

The Real Me is the Fake Me:  
An Exploration of Online Identity Through the Figure of the Instagram Influencer

When you open up Lizzy Hadfield's [Instagram feed](#), it's full of photos of the 20-something hanging out on the streets of North London. She's often holding up a takeout coffee cup, a leather tote or messenger bag slung effortlessly across her shoulder. In every post, she's wearing a different outfit. Then there are the photos of her at home, in her spacious, expensive-looking apartment. (How much does it cost to live in London again? How can a 20-something-year old afford this?) She looks perfectly poised next to a delicate glass of wine, her hair slightly dishevelled, her clothes a little loose, enough to appear comfy yet elegant, and coming off as overall carefree.

When I scroll through Hadfield's [feed](#), I feel a sense of ease, comfort and luxury. Her uniform of choice seems to come exclusively in neutral colours, and she tends to rely on a few staples for her outfits - straight-legged trousers, buttery, soft-looking knitted crewnecks, luxurious, long woollen trench coats, all often paired with basic white sneakers. She has a classic, uncomplicated style, a combination of both high-quality, expensive pieces mixed with more affordable accents and accessories. She comes across as effortlessly cool.

I'm not the only one who thinks so. Hadfield is what's known as a 'fashion influencer' and 'brand consultant.' She made a name for herself through the massive following she accrued with her popular blog '[Shot from the Street](#),' but these days she focuses her attention on her Instagram account.

Looking through her posts, you can see that almost all of her outfits are made up of clothes that have been gifted to her from different brands. She tags these brands within the photos or videos she posts, or captions the photos with 'AD', so it's clear she's either being paid for the content or has been given free clothes under the assumption that she will show them to her followers. (At the time of this writing she has 560,000 and counting.) It is no secret that being an influencer is Hadfield's full-time job. She's not trying to hide it.

Hadfield couldn't be further away from me, geographically of course, but also financially, living the lush life in London. And yet, I keep coming back to her, lusting over the dreamy aesthetic of her life I see while looking into the void of my phone screen. Although I can't relate to her professionally and I don't have access to her expensive lifestyle, this strangely doesn't deter me from continuing to follow her, nor does it necessarily make her less relatable. Although perhaps it should. Let me take a second to describe myself. Here's me: A 28-year-old grad student who is perpetually underslept, over-caffeinated, overcome with anxiety and depression, and worried about how she will afford the rent for the next month. Once a day in these pandemic times, she goes outside for a silly little walk that keeps herself from going properly mad, but other than that, she is stuck in her apartment, surrounded by second-hand furniture that's close to collapsing, working from a 7-year-old laptop that will die unless it's plugged in, in a very specific way.

My life seems worlds away from Hadfield's, but if this is the case, why am I so interested in Instagram lifestyle influencers like her? Why do I spend so much time on my phone, flipping through pictures, staring into my screen at these strangers' lives, even though they have nothing to do with my life? Perhaps the envy and awe I feel towards these individuals stem from what I believe I lack in my life, in my sense of self. The promise of wealth and having access to luxurious things. Or rather, the ability to afford a certain lifestyle that I have internalized to be appealing. But am I just envious? Or is it something else? I mean, I understand that these influencers are trying to sell something to me, carefully curating their image to give off a certain impression, and what they are showing to their audience is not exactly 'real.' But, still, there is something that seems strangely very real and authentic about them. I can't quite put my finger on it, and it is this intangible 'thing' that keeps me coming back. Or is it something else? Maybe I'm interested in this for other reasons? Maybe I just want to understand how they're able to do this - construct these images, attract advertisers and making a living this way?

About a year ago I decided that I wanted to see if I could find answers to these questions. Why do I not only follow Instagram influencers but want to intimately observe their lives? Why are they so popular? Why do I keep checking my phone every day to see what they are up to? I decided I needed to

go to the ‘experts’ to gain a fuller perspective, that is, people who study what influencers do and how this profession works. Along the way, I also wanted to better understand how I manage my digital self-image, and how I have developed and maintained my own specific identity within the online world. What follows is the story of my journey over the past year, talking to these experts who study social media and marketing, but also to people who follow influencers, people like me who keep them in business, to try to understand what exactly it is about Instagram lifestyle influencers that keep my eyes glued to their profiles.

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The first few months after the pandemic hit Montreal, everyday life was a hazy, wine-fueled, stir-crazy time for me. Sure, I had lots of schoolwork that needed to get done to occupy my time. But what am I doing instead? You guessed it, spending more time on social media, specifically, Instagram. It was during this social media binge I started following Allegra Shaw. I was recommended to check out Shaw’s Instagram account, [@allegrashaw](#), from a friend who “can’t get enough of her.” Shaw is a Toronto-based content creator who has developed a huge following on YouTube (917k followers) and Instagram (337k followers). Her Instagram feed is a mix of videos and pictures she uploads, all edited with a filter that looks soft, slightly grainy, and has a pastel hue which seems to amplify the white and golden shades featured in many of her posts. Her commitment to having the same aesthetic throughout her feed makes scrolling on her profile very seamless. The content Shaw posts mainly revolve around her day-to-day life – videos that show off her penchant for style through her beautiful outfits, some from her clothing line, Uncle Studios. She also posts other photos, many featuring her face, which I would describe as fitting into the category of “Instagram face” – youthful, with poreless skin, high cheekbones, cat-like eyes with long, exaggerated lashes (extensions?). Other photos feature her light-filled, two-story condo in Toronto or throwback photos to the many trips she has taken around the world, which she makes sure to let her audience know were captured pre-pandemic.

What draws me to Shaw, is the ease with which she carries herself in her videos and pictures, looking natural, relaxed, and comfortable no matter the outfit she’s wearing. In a [photo](#) she posted on January 7, 2021, she is lounging in an oversized, light grey sweatsuit while sitting in the passenger seat of a car next to what appears to be a lake. Her hair is thrown back in a messy ponytail and her feet are kicked up on the dashboard in classic black Birkenstocks. In her left hand, she casually holds on to a Tim Hortons coffee cup. She captioned this: “and the most worn item of 2020 goes to...sweats (trophy emoji).” In a [post](#) from a month later, on February 8, 2021, Shaw looks just at ease taking a picture of herself in a full-length mirror, wearing a very different outfit this time, a tight, body-framing white dress from the luxury fashion brand, Jacquemus. Visible behind Shaw are two bright-white, soft, fluffy couches resting on smooth wooden parquet floors, as the window above gives a view of a sliver of the Toronto skyline at golden hour. The caption: “me & jacquemus”.

Just like Hadfield, Shaw is also skinny, white, petite, in her twenties, and by the looks of it, financially very comfortable. As Shaw has been in the influencer circuit for a while, discovering her profile provided me with years’ worth of content to digest. Alongside what she posts to her feed, Shaw’s [Instagram](#) profile also features a dozen Instagram story “highlights,” which are different pictures and videos she has taken over the years, organized by theme. These highlights feature the books she’s read, the music she has listened to, her makeup routine, travels, among others, providing me with even more content to immerse myself into and get lost in. Recently, while I was mindlessly scrolling through her profile, I realized that while I’m consuming little moments of her life, whether it’s her travelling all over Europe, or showcasing a seemingly endless number of beautiful, often gifted, clothes, I feel like I already intimately know her. I mean, hundreds of thousands of users have also viewed the same content as me, and I’m sure feel the same way, but this doesn’t reduce the pleasure I get out of observing her life. I know that behind the scenes, the content Shaw posts is heavily curated, planned out, and edited, yet I am still deeply envious of the life that Shaw chooses to portray to her enormous audience, even if it’s not entirely true.

Upfront, it is important to note that my focus here is on a very small subset of women who are Instagram lifestyle influencers. But they are nowhere near the only kind of influencers out there to

observe and interact with. The world of influencers is incredibly vast, catering to seemingly any kind of interest and way of living. From cheerleading to gardening, to cooking to video games, there are a ton of people putting their energy into focusing their social media content and framing their digital identity around whatever it is they happen to be into. What an influencer looks like, where they are from, and what they are interested in is endless. The Instagram influencers I see myself most drawn to, like Hadfield and Shaw, are those who seem incredibly privileged, lounging carefree in sun-filled apartments filled with beautiful décor, but who also exude comfort and confidence in themselves, a sense that they know who they are. Although I'm pretty sure they are, at least to an extent, performing for their audience about how they want to be perceived, honestly, I believe them. They are good at their craft. To me, this is exactly what makes them stand out from other influencers, how strategic they are in curating and performing their online identities to be perceived in a desirable, positive light. And this is exactly what I want to know more about, the strategy and machine behind how these Instagram influencers excel on the platform. Maybe if I understand more about how identities are performed – if it is a performance – and how this all works, I'll understand better why I'm so interested in them.

### **Online/Offline, Digital Presentation of the Self in Social Media**

Just over sixty years ago, the sociologist Irving Goffman wrote his seminal work, *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (1959). The book's basic premise is that all of us, in our day-to-day lives, are like actors on a stage, and in every interaction that a person has, they put on a performance and give off an impression for that specific audience. These performances that we all take part in can be calculated and evident to those performing them. For example, if you're preparing for a job interview, you have most likely carefully planned out what you will wear, answers to the questions you might be asked, and the specific impression you wish to give off. But performances can also be unconscious, for example, if you have worked at the same job for many years, you may come to automatically know how to perform as expected within that specific setting. You come to intrinsically know what clothing is considered appropriate for that workplace, what coworkers you need to keep on their good side, or what the lunchroom etiquette is. Someone else who is just starting at that same workplace may have to learn what is accepted and considered the correct way to perform in that specific space and will most likely be much more conscious about how they act when they are there. Regardless of whether it's conscious or unconscious, Goffman's premise is that when we interact with others, we perform for an audience, and these performances have unique effects and results.

Dispelling the idea that identities are autonomous and something we alone come up with and decide on, Goffman's theory argues that individuals will produce identities within a dialogue we have with others. We selectively reveal aspects of ourselves that we believe will be relevant for the context of the situation. It comes down to this: We all act in specific, unique ways around different individuals and groups of people, depending on the circumstances and social situations at hand. With this in mind, it is often easy to forget we are practicing these performances until we examine and reflect on them. After reading Goffman's work, I became increasingly aware of how I perform different versions of myself, depending on who I'm surrounded by and what situation I'm in. The social interactions that I have with my closest friends versus a potential employer versus my thesis supervisor versus a medical professional versus my parents are all different performances. I act aloof, loud, hyper, and boisterous to my closest friends, as I see myself around them as energetic, funny, and engaging. Perhaps there's a small part of me that secretly feels like I need to be entertaining to them so that they won't get bored of me. To potential employers, I wish to come across as unabashedly hard-working, as someone who takes criticism well but seldom makes mistakes that could garner such criticism. To my professors, I tone myself down, wanting to appear agreeable to their opinions and perspectives, with the hope that I come across as mature, responsible, diligent. When I interact with doctors or other medical professionals, I see myself as being wary, unsure, questioning and challenging the person across from me who is making the diagnosis. Perhaps this is due to experiences I've had when I've not been taken seriously or patronized by those I have interacted with within the medical community. To my parents, I come across as impatient, easily

annoyed, reactionary, self-indulgent. I feel like I can be comfortable around them and let my guard down, but I also feel like I can get away with being grumpy, mean, and sensitive, maybe because when I see them, I often revert to my younger, more immature self.

As I wondered why I am interested in Instagram lifestyle influencers, Goffman's theory of identity performance and how it exists and perhaps differs in the Internet Age kept popping up in my head. As his research came out in the 1950s, before the advent of the internet and social media, Goffman's theory of identity is limited, focusing on face-to-face interactions. With that in mind, I still wondered if many of his ideas carry over to today and examined within the ways we perform for ourselves, and others, within the digital realm. I decided to take this question to someone who has spent their career studying precisely this: Dr. Jefferson Pooley, a professor of media and communications at Muhlenberg College in Pennsylvania, whose research focuses on social media, the history of media, and online identity performance. Pooley told me that much of Goffman's analysis can be applied to interactions in the online world precisely because there are now just as many different 'stages' and audiences online. "In a way, it's like an intensification of what Goffman was talking about, and some people think of him as saying something like there is no true self, that we as people are just a series of different performances for different audiences, that even in the 'backstage,' as Goffman refers to how you act when you are in private, you have yourself as an audience that you are still performing for."

Dr. Bernie Hogan of the Oxford Internet Institute (OII) had a similar perspective. When we spoke, Hogan made a point of telling me to keep in mind the fact that identity construction is entirely contextual. "It's not the case that we have an online identity or an offline identity, but we have many identities, depending on the people we are interacting with and how we are interacting with these people. They're not something that we come up with ourselves and say this will be my identity, and then they go out and act. Rather, individuals can produce identities in a dialogue with other people."

Perhaps I need to rethink the idea that people perform in ways specific on digital platforms, but rather that they act in particular ways according to social context. I undoubtedly grapple with the notion of having many identities at once. The different variations of myself that I perform not only occur in the face-to-face interactions I have but also carry over digitally to how I show various aspects of myself in several different ways. This year, what has become increasingly apparent to me is how my life seems to now wholly revolve around the internet. Work, school, socializing, leisure, entertainment, for all of it, I rely on the online world. What I find myself reaching for most frequently within this digital realm is social media, where I have tried to curate how I come off in specific ways that I believe will be most appealing to those observing my online presence. Curating myself a certain way is especially true on Instagram, where I try to come across as likeable, funny, intellectual, and attractive. Yet, there are layers of personalities I perform within even this one specific platform. When I post Instagram stories (pictures and videos which last 24 hours before disappearing) to my account, I want to portray myself as funny, self-aware, self-deprecating, and attuned to pop culture and politics. However, when posting actual pictures to my Instagram profile, I see myself as performing another set of how I wish to be perceived. That is, I hope to reflect myself to others as a woman who struggles with depression yet is not too sad or desperate for attention and validation. This woman that I see myself as on Instagram, although depressed, has not given up taking care of her body and still visibly conforms to heteronormative standards of beauty. She (myself) shares just enough information about her life to seem understood, but not enough to appear to be oversharing every waking moment of her life. Keeping my behaviour in mind of how I curate my online self to be perceived, is it that strange that influencers are also acting on Instagram, putting on a performance that only shows the most positive, happy and attractive moments of their lives? When I know strangers observe me, online or off, I want to show my best self. After all, why would I want to tell strangers that things in my life are not peaches and cream? So, why wouldn't influencers feel this way too?

Reflecting on this, I started to wonder where exactly the divide lies between who we are online and offline if it exists, and what makes our behaviour and interactions in each realm different. As I thought about it, all the seemingly unique ways I interact with people online, I also do offline in similar ways. Dr. Nora Draper is an Assistant Professor in Communications at the University of New Hampshire

whose research specializes in analyzing online identity, technology, gender, and digital media. She thinks the idea of distinct and separate online and offline selves is very fraught. “Certainly over the last ten years, I think what we have learned is it’s challenging to divide this idea of the online self and the offline self. So, if you think about what it means to be offline, most of us, we’re never offline, right? Like, even if I’m not scrolling through my phone or checking emails or doing work online, or whatever, there’s still a part of my life that is existing online, and my phone is still collecting data about me.” It’s not that Draper denies that there are people who create personas or alter egos that they choose to use online. Still, as she told me “when we talk about Instagram influencers, the distinction between online and offline is almost irrelevant.” For Instagram influencers, there is a kind of continuous performance between media spaces, with often no clear distinction stating what their lives look like online versus what their lives look like offline.

I’ve spent a lot of time wondering if the lack of distinction between how one identifies online versus offline plays out in people such as myself, who are not online influencers. Do online and offline identities blur together into an amalgamation of many different aspects of our personality and interests? Thinking about what Nora Draper said, this distinction is complicated, as, for most of us, the way we move between offline and online spaces has become so seamless and fluid that trying to distinguish when we are authentic is perhaps beside the point. We can see social media profiles in terms of identity performance by individuals who consciously and reflectively express themselves through visual or textual media. People post on social media to give off certain impressions about who they believe they are and foster certain narratives about their life and identity for the invisible audience observing this behaviour. “We are always engaged in the form of performance,” Draper told me, “so it’s more about asking, ‘what are we performing?’ than the question of ‘are we performing?’ Because we always are.”

### **Authenticity – Real or Not Real?**

The idea of performing still confuses me when it comes to influencers because they come across as so convincingly ‘real.’ In addition to producing content around branding and advertisements, many lifestyle influencers on Instagram also share personal memories, narratives, and intimate details of their lives. Heartbreaks, family tragedies, personal stories of failures and defeat, as well as of success and growth - nothing seems off-limits. It feels at times like I have witnessed firsthand the experiences of the influencers I follow. It is pretty apparent they are trying to communicate to their audience a sense of realness and transparency that I consistently find myself believing. In many ways, to me, at least, they come across as relatable, honest, and most of all, genuinely authentic. Yet, there seems to be an absolute contradiction between wanting to be authentic while at the same time performing for an audience. How can these two ideas be compatible?

When I talked to Jefferson Pooley about the specific role authenticity plays in influencer culture, he told me that it isn’t a new concept by any means, and to understand its place in influencer culture, he needed to go over its history. As an ideal way of life, authenticity started to gain traction and become popular in North America in the early 1920s with the rise of consumer culture and promoted advertisers and profiteers to sell products. In the 1920s and 30s, manuals about becoming successful through being true to oneself became popular; the most famous of these is arguably Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. Carnegie’s book centers around the importance of being perceived as authentic as a strategy to gain an advantage in life. Authenticity is achieved through, as the title sets out, winning friends and influencing people. Carnegie’s overall message, Pooley explained, is to “Be yourself, be authentic...because it is to your advantage, so you’ll get ahead,” both socially and economically. This same idea and message exist today, with corporations and advertisers using ideas of being one’s authentic self to sell products. According to Dr. Sarah Banet-Weiser of the London School of Economics, authenticity and commercialism have become the same for Instagram influencers. The concept is now a means to an end. Brand culture has become so persistent and pervasive on Instagram that authentic spaces and the idea of authenticity itself can now be considered a brand. Instagram influencers brand themselves as genuine and authentic to draw in audiences and potential advertisers.

I have found it hard to understand how performing a calculated version of oneself for others is associated with authenticity and realness. It seems common knowledge that creating and posting on social media, for influencers and the average user, entails a certain level of performative, calculated control. If this is the case, what makes a performance believable and authentic? And why is this term used so much with Instagram influencers? I brought up this question when talking to Nora Draper. She told me that when thinking about creating an authentic portrait of oneself on social media, “this image should be consistent enough that other people are going to feel like they know you and they can trust you. They have to have a sense that they know who you are. And, of course, that’s what influencers capitalize on... they have this kind of ability to generate trust and intimacy with their viewers because they are open and transparent, and that gives [off] a sense of authenticity.” While chatting with Pooley, he agreed with this statement. He told me that “at its core, authenticity within a commercial context is a definitional contradiction.” He means by this that authenticity is a way that advertisers can use to sell stuff to people, making the term contradictory to its origins, which was to describe something genuine, truthful, and real. Elaborating, Pooley continued, “At its core, authenticity entails being uncalculated and non-strategic,” yet “to the extent that advertisers use it to sell shirts, or influencers use it to sell sponsorships, that kind of authenticity is calculated.” Of course – and here’s the paradox - this makes it inherently inauthentic.

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There has been a rise of criticism online towards the curated inspirational life that social media influencers portray, which occurs on Instagram accounts such as [@influencertruth](#), which openly calls out what it deems to be “shady” or “inauthentic” behaviour by influencers. The anonymous operator of the account has [said](#) their motivation is that everyday people are tired of seeing influencers presenting a version of their lives that is not reality. Much of this authenticity policing includes calling out influencers for failing to disclose whether or not they have edited their photos, using Photoshop to enhance their appearance and lying about collaborations with brands. Throughout both 2020 and 2021, I have noticed an increase in what appears to be a trend of ‘hating on’ influencers. Many of these criticisms point to influencers who continue travelling with their families and friends during a pandemic. Such accounts call them out for being out of touch or selfish. Calling out social media influencers in this way has become incredibly popular since the start of the pandemic as a way to inform other users on the platform who is being a “good” or “bad” influencer. But I’m not sure how much sense it makes to expect or assume that anyone is presenting their “real” selves on Instagram, especially with all the editing and filtering that the social media platform encourages. Aren’t we all trying to make others perceive our lives as attractive, even desirable? I wonder whether it’s even necessary to call out aspects of influencers’ lives that appear fabricated. I understand that followers want honesty and clarity in what lifestyles the influencers are trying to sell to them. After all, this is what influencers get money for, and no one wants to find out some rewarded to lie. I would think that it would be in their best interest for influencers, to be honest about what they may have failed to disclose to their audience previously. For it is these audiences who play a significant part in creating and sustaining the success and popularity of these influencers in the first place.

At the same time, is influencer culture that deep? I have to remind myself that big, publicly-traded, profit-maximizing corporations own social media platforms such as Instagram. The rising appeal to present and brand oneself online as desirable and authentic makes complete sense within this context. After all, considering yourself a product to market and sell to others cuts to the core of our capitalist economy. While this language of branding ourselves has existed in business literature since the 1920s, it has become increasingly important in the last twenty years. Self-branding rhetoric, Jefferson Pooley says, “has leaked into the way in which influencers, as well as everyday people, including college students, are encouraged to think of themselves, as a brand that can be consistent and appealing to future employers. This sort of notion has become popular, that you ought to be putting forward a saleable front that can be attractive to people who will help you in the future, namely employers, but maybe others.” So, branding oneself to appear desirable to others has existed long before the advent of social media. Still, perhaps

nowadays, people are more acutely aware of who they are trying to appear desirable for: the audiences observing their behaviour on digital platforms.

With all this in mind, it's evident that Instagram influencers curate their digital identity to appeal to several potential audiences. Doing this 'well' means they have to focus on authenticity, that is, seeking to communicate to one's audience a sense of realness, transparency, and consistency. This behaviour intends to convey a reliably neutral persona that anyone can use to grow one's audience. As Jefferson Pooley put it, "Influencers can be 'authentic,' as long as they don't show their authentic politics." In her book that helped spark my interest in this topic, *Trick Mirror: Reflections in Self Delusion* (2019), Jia Tolentino explains that offline, one's audience is limited, and empties and changes over, and there is a time for one's performance. In the online realm, one's audience both never has to leave and can expand indefinitely, as one's performance of the self never seemingly has to end. She writes, "People who maintain a public internet profile are building a version of themselves that can be viewed by anyone, for any possible reason. On the internet, a highly functional person is one who can promise everything to an indefinitely increasing audience at all times (p. 16)." Tolentino's musings on the specificities of online identity reminded me of Instagram influencers who monetize off the idea of their digital selves while giving off the impression that this is also how they act offline. Social media influencers must commit to performing a consistent, neutral identity that will appeal to potentially anyone to grow their audience and maintain their relationships with different brands.

## **Feminism and Postfeminism**

The influencers I follow on Instagram are, in general, pretty diverse, with different racial backgrounds, gender identities, political values, and sexual preferences. This varied makeup of the influencers that appear in my feed does not change the fact that the image that first comes to my mind when I think about social media influencers is a skinny, cis-gender white, wealthy young woman. I spoke to Urszula Pruchniewska, an Assistant Professor of Communication Studies at Kutztown University of Pennsylvania, who told me that it makes sense that this particular image comes to my mind, as there is a stereotype surrounding the idea of what an influencer is and can be. Pruchniewska says both academics who research the subject and many people who might not be knowledgeable about social media culture tend to look at the most popular influencer-based accounts on Instagram and make generalizations about influencers from there. Pruchniewska told me that this could result from not being aware of many strong subcultures and popular influencers outside specific criteria. I also spoke to Alora Paulsen Mulvey about this, a doctoral student at The University of Calgary who researches social media lifestyle influencers and the lifecycle in which they exist. She said that social media algorithms favour users who already have a large following. However, to get a massive following in the first place, influencers must fit neatly into or conform to specific prescribed beauty standards. Paulsen Mulvey told me that for lifestyle influencers to reach that all-important initial 1 million followers, "it is dependent on hegemonic performances of femininity, which favours predominantly white, cis-women." She added, "If you already look the part in terms of normative beauty standards, it becomes very easy to leverage from it on your social media profile. So when I'm looking at my [Instagram] feed, it is overwhelmingly white and blonde, and able-bodied and heteronormative. It is harder for women of colour to break into these spaces." Similarly, in their research into online self-presentation, Brooke Erin Duffy of Cornell University, and Emily Hund, of the University of Pennsylvania, concluded that the chances of "going viral" or becoming well-known as a fashion or lifestyle blogger or influencer privileges those with existing economic capital and those that conform to aesthetics of white, straight, cis-gender womanhood that the mainstream media pedestalizes.

Paulsen Mulvey told me that I should think about the visible kinds of feminism allowed and accepted in the spaces of Instagram lifestyle influencers while also trying to figure out how critical influencers can even be about speaking up or commenting on subjects like feminism. Elaborating, she explained, "Influencers are able to talk about certain kinds of popular mainstream feminism over other forms of feminism that may be more critical of consumer-capitalism. This is because mainstream feminism, when performed on Instagram, does not alienate brands and is seen as more profitable in or

current media moment.” As Paulsen Mulvey told me, “I would never want to denounce the amount of work that goes into being an influencer because it is a lot of work, but at the same time, it’s work that’s afforded by privilege. Specifically, white privilege, by those who can perform femininities specifically from a privileged lifestyle, and that’s what makes them successful.” She continued, “I would argue that social media influencing is overwhelmingly white, and when diversity does come into play, it becomes very tokenized.”

I took Paulsen Mulvey’s advice to heart and started seriously thinking about the kind of feminism I see signalled as acceptable from influencers on my Instagram feed. I see the exact generic, consumer-friendly feminism that Paulsen Mulvey had described. These influencers display themselves as independent, self-assured, and seemingly in charge of their lives while constantly reaffirming to their audience that they are worthy of being admired, posting images of themselves that reinforce particular, societally embedded standards of beauty. One way to analyze this type of feminism that I see commonly portrayed by these Instagram influencers is through ideas of postfeminism. As the British sociologist and feminist cultural theorist Rosalind Gill has defined in her research, postfeminism is a response to feminism that finds itself entangled in ideas of both feminist and anti-feminist discourse (Gill, 2007). In their article “Self-Branding Among Fashion Bloggers,” Brooke Erin Duffy and Emily Hund identify postfeminism as a way of thinking that praises the importance of individualism, choice, and authenticity while also requiring women to pedestalize and seek to emulate a Western beauty aesthetic of being young, thin, and light-skinned (Duffy & Hund, 2015). As a result, many are excluded in postfeminism, as it ignores hierarchies of age, race, class, sexuality and body type while framing specific, socially mediated versions of the self that influencers create as authentic, relatable, and “having it all” in regards to how womanhood and femininity should appear. Duffy and Hund’s research has found that women put themselves under constant self-improvement, self-surveillance, and self-discipline to get closer to this “ideal.”

Sarah Banet-Weiser, Professor of Media and Communications and Head of the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics, explains in her 2012 book, *Authentic TM: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture*, that a significant component of postfeminism is the need for women to brand themselves to convey their individuality, authenticity, and freedom of personal choice. While attempting to create their self-brand, Banet-Weiser explains that women influencers often fall victim to reproducing societally entrenched ideas of what it means to be feminine and how to look like, act, and be a woman. As a result, they commodify themselves as an idea to be consumed by an audience.

It's starting to become a lot clearer to me what I see on these accounts – women who come across as naturally confident, desirable, and appealing are just constantly performing this packaged image to be found worthy of admiration from their imagined audiences. And it is not only influencers but many other women, including myself, who use social media to emulate a specific image and ideal, of being as visible and appealing to as many people as possible, of portraying oneself as worthy of being desired and admired. Designed to come across as natural and effortless, this "ideal woman" is tailored and packaged as something successful and attractive within capitalism.

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Talking with different academics has helped me better understand how Instagram influencers fit within the more extensive idea of consumer-capitalism surrounding us all. But I also wanted to talk to people like myself, who are attracted to social media influencers without a deep theoretical understanding of the subject. I wondered if they felt the same way I did and if they had any insight into why we keep 'clicking.' I felt like it was necessary to get insight from people who regularly interact with lifestyle influencers on Instagram. Individuals who like or comment on influencers' pictures, reply to their Instagram stories, go to the exact locations as them, try to imitate their style and digital aesthetic, or even buy the products and services that these influencers advertised. To track people down, I posted a story on my Instagram account, visible to all who follow me, of a picture of my face and a short blurb about



wanting to talk to other Instagram users. Several women, all in their early-to-mid-twenties, replied. After going through the conversations I had with these "admirers" of influencers, I noticed that several themes were repeating: body image, mental health, the challenges of being neutral versus political on the platform, changing relationships with influencers over time, and disillusionments with capitalism and advertising on social media.

The first person I talked to was a woman named Erica Whitehead of Fredericton, New Brunswick. Whitehead knows what she's looking at when she goes to Instagram; she's technologically and culturally savvy. When I asked why Whitehead likes lifestyle influencers, a definition was immediately at her fingertips, proof I think that she knows what's in store when she logs onto the platform. I think she has just as good a handle on influencers as the academics I spoke to. During our chat, I even felt a little embarrassed because Whitehead seemed more informed than me on the subjects I had asked her about. An influencer, she said, is "someone who has been able to build a platform or has been given a platform that they can wield in order to influence typically the purchasing habits, sometimes the ideologies, and lifestyles of others. I think that influencers and influencer culture, in general, can be tied very deeply to the concept of trends, not just to beauty and fashion trends, but to any number of things. They are a key marketing strategy, and it's successful because it makes you want to spend money!" Even though she's very aware of how influencers work, Whitehead told me that her relationship with Instagram influencers and the models she sees advertising products on the platform wasn't always, in her opinion, healthy. A few years ago, Whitehead was living in Toronto, attending Ryerson University. While there, she started to grow her Instagram account and expand her audience. "I was creating all this content and getting great responses and was getting like hundreds of followers in such a short period of time." Whitehead's interest in the potential growth of her Instagram account started to wane when she realized how surface-level the platform was, coming to know she didn't have a clue who the effortlessly cool and beautiful influencers she had been following even were. Whitehead would spend money she didn't have and time she couldn't spare traipsing all over Toronto to take pictures in aesthetically stylish cafes, restaurants and boutiques, hoping that the content she would post would perform well on Instagram. "I didn't like how it made me walk through my life, seeing everything as an opportunity for a photo, rather than appreciating what my experiences were," she told me. As well as becoming distraught with staging her life in this way, she said she realized she had been emulating an unrealistic persona: "I saw how damaging it is just having all these like, very skinny, naturally beautiful women who posit this lifestyle of never working out or not eating healthy, and it being like pure genetics and money that allows them to look this way, although they advertise the image of themselves like it's something one can easily purchase or attain."

After gaining popularity on Instagram and disliking the result, Whitehead took a year-long break from social media in order "to develop a better self-concept and not feel like I was living my life dressing or posting for Instagram to assure everyone else I was happy and successful when I was not." When Whitehead eventually returned to Instagram, she told me she cleared out all of the influencers she used to follow. "Now I only follow about 20 Instagram accounts of people that I do not know in real life. And about like five of those twenty would-be influencers."

Did this break from social media and her subsequent mass unfollowing of Instagram influencers improve her relationship with Instagram? According to Whitehead, it has: "[I] now feel much better and don't see myself comparing my body to that of models. But that was a realization that did take a lot of maturity and research into these kinds of ridiculous and enigmatic lives that these beautifully elite people live." Whitehead's relationship with social media and influencer culture is not linear, however. She has not reached a magical state of mind where she no longer cares how she presents herself online to others. She explained that while she tries to be more conscious of the façade of performing a version of herself on social media, "my online persona is still very curated and self-serving. And it's also different between my social media platforms. The way I present myself on Instagram is very different than the personalities that I depict on Twitter, for example."

What I began to find out while talking to everyday people is that sometimes their relationships with Instagram influencers – and they talk about them as relationships – change over time. Such was the

case for Whitehead and another "admirer" I spoke to, Kavi Kukha-Bryson. Kukha-Bryson, who lives in Montreal, told me she has long taken style inspiration from the people she follows online. "I have definitely been influenced by the influencers I follow on Instagram. I've been inspired to follow some of their fashion advice, even purchase a few things. I like to keep up to date on their lives in general." Unlike Whitehead, who now only follows a handful of the influencers she used to, Kukha-Bryson told me that she had consistently followed quite a few Instagram influencers, some of them for years, "back when they were considered to be micro-influencers (defined as having under 100,000 followers), and seemed relatable because they had smaller, humbler following." Lately, however, her thoughts on staying loyal to these influencers have waned, as she has noticed their online personas transform as their popularity steadily increases. Kukha-Bryson told me that she has noticed that the more popular an influencer gets, the less relatable she finds them. Once they start to advertise for brands increasingly, she sees their lives begin to come across as increasingly hyper-curated and increasingly unrealistic, and as a result, she unfollows them.

Antonina Pavilanis, a McGill Research Assistant living in Montreal, feels turned off by influencers with massive followings whose content revolves around paid advertisements and sponsored content. "As soon as I see a long caption about any kind of advertisement, I'll just scroll by. It almost makes me angry, like, I don't want to interact with the post. I don't care for that on Instagram. I can do my research if I'm really interested in the product."

Blatantly disliking when social media influencers increasingly post advertisements was a common opinion among those I interviewed. However, for influencers to become prevalent and begin to make money, they must do precisely this, which can lead many to unfollow or become disinterested in them. It makes me wonder how widely known it is that influencers must balance on this fine line to grow their audience and maintain the followers they already have. However, much like how Kukha-Bryson feels, Pavilanis explained that she's okay with advertising on social media platforms like Instagram but finds subtle advertising more drawing. To her, influencers "kind of need to look effortless; the whole image needs to be simple and uncomplicated. If influencers I follow are doing too many advertisements, I find that their content will start to diverge from my interest and attention." I understand where this sentiment is coming from, as I also have unfollowed influencers whose content seems to turn into nothing but paid advertisements.

At the same time, isn't this true of all influencers, or anyone with a social media account, where it kind of goes unsaid that you have curated your online image to show your best self and that you are not disclosing your entire "warts and all" self to your viewers? It seems like we often feel comfortable openly criticizing the 'fakeness' of others on the internet while ignoring the fact that we do the same. Incredibly sharp, Kukha-Bryson saw the paradox here. Still, like many of us, including myself, she is okay with a certain level of illusion on Instagram: "I understand that social media is just like a snapshot of someone's life, and it's a very well-curated, but still, I think when it's too perfect, it's just unattainable and unrealistic in that sense."

Pavilanis enjoys curating her social media accounts to look aesthetically pleasing by posting only specific images she finds beautiful onto her profile, showing a very curated version of herself. "I find I don't post my everyday life often. So in that way, I feel like it's not a true reflection of me because most of my life is just ordinary and being at home and being around my family and my boyfriend and my friends. I really don't post very much about that." The pictures she posts on her Instagram account are mainly of her, and occasionally of scenery, and images she believes will look good together on her feed, "so if you didn't know me and you just looked at my Instagram, I don't think that you would have a full idea of who I am as a person." I find it interesting just how aware Pavilanis is with how she curates her life to look a certain way on Instagram and that she feels fine with this, knowing that the people who matter to her understand who she is.

After hearing Pavilanis speak about being comfortable performing a specific idea of herself to her audience on Instagram, I was interested in how Kukha-Bryson, someone who admits to spending a lot of time looking at influencers, thinks about her own digital identity. She's not an influencer, but like many of us, she does have an online presence. Pavilanis wants to come across online as likeable, and as a result,

feels like she should just put out enjoyable and straightforward content. This desire to maintain a generic presence online is something that I have also felt pressure to conform to, and in some ways, I have. The way I come across to others on social media is crucial to my future career prospects, or so I've been told, so I must be both as visible and appealing to as many people as possible, not overly opinionated or political. Kuhka-Bryson, says she also feels this pressure to come across a certain way on social media. "Honestly, the version of me that I show online is really only 50% of who I actually feel I am. I definitely perform a specific identity online...I often just post photos where I think I look good. I acknowledge that this is bad, but I like to post pretty pictures of myself because I don't often always feel very pretty, and I like the satisfaction I feel from people complimenting me on how I look. "I have thoughts and feelings towards a lot of issues that in the past I haven't shared on Instagram. I know I should be more vocal about them, and I'm trying to improve." For the longest time, Kukha-Bryson refused to be political on Instagram because she wanted to present a simple, likeable, and aesthetically pleasing version, and sharing her political opinions did not fit that aesthetic in her mind.

Kuhka-Bryson's remarks resonated with me. Recently, I decided to look back at everything I've posted in the past on Instagram. It seemed like the self that I tried to showcase on the app came across as incredibly uninteresting because I felt like I needed to exude a persona that was palatable to the highest number of people, with the belief that this 'safe' content would get the most likes. Ashley Draper, an accountant based in Montreal, seemed to be just as aware as me as to how others see her on Instagram. "I'm always thinking, what can like strangers see? What can my family see? What can my employer see? What information can I give away, what images can I show, and where do I draw the line? When I am thinking about and then making my online presence or persona, I feel like I have to cater to like all those groups at once because any given person can just be looking at my profile." As a result of all these conflicting pressures on social media, Draper told me she feels like she needs to come across online as being overly neutral to appease everyone.

Draper revealed that she often has compared the way she looks to particular Instagram influencers and that it's harmed her self-esteem and mental health as a result. "I delude into telling myself I'm just admiring [influencers] or that I just I'm just curious, but like really deep down this is who I compare myself to, and that's what I would selfishly like to achieve, or to look like, or to have the same things as. Like, I know not to compare myself to them, but I still do it to a certain level subconsciously." Draper notes that from a mental health perspective, she believes she has become "so much more acutely aware of how I compare myself online, whether it be like to the lifestyle or physical traits of influences that I see on Instagram. Even though logically I know that the pictures are super curated, either they are photo-shopped or maybe they just look like that." Draper has become acutely aware of how these accounts of influencers become businesses. "When they're constantly sponsoring things and throwing them at you every single day, that cheapens the account to me, and then I will be turned off and unfollow them. That's now the kind of stuff I try to stay away from."

Becoming increasingly aware of the connections between influencers, branding, and capitalism, Draper decided to make a shift in the types of accounts she follows on Instagram. "I now follow a lot more like humorous accounts, social justice accounts, even mental health and well-being accounts, like a lot of therapists, have kind of made an online business of helping people and reaching out to them through Instagram. I have definitely changed who I follow, but the comparison [of myself to influencers] is still very present."

Vanessa Croome was another woman whose mental health and body image have been affected by influencers on Instagram in the past. Croome, a soprano who is a current artist in residence with Opéra de Montréal, finds her relationship to influencers, and social media in general, to have changed over the years. "I think when I was a bit younger, I definitely used to feel a lot more depressed using social media. You look at this stuff, and you compare your life to others, and I think now I feel less that way because I am aware of the fact that for most influencers, their feeds are so curated, it's not exactly what their life is like." Croome came to a similar realization as several of the other women I talked to, that she was following a lot of influencers because "I had some weird, subconscious desire for certain body aspirations that I would see on the bodies of influencers. I went through a phase where I was unfollowing these

accounts left, right and center because I realized they were having a negative effect on me." Like Croome, I also find that I compare myself to influencers, but rather than body image, I desire to have their lifestyle that fuels much of my envy towards them.

Besides becoming disillusioned by the specific body standards perpetuated by lifestyle influencers on Instagram, Croome, like several of the other "admirers" of influencers I talked to, did not like continuing to interact with influencers who began to advertise on their accounts increasingly. She explained, "it feels like it's no longer coming from like a genuine place, and that's something that would lead me to unfollow someone."

What remains most on my mind after talking to these different women is that there seems to be an unspoken agreement regarding an acceptable amount of advertising an influencer can do before they become unappealing, selling out to the brands paying them to promote their products.

This threshold seemed slightly different for each person I talked to, but there was a general agreement that increased paid advertisements did not work in the influencer's favour. Yet, isn't the very purpose of an influencer to advertise and display a branded lifestyle through a highly curated version of themselves? Each of the women I talked to who felt increasingly disinterested in influencers as they began advertising more believed that they were aware that these accounts had to become businesses for these influencers to make a living off of them. It's a weird paradox between what users seem to desire in the actions of the influencers they follow versus the reality of the situation. It's wanting to believe the mirage of who we think someone is, rather than being faced with the fact that who they have come to know online has been carefully curated to appear appealing, to sell an idea of an ideal life.

Pondering this made me think back to the conversation I had with Bernie Hogan from the Oxford Internet Institute. Hogan said that social media influencers want to give their audience the illusion that they control their online and offline persona and that they are in charge of the impressions they give off to this audience. The illusion of being in control, however, is fuelled by a sense of false consciousness: "The false consciousness of influencers is the belief that being an influencer is somehow under one's control when the whole nature of being an influencer is to be a mediator between the external world and an audience." In other words, influencers might believe they are in control of the impressions they give off to others. Still, the true nature of their situation is that this control is actually in the hands of their audience and the brands that work with them, who can turn on a dime and decide not to engage with them anymore.

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Thinking about how Lizzy Hadfield makes everyday life look elegant and desirable, a [photo](#) that comes to mind from January 8, 2020, before the pandemic hit most of the world. Hadfield is taking a mirror selfie of her outfit for the day in front of her just-made bed. It's an all-black outfit, each item tagged with a specific brand. The caption: "Just setting off. Just woke up." I am drawn to this photo, thinking of the many times I have gotten ready to leave my apartment and taken a picture of my outfit in the mirror just before I head off for the day. Again, this photo seems authentic but also aspirational. She looks exceptionally well-rested, effortlessly put together. But how realistic is it that after "just waking up," anyone could look put together with a full face of makeup? How curated is this photo? I think about how many times I have uploaded a picture of myself to social media in the hopes it will give off the impression of being taken "effortlessly." Meanwhile, behind the scenes, I will have spent half an hour taking 50 almost identical pictures and choosing one where I deem myself most attractive to post. Several photos that I have posted to Instagram appear to be taken in a similar style to Hadfield's: by myself in front of a full-length mirror, or caught off-guard on the street (although in reality, my friend is in front of me, very obviously taking my picture), to show off the outfits I wear, and the way I look overall, which I want others to perceive as stylish, cool, and attractive to those that follow me on the platform. Embarrassingly, I yearn for the life these influencers are selling, even though I'm aware of what goes on behind the scenes. I am falling prey to the exact trap set up for me from the brands and advertisers paying influencers to sell an image of an "ideal" life. Unfortunately, capitalism is working its charm on me,

always getting me to want more, never leaving me satisfied. I understand that I am being sold both an idea of a particular life alongside the items I can buy to create the mirage of an ideal life. Of course, I do, but I willingly choose to succumb to this false narrative.

I started this journey to know why I observe Instagram influencers' lives, even though my life is nothing like theirs. As I suspected, capitalism certainly has a part to play in *why* I idealize the lives and identities of specific Instagram influencers, people I think I intimately know but who are strangers, selling me a life to be desired. But in learning from academics and others that I talked to, I have a much better grasp. I am aware of so many more nuances about *how* Instagram influencers work and the intricacies behind how I perform my own identity online.

By gaining a broader perspective on identity performance, I understand the many stages that we all perform different versions of ourselves for observing others, both offline and online. Influencers perform their identity on a stage through their Instagram profile, but this is only one performance within the many that exist in their complicated and complex lives. This specific performance revolves around how authentic an influencer's performance comes across to their audience. I've come to understand that this idea of authenticity and performing our authentic selves is incredibly misleading, as commercialism co-opts it to mean the opposite of its original definition. When you look at something influencers do that appears authentic and genuine, you are looking at a specific branding of authenticity. And although perhaps many Instagram influencers started for other reasons, influencers cannot separate their identity from consumer capitalism. Consumer capitalism promotes what is profitable, including the idea that it is important and necessary to conform to certain ideals, which is why we see such narrow definitions of feminism and "ideal" women winning the algorithm war over other influencers.

Previously, when I've logged onto my Instagram account, I have always been aware, at least to an extent, that I was trying to curate my digital image and aesthetic to come across a certain way. Although this is a bit cringe to admit, perhaps, but what I came to realize is that I've wanted to be perceived as an "effortlessly" cool girl, ironic considering how much thought I put into my every move on the platform. Understanding how Instagram influencers work has allowed me to realize how much I have wanted to come across this way to other people online, many of whom I've never met. Because of this, I've felt pressure to post beautiful pictures of myself, of nature, and of pretty things I buy. I also feel a similar pressure to come across as physically attractive, intellectual, mysterious, fun, silly and carefree. I recognize that part of where these desires come from is internal and external pressures, but part of me believes that creating a specific image online is what I would want regardless. Of course, much of what I see in this romanticized image of how I want to portray myself has been copied and adapted from the Instagram lifestyle influencers I follow. Although I feel these same pressures outside of Instagram, the added element of being observed and watched by, well, really anyone on the internet adds more pressure to commit to branding myself in a certain way.

Something that has become especially apparent in the past year is how much I seem to live my life online. I have often found myself constantly looking at my phone, reaching for my phone, or feeling the absence of my phone. I realized that having my phone with me had become a security blanket and gave me a sense of comfort and ease when I held it. Now, more than ever, it feels like I am living my whole identity online. It was pretty interesting to see other Instagram users, "admirers" of influencers like myself, admit that they also have closely analyzed how they've portrayed themselves online and whether or not this portrayal aligned with how they saw themselves outside of this digital world. Because so many people's lives, including my own, are now wholly tied to the internet, it seems natural to focus our energy on how we wish to express the ideas, thoughts and actions we hold and make them known with our digital presence. During this pandemic, many of us have flocked to social media to have interactions with each other. These interactions we share, online and off, feed us information that allows us to create a commentary on who we believe we are. A significant result of this has been coming to understand how I use social media and how I have come to rely on it to tell me what I should desire in life by comparing myself to influencers and other users. This realization has made me feel sad, mainly in the way that I've let comparison to others run my life. This unexpected identity crisis has given me a fresh perspective. However, it has also been a turning point to begin using social media differently and in a way where I

take back some of my agency in how I decide to act online, rather than simply observing others, comparing myself to them, and lusting over what I believe to lack. Most recently, I have found myself caring much less about always being perceived in a positive light on Instagram. Still, I have also begun to use the platform much less because I care less about curating a specific “cool girl” identity that had been less to the benefit of me than to others.

In the online world, there are just as many stages, audiences, and performances as offline. I have come to understand that I present myself in just as many ways online as I do offline, depending on the digital platforms I am using and who I am interacting with, even if I’m not always conscious of it. I have been taught throughout my university education to curate an internet persona that is palatable and apolitical to potential employers, a digital personality explicitly drafted to succeed in capitalism. I have often gone against this advice, keeping my social media accounts public for anyone to see, stating my vulnerabilities and imperfections and politics openly, like underwear drying on a clothesline. I grapple with this, and I feel the push and pull of looking or behaving online in specific, generically attractive ways. Even if I were to make all my social media accounts private or limit who can see what I post, to a degree, I am always visible on the internet. Strangers always observe me in the digital world, predicting my personality with algorithms that watch my activity through my digital fingerprint. I’m sure Instagram lifestyle influencers are on the same continuum myself. Many others face the same dilemmas about performing our identities online, asking the question, who are we really?