

Narrative Journalism Report:

“The Real Me is the Fake Me:” Applying Knowledge of the Social Sciences to Narrative
Journalism to Tell Complex Stories in the Format of a Long Form Magazine Article

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ABSTRACT

“The Real Me is the Fake Me:” Applying Knowledge of the Social Sciences to Narrative Journalism to Tell Complex Stories in the Format of a Long Form Magazine Article

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This research-creation project explores how a narrative-journalism long form magazine-style article can use sociological theory as a framework to turn several different intersecting topics into one relatable and interesting story. It was written in the style of narrative journalism to take both myself and my imagined audience on a journey to understand the connections between online self-performance, Instagram influencer culture, consumer-capitalism, and postfeminist digital cultures (Gill 2007). This research is made up of personal narration, academic research, and excerpts from interviews with academics as well as of “admirers” of influencers, that is, Instagram users that follow and interact with social media influencers. The personal narrative journey within this research-creation project leads me to reach conclusions about my own biases towards influencers, and come to realize the conscious and unconscious ways in which I curate and modify my own digital identity on the internet. This research demonstrates how the literary techniques and subjectivity associated with narrative journalism can take a complex topic and turn it into understandable and nuanced story. Using theories of postfeminism, this research project adds knowledge to how the self-performance of Instagram influencers on social media supports consumer-capitalism and entrenched ideas of the “ideal woman” within North American society.

Table of Contents

List of Tables	v
Introduction	1
Research Questions	3
Literature Review	4
<i>History of Narrative Journalistic Reporting</i>	5
<i>The Use of Narrative Journalism to Tell Complex Stories..</i>	6
<i>Pros and Cons of Using Narrative Journalism in Reporting.</i>	7
<i>Social Media Influencers</i>	9
<i>Postfeminism on Social Media</i>	11
<i>The Presentation of the Self in Online Settings</i>	13
Methodology	14
<i>Reflections on Longform Magazine-Style Article Creation</i>	14
<i>Research-Creation Report Analysis</i>	18
Findings	19
<i>Simplifying Academic & Theoretical Language</i>	20
<i>Unable to Interview Instagram Influencers</i>	21
<i>Challenges Incorporating Personal Narrative into Story</i>	22
<i>Worries about Importance of the Subject Matter</i>	23
Conclusion	24
<i>Answering Research Questions</i>	25
<i>Research Limitations</i>	28
References	29
Appendices	33
<i>Sample Interview Questions: Academics</i>	33
<i>Sample Interview Questions: Fans & Admirers</i>	35

Table 1

Identifying Academic Interview Participants

Name	Title/Position	Affiliation	Research Specialties
Nora Draper	Associate Professor of Communication	The University of New Hampshire	Digital media, gender and online identity
Alora Paulsen Mulvey	Doctoral Student	The University of Calgary	Branded femininity among lifestyle influencers.
Jefferson Pooley	Professor of Media and Communication	Muhlenberg College, Pennsylvania	Social media, algorithms, the history of media, and online identity performance.
Kyle Asquith	Professor in the Communications, Media, and Film Department	University of Windsor, Ontario	Digital advertising and consumer culture, and the political economy of media industries.
Urszula Pruchniewska	Assistant Professor of Communication Studies	Kutztown University of Pennsylvania	Social media theory and strategy, social media ethics, and social media and gender
Bernie Hogan	Senior Research Fellow and Research Associate at the Department of Sociology	Oxford Internet Institute (OII), Oxford University	Focuses on the ways social networks and social media can empower people and build stronger relationships

Introduction

The purpose of my master's research-creation project is to experiment with how narrative journalism can be used to cover big ideas and tell complex, intersecting stories in a way that is easily digestible and interesting to an audience. Using the writing style of narrative journalism, I chose to create a long form magazine article on the personal journey I that I would take to discover why I was so fascinated with the lives of female-identifying Instagram influencers, what lay behind the composition of this specific online identity, and the elements that go into performing a monetizable version of oneself online. The magazine article, titled: "The Real Me is the Fake Me" is told from the perspective of the narrator, myself, and includes insights and perspectives from both academics and everyday Instagram users who have follow and admire lifestyle influencers on the platform. The academics and researchers that are interviewed for this project specialize in the topics of Instagram influencer culture, online self-performance and the workings of capitalism in social media. Overall, this research-creation project is an experiment in combining narrative journalism with academic theory, allowing these two formats to come together to add insight and understanding to complex ideas – in this case how Instagram lifestyle influencers' self-performativity online is intertwined with capitalism and consumer culture.

Narrative journalism is a style of journalism that borrows from the writing techniques of both literature and social sciences, "with their investigative tools and interpretive methodologies" (Neveu, 2014, p. 537) as an alternative to writing fast news that can ignore research and investigation. Many journalists, such as myself, have a background in social sciences, and apply the techniques, methods, and observations of such social sciences to their journalistic practice (Neveu, 2014). The integration of ideas and theories from the social sciences, such as history, anthropology, and sociology into journalistic practice can provide tools which allow for observation, investigation, and reflexive understanding of groups very different from the journalist and audience (Neveu, 2014). Neveu (2014) writes that theory from the social sciences can be used to "suggest the schemes which would allow making sense, in simple words, of complex causal relations" (p. 589). It is this unique aspect of borrowing theory and ideas from the social sciences that I wished to use and explore within my research. Specifically, I chose to apply sociological theory to analyze and make sense of online self-presentation, Instagram influencer culture, and how capitalism is intricately connected to the world of Instagram. By integrating sociological theory and research into my long form magazine-style article, my goal was to give

my audience the tools to better understand these topics. The purpose was to add new information to already established research on how narrative journalism can effectively cover complex, intersecting topics. The academic research that has been done on the topic of Instagram influencers has been fairly extensive, focusing largely on ideas of performance and commodification, and often links to feminist theory. One aspect of the social media platform Instagram revolves around creating an online version of oneself that will appear attractive to one's followers, and often to a larger public audience (Chae, 2018). An increasingly popular way of performing one's identity on Instagram is by commodifying one's personality for profit (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017). Examples of this phenomenon can be seen in Instagram lifestyle influencers, individuals who have used the platform to try to profit off of the versions of themselves they have created online (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016). These influencers are individuals who "generate a form of 'celebrity' capital by cultivating as much attention as possible and crafting an authentic 'personal brand' via social networks, which can subsequently be used by companies and advertisers for consumer outreach" (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017, p. 202). This online self-performance is measured as successful if one gains likes, comments, shares, and followers, evidence that is used to validate the social status and the social capital they are seemingly gaining on the platform (Cotter, 2018).

The trend of commodifying oneself on Instagram by becoming an influencer is intimately connected to consumer capitalism (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017). This can be seen in the way that influencers "brand" their online identities to have a unique selling point in order to be responsive to the needs of their online audience (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017). According to research done by Khamis, Ang, and Welling (2017), the idea of branding the self has existed in business literature since the 1920s, but it has become particularly resonant over the past twenty years (p. 192). In Tom Peters' 1997 article "The Brand Called You," he touches on the importance of self-branding, arguing that individuals have to assume control of their own brand identity to stand out in the labour market, through the construction of a memorable and charismatic image (Peters, 1997). Female Instagram lifestyle influencers, in particular, often perform a specific, gendered brand of selfhood and success that will sell within Western capitalist society (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Duffy & Hund, 2015).

But while the academic research on this topic is extensive, the question this project sought to answer was, how can this type of academic research on Instagram influencers be brought to and be understood by a wide audience? Principally, this research-creation project is an experiment that takes its cue from Neveu's (2014) suggestion that the "interpretive tools" of the social sciences could be used in narrative journalism to bring depth back to reporting. This project uses Goffman's theories of front stage/back stage performances and contemporary analyses of postfeminism to contextualize Instagram influencer culture, to help me (the narrator), and by extension, the reader, 'make sense' of the complex relationship between online influencers, capitalism and feminism.

Research Questions

My research revolves around the following central research questions and sub-question:

1. How can a narrative journalism-style long form magazine-style article tackle a complex, multi-dimensional topic in a way that an audience can engage with, relate to, and find culturally resonant?
 - a) Within this article, how can sociological theory and research be applied to tell a non-fiction story in a way that helps readers make sense of the connections between Instagram influencers, online performance, postfeminism, and consumer-capitalism?
2. How do female Instagram fashion influencers, either consciously or unconsciously, construct and perform online identities that reflect and re-affirm various mainstream ideals of consumer-capitalist culture?

In order to begin to answer these questions, I had to first figure out how to charismatically narrate a story that would come across as engaging and relatable. To do this, I decided to use an autoethnographic approach to articulate the experiences and processes of creating my research-creation project, reflecting on both the positive and negative aspects of the research I undertook. Autoethnography has been defined as a technique "combining characteristics of ethnography and autobiography" (Lindgren, 2017, p. 185). This methodological technique uses a mix of personal and confessional storytelling as tools to articulate emotional or challenging experiences (p. 184).

Stories using an autoethnographic approach often focus on a first-person narrative perspective where the researcher becomes another object in their research, disclosing personal details of their lives and highlighting emotional experiences (Ellis, 2004, p. 30; Lindgren, 2017, p. 185). In deciding to take an autoethnographic approach, I consciously chose to challenge a widely held belief in mainstream journalism that emotionality, empathy, sympathy and subjectivity do not belong within the world of reporting (Hartsock, 2007, p. 262). I did this by choosing to include personal and reflective narration in my reporting style, which allowed me to make sense of the complex, multi-layered subject that I chose to cover.

Using an autoethnographic approach in my methodology led to deep personal and theoretical reflection, which I examined through written observation and journal entries. Analyzing the process of creating this research creation project in this way allowed me to reflect upon my own privileged position within this project, and to step back and question the persona I was conveying to my imagined audience. This contemplation led me to reconsider if the topics I wished to examine were relevant or important, and whether or not someone who knew little-to-nothing about Instagram lifestyle influencers would be able to understand my article once it was completed. The personal reflections and observations that came out of using an autoethnographic process were weaved throughout my article to help both myself and the imagined audience reading my article make sense of the multidimensional story I hoped to convey.

Literature Review

Essential to the production of this long form magazine-style article was to have an advanced grounding in the research and literature that has already been written about the topics I wished to cover: narrative journalism, social media influencers, digital self-performativity, and postfeminism. Although there were a number of interpretive tools and theories I could have pulled from as a way to make sense of the topics I chose for my research-creation project, I decided to use contemporary analyses of postfeminism and Irving Goffman's theory of "front stage/back stage" to contextualize the lives of Instagram influencers and understand the ideas of online self-performativity and the production of a digital self. This was done to help me (the narrator) and by extension, the imagined audience, "make sense" and be able to follow the complex story I was trying to weave together. The following literature review will introduce these topics and serve as a backdrop for the organization of my research-creation project.

History of Narrative Journalistic Reporting

In mainstream breaking news, stories are produced quickly and the media tends to lean towards producing easily digestible versions of social reality. This kind of “hard news” reporting is based around the traditional “inverted pyramid” model of journalism where news stories are structured with the most important points at the top of the article, descending to the least important information at the bottom. Mainstream journalism tends to tell stories that are intended to be objective, short, concise and relatively neutral in their tone and intent, while still being fair and accurate (Hartsock, 2007). In practice, however, the need for journalists to keep up with a non-stop news cycle often leaves them less time to dig deeper into a story and find out what is true and false, a process that encourages a reliance on official sources who can provide information quickly and concisely. This method of news reporting can greatly reduce the complexities of an issue and present complicated stories within a single specific, often biased or one-sided frame (Palau-Sampio, 2019).

Narrative journalism, sometimes referred to as literary journalism or literary non-fiction, is a form of journalism that goes back to the first decade of the 20th century (Hartsock, 2007, p. 3), but is commonly associated with the New Journalism movement of the 1960s and 1970s (Lindgren, 2016). Journalists of the New Journalism movement, such as Joan Didion, Tom Wolfe, and Truman Capote, have written works that remain relevant today, largely due to the elements of narrative journalism they included in their works. Writers of the New Journalism movement incorporated investigation, narrative, and explanatory reporting, and listened to the perspectives of news events as told by the real people involved in them, allowing audiences to better make sense of certain issues, trends and ideas they might not otherwise care to learn about (Neveu, 2014). As well as incorporating the perspectives of others, the New Journalism movement also recommended journalists to be active participants in their reporting, as writers would physically insert themselves in stories and events.

Narrative journalism goes against the breaking news format of telling quick, digestible stories, and instead uses aspects of traditional storytelling such as “character development, complication, descriptive color, plot, and resolution” in an attempt to actively engage audiences to come up with their own opinions and meaning (Hartsock, 2007, p. 275).

The Use of Narrative Journalism to Tell Complex Stories

The literary techniques that narrative journalism uses, such as description, illustrate abstract ideas and allow for the telling of comprehensive, layered, and detailed pictures of a complex stories (Hartsock 2007). Such techniques can allow an audience to understand a multitude of meanings and perspectives about a range of topics. Research has shown that when first-person narration is used to tell a story, it can make readers feel like they know the people speaking to them on the page, and as such, identify with them and develop understanding and insight about other people's experiences (Lindgren, 2016). For instance, research by Palau-Sampio (2019) has shown that narrative journalistic techniques, when used in stories covering Central American migration, provided a more reliable and accurate portrait of the migrant experience than the biased or one-sided narratives to which the conventional news media often reported (Palau-Sampio, 2019, p. 93). It isn't that mainstream news reporting is unable to accurately report on complex issues, but they often tend to produce more easy-to-digest versions of reality that reduce the complexities of an issue, lumping a variety of different people and events together into one frame (p. 97). Certain complex issues require this kind of coverage, with more context and emphasis on the individuals and places that are affected by the news events, and it is in these situations that narrative journalism can be chosen as a way to respectfully and appropriately tell news stories (p. 97).

An important characteristic of narrative journalism that makes it especially appealing to use within the context of a long form magazine article, lies in its power to attract and maintain an audience (Boyd, 2009; Gottschall, 2012; Niles, 2010). Some have argued that because narratives are such a familiar way of hearing stories in daily life, that when used in journalism they can make ideas or topics seem more culturally resonant, relevant and engaging (Neveu, 2014; van Krieken & Sanders, 2017). This engagement aspect of narrative journalism is essential in its ability to increase an audience's understanding of ideas or events and can be used as a model to help people understand reality, other people, and ourselves (Ekström, 2000, p. 474).

Pros and Cons of Using Narrative Journalism in Reporting

There are some risks behind relying on narrative journalism to report on a story (van Krieken & Saunders, 2017). Specifically, these risks come with narrative journalism's use of literary techniques and using a subjective voice within its storytelling. Literary techniques can

tempt journalists to alter the truth by abandoning traditional principles of objectivity and factuality, which can lead to a story losing its credibility (van Krieken & Saunders, 2017). Some argue that because of these temptations, reporters writing narrative journalism stories must pay special attention to not fabricating, elaborating or fictionalizing parts of a story to seem more literary. When narrative journalism is done correctly and nothing is fictionalized or sensationalized, it can allow readers to understand a range of meanings and perspectives that such stories create, and it can draw an audience even closer to the news events they hear about every day (van Krieken & Saunders, 2017).

Just as important as examining the perceived risks behind the use of subjective voice in narrative journalism is to consider and perhaps challenge the widely held belief that journalists must never stray from their commitment to objectivity while reporting. Throughout a journalist's career, their ability to commit to the principle of objectivity while reporting is considered as important as believing in journalistic fairness and balance (Cunningham, 2003). Objectivity is meant to give consumers of mainstream news the illusion that the role of a journalist is an apolitical one that that they should not have personal biases or independent opinions separate from what they observe, report and who they interview. Within this specific idea of what it means to be objective from a journalistic standpoint, there are some contradictions worth addressing. Specifically, both in the naïve idea that the news media can be impartial when reporting about the world, and in the need to acknowledge the fact that journalists are much more subjective and less detached than what the guise of ultimate objectivity implies. The belief that anyone, let alone journalists, can remain neutral and unbiased in their reporting has been widely challenged and critiqued. In "Re-thinking Objectivity," Brent Cunningham explains that although journalists, as humans, come with biases, there is still the belief that they should not have a stance or a position on different subjects, that their lived experience is not to be shared to a wider audience (Cunningham, 2003). Rather than continue to ignore their existence, Cunningham argues that it is always important for reporters to understand and acknowledge their biases to understand what accepted narratives are, and to work against these as much as possible (Cunningham, 2003). To accept and understand that a multitude of competing ideas exist can allow for consumers of the news to understand that the world is not black and white.

In "The Forever Battle of a Journalist of Colour," Radiyah Chowdhury writes about the challenges of being taught to be an unbiased, objective reporter for the Canadian press, while

being a Muslim woman of colour. Chowdhury argues that being taught to be strictly objective as a reporter ignores her inability to dissociate herself from both the job and the story she is trying to tell. In order to uphold the legacy of traditional journalism, Chowdhury argues, racialized journalists are taught to erase themselves, to pick a side, “as to appeal to mainstream journalism is to appeal to a white audience” (Chowdhury, 2020, para 14). Chowdhury argues that in reality, the news that is reported by the contemporary news media is already told in an array of biased ways that promote and fuel stereotypes and racialize crime, poverty, and dissent. She writes that racism and discrimination are constantly perpetuated by the contemporary news media by giving ‘both sides’ an equal voice within a story, even when one side is spreading discrimination, vitriol, and hate about certain populations and beliefs. She notes, “These days, it feels like Canadian journalism asks something almost impossible of people of colour, it asks them to set aside their lived experiences, the traumas they face daily, all while viewpoints are legitimized which denounce and demean their very existence, all for the sake of balance” (Chowdhury, 2020, para 3). As Wesley Lowery argues in an op-ed in the *New York Times*, the model of absolute objectivity that has been upheld by the mainstream press “has allowed what it considers objective truth to be decided almost exclusively by white reporters and their mostly white bosses” (Lowery, 2020, para 6). Lowery writes that, “conversations about objectivity habitually focus on predicting whether a piece of writing will appear objective to a theoretical audience, often assumed to be white” (Lowery, 2020, para 10).

In comparison to the commonly used objective, inverted pyramid model of breaking news, it has been shown that understanding the subjective experiences of a variety of individuals and groups that are told through narrative journalism can result in meaningful knowledge of social facts (Neveu, 2016), and “personalized story-telling enables empathy or identification with and understanding of another’s situation, feelings, and motives” (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2013, p. 133). The tools and techniques of narrative journalism can be used to break down and understand all dimensions of a story by placing those involved at the center of the narrative, which can give insight into a multidimensional portrait of their reality to an unknowing audience (Palau-Sampio 2019). It is precisely for this reason in which I chose to have in-depth, one-one-one interviews with the subjects that were to be involved in my research.

The research cited above demonstrates the ways in which narrative techniques can successfully cover complex and multifaceted issues. This inspired the idea that narrative

journalism could be used within my research-creation project to cover the following array of subjects: social media, Instagram, digital self-presentation, postfeminism, influencer culture, and consumer-capitalism on social media. It is important to keep in mind that although using narrative reporting techniques can find success in reporting on various subjects, it is not always a realistic or economical way for new stories to be written (Neveu, 2014). The shrinking of newsrooms and their budgets, competition between publications and news sources, and the population's increasingly reduced attention span, are some of the reasons which hinder the ability for reporters to be given the time, opportunities and resources to produce high-quality narrative journalistic storytelling (Neveu, 2014, p. 535).

With this in mind, these factors are more so related to the fragility of the journalistic profession, and do not reduce the importance of using narrative techniques to tell immersive, relatable, and understandable journalistic storytelling. This is why I decided to create a narrative-journalism long form magazine article as my research-creation project, in order to broaden the narrative surrounding Instagram influencer culture and re-frame how certain aspects of the subjects I wished to cover could be analyzed and researched (Palau-Sampio, 2019). In order to re-examine these subjects in a different light, I created a narrative long form journalistic article made up of personal narrative reflection and information, which I attained from one-on-one interviews with the online admirers and fans of influencers, as well as researchers and academics who pursue research similar to the topics I had decided to cover for this project. This allowed for these individuals to talk about their own research and experiences, allowing for a much more multidimensional portrait of their realities than has often been reported.

Social Media Influencers

Social media influencers have been defined as individuals who have “the commitment to deploying and maintaining one’s online identity as if it were a branded good, with the expectation that others do the same” (Senft, 2013, p. 1). Such individuals exist on a variety of social media platforms, such as YouTube, TikTok and Instagram, and cater their digital personality and aesthetic to revolve around specific interests, such as health, beauty, fitness, sustainability, fashion, interior design, and motherhood (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). Social media influencers often create an online version of themselves that will appear attractive to their followers, and often to a larger public audience. These individuals commodify their online

persona for profit (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017), that is, they use platforms such as Instagram to try to profit off of the versions of themselves they have created online (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016). This online performance can be deemed a success if the influencer in question gains likes, comments, shares, and followers, and most importantly, and lucratively, is able to secure brand endorsements with different companies. Such outcomes are used to validate the social status and the social capital Instagram influencers seemingly gain from their popularity on the platform (Cotter, 2018).

The trend of commodifying oneself on Instagram by becoming an influencer is intimately connected to consumer capitalism (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017). Influencers who attain success on social media platforms through the accumulation of followers and advertising contracts act as living advertisements, stealthily showing, or in some cases, telling their followers outright what they should buy and how they should be living to be like them. This is done through a display of an often expensive and enviable lifestyle, assumed to be the influencers', filled with expensive clothes, food, and non-stop travel. In her research, Chae (2018) writes that these influencers post "catalogues of what many young people dream of having" (p. 247). Female Instagram lifestyle influencers, in particular, often perform a specific, gendered brand of selfhood and success that will sell within a capitalist society (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Duffy & Hund, 2015). These enviable lifestyles and personalities can lead to followers comparing themselves and their lives to those of influencers. Specifically, Chae (2018) found that Instagram followers' interest in influencers' postings about their daily life was positively associated with comparison of one's own life to that of influencers.

Who social media influencers are and what they do for a living outside of the digital world can be a multitude of things, but what seems to matter beyond this is the way they can textually and visually exhibit their personal, daily lives to their followers (Chae 2018). By showing their followers aspects of their 'personal' lives, these social media influencers are performing a curated idea of how they wish to be perceived by their audience (Chae 2018). This self-branding is often accomplished by influencers through developing a distinct public image for commercial gain and/or cultural capital (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017). Central to this concept of digital self-branding is that influencers can benefit from having a unique public identity, although in order to do this they must be charismatic and responsive to the needs of their audience (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017, p. 200). In order to maintain their audience,

influencers need to create compelling narratives about themselves and be strategic in capturing and maintaining an audience that will consistently come back to them and their “brand” (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017, p. 196). This results in creating a highly curated and narrow idea of how they want to be seen for online public consumption. For Instagram influencers, this revolves around creating a version of themselves that is “successful,” with success being measured in the form of likes, comments, shares, and followers, evidence that validates influencers’ social status and social capital on social media. Individuals who wish to gain access to the world of influencers modify the way they present themselves, according to who they believe their audience is and what that audiences so-called expectations are (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017).

Postfeminism on Social Media

One way to analyze the phenomenon of social media lifestyle influencers within neoliberal society is through the lens of postfeminism. Postfeminism is a distinctly new response to feminism, different from previous constructions of gender in the ways in which it entangles both feminist and anti-feminist discourse (Gill, 2007). Postfeminism’s constructions of gender relations are extremely contradictory, as they are both expressed and disavowed (Gill, 2007). Gill (2007) examines this idea, writing that “postfeminism constructs an articulation between feminism and anti-feminist ideas, and this is effected entirely through a grammar of individualism that fits perfectly within neoliberalism” (p. 162). A postfeminist sensibility is “one in which notions of autonomy, choice, and self-improvement sit side-by-side with surveillance, discipline, and the vilification of those who make the wrong choices within neoliberal society” (p. 163), i.e., shaming those who do not conform to what constitutes an ‘ideal woman’ in neoliberal capitalism.

Instagram influencers cultivate and create ideal versions of themselves online as a way to depict themselves as “having it all” (Duffy & Hund, 2015). Part of this idea of “having it all” lies in the desire to have an “ideal body,” as today’s media regards the possession of a “sexy body” as women’s key (often sole) source of identity (Gill, 2007). This “ideal body” is coded as someone who is slim, white, able-bodied, or who has the capital to alter their body to fit this standard if they do not. Postfeminist media culture frames women’s bodies as being both a source of power and as being unruly, “requiring constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline and remodeling (and consumer spending) in order to conform to ever-narrower judgements of female attractiveness”

(Gill, 2007, p. 149). Women's bodies are evaluated, judged and ranked across all platforms, including Instagram, and are always at risk of being "wrong" or "failing" to meet expectations of unrealistic, often contradictory expectations of femininity.

Another key component of postfeminism, essential also to social media influencers, is creating and cultivating one's own "self-brand" (Duffy & Hund, 2015, p. 3). Self-branding, meant to convey an individual's authenticity, freedom of choice, and personality, can become articulated through "normative feminine discourses and practices, including those that are anchored in the consumer marketplace" (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 64). In other words, women who wish to create their own self-brand often fall victim to reproducing societally entrenched ideas of femininity and commodify themselves as something to be consumed by an audience. In 2010, the Independent Fashion Bloggers (IFB) Coalition framed the notion of self-branding as "the most important way to proactively control your career development and how the market perceives you" (Noricks, 2013, para 2). Taking this idea into account, self-branding, using the language of commercial brands, is an essential way that lifestyle bloggers and influencers depict their lives and personalities to their audience.

The socially mediated versions of the self that social media influencers create and project to their audience give the impression that they are authentic, relatable, and "just like us (a generic, Eurocentric idea of womanhood and femininity)" (Duffy & Hund, 2015, p. 9). However, these ideas ignore hierarchies of age, race, class, sexuality and body type (Duffy & Hund, 2015) as postfeminism excludes many in its portrayal of an "ideal" woman is (Gill, 2007). In their research on the self-presentation of well-known fashion bloggers, Duffy and Hund (2015) found that the female bloggers they examined overwhelmingly conformed to a Western, heteronormative beauty aesthetic: young, thin, and light-skinned. The findings of this research concluded that the chances of "going viral" or becoming well-known online as a fashion or lifestyle blogger privileges those with existing economic capital and those that conform to the white, heteronormative aesthetic standards that are pedestalized in mainstream media (Duffy & Hund, 2015). As a result, depictions of the self that are created and promoted by fashion influencers "are inscribed in a culture that constructs women as feminine subjectives" and above all, consumers (Duffy & Hund, 2015, p. 9).

The Presentation of the Self in Online Settings

Much of the research that has been done surrounding ideas of performing the self in the digital world is based in some regard on the sociologist Irving Goffman's seminal work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Published in 1959, Goffman's work looks at identity construction, interpersonal interaction, and how individuals 'perform' in order to project a desirable image (Goffman, 1959). Goffman uses the theatre terms 'front stage' and 'back stage' to illustrate the contrasting behavior of how individuals present themselves in daily life. On the 'front stage,' Goffman wrote that an individual is like an actor who is conscious of being observed by an audience and performs for those who are "watching" by following and conforming to certain rules and conventions. If this individual fails to conform to these societal expectations of acting specific ways in specific situations, they will fail to project the image or persona they have created and want others to believe they are (Goffman, 1959). Counter to this, the 'back stage,' or how an individual behaves in private, is deemed by Goffman to be closer to the 'real self' - less structured, and less of an act, as no performance is necessary (Goffman 1959).

Specifically, in the past two decades, Goffman's framework of identity construction has been used in research to try and understand the presentation of the self in online environments (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013). The growth of technology and social media platforms has increasingly allowed its users the potential to customize, expand and divide their identities, and create 'new selves' online (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013, p. 102). Using Goffman's terms, some believe that online environments can be interpreted as a new front stage, and the offline world as a back stage, as online users invest strongly in a certain appearance online to provoke a desired reaction from other users (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013, p. 103). Adding to this, the virtual distance and sense of detachment that exists online makes it easy for individuals to conceal aspects of the offline self, or "back stage self", and embellish one's online persona, or "front stage self" (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013, p. 102).

Social media has turned everyday life into a public performance, where everyone is constantly observing and comparing oneself to one another (Senft, 2013). Individuals increasingly know they are being watched online, and they are more willing to offer up private parts of themselves to both known and unknown audiences, as there is a growing sense that the unwatched life is invalid or insufficient (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017). As a result, when users present themselves online their aim is often to appear desirable by creating positive, idealized

versions of themselves (Harris & Bardey, 2019). They behave on the internet as if they would on a stage, knowing they are being observed (Senft, 2013). One form of social media, Instagram, has enabled its users to emphasize and minimize certain aspects of the self, such as their personality, appearance or a combination of the two. This is because, by design, Instagram encourages its users to edit and share photos and videos, and with that comes external pressure for users to present themselves in increasingly specific ways (Harris & Bardey, 2019). This has resulted in Instagram becoming a platform where users are constantly exposed to their and others' online self-presentation and how they choose to curate their ideal online selves (Harris & Bardey, 2019).

Methodology

Reflections on Longform Magazine-Style Article Creation

This research-creation project, written in the form of a narrative-journalism long form magazine-style article, sought to answer the two research questions, and one sub-question. The journey that was taken in this project to answer these questions was made up of semi-structured, in-depth interviews, my own narration, personal reflection, and previously researched academic materials on the following subjects: online performativity, Instagram influencer culture, and the intersections between consumer-capitalism and Instagram. I interviewed six academic researchers who specialize in research relating to one or more of the aforementioned subjects. In addition to these academics, I also interviewed five individuals who follow and regularly interact with Instagram influencers. My initial intention of this project was to connect with and talk to the specific cultural figure at the center of my project: Instagram lifestyle influencers. Although I believed it to be crucial to incorporate their perspectives and opinions into my analysis, after several dozens of attempts at contacting different influencers, I was unable to secure any such interviews.

Research has shown that the integration of social sciences, such as history, anthropology, and sociology into journalistic practice can provide tools which allow for observation, investigation and reflexive understanding of groups very different from the journalist and audience (Neveu, 2014). Theory from the social sciences can be used to “suggest the schemes which would allow making sense, in simple words, of complex causal relations” (Neveu, 2014, p. 589). I sought to explore this in my research-creation project by applying the theories and knowledge from the social sciences to my journalistic practice. During the construction of my

research-creation project, I applied elements of sociological theory, specifically Irving Goffman's theory of identity, alongside established postfeminist theory, to analyze and make sense of the main topics that were covered: online self-presentation, Instagram influencer culture, and the presence of consumer-capitalism within Instagram.

By integrating sociological theory and research into my long form magazine-style article, I sought to do two things: first, to use sociological theory to turn several different intersecting ideas into one relatable and interesting story which would allow my audience to better understand the story I was creating, and second, to add new information to already established research on how narrative journalism can effectively cover complex, intersecting topics. In order to do this, I engaged in an autoethnographic approach throughout this project, taking notes and keeping a diary on any complications, challenges, triumphs, and other experiences I faced in my research, interviews, and analysis.

The participant recruitment of academics and professional researchers for this project began by targeting individuals who had published books, articles, and other work related to any of the following: Instagram influencer culture, the presentation of the self on Instagram, postfeminist digital cultures, and the presence of capitalism within Instagram. The initial recruitment began by going through the research I had already read, noting the authors whose research touched on ideas most similar to what I wish to cover myself. Alongside this, I dug further into the Concordia Library Portal and Google's search engine to find researchers, academics, and authors that I might have missed otherwise. Once I had done this, I created a document with all potential researchers and academics to interview, where they taught or had completed their research, and what specific topics they were experts in. In order to be able to contact these individuals and recruit them to be interviewed, I needed their contact information, whether that be their email, phone number, or both. I found many potential interviewee's contact information through Google's search engine, on the websites of the academic institutions they work for, and occasionally, through their personal websites. I sent out a few dozen recruitment emails and received responses from six academics who I would then interview.

Name	Title/Position	Affiliation	Research Specialties
Nora Draper	Associate Professor of Communication	The University of New Hampshire	Digital media, gender and online identity
Alora Paulsen Mulvey	Doctoral Student	The University of Calgary	Branded femininity among lifestyle influencers.
Jefferson Pooley	Professor of Media and Communication	Muhlenberg College, Pennsylvania	Social media, algorithms, the history of media, and online identity performance.
Kyle Asquith	Professor in the Communications, Media, and Film Department	University of Windsor, Ontario	Digital advertising and consumer culture, and the political economy of media industries.
Urszula Pruchniewska	Assistant Professor of Communication Studies	Kutztown University of Pennsylvania	Social media theory and strategy, social media ethics, and social media and gender
Bernie Hogan	Senior Research Fellow and Research Associate at the Department of Sociology	Oxford Internet Institute (OII), Oxford University	Focuses on the ways social networks and social media can empower people and build stronger relationships

The other group of individuals that I interviewed were fans and admirers of Instagram influencers. I sought to talk to several people who not only follow lifestyle influencers on Instagram, or have so in the past, but have found themselves regularly interacting with influencers by liking their pictures, watching their Instagram stories, and generally being “influenced” by them, whether that be buying what they advertise, going to the same stores or restaurants as them, or trying to mimic their personal style. The participant recruitment of admirers of influencers to be interviewed for this project was done through social media, and relied upon volunteers who felt they fit the criteria and agreed to a recorded interview. On my personal Facebook and Instagram accounts, I made posts asking for individuals who identified with the notion of being an admirer or fan of Instagram influencers to contact me, if they so desired, to be interviewed for my research-creation project. Although I mainly relied on the responses of this poll for the recruitment of interviewees, I was also referred to by personal

friends who would refer me to people they know who might want to talk about their relationship to Instagram influencers. Overall, this recruitment process led me to organize and arrange virtually interview five young women aging from 22 to 27: Antonina Pavilianis (Montreal), Ashley Draper (Montreal), Kavi Kuhka-Bryson (Montreal), Erica Whitehead (Fredericton), and Vanessa Croome (Montreal).

For each interview I conducted, I would follow a loose script of questions I had created to help guide the discussion. The questions that were posed varied depending on if I was talking to an academic or fans of influencers, covering the topics of online identity, online perception, Instagram influencer culture, Instagram advertising, and the workings of consumer capitalism within social media. For academics, I tried to cater the questions I would ask them to their individual research specialty. All interviews conducted for this research project, both with academics and admirers of influencers, were taken with an in-depth, yet conversational approach. This approach was in-depth in the sense that I made sure to touch on the main themes and topics throughout the conversations that were had with academics and fans of influencers. However, if interviewees brought up topics unrelated to the question I was asking them, skipped to another topic that I was intended on bringing up later in the conversation, or simply wanted to casually converse, I would not draw back, but let them continue, and see where the discussion went. The full list of questions asked to both academics and “admirers” of influencers can be found in an appendix at the end of this report.

Interviews were organized and recorded either over the telephone or through the video-communication platforms of Google Meet, FaceTime, or Zoom, depending on the location of the participants and their preference. Interviews ran from 30 minutes to just over an hour. Every interview that was conducted for this project was recorded over the software Audio Hijack and uploaded to the hard drive of my personal computer, as well as uploaded to a USB thumb drive to be securely stored, where it was then transcribed and examined for different themes that were repeated. These interviews were then digitally transcribed and examined for quotes pertaining to the four specific themes of influencer culture, digital identity, postfeminism, and digital advertising and consumer capitalism. These quotes were interwoven into the long form narrative journalism magazine-style article, alongside my own narration. Included in this narration were details on the digital interactions I had with interviewees, any assumptions I previously had about both the interviewee and the topics that were brought up in each interview, and finally, what each

interviewee contributed to the topics I was analyzing for this project. Alongside personal narration, the tools and storytelling structure of narrative journalism were used while writing this long form magazine-style article. In order to do this, the narrative journalism long form article was mapped out in story-like chronology in a way that helps readers fully engage in the subject matter (Palau-Sampio, 2019). Literary tools that are used in narrative journalism, such as structure, point of view, setting a mood, foreshadowing, sensory details, word choice, and emotion were used as techniques to pique reader's interest, and allow them to become immersed in the subject matter (Palau-Sampio, 2019).

Before creating my narrative-journalism long form magazine-style article, ethical clearance was needed from the University Human Research Ethics Committee (UHREC) at Concordia University. On April 28th, 2020, the ethics clearance for this project was approved by the UHREC.

Research-Creation Report Analysis

After I had completed my initial research, held virtual interviews with research participants, and transcribed and organized the content of these interviews, I chose to then take an autoethnographic approach in the methodological analysis of my research. In "Autoethnographic Journalism: Subjectivity and Emotionality in Audio Storytelling," Mia Lindgren defines autoethnography as a technique "combining characteristics of ethnography and autobiography" (2017, p. 185), a "mix of personal and confessional storytelling" that uses self-narration as a tool to articulate emotional or challenging experiences (p. 184). When researchers do autoethnography, they do so by writing, studying and analyzing culture from the perspective of the self (Adams, Jones & Ellis, 2014, p. 47). Autoethnography is a methodology of research that "transcends mere narration of the self to engage in cultural analysis and interpretation" (Adams, Jones & Ellis, 2014, p. 47). Stories that use these techniques often focus on a first-person narrative perspective where the researcher is yet another object in their research, disclosing personal details of their lives and highlighting emotional experiences (Ellis, 2004, p. 30; Lindgren, 2017, p. 185).

I choose to use this methodological approach to express my research through personalized storytelling, with the intention that both myself and the imagined audience consuming my work will be taken on a journey to understand shared personal and cultural experiences (Adams, Jones

& Ellis, 2014, p. 47). I hope that those who read my long form magazine-style article will be able to go through the same process that I went through when I was creating it, a process which made me question, reconsider, and reconfigure my own understanding of myself, others, and the larger culture due to an incredibly niche subject and a fascination with Instagram influencers.

One aspect of an autoethnographic approach is for the researcher to put themselves into the story they are telling, which “transcends mere narration of self to engage in cultural analysis and interpretation” (Chang, 2008, p. 193) and allows the researcher to look at larger ideas and concepts. This aspect of the journalist or researcher putting themselves in the story is unconventional compared to more traditional impartial and objective reporting styles. Challenging traditional objective reporting in journalistic storytelling can pose the risk of the narrator exploiting themselves and those they interview and can invite moral judgement from audiences that disagree with what is said in the piece (Lindgren, 2017, p. 195). However, autoethnographic storytelling can also challenge and confront the belief that true objectivity should always be held up as the gold standard of reporting, showcasing how personal emotion, experience and reflection can be essential to successful storytelling. I applied this subjective approach of putting myself in the story, both as a jumping off point to the topics and themes I covered, and also has a way to link subjects together throughout the article.

Taking notes of my experience, alongside personal and reflective narration, allowed for me to make sense of complex ideas touched on throughout the article, both by listening to others’ stories and as a way to articulate my own. This allowed me to reach a point to try and answer my first research question: How can a narrative journalism-style long form magazine article tackle a complex, multi-dimensional topic in a way that an audience can engage with, relate to, and find culturally resonant?

Findings

In interpreting and analyzing autoethnographic fieldwork, it is difficult to assess how a researcher can make use of such research to tell a story of themselves within and alongside the wider culture. How can a researcher know that autoethnography has achieved its purpose? In *Autoethnography*, authors Adams, Jones, and Ellis explain that this method of research has served its purpose if it has made contributions to knowledge, if it has shown it values the personal and experiential, if it demonstrates the power, craft and responsibilities of storytelling, and if it

takes a respectful and responsive approach to the research subjects (p. 67). I hope to make clear that although I faced several challenges and frustrations in various aspects of creating my research-creation project, I believe that the hurdles I experienced were also helpful and allowed me to realize the importance of contributing further knowledge to this area of research. I value and appreciate the insights and experiences that those I interviewed were able to share, as well as those I learned from myself through my own narration. I tried to be respectful and responsive in the approach I used in my narrative journalistic storytelling, carefully and conscientiously using personal narration, knowledge from previously published research, and the thoughts of academics and everyday people, to examine a complex, multi-layered topic and make it interesting, understandable and culturally relevant.

Essential to using autoethnography as a methodology was writing down my experiences in my diary, in order to keep track and mark down all the *roadblocks, epiphanies, limitations and benefits* I experienced while creating my research-creation project. Personal narrative, which was crucial to the make-up of my long form magazine-style article, was used throughout the story to find repeated themes and ideas that I could revolve my analysis around. The findings that came out of my autoethnographic analysis are examined in the following section of this report.

Simplifying Academic & Theoretical Language

Throughout the process of writing my long-form magazine style article I found it challenging at times to simplify the academic language and wider theory, in order to be able to make it understandable to an audience that could be unfamiliar with these topics. Specifically, I found this challenge to appear when incorporating quotes from interviews with academics and researchers, as well as trying to put the wider theory I had researched into everyday language. Incredibly knowledgeable in their fields of study and research, the academics I talked to would share insights on the topics of postfeminism, Irving Goffman's theory of identity, digital constructions of the self, and the inner workings of consumerism on social media with passion and excitement. Although I struggled to simplify the information given to me by academics, through their interview quotes, what helped was that I was able to understand and enjoy their wisdom, as I had also researched these theories myself in the process of doing research. Hearing these academics touch on theories and ideas I had been reading about for months helped give me context and a more in-depth understanding of the social forces at work behind Instagram

influencer culture. The knowledge and understanding these academics were able to provide me allowed me to reassess the level of understanding of the average person reading about the subjects touched on throughout my project would or would not understand. An imagined audience reading my long form magazine-style article with little-to-no knowledge of these topics may not understand nor wish to engage in reading such material. When I first started this research, I found this information confusing and unengaging at times as well. With this in mind I was able to simplify some of the more complicated academic language and theory to gain a better understanding of the subjects covered, for both myself and to the imagined audience consuming my long form narrative-style article.

Unable to Interview Instagram Influencers

In my original research proposal, I explained that a crucial aspect of writing good narrative is being able to understand all dimensions and perspectives of the story being told. Throughout the process of writing my research-creation project, I sought out what I believed was the most important perspective to my project, the figure at the center of my story, that of Instagram lifestyle influencers. Unfortunately, after many attempts of reaching out to dozens of such individuals, I was unable to secure a single interview. I struggled with the absence of this perspective and wondered how legitimate my research would be without their voice. Would I really be able to understand their position and experiences as influencers? I'm not sure, but for a long time during the process of creating my project and trying to answer my posed research questions, I felt inclined to say no.

In *Autoethnography* (Adams, Jones & Ellis, 2014) the authors state that just like ethnographers, auto ethnographers cannot begin fieldwork until they have located and gained access to the field (p. 50). Because I never “gained access” to the personal lives of the influencers through which this project revolved around, I was worried this would make my research perhaps questionable and up for debate to be considered as legitimate. However, I came to understand that “accessing the field” or “gaining access” can mean many things, not just being in the physical (or digital) space of the subject or individual a researcher is analyzing. The absence of Instagram influencer’s personal perspectives felt increasingly less prominent as I incorporated an array of other perspectives within my research, that of both academics and everyday Instagram users who were drawn to influencers in a number of ways. Successfully covering a field of research means

attending to the social patterns around oneself, analyzing one's own actions, and piercing together the observations you make and the words you hear (Adams, Jones & Ellis, 2014, p. 50). Because of this, I believe that I was still able to create a nuanced and diverse narrative journalistic story for the research-creation project that was completed.

Challenges Incorporating Personal Narrative into Story

When doing autoethnographic writing, researchers often begin by sharing their personal experiences on topics they want to understand more fully, deeply and meaningfully. Sometimes these experiences can be epiphanies – transformative moments and realizations that significantly shape or alter our lives significantly. But researchers also don't need to have a specific moment or epiphany in order to use autoethnographic methods, they can also organize their personal narrative around “aesthetic moments” – everyday experiences that, although not epiphanies, would usually be overlooked because they lack transformative power (Adams, Jones & Ellis, 2014, p. 48).

When a researcher is writing about their research, they must write, work and hold both themselves and their imagined audience in the experience. It is essential in narrative journalistic storytelling “for the researcher to not let themselves or the reader exit the movement or emotions of the story until both parties have had a significant opportunity to be engaged by the content” (Adams, Jones & Ellis, 2014, p. 66). While writing my long form magazine-style article, I often would picture an imagined audience consuming it and learning about the different subjects which were covered within it. I struggled to picture myself as a character within the story who's perspective needed to be told. I had to learn how to turn events I would normally tell in the form of “this happened, then this happened,” into a meaningful and coherent narrative. I had to think deeply about my place in every scene that was taking place in my writing and what it might mean to understand myself and the subjects I had covered. I had to learn how to appreciate and honour my own personal curiosities and the knowledge I have been accumulating throughout my life up until this point. I often felt silly, and even confused, that all of the knowledge I have gained in my life had led me to want to research Instagram influencer culture and its intersections to digital self-presentation, consumerism, and postfeminism. I often convinced myself that what I chose to research was not important or interesting enough to dedicate an entire research-creation project to. But interesting enough for whom, and why did I keep critiquing my research from a

judgemental perspective that was not my own? It was difficult at times to know why or understand exactly why or how I was drawn in the direction of examining these topics, but when that happened, it was essential to remind myself that these topics truly interest me, and I wish to know more about them.

Worries about the Importance of the Subject Matter

There were several instances in the process of creating my project where I would write in my diary questioning whether or not I was even still interested in the subject of Instagram influencer culture, especially due to my inability to share the first-hand experiences and opinions of the very cultural figure I was examining. To a degree, it is normal for people to lose interest in their topic of research topic after spending so much time on it. What makes this disinterest noteworthy as one of this project's findings lies in the fact that the majority of my research-creation project was written in the middle of a pandemic, where I gained a heightened sense of awareness of what is important in my life, as well as in everyday existence. I frequently wondered if writing about this topic could be justified as being necessary or relevant while there are many important geopolitical, economic and social issues that I could have focused on and immersed myself in, many of which exist in the world outside of Instagram and social media. On December 14th, I wrote down "I feel like I'm kind of over it, and to be honest, I guess the biggest thing is that I feel like I'm not even interested in Instagram influencers anymore. None of them want to talk to me anyways. This entire project was meant to be about me trying to go on a journey to discover why I was so fascinated by Instagram influencers, but what the hell is this article even about if I don't even seem to care about the main subject I am analyzing? Doing this research isn't helping anyone." I was overwhelmed, uncertain, and was judging myself for examining a topic that seemed unimportant compared to the research I saw other students conducting.

What allowed me to remain hopeful and inspired me to keep going, was coming to understand the importance of researching Instagram influencer culture, alongside reaffirming how effective the use of narrative journalism can be in covering complex, intersecting topics like the one I chose to dive into. I chose to examine and expand upon the discourse related to broader digital media culture and the way that many people choose to live their lives online. Academic research does not have to fall into a specific category to be considered legitimate.

Autoethnography is sometimes seen as an untraditional way of doing research. Projects that use autoethnographic analysis often revolve around subjects that show people in the process of figuring out how live, and that fascinate the researcher, turning them inside-out and making them question their thoughts, feelings, and sense of self. This was the case for this project.

Examining the digital identity of Instagram influencers as a research topic falls into an incredibly relevant and important aspect of many individuals' daily lives, as we are seemingly constantly attached to a variety of screens. Within these screens, social media is being used in one form or another, and where social media is present, so are influencers. With our lives increasingly online, it makes sense to increasingly critique, judge, emulate and admire the figures we see pop up over and over on our devices. I chose this topic because I was interested in examining Instagram influencer culture, and how, interestingly, in the midst of a pandemic, they continue to "influence" individuals in all kinds of ways. We attach emotions and intentions for how social media influencers choose to create meaningful lives, and how they experience or cope with the problems of living, that may be different, or surprisingly familiar to ourselves.

Conclusion

My research-creation project was an experiment that combined the knowledge and tools of academic theory and the stylistic and reflective aspects of narrative journalism, to try and make to a multi-layered, complex array of intersecting topics, into an understandable, easy-to-follow, and culturally resonant story. I sought to write a long form, magazine-style narrative journalism article, that would take both myself, and the imagined audience reading the article, on a "journey" to understand the connections between Instagram influencers, online performance, postfeminism, and consumer-capitalism. Many different aspects of Instagram influencer culture were outlined and examined, and as a result, I was able to shed light on the lives of influencers, add knowledge to how self-performance on social media benefits and supports consumer-capitalism, and entrenches specific ideas of the "ideal woman" within the context of a postfeminist Western society.

The research questions that I sought out in my research were explored and answered by applying the use of personal narrative reflection, knowledge from established sociological research, and insights from one-on-one interviews with research participants. The two research questions and one sub-question posed at the beginning of this report as follows:

1. How can a narrative journalism-style long form magazine article answer tackle a complex, multi-dimensional topic in a way that an audience can engage with, relate to, and find culturally resonant?
 - a) Within this narrative journalism long form magazine article, how can sociological theory and research be applied to tell a non-fiction story in a way that helps readers make sense of the connections between Instagram influencers, online performance, postfeminism, and consumer-capitalism?
2. How do female Instagram fashion influencers, either consciously or unconsciously, construct and perform online identities that reflect and re-affirm various mainstream ideals of consumer-capitalist culture?

Answering Research Questions

The stylistic writing style of narrative journalism was chosen for my project due to how it uses the techniques from literature and the social sciences to tell compelling, complex, and interesting stories. I combined the literary tools and confessional aspects of narrative journalism with established sociological theory, to try and make sense of the ways in which Instagram lifestyle influencer's digital self-performativity is intertwined with capitalism and consumer culture. Specifically, I chose to apply sociological theory to the topics of identity construction and postfeminism to make sense of Instagram influencer culture and how intricately connected it is to capitalism. By applying this established knowledge of the social sciences to the topics I was examining in my research, I was able to gain a more nuanced perspective of these topics, which I could pass over to the imagined audience reading the piece. Despite difficulties in simplifying the language of academia to be better understood by a broad audience, I able to cover several topics in relation to Instagram influencer culture, without reducing the complexities or nuance that these topics brought to the conversation. Overall, the academic research and sociological theory included in my research were essential tools that provided me greater engagement and understanding of the subject and the story I wished to tell.

In order to make sense of the variety of intersecting topics covered in my research-creation project, I used the methodological technique of autoethnography in analyzing the findings that were discovered within my research. Although it was difficult at times to put myself into the

piece, the personal observations which I included were essential to uncovering and understanding my own biases surrounding Instagram influencer culture, and allowed me to gain a better understanding of my own self, online and off. Drawing on deep personal and theoretical reflection, and weaving it throughout my long form magazine-style article allowed me to articulate and make sense of social media influencers, and what lies behind the specific trend of this digital figure. As well as gaining a better understanding of my own self, the subjective voice was applied throughout the long form magazine-style article to ignite feelings of empathy, identification and understanding, allowing the opportunity for the imagined audience reading this piece, alongside myself, to identify and develop understanding of groups of people and their experiences outside of their own.

Within the framework of narrative journalism, I chose to additionally apply tools and theory from the social sciences to further elevate the storytelling potential of the multi-layered, complex subject. This way of doing journalism seeks to go against the popular reporting style of producing fast, short, and simple journalism, and instead relies more on investigative and narrative journalism. I was inspired by Neveu's (2014) research which suggests that the specific tools and theories of the social sciences can be used within narrative journalism to bring depth to reporting and make sense of otherwise complex relationships and topics. My research creation project used established knowledge from the field of sociology and applied it to the topics covered within the long form magazine-style article, leading to the creation of a more understandable story. Specifically, I used contemporary analyses of postfeminism and Irving Goffman's theory of "front stage/back stage" to contextualize Instagram influencer culture, digital performativity, and the monetization of the self. This allowed me, as the narrator of my long form magazine-style piece, as well as the imagined audience reading it, to make sense and easily follow the complex story I was weaving together.

Goffman's theory of identity drove me to go far beyond surface-level explanations and examinations within my storytelling. Specifically, the knowledge I gained from Goffman's theory of identity, along with immersing myself in research that has been inspired by Goffman, allowed me to intricately and completely understand the role authenticity plays within identity performance, and how performing for one's online audience is not unlike the "front stage" performances occur in our interactions outside the internet. Immersing myself in the theory and established research of postfeminism brought depth and nuance to my covering of such subjects,

unearthing the intricacies of what an “ideal” woman means and represents within the world of Instagram influencer culture. Applying the knowledge of postfeminism to my research allowed me to make sense and divulge to my imagined audience the intimate relationship between self-branding, conforming to Western, heteronormative standards of beauty, and influencer culture, components which construct reaffirm mainstream ideas of womanhood and success in consumer-capitalism.

There is so much more that goes into being an Instagram lifestyle influencer that meets the eye. By immersing myself in previous research on Instagram influencer culture, as well as by interviewing academics and everyday Instagram users, I was able to better understand the digital identity of Instagram influencers, and their essential role in digital advertising, marketing and consumerism. Like anyone who uses the internet, social media influencers perform and project a specific version of themselves, both consciously and unconsciously, for an imagined audience. However, for influencers, not only do they produce a specific identity, but this identity becomes a brand, a commodity to be bought and consumed by an audience. Female Instagram lifestyle influencers, in particular, perform a specific, gendered brand of selfhood and success that will sell within Western capitalist society. They are branding an idea of themselves, yes, but also an idea tied to specific products, services, companies, lifestyles and womanhood. As a result, branding, marketing and consumption infiltrate everything they do, and their performance of this specific identity never seems to end. Although this identity is carefully curated, Instagram influencers have to appear authentic, relatable, and attractive to an ever-growing audience. They must be extremely careful about the image they are portraying, to be palatable and attractive to an indefinitely increasing audience at all times. As a result, the distinction between who these influencers are offline, as opposed to online, blurs into one constant performance. The difference between the average person’s online and offline identity has become so fluid and seamless that trying to figure out which is more authentic or real is beside the point. Authenticity instead becomes a selling point, branding oneself to be natural, effortless, and real, as in order to gain an audience’s trust and capitalize off of an idealized idea of themselves.

Research Limitations

The findings which came out of my research-creation project added knowledge to how narrative journalism, and the tools and knowledge of the social sciences can cover complex,

multi-dimensional topics, such as Instagram influencer culture and digital self-performativity. It is important, however, to acknowledge the limitations that this research presents. Perhaps what most evidently limits the scope and findings of my research was the inability to include first-person perspectives and insights from Instagram lifestyle influencers themselves, the very figure who this research centered itself around. The narrative journey taken in this research, and the answers to the research questions, could have been very different if the voices and perspectives of influencers were involved.

Alongside the absence of the perspective of influencers, the sample size of those interviewed for this research was limited in size to 11 individuals. The lifestyle influencers within this research were only analyzed on the platform of Instagram, although an endless number of influencers exist on different forms of social media, and definitions of what an influencer is and what they do changes based on the social media platform and location. Influencers have become popular in a number of countries around the world and are defined in a number of ways. However, the scope of influencers discussed in this research was limited geographically to North America, and linguistically to those who communicated in English. Moreover, the overrepresentation of influencers as slim, white, wealthy, able-bodied cis-gendered women within this research erases the existence of the many Instagram lifestyle influencers who do not fit neatly in this definition: women of colour, LBGTQ+ women, plus-size women, and women with disabilities. The way that Instagram influencers were defined and analyzed within my own personal narration added to these limitations, as I was only speaking from my own perspective as a privileged, white woman. In fact, in choosing to include my personal thoughts and perspectives through narrative journalism, there occurs oversight of certain perspectives and opinions of those other than my own. Avenues for further research on this topic should take note of these limitations, in order to expand the analysis of digital self-performativity and influencers on social media to other platforms, countries, and a greater variety of perspectives, both by influencers and researchers alike.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Sample Questions and Themes for the Semi-Structured Interviews with Academics

A) Your Research:

Tell me about the research you do that looks at social media.

What made you interested in this research? Why are you interested in Instagram?

What is it like to do this type of research?

Have you been presented with any challenges in pursuing this type of research?

What topics have you found to be most surprising to do research about?

B) Online Identity Construction:

What are your thoughts about online identity construction on Instagram?

Should there be a wider discussion about the fabrication of Instagram influencer's online identities?

Why do you think the idea of digital authenticity and being an authentic person online has become so popular?

Can an "authentic self" even exist?

If an influencer advertises themselves as being authentic, what does it mean for them to sell this authenticity to different companies for profit?

What aspects of Instagram influencer's have made them so appealing and made others want to mimic them?

C) Instagram Influencer Culture:

How does influencer culture work?

How would you define the work that an Instagram lifestyle influencer does?

What are these Instagram influencers presenting to the world?

Is it fair to generalize all influencers as doing the same work, or being the same in other ways?

D) Neoliberalism and Consumer-Capitalism on Instagram:

How would you position Instagram influencers within neoliberal consumer capitalism? For instance, are they reinforcing certain ideals of how capitalism works today? Conversely, are they breaking new ground?

Appendix 2: Sample Questions and Themes for Semi-Structured Interviews with Fans and Admirers of Instagram Influencers

A) Thoughts on Influencers

Which Instagram influencers followers do you like?

What makes you drawn to certain influencers over others?

What is it about the image they present that you like?

Have you ever followed certain influencers and later found yourself to unfollow them? If so, why?

Do you want to emulate any influencers? Why or Why not?

Would you ever want to be an Instagram influencer?

Have you ever bought something after seeing an influencer talk about it, wear it or advertise it?

Do you find yourself copying certain aspects of influencers, be it in the way they look, dress, or choose showcase their life online?

Do you believe your online self to be the same as who you are offline, or in real life?