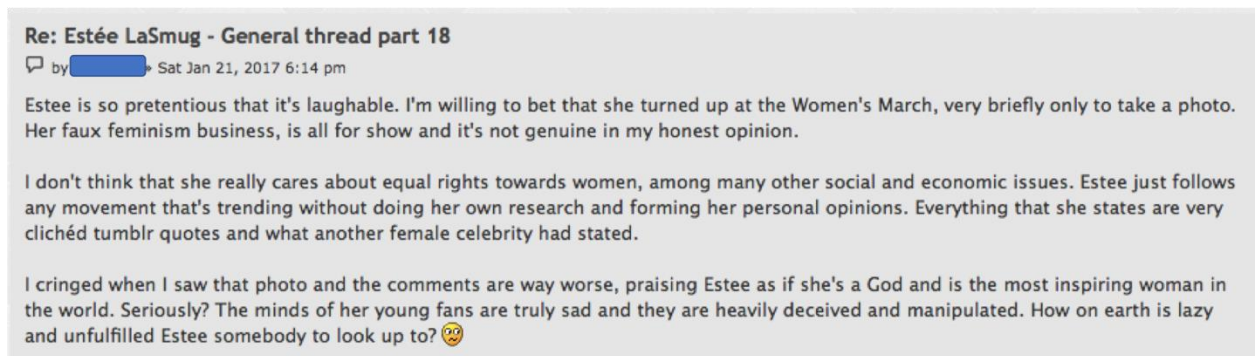


Figure 5 User angry over Lalonde's presence at the Women's March 2017 on gossip website, Guru Gossiper. January 21, 2017.

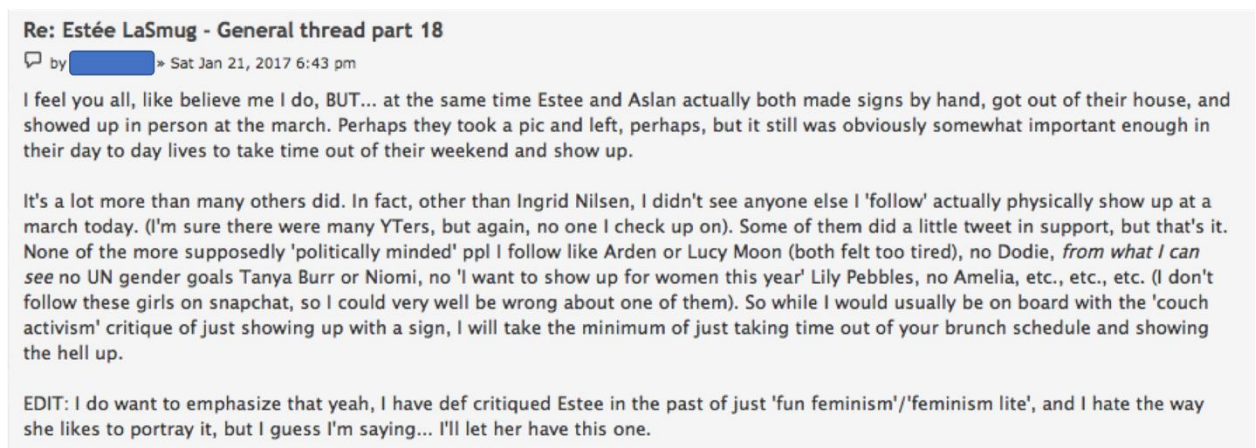


Figure 6 User praising Lalonde's presence at the Women's March 2017 on gossip website, Guru Gossiper. January 21, 2017.

Re: Estée LaSmug - General thread part 18

by [redacted] Sat Jan 21, 2017 8:09 pm

we still have actresses that are coy about feminism and be like, ohhh noo i'm not a feminist, i'm a ~~ humanist ~~ , even that fucking ritarded Meryl Streep was saying some dumb shit just a few months ago promoting her movie, ooohh i'm scared to offend the males, let me just keep it neutral!!

what she is doing is better for young , pre-teen girls that follow her. whatever her inetention is, honestly who cares. at the end of the day, she cared to post it.

Figure 7 User comparing Lalonde's feminist activism to Meryl Streep's on gossip website, Guru Gossip. January 21, 2017.

The Heart of It features 40 to 50-minute episodes covering a wide-range of topics from tattoos, mother-daughter relationships, and the merits of travelling the world as a young woman. In general, the episodes are concerned with a larger theme of self-actualization, as is emblematic of neoliberal feminist media (Rottenberg 2013). The opening episode's theme was "Protest," inspired by her attending the Women's March, uploading a photo on Instagram, and the subsequent social media backlash. Lalonde said she was surprised to see people's negative reactions in the comment section, and it prompted her to explore women's issues more broadly in her podcast. She encapsulates the overarching theme of *The Heart of It* season one as being about women.

For each episode, Lalonde provides a small write up to provide context, outlining the installment, the history of the topic, who her guest will be, and one or two key take-aways from the episode. She describes the feminism episode with self-aware reflection of whether or not "individualism is blinding us from our collective power to make real change" (Lalonde 2017b). She also quotes black American feminist Roxane Gay, emphasizing that she would rather be a bad feminist than not a feminist at all. When referring to the history of feminism, Lalonde returns to the story from *Bloom* about her step-sister, indicating that this history is not feminism's history, but Lalonde's history with feminism. She further describes the episode as a journey of self-discovery and invites listeners to enjoy learning along with her. Her guest for the feminism episode is a young, black comedian and fellow YouTuber, Akilah Obviously. In Akilah's bio,

Lalonde emphasizes the light-hearted nature of her guest's feminism, ensuring the episode will be consumable and not without humour (Gill 2016). Overall, the pre-amble for the episode frames feminism as a cool act of personal reflection and growth. This is achieved by referencing celebrities like Emma Watson, retelling her own feminist history, and emphasizing how learning from a black feminist will help Lalonde grow as a person.

As the expert guest, Lalonde allows Akilah to do most of the talking. They open with a discussion of whether or not women can be comedians and their fears surrounding feminism as a scary or dirty word. Later, Lalonde starts discussing intersectionality and asks Akilah how white feminists can act as allies for marginalized groups. As a feminist researcher, I found it difficult to reconcile Lalonde discussing her desire to be an ally and being concerned with her ability to “do feminism better” while simultaneously scrolling through her Instagram feed powered by branded content, emphasizing excessive consumption. Aside from her podcast, feminism does not feature prominently in her overall brand. She identifies as a feminist, but despite her assertion in the Women's March Instagram post, it's rare that Lalonde ‘shows up,’ at least on social media. There seems to be an obvious disconnect between her platforms that she has the ability to monetize, such as YouTube and Instagram, versus her podcast which does not feature any advertisements.

Instagram's platform affordances are optimized for users who meet a threshold of 10,000 followers or are verified accounts (Pasarow 2018). To verify an account, a user must submit a form to Instagram who will then decide whether or not the user is a “notable public figure, celebrity, global brand, or entity” (Buxton 2018). Once an account has accumulated enough followers or notoriety, they are able to embed links in Instagram Stories, making affiliate marketing simple. Users are able to shop for the items an influencer recommends without leaving

the app. Lalonde keeps her feminist politics relegated to her podcast, suggesting that there are still limits to how feminism can be discussed on commercial platforms by public figures. For Lalonde, it is safe to discuss intersectional feminist politics in a space that is not being monitored by potential brand collaborations. *The Heart of It* is an advertising-free safe haven in which intersectional feminism is an acceptable topic for her to cover (Lalonde 2017b). Also, her podcast is not necessarily central to her brand, and is framed throughout her website as a passion project rather than a business pursuit. By containing discussion of intersectional feminism to her podcast, Lalonde maintains her consumable brand of feminism.

Feminism as Identity

My goal with this analysis is not to discount the moves towards feminist politics that Lalonde attempts to make, particularly in her podcast, but instead to call in to question the larger issue of a general neoliberal feminist sentiment espoused by the beauty and lifestyle influencer industry in which feminism is reduced to a ‘cool girl’ label. As evidenced by Lalonde’s performance of commodity feminism, I argue that Renninger’s (2018) assertions regarding feminism as a label or identity rather than a movement for traditional celebrities extends to influencers. Traditional media outlets do not provide the same high-profile coverage of social media influencers, but their status as feminists is called into question on online forums, especially if the influencer has previously identified themselves as a feminist. I acknowledge that, in short, to label a person or media text feminist or not feminist becomes a complicated issue, though it is a critical analysis that should be tackled nonetheless. There is a tension in current media texts in that they often are “antithetical to ‘activist feminism,’” and this tension makes continued study of these texts valuable to scholarship (Keller and Ryan 2018 5).

Following her breakup with Aslan, Lalonde's feminism was called into question on gossip forum *Guru Gossip*. As I will discuss in the following section, Lalonde underwent a transformation in the aftermath of their split in which she lost a considerable amount of weight. In reference to this, forum user bubblelicious commented:

I have got to agree with you. All of a sudden what ever [sic] feminist values she was trying to impart are gone. This girl is gradually losing her identity of a strong and independent woman. She is slowly morphing into a classic Instagram hoe. She is sexualizing herself to get back at Aslan or what ? She seriously needs to reevaluate her worth. (bubblelicious 2018)

This was not the first time she had been called out for her feminist politics. In a December 2017 Instagram post promoting the United Nations' campaign to #drawaline to end violence against women, Lalonde was again called on by her fans to address the difficulties in labelling yourself a feminist while supporting what one commenter called "anti-woman brands," presumably referencing one of her many sponsored posts. These comments contribute to discourses around feminism that Renninger (2018) argues reduces feminist politics to "a yes or no question," an assertion I would agree with.

Lalonde has admitted she struggles to strike a balance between promoting material possessions and creating content that was personally fulfilling (Lalonde 2016). This is an unfortunate reality for lifestyle influencers because the success of their brand relies heavily on consumerism. Brand partnerships are lucrative, and Lalonde admits that after her re-brand from beauty to lifestyle influencer in 2016, she returned to promoting red lipstick because "what I like even better is how red lipstick makes me *feel*" (102). In reference to her responsibility as a content creator to grapple with social issues and reconciling beauty blogging with what Lalonde identifies as being a "strong woman," she had this to say: "I realized I have to be accountable for the messages I'm sending and how I want to be portrayed" (Lalonde 2016 100). The disconnect

between the politics she espouses in her podcast and her paid posts on Instagram suggest that the influencer market does not allow for the promotion of feminism beyond neoliberal feminism and that careful navigation of gender politics are essential to maintain harmony between the influencer, their advertisers, and their audience (Bae 2011; Banet-Weiser 2017; Gill 2016). I now turn to look more closely at how Lalonde navigates her romantic relationship within a digital space that requires constant impression management (boyd and Marwick 2011).

Commodified Couples on Social Media

Scholars Brooke Duffy and Erin Hund (2015) include the celebration of heterosexual romantic love as an integral aspect of the curated social sharing fashion bloggers display while engaging in what they call “entrepreneurial femininity.” As previously established, influencers share many similarities with fashion bloggers in the ways in which they establish their branded identities. We can understand influencers’ curated social sharing as an extension of the established practices of fashion bloggers. Within Duffy and Hund’s (2015) framework, curated social sharing is used to “depict an updated version of the post-feminist ideal of ‘having it all’” (2), which includes two other tropes: predestined path of passionate work and emphasizing the ‘glam life,’ both of which I have discussed at length in previous analysis sections. Users on social media platforms are encouraged to see themselves as commodities to be exchanged for social capital (Hearn 2008). For some lifestyle influencers, romantic relationships become a primary focus of their brand. Because these partnerships make up a large portion of the ‘self’ lifestyle influencers portray online, I understand the couple as a commodity unit requiring self-branding and impression management. These couple units are part of what makes an online

persona feel authentic to their audience, allowing for the influencers to gain and maintain social capital in a space where being in a romantic relationship is valorized.

Within highly publicized online relationships, the lines between real and performance are constantly being blurred. Content creators' ability to navigate this aspect of impression management impacts their ability to seem authentic (Marwick and boyd 2011). With an Instagram following of over 700,000 and YouTube following of over 1.1 million, I consider Lalonde's relationship as highly publicized within her niche market. She has a sizeable audience interested (and invested) in her romantic life. Because of this, she actively includes her romantic relationship within her lifestyle content, solidifying the importance of romantic partnerships to the embodiment of femininity. In considering her relationship as highly publicized commodified units, I argue that lifestyle influencers' ability to navigate the promotion, maintenance, and potential dissolution of a couple unit is an important aspect of their feminized brand. Throughout the course of their relationship, Lalonde used her transatlantic romance with her ex-boyfriend Aslan to market herself as a small-town introvert turned expat beauty vlogger. This narrative solidified her prescriptive path to influencer success by establishing feelings of connectedness with her audience (Duffy 2017).

To demonstrate this, I will focus on how carefully curated social sharing is used to establish a cohesive brand (Duffy and Hund 2015), not only for Lalonde but also for her couple unit. I will also discuss the impression management influencers must engage in following a breakup of one of these commodified units, and how self-actualization and female friendship replaces discourses of heterosexual romance in the space that the couple once occupied. To do this, I analyze purposefully selected media content from their joint online presence including an abandoned couple's blog and vlog channel, their respective breakup statements, and Lalonde's

personal Instagram uploads. In order to demonstrate the ways in which influencers are expected to share *all* aspects of their lives, including the negative, I have chosen media texts that span the course of their relationship.

The Commodified Couple Unit

Curated social sharing is understood as selecting certain aspects of one's life that are both relatable and aspirational, and sharing these moments on a social media profile (Duffy and Hund 2015). Displays of romantic love can be used to add an element of realness to a profile otherwise focused on fashion and beauty. A post with a boyfriend or husband breaks up the monotony of outfit-of-the-day (#OOTD) selfies, product shots, and advertorials. Relationships of all sorts – romantic, familial, and platonic – are fair game for content within the lifestyle genre as it is concerned with everyday lives as lived, including interpersonal ties (Abidin 2015). These posts are carefully calculated in order to fit the influencer's aesthetics, though they are almost always framed as candid (Duffy and Hund 2015). As such, these relationships are enabled and exploited within the mediated intimacy of branded spaces of online culture (Winch 2015). If we understand the self as a commodity to be bought and sold online (Hearn 2008), it follows that romantic relationships can act as an extension of these self-branding practices.

In a recent article on *The Verve*, writer Patricia Hernandez (2018) explained commodified coupledness in the current media moment: "When before partners might consider joining things like banking accounts or bill, lovers in 2018 have to think about what it means to merge your brand with someone else's." The decision to commodify one's relationship is a conscious, necessary decision. Lalonde and Aslan have a prolific digital media presence dating back to 2011. Since the launch of Lalonde's beauty blog, 'Essie Button,' he has been an aspect of her self-brand across many platforms. In the archived FAQ section of her first website, she includes:

“Why did you move to the UK?” with a response of “I’d always wanted to travel so when my boyfriend asked me to move here I said yes!” (Lalonde 2011 via archive.org/web). In fact, her original blog, YouTube channel, and social media handles were a nod to Aslan’s nickname for her (Button). The couple ran a blog together called ‘Goose and Button’ from early 2011 until May 2012 which detailed mundane aspects of their everyday lives in a way Lalonde’s YouTube videos had yet to attempt, including music suggestions, thrift shopping adventures, and vacations back home to Canada. The branding for the couple’s site matched Lalonde’s original blog branding; both featuring a hand-drawn logo by the same artist, matching fonts, and minimalist aesthetic. Aslan first made an appearance on Lalonde’s YouTube channel October 11, 2011 in “The Boyfriend Tag” (Lalonde 2011b), a Q and A-style video about their relationship, less than seven months after the launch of her channel on April 12, 2011.

Their commodified couple unit had existed in the online space since its beginnings. The two met in a chatroom when they were 19 – a story retold in many videos and well-received by her internet audience. “The Boyfriend Tag,” a sponsored video called “THE LOVE TEST,” and “BF DOES MY MAKEUP” are some of Lalonde’s most watched videos, totalling more than 1.2 million views between them. In 2012, the couple launched a second YouTube channel, *Everyday Estée* in order to upload more vlog-style content. Though it bore her namesake, there was rarely a video of Lalonde alone, Aslan was always there in some capacity. He also started his own YouTube channel in 2014. The videos uploaded on his channel acted as more “behind-the-scenes” footage or bonus content to enhance the main brand – Essie Button. Their posting schedule was sporadic and the view-count considerably lower on these off-shoot accounts. They continued to produce content as a couple for her main channel, including sponsored videos for

Revlon, TLC, and Armani perfume, interspersed among travel vlogs, a Japanese stationary haul, a birthday trip to Finland, and a “Boyfriend Does My Voiceover” tag video.

These videos often blurred the line between real life and performative displays of love (Marwick and boyd 2011). This is evidenced by the inclusion of sponsored content which implies a certain amount of scripting as brands often have a say in what influencers include in these videos (Martineay 2018). Specifically, “THE LOVE TEST” is a Revlon advertorial framed as a ‘love Q&A.’ The couple answered questions from followers on Twitter about their relationship including: “What attracted you most to Lalonde?” “How has your relationship changed over time?” and “Who hogs the covers at night?” (Lalonde 2015). The advertorial was edited, with cuts in between the responses and postproduction effects added in, suggesting the responses were staged, and perhaps scripted to emphasize the aspirational aspects their relationship.

“Some News...”

The blurring of the private and performance of public life is required by social media afforded celebrity to create affective feelings of accessibility, presence, and authenticity (Jerslev 2016). Because this blurring often includes curated sharing of commodified couples, it follows that it may also include the dissolution of one of them. Breakups remain complicated enough in the ‘real world,’ but influencers must deal with the subsequent impression management online as well. Though little media studies scholarship exists on the phenomenon of influencer breakups, popular media shows an interest in the ways in which unlike traditional celebrity breakups, influencers often invite their audience to be a part of their grieving. This is a deviation from the more common celebrity breakup narrative that requests “privacy during this difficult time” (Lindsay 2018).

Breakup statements from content creators are disseminated through a variety of media: YouTube videos, Instagram Stories, and Tweets. In whatever form the statement takes, it is considered a requirement because of the emotional investment followers have in these commodified couple units and understood as a necessary evil – the price you pay for sharing your life online (Fagan 2018, Sung 2018). In the case of both parties being influencers, the breakups require strategic impression management in which the split is framed in such a way that their audience does not need to take sides and can instead enjoy *both* creators' individual brands even when they are no longer together. Though Lalonde always carried more 'star' power than Aslan, he still has over 90,000 followers on Instagram – a following lucrative enough that it requires protection from the potential fallout of a breakup in the spotlight.

On April 2, 2017, Lalonde uploaded her breakup statement to two social media channels: Instagram via the Stories function and Twitter. It read as follows:

Some news... It feels like the right time to share with my internet family that Aslan and I have decided to part ways as a couple. This decision was made mutually and we will continue to love and respect each other as friends. You guys have been with us from the very beginning of our relationship and we loved every minute of sharing this journey with you. We appreciate your love and support.
(Lalonde 2018)

There are over 621 replies on Twitter, most of which are overwhelmingly supportive messages from followers and other recognizable lifestyle influencers. Though it was shared on April 2, 2018, many people thought it might have been an April Fool's joke; on Twitter, Aslan quickly confirmed it was not (See Figure 8). There were concerns about the dog they owned together, Reggie, and how they would share joint custody. Many were upset because Lalonde and Aslan were considered 'end game,' meaning they would be together forever: "I'm so sad. The way they would look at each other . I thought they'd be together forever. And she moved all the way to

London for him 🙏🙏🙏” (See Figure 9). These reactions indicate an obvious emotional investment in the couple and speak to how well their branded relationship was received. Aslan’s breakup statement was only released on Instagram Stories, meaning it disappeared after 24 hours, though it was immortalized in the form of screenshots uploaded to a gossip forum dedicated to beauty and lifestyle influencers, *Guru Gossiper*. He wrote:

Fairy tales have that happy ever after ending. I guess they are fiction for a reason. Lalonde and I have split up. After so many years together, slowly growing apart, we decided it was best to spend time separated. I want to say life isn’t fair but I can’t. The journey has been as beautiful as that 19 year old boy dared to dream it would be. So you see the destination doesn’t really matter when you have been blessed with so much along the way. You learn your lessons, you pick yourself back up and carry on as a better person. The support from you guys has been a dream. Thank you all for it. (PowderGirl 2018)

Both were careful not to disparage the other. Aslan, especially, continues the romanticizing of their online brand. They refer to their relationship has a beautiful journey, though, as Aslan points out, it was not a fairy tale because there was no happy ending. Lalonde emphasizes their mutual love and respect for each other while Aslan reflects on how their relationship has been a blessing. The statements remain on-brand for both of them but are final enough that they give permission for their followers to move on from the relationship knowing there is no bad blood between the two of them. The decision to announce the breakup over Instagram Stories, which expire after 24 hours allowed both of their profiles to go un-marred by a more permanent statement such as a photo upload. There is no ‘Team Aslan’ or ‘Team Lalonde,’ the commodified couple unit stands together even after their offline relationship ends, enabling them both the ability to transition into solo brands.



Figure 8 Aslan’s responds to followers thinking the breakup is a hoax from his account @li0nsmane. April 2, 2018.



Figure 9 A follower’s reply to Lalonde’s breakup announcement on her Twitter account, @esteelalonde. April 2, 2018.

Post-breakup Narrative of Success

When Aslan was noticeable absent from Lalonde’s social media for months before they released their joint statement, I selfishly wondered how her content would change and if it would affect this project. How does an influencer handle the dissolution of a relationship that has always had an audience? Would she delete all of their photos? But their photos together remained on their respective profiles, they did not unfollow each other, and her YouTube channel continued on with only indirect mentions of the breakup following her initial statement. Influencers use ‘life update’ videos as a way to disseminate new information about their personal lives. Rather than addressing the break-up, Lalonde’s life updates included a sudden insurgence

of content focused on bettering the self, and talk of new beginnings, starting over, yoga, and weight loss.

Women's external appearances are considered reflective of their interior psychic life (Gill 2007), and when a relationship ends, a signifier of how they are handling the breakup. Taking care of their psychological well-being is defined by having a positive mental attitude. Pain, struggles, and post-breakup life are communicated through fun anecdotes and consumable stories (Gill 2017, 619). The postfeminist subject is often represented as 'lost' post-breakup but is able to return to herself in many ways, including a makeover (Negra 2009). In Lalonde's post-breakup narrative, she is finding herself through dedication to self-care. She has achieved a new sense of self by modifying her external appearances to embody the ideal post-breakup woman: blonder, slimmer, and focused on her female friendships. Her post-breakup transformation is marketable because "'becoming' is more desirable than 'being'" (Winch 2015, 223). Having what Alison Winch calls a "meta-narrative of self-actualization" is sexy. Investing in yourself, including the body, is the pathway to self-actualization and therefore success (Winch 2015).

One of Lalonde's first Instagram uploads post-breakup announcement was her standing in her former office in the house she once shared with Aslan. Avid viewers would recognize the wood panel floors and custom marble tabletops discussed at length in previous home tour videos. The shelves are empty – all of her signature knickknacks presumably packed away and ready for her big move. A confident, noticeably thinner, Lalonde is dressed in all black: a short, flared leather skirt, a black turtleneck, and thigh-high leather boots. The camera is below her; she is staring down at her audience with a coy smile. The caption reads: "Thigh high ♥" (See Figure 10). Everything about the photo is off-brand for pre-breakup Lalonde but perfectly encapsulates her reinvented, post-breakup self. If her outward appearances were any indication, she was

handling her breakup with Aslan well. The image marked the re-invention of Lalonde her following had always known – the start of her newly single brand.



Figure 10 In a photo uploaded to her Instagram account, @esteelalonde, Lalonde poses in her former apartment. April 5, 2019.

Later that month, she uploaded many photos of herself with her girlfriends in New York City. They were on a sponsored brand trip for skincare brand Kiehl’s: eating bagels, brunching, taking photos in Central Park, and drinking rooftop mojitos. On May 2, 2018, she announced an on-going partnership with an athletic brand via Instagram. In the photo she is standing in a changeroom designed for taking social media photos. We know this because the mirror has a decal with the brand’s hashtag, #DoingThings to include in selfies. Lalonde is wearing a purple cropped top and gray leggings. The caption reads: “Last week I popped into @outdoorvoices and

fell in lurrve. These are the 7/8 Dipped leggings if you also want to feel bomb diggity while working out) #doingthings” (Figure 11). In the months following, I watched her upload Instagram Stories of her yoga flows tagged as ‘Paid Partnership with Outdoor Voices’ – solidifying the importance of practicing yoga to her new brand.



Figure 11 Lalonde promotes activewear line, Outdoor Voices, on her Instagram account @esteelalonde.

Two weeks after the breakup announcement, she uploaded “FURNITURE SHOPPING FOR MY NEW APARTMENT” (Lalonde 2018b). This video is framed as a response to her following’s curiosities: “A lot of you have been leaving comments and asking about my new living situation” (Lalonde 2018b). It is also worth noting, vlogging IKEA shopping trips was a fairly common and well-received video for her to film with Aslan. Lalonde was solidifying her place in the YouTube sphere without him. Instead, her assistant has come along on the trip. They

roam the halls of IKEA picking out new dressers, bedding, desks, and kitchen tools. There is a closeup clip of Lalonde in the utensil section, looking tired with watery eyes. She says: “five seconds away from pure meltdown in the utensil section... this is overwhelming guys” (Lalonde 2018b). She does not elaborate on what is overwhelming, but we can assume it is the combination of leaving the home she shared with Aslan over the span of eight years and the overall nature of shopping at IKEA, which most of her viewers could relate to. Here, she re-emphasizes the importance of keeping her breakup relatable, while avoiding any emotions that may be too difficult, or uncomfortable, to consume (Gill 2016). Instead, she finishes the video by acknowledging the difficulty of the split but quickly diverts to a clip of her in the salon, reinforcing the importance of the post-breakup makeover (Negra 2009): “Obviously it’s been a very stressful time... new beginnings and all of that. I actually have some footage of me getting my hair done!” (Lalonde 2018b).

In the final installation of her unofficial post-breakup series, Lalonde uploaded her life update video: “LIFE UPDATE – Reggie, my apartment, Yoga, & More!” She opened by skirting around the breakup, carefully framing it as an overall positive experience, and redirecting attention back to her followers: “As you know, there have been a few changes in my life recently. And before I get started on this life update video, of course I have to say a huge thank you to everybody who has been so positive with me and so supportive in the comments. This has obviously been an interesting time and um all of your comments have kept my spirits really high... I read all of them. They are awesome!” (Lalonde 2018b). This statement highlights the importance of impression management in order to maintain authenticity (Marwick and boyd 2011). Lalonde assures her audience that she is capable of properly handling the breakup (Gill 2017), but attributes it to her following to reinforcing their supposed bond. After thanking her

followers, she launches into discussion of how amazing the new couch was, her newfound passion for yoga, and how their dog was handling the new apartment. Just as life offline was continuing on without Aslan, Lalonde's channel was being distanced as quickly as possible, making room for new content focused on her growth and development – and her female friendships -- outside of her commodified couple unit.

“This Friendship is So Real”: Navigating Female Friendship on Social Media

Female friendships play a crucial role in the online identity construction of many lifestyle influencers. Because identity on social media is always in flux (Cover 2013), influencers are able to use their friendships to construct narratives about their selves, lives, and relationships. Much as the self becomes a commodified subject to market and exchange online (Hearn 2008), friendships can also be used as social capital to bolster social media influencer's brand, particularly their aura of authenticity. Having a normal, everyday persona online requires influencers demonstrate their ability to maintain female friendships in order for their readers to understand them as relatable to themselves and their own peer groups (Abidin 2015, Winch 2013). This relatability is further established through actively engaging in one another's content, including tagging each other in memes visible to the public, giving an intimate glimpse into the friendship (Kanai 2017). In this section I explore how female friendship is discursively constructed by Lalonde, particularly through her friendship with Amelia Liana, a fellow influencer who features prominently in Lalonde's digital and print media.

In particular, I use Alison Winch's (2013) theoretical concept of “girlfriendship” as a productive framework to analyze the ways in which Lalonde mobilizes friendship as a key aspect of her branding strategy. I argue that by cross-promoting each other through their BFF co-brands

(Winch 2013), the women are able to portray seemingly authentic selves that further solidify their positions as successful young women within a 21st century media context (Gill 2007; Duffy and Hund 2015; Keller and Ryan 2018). Also, I consider how female friendship is used strategically following Lalonde and Aslan's breakup when the BFF co-brand is called up as a stop-gap between romantic relationships. The BFF co-brand refers to a female friendship that functions as both a legitimizing force in relatability and cross-promotion for individual self-branding strategies (Winch 2013). To discuss Lalonde and Liana's friendship, I explore the 'Friendship' chapter in *Bloom*, Instagram exchanges between the two influencers, and a YouTube collaboration in which each young woman uploaded a video on their respective channels, and how these texts legitimize their co-brand.

"Finding Your People": The Value of Female Friendship

According to *Bloom* (Lalonde 2016), a crucial aspect of "navigating life and style," is cultivating and maintaining friendships with other women. Young women and girls from Lalonde's past feature prominently throughout the book, framing Lalonde's "bloom story." She discusses the "bitches" from the "Warm Fuzzy Club": the popular girls from her elementary school who rejected her because she did not own the proper sweater from a popular pre-teen clothing store. In the section, "The meaning of friendship," Lalonde acknowledges that cultivating friendships, particularly with other women, did not necessarily come easy to her. Her anecdote about the Warm Fuzzy Club, her first soccer team, and her subsequent rejections from both groups help frame a narrative in which successfully maintaining female friendships was difficult but that through self-love and confidence, these friendships become easier to grow, and crucial to maintain (68). Stories of Lalonde's struggles with other girls in her school years are peppered throughout *Bloom*, reinforcing the importance of these friendships, or lack thereof, to

the formation of her identity. The affective stories also function to establish feelings of intimacy with her readers (Abidin 2015). Lalonde becomes not only a successful influencer, but a young woman who has struggled with finding “her people” – and she banks on her readers being able to identify with this struggle.

Also included in “The meaning of friendship,” is a letter to Lalonde’s first blogger friend, Amelia Liana. Liana also lives in London and runs her own successful brand with over 500,000 followers on Instagram and just under 500,000 subscribers on YouTube. Lalonde credits some of her success to Liana thanks to their steadfast friendship. Here, Lalonde begins to establish what Alison Winch refers to as a BFF co-brand (2013). Their BFF co-brand is a valuable aspect of both women’s individual brand as it works to establish credibility and share audiences across the two accounts. According to Winch (2013), young women look to each other and their performances of self to define what is valuable within the social context. By cross-promoting each other, they establish one-another as valuable to their followers.

Additionally, these co-brands exist to help the influencers make a profit, whether it be financial or social capital. Approval from a trusted individual tells their followers that the BFF is someone worthy of their attention as well. In these instances, the influencers play off of each other as a way to reach a larger audience. BFF co-brands allow women to “convey their ordinariness and simultaneously demarcate their brand exclusivity as aspirational and marketable products” (Winch 2013, 47). These co-brands rely not only on each other’s audiences but the other’s socioeconomic power to succeed on a variety of platforms. One example of this is Lalonde promoting Liana on the many occasions in which the two young women tag each other back-and-forth on social media, either through memes, Instagram, and YouTube videos.

Public displays of friendship

Akane Kanai's (2017) work concerning Tumblr users' relational constructions of self, analyzes the use of memes as a way to communicate to an audience. Memes are used to establish feelings of intimacy by creating an intimate public in which the audience can actively participate. Lalonde and Liana share memes through Instastories, tagging each other while allowing the audience to participate in what Kanai, drawing on Winch, calls the "spectatorial girlfriend" (2017). The spectatorial girlfriend understands the influencer's references, experiences, and sense of humour. The use of memes helps bolster affective reactions to everyday experiences. They are a part of a much larger digital phenomenon of using visual images to articulate feelings and emotions (Kanai 2017). The sharing of these memes further contributes to an intimate public in which Lalonde, Liana, and their followers are all participants in an inside joke. Humour in particular, helps with their relatability to the audience. The memes contribute to their narrative of realness while encouraging their followers to participate in their friendship. According to Kanai (2017), the best friend is a figure that exemplifies idealized feminine traits. The best friend is typically held above boyfriends in terms of her value. The friends "get" each other, meaning they are both privy to gendered postfeminist knowledges (Kanai 2017).

For Lalonde and Liana, this is exemplified through the sharing of memes through Instagram Stories and dedicated photo uploads. One Instagram Story exchange featured Carrie and Samantha, two characters from *Sex and the City*, with the caption "Don't you want to judge me just a little bit?" to which the other woman replies, "Not my style." This was uploaded to Liana's account. Lalonde reposted the meme to her Story with her own commentary: "This made me weep. I love you" (See Figure 12). These Stories are open to the public, inviting their followers to share in this supposedly organic, intimate exchange that supposes a certain amount

of cultural knowledge (Kanai 2017). First, their followers are expected to recognize the *Sex and the City* characters and second, Liana's followers should also recognize Lalonde and vice versa. This contributes to the feelings of interconnectedness established through insider knowledge. Public displays of BFF affection appeal to the spectatorial girlfriendship afforded by social media (Kanai 2017).



Figure 12 Lalonde tags Amelia Liana in a meme on her Instagram Story.
February 14, 2018.

In an Instagram upload in late 2017, Lalonde celebrates five years of friendship with Liana posting a selfie with the caption: “More than 5 years of friendship with @amelialiana 💕 I couldn’t imagine life without her! Real friendships are so special ✨” (See Figure 13). In February 2018, Lalonde celebrated their friendship again by uploading a photo of the two of them at a Lancôme event. The two young women are applying lipstick in the mirror and the caption reads: “So in love with this picture with @amelialiana 💕 This friendship is so real. @lancomeofficial @thelensbox #EEBaftas #ELbeauty” (See Figure 14). Lalonde legitimizes their friendship by celebrating the anniversary of their friendship and emphasizing the “realness” of their relationship. The friendship becomes real as it is performed for their respective followings. Exchanges like these contribute to strategic performances of girlfriendship in which female friendships are visible and commodifiable, particularly in the Lancôme post as it is used not only to advertise their BFF co-brand, but also uses Lancôme’s hashtags for the event. The ability to navigate female friendships with other young women is a necessary characteristic to have when asserting oneself within the hyper-visible digital landscape. By extension, female friendships enable hegemonic performances of femininity, in which maintaining public, platonic relationships with other women is required (Winch 2013).



Figure 13 Lalonde celebrates five years of friendship with Liana on her Instagram account, @esteelalonde. December 13, 2017.



Figure 14 Lalonde shares a photo of herself and Liana at a press event on her Instagram account, @esteelalonde. February 26, 2018.

The Single Life and Domesticity

The most recent content Lalonde and Liana produced together for YouTube were guides on how to conduct oneself post-breakup and get by living on your own. This content contributes to conversations about what it means to be an independent and empowered woman, while reinforcing existing discourses about hegemonic femininity (Winch 2013). In a video titled “Q&A: LEARNING TO LIVE ALONE” (Lalonde 2018d), the two women sit together on Lalonde’s living room floor exchanging stories about living on their own. First, neither of them are certain of how to use their dishwasher. They recall a time Liana was over to visit and Lalonde’s toilets were plugged, and a plumber was called because neither knew how to use a plunger. This allows the women to display their supposed ineptitude with all things domestic in an effort to distance themselves from traditional female gender roles, while simultaneously engaging in postfeminist narratives in which women remain primarily focused on matters of the home and consumer culture (Negra 2009). Newly-single Lalonde reminisces about how she called Liana for comfort when she was anxious her first week alone in a new apartment. This affirms that the women are connected outside of their social media relationship and involved in the mundane aspects of each other’s everyday lives – much like “real” best friends would be. Also, it demonstrates how female friendships are called up in place of heterosexual romance when it is needed from a branding perspective. Both women have recently gone through a breakup, and thus a lull in content, therefore their BFF co-brand becomes more important than ever.

On Liana’s channel, they discuss relationships and dating in “RELATIONSHIP Q&A- breakups, dating, & more!” (Liana 2018). The video reinforces Liana’s position as Lalonde’s BFF and main support system during her recent breakup. They discuss the ups-and-downs of heterosexual romance, while avoiding unpacking the emotional weight of the dissolution of

Lalonde's eight-year relationship with her ex-boyfriend. Instead, they focusing on finding solace in the excitement of the honeymoon stage with someone new and re-centering yourself through beauty treatments – common themes in postfeminist media, where salvation is found through romance and consumerism (Negra 2009). When they promote these ideals together, they reinforce a “postfeminist credibility” in which they become voices of authority in terms of the 21st century female experience (Winch 2013). While being about break-ups and the single life, both of the videos serve as reminders that heterosexual romance is the privileged relationship in a woman's life.

Female Friendship as Feminist Politics

As I discussed at length in the previous section on neoliberal feminism, navigating a palatable version of feminism as a self-brander is an interesting challenge. Because feminism is trendy and often linked to youthfulness within the current cultural landscape (Gill 2016), female friendships are called up to solidify a young woman's position as a feminist. March 8th, 2018 was International Women's Day. In honour of the occasion, both Lalonde and Liana took to their Instastories to post a brief mention of the women in their lives that they admire. Liana shared a photo of her grandmother, mom and younger sister with the caption: “Happy women's day [sic]! From me and mine to you and yours!” (See Figure 15). Lalonde tagged 10 women who inspire her -- the maximum number of accounts Instagram allows a user to tag, as per her caption. Among these ten women, she includes her mom and grandma, as well as eight other lifestyle and beauty influencers. (See Figure 16). Having these female friendships, acknowledging them, admiring them, and recognizing their accomplishments is a tactic Lalonde uses to emphasize her status as a feminist.



Figure 15 Screenshot from Liana's Instagram Story celebrating International Women's Day. March 8, 2018.



Figure 16 Screenshot from Lalonde's Instagram Story celebrating International Women's Day. March 8, 2018.

In *Bloom* (2016), she discusses her admiration of other women in her brief section on feminism (99), watering feminism down to the appreciation and celebration of highly successful women. This is further reinforced by how she chose to comment on International Women's Day, using the day as another opportunity to promote her fellow influencers (including Liana) and demonstrate her ability to create real connections with other women (Winch 2013). Posting on International Women's Day becomes a way for both influencers to identify as "cool," (Gill 2016) while simultaneously enforcing a postfeminist normative narrative in which female friendships indicate authenticity and therefore, success (Winch 2013).

In this case, female friendships act as a placeholder for more radical feminist politics. Lalonde is able to engage in a feminist event without alienating her following. Her established brand of female empowerment through the celebration of friendship does not seem out of place within the larger scheme of her brand. The shout-outs are apolitical because they do not acknowledge structural injustices or engage with radical feminist politics. Even if a follower did not identify as a feminist, there is little backlash to be had for celebrating one's mother, grandmother or friends when framing International Women's Day as a holiday dedicated to celebrating women. From a potential brand collaboration perspective, a post like this positions Lalonde as savvy in terms of social issues but not so polarizing that she may offend. This exemplifies Gill's (2016) celebrity feminism in which being a feminist is unencumbered by being difficult but still able to remain relevant. In the final section of this analysis, I problematize how Lalonde inserts herself into larger discourses surrounding self-care and empowerment through self-improvement.

Gendered Maintenance of the Interior Psychic Life

Feminist self-care is about moving beyond attending to the physical body and engaging in practices aimed at caring for the mind (Ouellette and Arcy 2015). In order for the act of self-care to be considered “feminist,” it must benefit both the personal and collective. Within this definition, it is understood as being about more than just looking and feeling good but finding a way to deal with and work through pain in a way that benefits both the self and a larger collective (Ouellette and Arcy 2015). If we understand self-care in this way, attending to one’s spiritual needs is an integral part of engaging in the practice. In this section, I intend to problematize what happens when these practices become entangled with consumerist tendencies and monetized for individual commercial gain and contribute to larger neoliberal sentiments of individualism.

Ultimately, the goal of self-branding is to gain cultural capital and the potential for material profit (Hearn 2008). As such self-care becomes an extension of self-branding for influencers. For influencers, affective relationships play a key role in building a community among their followers based on intimacy and perceived interconnectedness (Abidin 2016; Duffy 2015; Jerslev 2016). They engage in a confessional discourse which is centered on performed authenticity in an effort to elicit affective feelings. Influencers will share intimate details of their lives, including but not limited to: struggles with mental illness, asking for life advice, and breakups (Jerslev 2016). Within these confessionals, they will often include their acts of self-care that allow them to move through these difficult seasons of life.

Performances of femininity online have a long-standing tradition of relying on visibility and disclosure which are “encouraged as the path to success and empowerment” (Shields-

Dobson 2008 124). Amy Shields-Dobson (2008) argued that camgirls used their “feminine image as a tool to be used towards the goals of economic and social success, power and self-actualization” (Shields-Dobson 2008, 124). In this section, I argue that influencers use self-actualization and the maintenance of their interior psychic life as a way to sell their femininized self-brand. Women are empowered by working on themselves in order to meet certain cultural ideals which according to scholars, includes taking care of one’s psychological state (Gill and Orgad 2018). I argue that this is achieved by influencers through acts of engaging in spiritual consumption and the act of resilience, all while employing confessional discourse to garner an affective response from their audience (Williams 2014; Gill 2018; Jerslev 2016).

To demonstrate how Lalonde engages in these practices, I provide three textual examples: purposefully selected posts from her curated Instagram feed, excerpts from her book *Bloom* (particularly the chapter on ‘Home’), and a YouTube video titled “HOW TO GET OUT OF A RUT” (Lalonde 2018a). Each of these examples works together to provide a prescriptive guide on living life well by engaging in spiritual and self-care rituals. This is also connected with the neoliberal feminism Lalonde performs online which reduces performances of feminism to individual act based in self-discipline with the intent to reach balance, which neoliberal feminism has established as the pinnacle of doing feminism (Rottenberg 2013).

Consuming Crystals: Spiritual Consumption

Spiritual consumption refers to the consumption-based shortcuts taken on the road to empowerment. Consumption is intricately linked to arriving at spiritual enlightenment. As I will discuss later in this section, much like resilience, spiritual consumption requires capital in order to arrive at the final destination of happiness (Williams 2014). Happiness is solely the responsibility of the woman herself and ignores the social conditions that may be negatively

impacting the neoliberal subject's happiness. This emphasis on happiness is pertinent to understanding performances of femininity online because social media acts as a place to display personal success at achieving certain social goals. The ability to buy spiritual products in physical form suggests power is only achievable for those who have the ability to purchase it. Spending money in this instance is not about accumulating material goods but instead finding health and empowerment. The spending is justified because it is moving towards self-love and healing psychic wounds (Williams 2014). As such, I understand spiritual consumption as an act of self-care that allows women to perform femininity better, portraying them as "well-rounded" and in-touch with their spiritual realm.

The most obvious example of Lalonde's spiritual consumption is her affinity for crystals: both for their display purposes and supposed healing powers. Popular press has covered the recent interest on social media in crystals and the mysticism that surrounds them (Ferrier 2018; Tice Studeman 2017). In part, their sudden rise in popularity is attributed to endorsement by influencers and celebrities like Lalonde and the larger wellness movement which includes practices such as yoga, meditation, and reiki (Ferrier 2018). From Lalonde's website, she understands crystal therapy as "a holistic form of healing that aims to help with mind, body, spirit and emotions. Crystal therapy is said to neutralise negative thoughts, lift the mood and even help you sleep better!" (See Figure 17).

Crystals have a long tradition of being used for healing. From what I understand, each type of crystal has a unique structure, which causes it to radiate at a certain frequency. This is said to give crystals their healing abilities, and using crystals can restore balance to the body and stabilise the energy system.

Crystal therapy is of course a holistic form of healing that aims to help with mind, body, spirit and emotions. Crystal therapy is said to neutralise negative thoughts, lift the mood and even help you sleep better!

I have absolutely no idea if crystal healing is real, but my philosophy about these things is that it can't hurt. Whether or not it's working, or it falls into the placebo effect category, at least I have some gorgeous crystals to look at dotted around our home.

They make me happy so that's doing some good, right?!



Figure 17 Screenshot captured from Lalonde's website, esteelalonde.com. Note: a direct link to this webpage is no longer available as Lalonde rebranded again in early 2019 following the data collection for this project.

Crystals play a large role in Lalonde's image, featuring prominently across her media platforms. For instance, on January 2, 2018 she shared a closeup photo of her hand holding both a pink jade facial roller and an unidentified white crystal. The image is geotagged with the location 'Crystal Magic,' a retail store in Sedona, Arizona, US. A jade roller is a skincare tool which is used to massage the face. Some cultures believe they also carry healing powers. At

present, the tool is incredibly trendy within the beauty community (Norton 2018). The post's caption reads: "✨ Crystal magic ✨ If there was ever a place to get a new crystal it's Sedona, AZ. I also got a new jade roller (google them if you're unfamiliar) because my last one broke the day before I left for Christmas! ☆ " (See Figure 18). In the comment section her followers request Lalonde do a video on crystals, explain the merits of jade rolling, and speak to both items' healing powers. Her followers praise crystals for their healing powers and post the crystal ball emoji – a pictographic representation of mysticism on social media. Again, on January 5, 2018, she shared a wide shot of retail shelves full of haphazardly arranged crystals of various shapes, colours, and sizes. The caption reads: "All of these crystals were 40% off and it took all I had not to fill my suitcase 🛒 #regrets" (See Figure 19).



Figure 18 Lalonde shares a photo of a jade roller and crystal on her Instagram account, @esteelalonde. January 2, 2018.



Figure 19 Lalonde shares an image of a store display featuring crystals on her Instagram account, @esteelalonde. January 5, 2018.

The chapter ‘Home’ in Lalonde’s print lifestyle book, *Bloom*, features a section on “Crystal power.” Lalonde including this chapter on her well-kept home, and consequently well-kept self, speaks to a larger narrative of how taking care of one’s home is indicative of achieving adult femininity (Negra 2009). Each chapter of *Bloom* is colour-coded, and the ‘Home’ chapter is lilac, adding to the notion that the home is a feminized sphere. This is important because maintenance of psychic health is gendered, and often occurs within hegemonically feminine spaces (Gill 2018). On the light purple pages, Lalonde describes her how her passion of crystals started as a young girl collecting tiny stones. She was obsessed with “becoming an archaeologist and discovering rare fossils and stones. Obviously, my career didn’t go in that direction,” she

writes (176). The section describes how crystals work using vibrations, and depending on each crystal, they can have different effects on a person from helping with sleep, to clearing your mind, and helping with depression. There is only one photo, but it features nine crystals; some green and jagged, some black and smooth, some pink and translucent, all staged on a brown shag carpet or blanket. A pink jade roller similar to the one featured in her Instagram post also makes an appearance in the book's skincare section, and again, it is strategically placed in an image of her beauty favourites.

On her website, Lalonde admits that she isn't sure whether or not crystal healing is real, but that she continues to use them because "they make me happy so that's doing some good, right?" (See Figure 15). She goes on to connect crystals with her happiness again when she mentions them in skincare regimes, which she notes are an integral part of her self-care routine. This contributes to the neoliberal discourse surrounding the pursuit of happiness, and how it can be achieved through the purchase of material goods. Crystals are expensive. A jade roller from the popular beauty retailer Sephora was priced at 50 dollars Canadian at the time of writing (Sephora 2019). As Ruth Williams (2014) writes: "consumerism that may otherwise be seen as crass and empty materialism takes on a spiritual sheen that obscures not only the way in which these female consumers are privileged, but also those troubling factors that may motivate them to seek this 'spiritual enlightenment in the first place'" (621). Because Lalonde frames the purchase of crystals as an act of self-care, her purchase seems justifiable rather than excessive. It is a move towards spiritual enlightenment and an important part of taking care of her psychic life.

Lalonde not only associates these crystals with happiness, as I previously argued, but with success. This is demonstrated in *Bloom* when she writes: "Some of the most successful and inspirational people I know are believers in crystals so I'm going to stick with it" (Lalonde 2016

176). Her comment implies that she equates entrepreneurial success with happiness. As discussed in the previous section on her performances of commodity feminism, Lalonde suggests that she is inspired by those who have benefitted from neoliberal feminism in order to achieve fame and fortune. Therefore, crystals and the perceived healing powers they afford contribute to neoliberal discussions of empowerment and fulfilment, in which both are achieved by finding economic success (Rottenberg 2016).

Resilience: Thriving in the Face of Adversity

Resilience is defined as the ability to “bounce back” from trials and difficulties, and to emerge on the other side better than before. This is achieved through self-regulation, positivity, and the ability to adapt to new situations. Resilience is discursively framed as key to thriving in a neoliberal context and functions in conjunction with other qualities necessary to survival such as confidence, creativity, and entrepreneurialism (Gill and Orgad 2018 478). Middle-class women are often the focus of discourses of resilience and are best suited to “bounce back” because this form of resilience is inherently classed and gendered. According to Gill and Orgad (2018), the resilient subject is characterized by three key features: the ability to bounce back from negative experiences; the injured self who invests in her resilience as a lifelong process of self-growth; and the positive self who self-polices any negative feeling while focusing on positive psychological notions of self-love, self-belief, confidence, and making the best out of a bad situation while simultaneously moving on from it. Resilience is often framed as unlimited resource when in actuality, resilience requires significant capital in the form of material, educational, and emotional resources (Gill and Orgad 2018). I understand spiritual consumption as an act that moves the subject towards resilience. This is demonstrated through Lalonde’s

book, her Instagram posts, and further bolstered in her prescriptive YouTube video title “HOW TO GET OUT OF A RUT” (Lalonde 2018a).

In the video thumbnail, Lalonde sits with her head resting on her hands, a bewildered look on her face. The video’s title is in graphic, blue block letters. It is a sit-down video, meaning Lalonde is seated at eye level, speaking directly into the camera (Jerslev 2016). She looks casual wearing a blue corduroy jacket, her hair in loose curls, and her signature no-make-up makeup look. The video starts with a confession: Lalonde is troubled by the lack of fulfilment in her personal life. She’s trying to “come out of this feeling,” and wants to share how she’s healing with her viewers. In summary, the tips recommend her followers start a new hobby, say yes to more opportunities, find new friends, reorganize their homes, take a digital detox, talk about their issues with a trusted friend, explore their creativity, exercise, consume inspirational content, and plan something to look forward to. In the description box below the video she invites her viewers to answer the questions: “Are you in a rut? What do you do to get out of it? Let me know in the comments down below!”. She also lists affiliate links (meaning she receives commission from purchases) to her outfit, as well as a few of the services she mentions including a yoga course.

Using Gill and Orgad’s (2018) framework, “GETTING OUT OF A RUT” (Lalonde 2018a) can be understood as a step-by-step guide to embodying resilience. First, she identifies her negative experience. Though she does not point to one defining life event, her general feeling of ennui is considered a problem that needs to be solved. She is confident in her ability to work through it using a simple process of self-regulation and self-care. If one is familiar with Lalonde’s media content, as her audience is, they would know that she has used the advice she espouses in the video (and previously in *Bloom*) as a way to overcome the adversity she faced

trying to fit in in high school and early adulthood. This fits into the narrative of resilience as a lifelong process (Gill and Orgad 2018). It is not unusual that Lalonde finds herself struggling once more, and it is in fact, expected. Her ability to work through it is crucial to her being empowered as a woman.

Yet, the act of making the video functions as a form of self-policing. She has veered off of the course of happiness, so she must correct it to make her way back. The documentation of her self-care followed by the visibility and circulation of the text becomes a part of the process of recovery. When discussing her tip to read inspirational books, she specifically references the process of self-discovery – this is key to the resilience narrative. Resilience is an individual process (Gill and Orgad 2018). The need to navigate it alone is important. Lalonde goes so far as to mention that while she talks to friends about her feelings, she has never seen a therapist for her diagnosed depression and anxiety because she feels she can work through it on her own, and the help of a few close girlfriends. This calls back to my previous discussion on the importance of maintaining female friendships to performances of femininity (Winch 2013).

Much like spiritual consumerism (Williams 2014), resilience requires social and economic capital. Tied in to notions of spiritual consumerism is Lalonde's recommendation to start a new hobby such as yoga, and suggests an online program she has been participating in. Almost all of her recommendations are rooted in buying something. When she recommends trying to say yes to more things, she mentions going to the movies or out for dinner with new friends. She suggests rearranging or changing up your living space. While she does say that the changes can be small, such as moving your desk a few centimetres, she also mentions the thrill of buying something new. Even a suggestion to explore creativity includes buying a new book to teach her how to find the innate creativity she believes she has lost somewhere along the way.

Finally, she recommends always “having something to look forward to,” which includes a vacation, a night out with friends or treating yourself to “something you really want” or an item you have been eyeing for a while (Lalonde 2018). All of this spending serves one end goal – to maintain feelings of happiness. The spending is not frivolous, and therefore acceptable, because it serves a greater purpose of self-growth and realization (Gill and Orgad 2018).

In conclusion, Gill (2007) argues that the emotional labour women perform to achieve a well-kept interior landscape is often disguised as “fun, pampering, or self-indulgence” that should never be disclosed (155), but influencers navigate this differently by labelling the labour as self-love and self-care, and an important aspect of managing their psychic life in attempts to ward off inconveniences such as anxiety, stress, and depression that prevent them from being their true selves. The visibility of their self-management is crucial to maintaining a connection with their audience. Pain, struggle, and dealing with difficult aspects of life are communicated through fun anecdotes and consumable stories. The focus is on remaining positive, even in the face of adversity with no critique of the social conditions that produce affects like depression and anxiety (Gill 2018). Monitoring and self-surveillance have always been integral parts of femininity. Women are made responsible for personal liberation which can be achieved by practicing self-care and finding balance in their lives. Balance is considered a feminist ideal and one of the highest feminist priorities (Rottenberg 2013). As I have argued in this section, the necessity of maintaining one’s psychic life is continually reinforced through Lalonde’s content. The maintenance of her psyche is a journey she must go through alone, albeit with the help of crystals and a yoga class.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

The primary goal of this research project was to problematize the ways in which lifestyle influencers navigate feminine self-branding within our current media moment. Through textual discursive analysis of purposefully selected media examples, I found that lifestyle influencer Estée Lalonde embodied a brand of white, middle-class femininity. Her particular brand of femininity is emblematic of a postfeminist media culture (Gill 2007, Negra 2009). I explored the ways that Lalonde not only embodied hegemonic, white femininity but embraced it in order to monetize her social media following. Successful self-branders manage a cohesive aesthetic across platforms. I attempted to provide the most holistic representation of her brand by including purposefully selected media texts from a variety of my Lalonde's platforms. As such, it was imperative to move beyond one platform and explore the plethora of content she creates. For my analysis, I employed feminist discursive analysis to make sense of my data (Gill 2009, 2018). In all, over the course of six months, I collected 238 Instagram uploads, 10 Instagram Stories, one print book, and one podcast episode, all of which were included in my dataset. My findings contribute to a growing body of research discussing influencers, but also provides unique insight into performances of femininity within online spaces.

Project Overview and Key Findings

Throughout this thesis, I refer to Lalonde's embodiment of postfeminist sensibilities. Here, I would like to reiterate that media texts, and by extension content creators, have the ability to engage in both feminist and postfeminist politics simultaneously (Keller and Ryan 2018). This tension of opposites was a reoccurring theme in my dataset. As often as I identified postfeminist sensibilities in her content, I noted engagement with feminist politics. While I identified five

distinct themes in the dataset, there was a broader theme of celebrating a particular type of female empowerment as an integral aspect of performing branded femininity. Though female empowerment is essential to Lalonde's feminized self-brand, she often perpetuates notions of traditional femininity and established gender roles, limiting the range of what is acceptable for feminine performances within our current media moment. As a successful self-brander, she holds a privileged position in which she is able to simultaneously engage in feminist and postfeminist politics. While she would sometimes mention gender inequality, she avoided discussing structural barriers that affect those who do not hold her same privilege.

Lalonde's engagement with feminism, even if it was limited, was integral to her self-brand. I argue that Lalonde's ability to engage with feminist politics might be affected by the brand deals on which her feminized self-brand is built. Intersectional feminist politics were confined to Lalonde's podcast, *The Heart of It* (2017b). The podcast is one of her only platforms that does not have advertisements or sponsorships. Lalonde frequently refers to it as a passion project, rather than a business pursuit. While feminism may be a passionate subject for Lalonde, it is not on-brand and is therefore relegated to her non-monetized platform.

This suggests that while feminism is having an 'in moment' (Gill 2016, Rottenberg 2013), feminist politics are still too risky to discuss on monetized platforms. Popular feminisms are marked by their need to not be difficult or threatening (Gill 2016). As Bryce Renninger (2018) suggests, in our current media moment, 'feminist' is a label those in the public eye are expected to assume, but only as an answer to a 'yes' or 'no' question. I found this extended to Lalonde's feminized lifestyle influencer brand. feminism was not only highly-individualized but more concerned with assuming the feminist label. She takes on the identity of a feminist but avoids any political action. Instead, her visible feminisms are intricately linked with

entrepreneurial femininity contributing to neoliberal feminist ideals of having-it-all (Rottenberg 2013). In Bloom, her discussion of feminism included in the 'Work' chapter, solidified the neoliberal imperative that all human endeavours should be entrepreneurial in nature (Rottenberg 2013).

Lalonde emphasizes her support of other successful women as a way to celebrate her feminist, and by extension feminine, identity. Whether it be praising Sheryl Sandberg for her neoliberal feminist manifesto (Rottenberg 2013) or using her female friendships as placeholders for feminist politics, this was a reoccurring theme throughout the data. I suggest this might be another way for Lalonde to engage with feminist politics without coming across as too intimidating. She uses a BFF co-brand to provide legitimacy to not only her friendship but her feminine identity (Winch 2013). Their friendship enables postfeminist credibility in which Lalonde and Liana become voices of authority on their subject matter (Winch 2013). Lalonde encourages her audience to support women like Liana, who espouse similar discourses of hegemonic femininity and neoliberal feminist ideals. Within these discourses, women are encouraged to seek a happy work-life-balance (Rottenberg 2013). Lalonde does not have a family, but even when she and Liana discussed living alone after a breakup, they were doing so in order to prepare themselves to eventually live with someone else. This adds to other prescriptive paths of femininity in which women are encouraged to better themselves for the sake of eventually pairing off.

Finally, Gill and Orgad's (2018) framework was particularly useful for understanding resilience as a feminized neoliberal act to problematize crystal healing as a form of spiritual consumption. These findings are indicative of a larger social media trend framing mysticism, spiritual healing, and self-care through consuming branded goods as radical acts. I understand

spiritual consumption as an act of self-care that allows women to perform femininity better, portraying them as “well-rounded” and in-touch with their spiritual realm. The dissolution of Lalonde’s commodified couple unit was taken-up as an opportunity to re-brand as an unapologetically-single 20-something-woman, empowered by her female friendships and self-care rituals. Following the breakup, Lalonde frequently featured content concerned with self-improvement and self-actualization, suggesting that both the interior and exterior of her body was in need of constant repair. This work is important because her body is a key aspect of her identity, and by extension, her power as a woman (Gill 2007). Lalonde’s particular brand of femininity suggests that a culturally acceptable body is effortlessly beautiful, blonde, white, and reserved for a middle-class audience because it involved consumption contingent on disposable income (Lazar 2017). The findings I outlined here are valuable contributions to a growing body of media studies literature concerning influencers and online celebrity. As I outlined in my introduction and literature review, existing scholarship has focused on the gendered labour operating behind influencer marketing. This project was unique as it considered how blending popular feminisms and traditional femininity allows certain influencers the ability to create a branded femininity reliant on discursive constructions of what it means to be a young woman in a 21st century media context. Through a feminist cultural studies lens, I was able to arrive at new understandings about internet celebrity in our current cultural moment. In particular, the concept of the commodified couple unit has received little to no scholarly attention, yet popular media has identified navigating a breakup online as an important cultural moment not only for influencers, but the general public (Fagan 2018, Sung 2018). Relatedly, this research builds on Gill and Orgad’s (2018) concept of neoliberal resiliency by illustrating how it manifests on branded social media platforms taking the form of spiritual consumption and self-care. In the

following paragraphs, I outline the questions my findings raised that have the potential for future scholarly inquiry.

Future Considerations

Existing scholarly literature is particularly concerned with the ways in which feelings of authenticity function to maintain influencer brands (Abidin 2015; Bergen 2017; Duffy 2017). This thesis expands on these discussions, understanding authenticity not as something that can be successfully attained, but instead an illusory act of self-branding. As popular media continues to publish exposés such as Paris Martineau’s (2018) piece, “Inside the Pricey War to Influence Your Instagram Feed,” influencers are forced to adapt to an audience that is increasingly aware of the disingenuous nature of authenticity online. Martineau’s article and others like it, along with forums like *Guru Gossip* and r/BeautyGuruChatter suggest that at least a subset of consumers know these online performances are heavily staged. As I was finishing this project, the UK’s Competition and Marketing Authority released new regulations forcing influencers to not only paid partnerships but PR gifts as well (McKenzie 2019). Now, almost every post Lalonde shares is tagged with brands and the hashtag #gifted, which takes away from the feeling that her posts are impulsively shared. Instead, outfit photos read as unpaid advertisements, which all of her clothing marked as PR gifts.

As I discussed in the introduction to this thesis, Fyre Festival marked a shift in popular conversations surrounding influencers marketing. In response to the festival, Vanessa Friedman’s (2017) *New York Times* article “The Rise and (Maybe) Fall of Influencers” questions whether influencer marketing would survive now that people were more aware of just how supposedly inauthentic these self-presentations were. Now, more than two years after its writing, the industry remains as lucrative as ever. In reviewing my dataset, I wondered whom Lalonde’s target

audience was supposed to be. Pew Research (2018) demographics suggest that the majority of Instagram users are young women. I discussed how Lalonde's brand was reserved for a middle-class audience because it encourages a level of consumption contingent on a disposable income (Lazar 2017). But some of the products Lalonde promotes are unattainable even for a middle-class audience. For example, she recently promoted a 12-step evening skincare routine totalling more than \$500 CAN. In the video, Lalonde is also wearing \$150 pajamas which she promotes in an affiliate link in the description box.

Critical media scholars discuss influencers concealing aspects of their privileged lives in order to seem attainable, and I agree that the ability to portray a supposedly authentic self that is attainable to the everyday follower is important, but I felt my data reflected a trend towards flaunting wealth and upper-middle-class status. This suggests a move away from masking both the labour and expense required to maintain an attainable, but still aspirational lifestyle (Duffy 2017). Because influencer marketing is constantly adapting to new platform affordances and in response to media backlash, continued study of these internet celebrities is required. Also, influencers' privileged positions as tastemakers and curators mean they carry significant cultural weight. Their brands matter because they reinforce hegemonic notions of femininity and masculinity.

In response to Gibbs et al. (2013) call for future study into the way users engage with platform vernacular, again, I suggest continued research into the ways influencers navigate these conventions because they are always in flux. Lalonde relied on storytelling, both on and offline, to build her self-brand. The shape these stories took changed based on each platform's unique affordances while serving the greater purpose of mobilizing her self-brand. In *Bloom*, she often told stories relating her current experiences back to her childhood helping to foster a sense of

intimacy and exclusivity for her dedicated readers. Instagram Stories allowed her to offer behind-the-scenes looks into her day-to-day life, her friendships with other influencers, and instantaneous sharing of supposedly spur-of-the-moment thoughts. She also used Instagram Stories to promote her other content and affiliate links, a platform privilege afforded to her based on her high follower count. Further, on YouTube, she was able to create long-form advertisements and product endorsements, but also engage with YouTube conventions such as Q&A-style videos with her friends. Finally, her podcast, which was unmonetized, served as a place for her to safely engage with intersectional feminist politics without alienating potential advertisers. As a junior researcher, I felt there were few existing scholarly works that addressed methodological approaches to studying social media platforms and their conventions. Specifically, I struggled with the ephemeral nature of Instagram Stories. Again, because technology is ever-evolving, there is a need to continue updating scholarship in order to attend to the methodological challenges of studying platforms that are constantly changing.

Though this project had many important findings, it also raised just as many questions and interesting avenues for discussion. I had many unanswered questions about the gendered nature of the beauty and lifestyle community more broadly. Specifically, I wanted to further investigate the gendered ‘call-out’ culture that seemed to single-out young women for profiting from brand deals, when other influencer niches such as gaming are just as lucrative of a career path for a select few privileged individuals. I was particularly interested in the ways lifestyle influencers were attempting to justify their feminized labour and provide legitimacy to the job title of ‘influencer.’ Further, I wondered how the aspirational nature of influencer marketing might contribute to larger neoliberal feminist discourses around work-life balance that it may afford (Duffy 2017; Rottenberg 2013). Resiliency was a key aspect of Lalonde’s self-brand that

allowed her to participate in a larger wellness and self-care movement in our current cultural moment. Her acts of resiliency were connected to her successfully navigating the dissolution of her commodified couple unit, a concept worthy of further discussion beyond the scope of this master's thesis. As such, I intend to pursue this research in further graduate studies.

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