# Perspective

# Evolving Notions of Consumption, "Influencing," and Postfeminist Femininity in Digital Cultures

## A Perspective Piece

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### Introduction

Since the rise and mainstreaming of social media platforms in the mid-to-late 2000s, there has been considerable academic interest in the meaning of these spaces for both individual users of social media and wider society. There has been extensive discussion focused on how these spaces come to shape and influence user's lives and behavior in various ways, and there has been increasing interest in the kinds of content that becomes prevalent on sites such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Tumblr, and TikTok. A part of this wider exploration is making sense of how people (and particularly young people) use social media platforms in their everyday lives and the ways in which various content is engaged with in the construction of their own identities. Given the gendered nature of social media, there has been specific interest in the role of various social media platforms in young women's lives and in the wider construction of contemporary femininities. It has been noted, for example, that content focusing on beauty, fashion, and the body has been particularly popular among girls and women online and, given the tendency for algorithmic systems to make popular content more widely "visible," this may raise concerns about the ways in which social media platforms (re)produce specific ideals and norms around feminine subjectivity.

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In previous research based in England, I have explored the relationship girls and young women have with social media platforms as they navigate the construction of their identities and selfhood. When beginning research into the gendered construction of social media in the 2010s, I was interested in the ways in which competing narratives of social media circulated and intersected in both academic and popular discourse. On the one hand, the emergence of social media platforms had provided space for women to tell their own stories and to create and engage in collective communities such as the "feminist blogosphere."[1] On the other hand, social media platforms were criticized for being host to new forms of online misogyny[2] and contributing to the enhanced scrutiny and surveillance of women's bodies.[3] Given the wide-ranging understandings of social media that circulate in both academic and popular discourse, it is unsurprising that girls and young women's own relationship with social media is complex and often contradictory. In research I conducted with girls and young women in England in the mid-2010s, I found that the process of constructing an online presence was often experienced as both constraining and enabling. While engagement with digital cultures enabled scope for participation in new and exciting political cultures and feminist pedagogies, there was also a clear understanding that social media platforms such as Instagram were used as a means through which to produce and disseminate new norms associated with particularly gendered forms of (hyper)consumption, self- and social surveillance, and narrow forms of beauty. For participants, an emerging "influencer" culture at the time played a key role in the construction of these norms.

In this perspective article, I revisit some of this work in light of more recent shifts in the economic and political context in the United Kingdom,

1. Jessalynn Keller, *Girls Feminist Blogging in a Postfeminist Age* (New York: Routledge, 2016).
2. Debbie Ging and Eugenia Siapera, "Special Issue on Online Misogyny," *Feminist Media Studies* 18, no. 4 (2018).
3. Nicholas Carah and Amy Dobson, "'Algorithmic Hotness': Young Women's 'Promotion' and 'Reconnaisance' Work via Social Media Body Images," *Social Media + Society* (2016), https://doi.org.10.1177/2056305116672885.

wherein additional economic crises and increased precarity and instability have further complexified the political, economic, and cultural terrain within which these digital cultures play out. In previous work, I have tended to situate my discussions of gendered digital cultures against the postfeminist and neoliberal backdrops that emerged in the British context[4] in the latter part of the twentieth century and which have continued to intensify throughout the twenty-first century. Postfeminism has been defined as "a set of assumptions, widely disseminated within popular media forms, having to do with 'pastness' of feminism, whether that supposed pastness is merely noted, mourned or celebrated."[5] This definition understands postfeminism as a cultural and political landscape that constructs a collective feminist resistance, either explicitly or implicitly, as outdated and/or unnecessary. Many feminist academics have argued that a culture of postfeminism in the United Kingdom has had profound implications on the formation of subjectivities in the twenty-first century. Similarly, a wider culture of neoliberalism has worked to encourage and valorize a kind of "entrepreneurial subjectivity" that centers the importance of "ambition, calculation, accountability and personal responsibility."[6]

Within these contexts, "new" forms of idealized femininity shaped by discourses of individual "empowerment" became dominant. The notion of empowerment in postfeminist contexts has often been explicitly or implicitly tied to consumption, the pursuit of wealth and material success, and

4. While this work is situated in the context of the United Kingdom, there is scope for international crossover and overlap, as many of the works drawn upon here demonstrate that similar constructions of young femininity have operated in other global contexts. However, while some of the topics discussed speak to wider global trends, this article does not claim to speak for one homogenous experience of digital cultures. Rather, it draws on small-scale qualitative research conducted in England to contribute to wider discussions on the topic of gendered digital cultures.
5. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, "Introduction: Feminist Politics and Postfeminist Culture," in *Interrogating Postfeminism*, ed. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (London: Duke University Press, 2007).
6. Christina Scharff, "The Psychic Life of Neoliberalism: Mapping the Contours of Entrepreneurial Subjectivity," *Theory, Culture & Society* 33, no. 6 (2016): 107–22.

"working on" the body. While some feminists in the 1990s understood these changes to gender politics as contributing to a wider "backlash" against the gains of the second-wave feminist movement(s) of the 1960s and 1970s,[7] McRobbie has suggested that, rather than reject it outright, postfeminism adopts and co-opts certain feminist rhetoric in order to undermine and undo it in more complex and insidious ways.[8] This shall be discussed in the following section of this article. As popular media cultures were always central to early understandings of postfeminism as a cultural sensibility, an analysis of new(er) forms of *social* media that have become dominant in the United Kingdom since the late 2000s is essential to our understanding of the ways in which postfeminism continues to operate and evolve.

To do this, I lay out previous debates and explorations relevant to the study of gendered social media—including my own work—while also exploring more recent trends in digital cultures to pass comment on new directions and areas of interest. Here, I identify shifts in "influencer" cultures that seemingly attempt to respond to the increasing economic and political uncertainty experienced by their audiences but that ultimately fail to disrupt the dominant norms associated with the idealized postfeminist subject that has been central to constructions of "new femininities" over the past two decades. As "influencer" cultures have expanded since the mid-2010s, there has been an apparent shift away from the dominance of the hyper-glamorous and overtly consumeristic feminine subject identified as the norm by participants in my previous research in 2015. While this figure certainly still exists, a range of alternative influencer cultures have emerged that complicate (but, ultimately, do not meaningfully challenge) the dominant discourses associated with young femininity in twenty-first-century Britian.

7. Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1991).
8. Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (London: Sage, 2009).

This perspective article starts by giving a more in-depth overview of the wider context of postfeminism and neoliberalism, which have long been argued as central in the shaping of contemporary Britain. While there have been questions raised about the continued usefulness of "postfeminism" as a lens through which to understand an increasingly complex cultural terrain, I follow Gill[9] in arguing that, rather than becoming less relevant, postfeminism has adapted to shifting cultural and political contexts in the United Kingdom and beyond. I then revisit some of the key findings of my own research conducted in 2015 in order to situate the role of social media within a wider context of postfeminism. The previous findings in this section are drawn from a larger study that examined girls' and young women's cultural and political engagement with social media platforms in England in the mid-2010s.[10] These findings are drawn from focus groups conducted in 2015, and much of it has been published elsewhere.[11] However, it is useful to revisit these findings as a "snapshot" from a specific period in time and consider their relevance for more contemporary discussions as we approach a decade later. Drawing on more recent literature and observations, I end the article by reflecting on previous arguments and considering the ways in which digital cultures continue to evolve in ways that exacerbate postfeminist and neoliberal discourses, albeit in ways that may appear less explicit.

## Context: Postfeminism and Neoliberalism in the United Kingdom

It has long been argued by some feminist scholars that the gender politics of twenty-first-century Britain can best be understood through the lens of

9. Rosalind Gill, "Surveillance Is a Feminist Issue," in *The Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Feminism*, ed. Tasha Oren and Andrea Press (Abington: Routledge, 2019), 148–61.
10. Frankie Rogan, *Digital Femininities: The Gendered Construction of Cultural and Political Identities Online* (Oxon: Routledge, 2022).
11. Rogan, *Digital Femininities*.

postfeminism.[12] In this context, postfeminism is understood as an object of analysis, defined by a set of discourses that emerged in the late 1980s and 1990s and which had become dominant in British media cultures by the 2000s.[13] Within these contexts, there was an increasing assertion (either explicitly or implicitly) that feminism was "over" and was no longer a relevant or necessary political force. Given that legal "equality" had been achieved through the passing of legislation such as, in the United Kingdom, the Equal Pay Act of 1970 and the Sex Discrimination Act of 1975, women were presented with the narrative that the primary goals of the women's liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s had been achieved. In short, the feminist battle was said to be won, and a new generation of young women were presented with the dubious claim that they were living in a more equitable and just society and could expect to live a life unhampered by the gendered norms that had shaped the lives of generations of women before them.

Within these contexts, young women in particular were considered important figureheads of this new moment in time and, as such, became highly visible in popular culture and public policy. The construction of what Anita Harris[14] referred to as the twenty-first-century "can-do girl" was central to this visibility, wherein young women were encouraged to capitalize on the new opportunities available to them in a "postfeminist" world by working hard, obtaining a good education, making "sensible" choices, and becoming empowered and independent subjects. Of course, the figure of the can-do girl was racialized and classed as well as gendered, and it was largely white, middle-, and upper-class girls who were the discursive targets of these aspirational messages.[15] While structural inequalities continued to be heavily responsible for *which* girls were more readily able to capitalize on

12. McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*.
13. McRobbie.
14. Anita Harris, *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Routledge, 2004).
15. Karen Wilkes, "Colluding with Neo-Liberalism: Post-Feminist Subjectivities, Whiteness and Expressions of Entitlement," *Feminist Review* 110 (2015): 18–33.

the new opportunities supposedly afforded to them, a wider culture, which was dominated by discourses of individual choice, freedom, and personal responsibility, meant that this structural inequality was recast as the result of poor personal decision-making and an abdication of personal responsibility.

Of course, the wider culture in the United Kingdom at this time was one dominated and heavily shaped by neoliberal discourses, and it has long been argued that postfeminism operates as the gendered facet of neoliberalism.[16] Here, neoliberalism is understood as another type of cultural sensibility produced by the ramifications of the neoliberal economic changes implemented in the United Kingdom by Margaret Thatcher in the late 1970s and 1980s. A slew of economic changes that advocated for market fundamentalism, a rollback of the welfare state, and the positioning of the individual as sovereign had profound effects on the ways in which individuals conceived of themselves and of others.[17] The relentless emphasis on the individual (and the Thatcherite suspicion of "collectives") meant that discourses of individual agency and personal responsibility became hegemonic and new notions of selfhood were recast to fit a new neoliberal agenda.[18]

Within these contexts, a specific type of successful young femininity emerged, which prioritized individual choice, economic independence, and the ability to consume. For Gill, these new forms of femininity could be identified as being structured by a kind of postfeminist sensibility, the key features of which were "the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; the emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference; a marked sexualisation of culture; and

16. Gill, "Surveillance Is a Feminist Issue."
17. Alison Winch, Jo Littler, and Jessalynn Keller, "Why 'intergenerational Feminist Media Studies?" *Feminist Media Studies* 16, no. 4 (2016): 557–72.
18. Christina Scharff, "The Psychic Life of Neoliberalism: Mapping the Contours of Entrepreneurial Subjectivity," *Theory, Culture and Society* 33, no. 6 (2016): 107–22.

an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference."[19] These features emphasized the central role of the body in constructions of postfeminist femininity, the enhanced levels of surveillance and discipline that these bodies are subject to, and, crucially, the shift to subjectification (rather than objectification) providing the sense that women freely *choose* to undergo these practices rather than them being imposed or, at least, shaped by wider patriarchal structures. During the 1990s and 2000s, it was noted that postfeminism was largely played out in popular culture as celebrities and cultural icons found in (often North American) television and film became key figures of aspirational femininity. Popular television shows such as *Sex and the City*[20] and *Ally McBeal*[21] and the cultural figures found within books and films such as *Bridget Jones's Diary*[22] served to disseminate these messages about individual pursuits of empowerment, which both depoliticized and historicized feminism in a variety of ways.[23]

These media cultures, alongside wider political and public discourses, focused on the importance of can-do girls and "girl power," coalesced to produce a vague "postfeminist promise" wherein young, middle-class girls were told they could do and be anything they wanted if they were ambitious and hard-working enough. There has been much discussion about the development and evolution of postfeminism since it was theorized in this way in the 2000s. In 2017, Gill revisited postfeminism and argued that it had "both spread out and intensified across contemporary culture"[24] as she noted an increased emphasis on postfeminism's affective and psychic dimensions.

19. Rosalind Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10, no. 2 (2007): 149.
20. Jane Gerhard, "Sex and the City: Carrie Bradshaw's Queer Postfeminism," *Feminist Media Studies* 5, no. 1 (2006): 37–49.
21. Laurie Oullette, "Victims No More: Postfeminism, Television, and Ally McBeal," *Communication Review* 5, no. 4 (2002): 315–35.
22. Stephanie Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011).
23. Angela McRobbie. 'Post-Feminism and Popular Culture," *Feminist Media Studies* 4, no. 3 (2004): 255–64.
24. Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture," 147.

Here, Gill noted postfeminism's increased tendency to encourage women to adopt "the 'right' kinds of dispositions for surviving in a neoliberal society: confidence, resilience and positive mental attitude."[25] Therefore, while the body continues to be a key site of regulation in postfeminist contexts, the call for self-regulation became increasingly all-encompassing as it more regularly targeted mindset and attitude. In a digital context, Kanai's research into young women's Tumblr blogs has demonstrated the ways in which such "feeling rules" have come to regulate young femininity on social media platforms wherein "young women must not only engage in regulatory practices in relation to life planning, careers, their bodies and their (hetero)sexual relationships, but additionally . . . in an intensified layer of regulation, they must manage their feelings in relation to such practices."[26]

Encouraging women to have the right kind of outlook to enable them to successfully navigate increasingly precarious and unstable contexts has become ever more key to cultural representations of femininity. As Gill notes, when contextualizing this shift within the wider political and economic context of the United Kingdom in the 2010s, links between increasingly "hard times"[27] and intensified calls to develop resilience and "positive mental attitudes" can be drawn. After the global financial crash of 2007 to 2008, the young targets of the postfeminist messaging of the 1990s found themselves entering a job market that was hampered by high levels of precarity and instability. While the "postfeminist promise" of the 1990s and 2000s was always contingent on access to specific forms of capital structured by racialized and classed inequalities, it became clear that the "promise" of economic prosperity and independence through hard work became increasingly unstuck as a growing number of young people bore the brunt of public

25. Rosalind Gill, 'The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Postfeminism: A Postfeminist Sensibility 10 Years On," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 20, no. 6 (2017): 606–26.
26. Akane Kanai, "On Not Taking the Self Seriously: Resilience, Relatability and Humour in Young Women's Tumblr Blogs," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 22, no. 1 (2019): 62.
27. Gill, 'The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Postfeminism," 608.

spending cuts and found it difficult to transition into adulthood as stable homes and careers became increasingly difficult to locate.[28]

It is within this context that influencer cultures and new forms of labor, "success," and celebrity emerged and came to restructure the media (and labor) cultures that young people navigated their identities within. As such, social media cultures (particularly evolving influencer cultures) serve a key role in the continued reproduction and reconstitution of postfeminist discourses as they become the new medium through which ideals around economic freedom, consumption, mindset, and self-transformation are delivered to young women in increasingly precarious contexts.

## Postfeminism in a Digital Age: New Femininities and Influencer Cultures

As previously discussed, media cultures have long been identified as central to the production and dissemination of postfeminist and neoliberal discourses. One of the key transformations in the cultural terrain since the original theorization of postfeminism in the 1990s and 2000s is, of course, the mainstreaming of digital cultures and the rise of new forms of celebrity found within them. As celebrities and cultural figures have long been identified as key to the production of normative femininity in neoliberal and consumer societies, it is perhaps unsurprising that new forms of celebrity online have become increasingly significant in the construction of identity among young women. These new iterations of fame have their roots in "microcelebrity," a term first employed by Theresa Senft[29] to describe the camgirls she was researching in the early days of widespread Internet access. Senft identified the ways in which new technologies were being utilized by

28. Kim Allen, 'Top Girls Navigating Austere Times: Interrogating Youth Transitions since the 'Crisis,'" *Journal of Youth Studies* 19, no. 6 (2016): 805–20.
29. Theresa Senft, *Camgirls: Celebrity and Community in the Age of Social Networks* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008).

"ordinary" people to attract large fan-like followings online, and the term "microcelebrity" signaled a new form of celebrity where fame was located within a specific bounded context (rather than being more wide-reaching and mainstream, as in traditional forms of celebrity). As the use of the Internet and its associated technologies spread, other scholars began to grapple with the new ways in which ordinary users of the Internet and smartphones were constructing identities through the logics of celebrity despite not being famous themselves. This led to an interest in the ways in which people were actively courting a large number of "followers" simply by "being" (or, perhaps, commodifying) oneself.[30]

These shifts can be situated within what Gamson has referred to as celebrity culture's "turn towards the ordinary"[31] in the twenty-first century, wherein ordinary people were able to attain celebrity status through engaging with new forms of media output such as reality television. This laid the foundation for the emergence of "Internet fame," especially that of social media "influencers." Social media influencers are defined by Duffy as a "highly visible subset of digital content creators defined by their substantial following, distinctive brand persona, and patterned relationship with commercial sponsors."[32] Social media users can, therefore, earn (sometimes considerable) income by forming partnerships with brands or venues and advertising or endorsing their goods and services to their follower base. By documenting their everyday lives and integrating these sponsored products seamlessly within this documentation, influencers can market these products in ways that audiences may find more "authentic" and "relatable" than

30. Alice E. Marwick, "Instafame: Luxury Selfies in the Attention Economy," *Public Culture* 27, no. 1 (2015): 137–60.
31. Joshua Gamson, "The Unwatched Life Is Not Worth Living: The Elevation of the Ordinary in Celebrity Culture," *PMLA* 126, no. 4 (2011): 1061–62.
32. Brooke Erin Duffy, "Social Media Influencers," in *The International Encyclopedia of Gender, Media and Communication*, ed. Karen Ross, Ingrid Bachmann, Valentina Cardo, Sujata Moorti, and Cosimo Marco Scarcelli (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2020).

traditional forms of advertising.[33] It has been noted that the rise of social media influencers in the 2010s spoke to a wider culture of "self-branding" that is prevalent in postfeminist and neoliberal contexts, wherein individuals (and especially women) are encouraged to see themselves as a product and undergo various processes of self-promotion.[34]

It is important to note that the online influencer space is heavily feminized. In 2019, it was found that 84 percent of users creating sponsored posts on Instagram worldwide were women.[35] Therefore, the ways in which femininity is constructed in these spaces is integral to our understanding of contemporary gendered identities. It has been noted that social media platforms have often been utilized by content creators in ways that exacerbate and intensify postfeminist discourses and to further emphasize "entrepreneurial femininity" as the idealized subject position. For example, in the 2010s, Duffy and Hund[36] highlighted the ways in which fashion bloggers depicted the ideal of "having it all" through carefully constructed images of glamour and independence—two highly coveted features of an idealized postfeminist identity. These bloggers could also be seen as playing a key role in perpetuating mythologies around creative work, as the intensive labor involved in carefully constructing the "right" image is hidden or minimized. This resonates with longer standing arguments about the contradiction between the "allure" of creative industries for young women in postfeminist and neoliberal contexts and the realities of the precarious, contingent, and

33. Brooke Erin Duffy and Emily Hund, "Gendered Visibility on Social Media: Navigating Instagram's Authenticity Bind," *International Journal of Communication* 13 (2019): 4983–5002.
34. Susie Khamis, Lawrence Ang, and Raymond Welling, "Self-Branding, Micro-Celebrity and the Rise of Social Media Influencers," *Celebrity Studies* 8, no. 2 (2017): 191–208.
35. "Distribution of Influencers Creating Sponsored Posts on Instagram Worldwide in 2019, by Gender," Statista, accessed June 24, 2024, https://www.statista.com/statistics/893749/share-influencers-creating-sponsored-posts-by-gender/.
36. Erin Brooke Duffy and Emily Hund, " 'Having It All' on Social Media: Entrepreneurial Femininity and Self-Branding Amongst Fashion Bloggers," *Social Media + Society* 1, no. 2 (2015), https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115604337.

often low-paid work to be found in those spaces.[37] Recent research has highlighted how the work of online content creation mirrors these long-standing concerns about working conditions in the creative industries, as content creators from marginalized groups in particular face increased algorithmic barriers to visibility and economic reward.[38]

Despite inequality and precarity being central to the influencer industry, it is often perceived from the outside as one of the few spaces wherein young girls and women can obtain success and economic mobility. In my own research with girls and young women in the 2010s, an emerging influencer culture was often identified as the contemporary symbol of "the good life." There was often an assumption that this kind of work (i.e., posting one's life online and recommending makeup, clothes, restaurants, or travel locations) required little effort but garnered huge material reward and represented the pinnacle of an aspirational, carefree, and glamorous existence. Since then, it seems that there has been a shift in the kind of content that is produced and favored by audiences (and algorithms), although the popularity of content that is underpinned by postfeminist and neoliberal sensibilities remains. The following section will summarize some of these shifts by outlining the wider context of my earlier research and highlighting how recent shifts both build upon and differ from those previous findings. By doing this, I aim to offer some perspectives that may offer a springboard for future research into gendered digital cultures.

## Shifting Constructions of Femininity within Influencer Cultures

In response to wider competing discourses about the meaning and impacts of social media in the 2010s, I conducted qualitative focus group research

37. Angela McRobbie, "Fashion Culture: Creative Work, Female Individualization," *Feminist Review* 71 (2002): 52–62.
38. Zoe Glatt, "The Triple Intimacy Bind: Structural Inequalities and Relational Labour in the Influencer Industry," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 27, no. 3 (2024): 424–40.

with girls and young women. In 2015, nine focus groups were held with participants aged twelve to eighteen across three urban locations in England. There was a total of sixty-three participants. A more in-depth analysis of these discussions has been published elsewhere.[39] However, it is useful to briefly revisit some of these findings as a snapshot from a specific temporal and geographical context and consider their relevance for more contemporary discussions about gender and social media as we approach a decade later. Drawing on more recent observations, I end the article by reflecting on the ways in which digital cultures continue to exacerbate postfeminist and neoliberal discourses, albeit in ways that may appear less overt or explicit.

During this research, it was clear that many participants saw celebrities (both those that exist largely online and those who could be considered more mainstream) as central to the production of wider norms around femininity. While the term *influencer* was not yet in common parlance, participants often referred to "types" of women who were seemingly famous simply for being "glamorous" on Instagram, as well as those who were creating large audiences on video-sharing platform YouTube. Participants would note that these women were often perceived as "aspirational" figures among peers and that online celebrities such as those who created lifestyle blogs or "vlogs" produced new ideas around what success could look like for young women in contexts where possibilities for their economic mobility were becoming increasingly limited. For example, some participants referenced British lifestyle vlogger Zoella as a key figure in the construction of idealized young femininity in the 2010s. When asked about their own futures, one participant said Zoella was someone who could be considered a role model for young women, because she was "really pretty" and had a "perfect lifestyle." Indeed, the word *perfect* was one that was often used by participants when discussing common productions of femininity on platforms such as Instagram. It was noted by some participants that being exposed to a high number of pictures where women's appearance could be considered

39. Rogan, *Digital Femininities*.

"perfect" resulted in participants themselves experiencing feelings of jealousy or failure for not "living up to" a set of standards that were seemingly being imposed by images that emphasized new norms around appearance and lifestyle for increasingly young audiences.

There was often reference among participants to feelings of pressure when observing an increasing number of highly stylized images of "ordinary" (not just mainstream celebrity) women. The online feminine subject that could successfully present a "perfect" aesthetic and lifestyle became conceptualized as the idealized form of femininity in a digital age. This resonates with McRobbie's theorization of "the perfect," which she argues is a "leitmotif for contemporary femininity" in neoliberal regimes.[40] The "perfect" becomes operationalized through feminine self-regulation, wherein women attempt to meet cultural expectations that are constructed around ideas of consumption, celebrity, and self-branding. This contributes to increased feminized competition and, thus, continues to neoliberalize and commodify displays of femininity. In many ways, this builds on McRobbie's earlier theorization of "the postfeminist masquerade"[41] where she argues that women in consumer cultures are encouraged to reinstate "the spectacle of excessive femininity" through "the mask of make-up and the crafting of a highly-styled mode of personal appearance."[42] McRobbie claims that both "the postfeminist masquerade" and the cultural expectation of "the perfect" reinforce male structures of power, even though the "voluntaristic structure works to conceal that patriarchy is still in place."[43] In these contexts, then, women's appearance and embodiment become a symbol for their success and their ability to effectively embody a neoliberal self. Crucially, McRobbie points to the seemingly "voluntaristic" nature of these constructions of

40. Angela McRobbie, "Notes on the Perfect: Competitive Femininity in Neoliberal Times," *Australian Feminist Studies* 30, no. 83 (2015): 3–20.
41. Angela McRobbie, "TOP GIRLS? Young Women and the Post-Feminist Sexual Contract," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 4–5 (2007): 718–37.
42. McRobbie, "Notes on the Perfect," 725.
43. McRobbie, "Notes on the Perfect," 726.

femininity, resonating with Gill's claims that postfeminist contexts had seen a shift from objectification to *subjectification*.[44] Here, participants discussing these images of "perfection" alongside intense feelings of pressure to replicate them indicates that the "choice" to pursue specific ideals of femininity is not merely voluntaristic and is, instead, bound up with the wider demands women often face to meet the increasingly unobtainable expectations associated with femininity.

During focus group discussions, I noted that celebrity cultures popular among participants at the time were key sites where the "pressure" mentioned previously was absorbed most acutely. In previous analysis of these spaces, I have argued that they often reproduced postfeminist discourses around self-improvement, transformation, and "empowerment," which was largely achieved through active participation in consumer culture.[45] In 2015, many of the participants felt that normative ideals around femininity were increasingly shaped by influencers in the beauty, lifestyle, and fitness spaces. Participants spoke of the rise of social media accounts and communities that were there to "inspire you" and "motivate you," The example of the female "fitspo" influencer was invoked as a dominant figure in the online community that encouraged young women to undergo "transformations" of the body through exercise and dieting. Participants often spoke of the focus on beauty, fashion, and fitness within digital spaces, suggesting that they were understood as a key part of achieving the "perfection" they felt was so pervasive in wider cultural constructions of femininity.

For feminists, these discussions are likely to raise concerns, as they suggest that young women are increasingly targeted with images and messages that encourage the replication of narrow and heteronormative gender ideals. However, one observation made since conducting this research in 2015 is that content made by young women appears to be increasingly concerned with producing images of "imperfection" and "relatability," which obviously

44. Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture," 149.
45. Rogan, *Digital Femininities*.

moves away from and even actively eschews displays of "perfection." It is important to note that influencers and online content creators have long pursued "authenticity" in their storytelling, which is understood as a key tool for success in the digital economy. For example, Zoella, one of the early pioneers of the British YouTube community and a figure often revered by my participants in 2015, often spoke to her large audience about her experiences and difficulties relating to her anxiety disorder.[46] This represented an early example of a now-popular "confessional" genre that became prevalent among YouTubers and other online content creators. This tendency for storytelling and "bringing audiences in" to one's personal life fosters a curated sense of intimacy between creator and audience. Avoiding the traditional tactics of excessive "commercialization," this confessional genre of online content has been identified as a way to increase the algorithmic visibility (and, therefore, monetization) of content without overtly "selling" any product or service.

These examples of "relatability" and "authenticity" as a key part of the success story of early pioneers of online celebrity and success offer an early example of what has become the norm in online content creation. Today, much of the content available online has a clear behind-the-scenes element to it. Instead of talking straight to the camera, audiences are regularly invited to "get ready with" and to observe the domestic labor and mundane morning routines of online content creators. While this kind of material has been present in some form since the beginning of social media content creation, it is telling that it is this kind of content that has persevered and has become increasingly adopted and engaged with. As many young women find it increasingly difficult to obtain and follow the lifestyles of highly glamorized and overtly consumeristic influencers in the midst of persistent economic crises, those who are unable to produce content that speaks to the experiences

46. Sophie Bishop, "#YouTuberAnxiety: Anxiety as Emotional Labour and Masquerade in Beauty Vlogs," in *Youth Mediations and Affective Relations*, ed. Susan Driver and Natalie Coulter (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 89–106.

of their audience face increasing backlash and loss of engagement. This was particularly true during the COVID-19 pandemic, wherein influencers and celebrities who posted images and other content relating to their "work trips" abroad received backlash from audiences and mainstream press who suggested that this content was far removed from the vast majority of the population and, indeed, their audiences who were navigating the struggles of the pandemic and economic downturn in far more austere ways.[47]

As such, the popularity of the overtly commercialized influencer has arguably been usurped by or, at least, placed in competition with a more subtle version of influencing that invites audiences into the ordinary routines of everyday life. There is no doubt that the drive to produce aesthetically pleasing content remains but, in many ways, has expanded beyond the need for one's personal appearance to be highly stylized or one's surrounding location to be a glamorous restaurant or luxury hotel. A growing amount of content now focuses on presenting "makeovers" of the domestic space through regular spring cleaning, decluttering, and (re)organizing, as well as content that encourages viewers to "make over" their morning routine, providing suggestions for aesthetically pleasing breakfasts, morning movement, and home office spaces. While some of this content continues to advocate for the purchase of expensive materials (e.g., journals, workout clothing, and elaborate organizing materials), the overriding messages are focused more explicitly on the importance and value of the practices (e.g., cleaning, following a routine, and pursuing "wellness"). This avoids the content being received as a clear advert for singular products (even if posts are marked as an #ad), in place of advertising a mindset and outlook that encourages audiences to make over and "reset" their lives and routines in ways targeted at the inner dimensions of selfhood. While this content may look different to the overtly postfeminist material of the 2010s, notions of entrepreneurial

47. Katie Storey, "Olivia Attwood Hits Out at 'Tone-Deaf' Influencers Amid Pandemic: 'Someone Else's Hard Day Is Zipping up Body Bags,'" *Metro*, January 14, 2021, https://metro.co.uk/2021/01/14/olivia-attwood-hits-out-at-tone-deaf-influencers-amid-pandemic-13906644/.

selfhood and self-monitoring remain overwhelmingly present. In fact, the level of monitoring and surveillance has, in many ways, increased as audiences are told of the virtues of monitoring and tracking their time to ensure they repeat the same routines each day as a form of wellness and stability in an increasingly unstable world. In the final section of this perspective article, I explore some of the potential reasons for these shifts and lay out future directions for research that may enhance our understandings of the evolution of postfeminism and neoliberalism in a digital age.

## Future Directions for Research: The Shifting Terrain of Digital Cultures in Economic Crises

In the final section of this article, I want to reflect on the previous thoughts and continue the discussion of these more recent observations in order to present new perspectives on the ways in which digital cultures have evolved and shifted since 2015. In 2015, the notion of "influencer culture" was relatively new and participants were observing key trends that spoke to the specific cultural moment of the mid-2010s. As influencer cultures have become more expansive (and, indeed, more thoroughly explored in the academic literature), it is worth reflecting on the norms and ideals identified by participants in 2015 and situating them within more recent shifts and changes in the digital landscape. When I conducted this original research, the United Kingdom was living through the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2007 to 2008, which had been marked by extensive austerity measures rolled out under the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government between 2010 and 2015. This period of government is often invoked in the United Kingdom as a period of increasing inequality, which left "none but the most privileged in the UK . . . untouched."[48]

48. Vicki Cooper and David Whyte, "Introduction: The Violence of Austerity," in *The Violence of Austerity,* ed. Vicki Cooper and David Whyte (London: Pluto, 2017), 1–34.

The reason I mention this wider economic context is twofold. Firstly, discussions of austerity are key to understanding the backdrops against which participants and others of their generation were living their youth and transitioning into adulthood. Considering the ages of the participants and the format of the discussions we had, it will not be surprising that participants did not directly address their position within the wider economic structure. However, there were frequent mentions of the pressure to emulate a cycle of continual consumption or the tendency for people to aspire toward the display of an unobtainable "luxury" lifestyle, even at ages as young as twelve. The anxieties associated with emulating these perceived expectations were clearly felt and expressed, and therefore it is worth reflecting on the ways in which digital cultures may have adapted or been reconstituted to respond to these anxieties as they have evolved. Indeed, it has been identified that young people in the United Kingdom are currently using high levels of credit, particularly via BNPL ("buy now pay later") schemes such as Klarna and Clearpay,[49] while it has also been noted that the use of BNPL schemes is itself gendered, with reports suggesting that 75 percent of users are women. This gendered use of BNPL schemes is said in part to be down to women's "strong uptake in the online fashion sector," suggesting a relationship between personal debt and online consumer cultures.[50]

Secondly, the wider economic context is key to the ongoing development of academic discussions of digital cultures since my own fieldwork was conducted. In particular, there have been a number of interesting contributions to the study of digital cultures and how they respond to or reproduce the conditions of postfeminism and/or neoliberalism. For example,

49. Lindsey Appleyard and Hussan Aslam, *Your Money, Your Life: Experiences of Young People's Borrowing* (United Kingdom: abrdn Financial Fairness Trust, 2023), https://www.financialfairness.org.uk/docs?editionId=cad6c989-93dd-4d7f-b4b5-b0ac00ea4b61.
50. Financial Conduct Authority, *The Woolard Review: A Review of Change and Innovation in the Unsecured Credit Market* (London: FCA, 2021), https://www.financialfairness.org.uk/docs?editionId=cad6c989-93dd-4d7f-b4b5-b0ac00ea4b61.

Casey and Littler[51] have highlighted the rise of the "cleanfluencer" since the late 2010s—those (predominantly women) who have found large followings online by providing household cleaning and organization tips. As mentioned previously, this kind of domestic content is becoming increasingly popular among women on YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. In Casey and Littler's study of cleanfluencers, housework is argued to be presented to women as a form of "therapy" and a way to respond to the anxieties and stresses created by wider structures such as neoliberalism. Situating the rise of the cleanfluencer within an age of multiple crises, Casey and Littler argue that cleanfluencer accounts such as that of Mrs. Hinch in the United Kingdom convey domestic labor and women's "retreat" to the private sphere as an effective way of "coping" with an increasingly unstable and anxiety-ridden world. This speaks to the ways in which digital spaces are often used to reproduce and reentrench gendered norms. My own participants who were aged between twelve and eighteen in 2015 noted the ways in which their peers would engage with beauty, fitness, and fashion content as a way to participate in "aspirational" discourses of femininity. While cleaning content may not be immediately considered similarly "aspirational" in postfeminist terms, Casey and Littler's case study demonstrates the myriad ways in which gendered norms can be entrenched into the digital landscape and targeted at different audiences of women depending on age, class, and ethnicity. While Mrs. Hinch is a particularly popular cleanfluencer, as mentioned earlier, the wider digital landscape is now host to countless iterations of domestic influencing, wherein tidying and cleaning is framed not as gendered reproductive labor but as a fun feminine pastime.

While cleaning and household content may, in some ways, be considered the antithesis of the images identified by my participants in 2015, there are similarities to be noted. As it became increasingly clear that the high-end

51. Emma Casey and Jo Littler, "Mrs Hinch, the Rise of the Cleanfluencer and the Neoliberal Refashioning of Housework: Scouring Away the Crisis?," *Sociological Review* 70, no. 3 (2022): 489–505.

luxury of many fashion and beauty influencers was unobtainable for many, there was an increase in influencer content aimed at a wider range of budgets and lifestyles. The postfeminist and neoliberal notion that one can "work away" their worries and stresses—through a dedicated fitness regime or through sufficient domestic labor—is something that is identifiable in a range of online spaces aimed at women. Crucially, the call to consume rarely disappears, but different budgets and affordability become more frequently addressed and the encouragement to purchase specific products becomes more insidiously embedded into the content produced. As "relatability" is frequently noted as the most significant characteristics of successful online influencers, content creators must carefully respond to wider economic contexts so as not to appear unrelatable or out of touch while needing to continue to sell products to maintain brand partnerships and continue the generation of their own income.

Another example of these discourses becoming further entrenched is the growing interest in the commodification and expansion of the self-help and "wellness" industries. In many ways, a post-recessionary context became fertile ground for their growth and expansion. In response to rising levels of insecurity and anxiety, a culture of "self-help" and "self-care" has become increasingly popular, characterized by best-selling books and commodified "wellness" communities, which are increasingly located on social media platforms, particularly Instagram.[52] This speaks to a widespread commodification of feeling and emotion, where happiness becomes measured and quantified and mental health becomes a profitable industry.[53] This culture of self-help and wellness is a symptom of the earlier mentioned "psychological turn" within neoliberalism and postfeminism, wherein citizens' characters, feelings, and dispositions are (re)shaped by evermore targeted discourses of

52. Rachel O'Neill, "Pursuing 'Wellness': Considerations for Media Studies," *Television & New Media* 21, no. 6 (2020): 628–34.

53. Edgar Cabanas and Eva Illouz, *Manufacturing Happy Citizens: How the Science and Industry of Happiness Control our Lives* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019).

self-management and demands for a "positive mental attitude."[54] Notably, these wellness spaces often reproduce dominant discourses relating to race, gender, and class. For instance, Wilkes[55] highlights the dominance of privileged white women in contemporary "food media," which is closely bound up with the wellness communities online, and the work of Sobande[56] also demonstrates how through the production of food and baking, content on Instagram reproduces specific discourses of white femininity and domestic minimalism. Here, ideals of white, middle-class femininity become rewritten for a contemporary digital audience and intersectional inequalities are implicitly reproduced. These trends signal a revival and reentrenchment of femininity and domesticity in the twenty-first-century digital landscape.

Despite academics noting the ways in which digital content reproduces structural inequalities, due to the long-standing success of implementing neoliberal postfeminism as a sensibility, when the failures and injuries of these projects become explicit (i.e., through clearly identifiable and explicit levels of inequality and poverty), the focus can easily be shifted to individuals' responses and abilities to navigate adverse circumstances through therapy and strategies for self-improvement (cleaning, life management, wellness, self-help). These spaces, then, serve as an opportunity to valorize and further entrench rather than challenge the central tenets of neoliberal subjectivities: flexibility, reinvention, and resilience. It has been noted that, during these austere times, behavioral discourses of personal responsibility

54. See Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad, "The Amazing BounceBackable Woman: Resilience and the Psychological Turn in Neoliberalism," *Sociological Research Online* 23, no. 2 (2018): 477–95; and Rosalind Gill and Akane Kanai, "Mediating Neoliberal Capitalism: Affect, Subjectivity and Inequality," *Journal of Communication* 68, no. 2 (2018): 318–26.

55. Karen Wilkes, "Eating, Looking, and Living Clean: Techniques of White Femininity in Contemporary Neoliberal Food Culture," *Gender, Work and Organization* 31, no. 3 (2021): 916–36, https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12620.

56. Francesca Sobande, "White and Gendered Aesthetics and Attitudes of #Pandemicbaking and #Quarantinebaking," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 27, no. 3 (2024): 389–407, https://doi.org/10.1177/13675494231222855.

became *further* entrenched rather than challenged.[57] It is interesting to observe the ways in which digital cultures reproduce these discourses. Over the last year, the trend of "deinfluencing" has become particularly prevalent online, wherein online creators increasingly produce content that tells their followers what *not* to buy. While some of this content does offer a critique of over-consumption and the role that social media influencers play within it, many of the videos simply discourage their audience from buying specific products that the creator may consider undesirable while recommending other products that are more to their taste. It is worth noting that influencers themselves are often the ones participating in the deinfluencing trend as they discourage their audiences from buying products they may have previously encouraged them to buy. These contradictions could be considered a response to the wider economic context, wherein young audiences can no longer keep up with purchasing the large number of "viral" products presented by influencers. More critically, it could be considered a cynical attempt at relatability and a way to find more subtle ways to develop trust among viewers in an increasingly oversaturated and competitive field.

This offers some perspectives on shifting notions of consumption, influencing, and postfeminist femininity in digital culture. These new shifts are worthy of future research. The role of digital cultures in the production of youth identities is significant and therefore it is important to understand the ways that young people engage with this wide range of online communities. In 2015, an emerging influencer culture was identified by the girls and young women I spoke to, and the key features of these cultures were often predicated upon high levels of consumption and images of luxury and glamour. This contributed to understandings of what an "idealized" form of femininity was for the participants involved and, in many ways, these norms reestablished postfeminist and neoliberal norms prevalent in British

57. Simon Pemberton, Eldin Fahmy, Eileen Sutton, and Karen Bell, "Navigating the Stigmatised Identities of Poverty in Austere Times: Resisting and Responding to Narratives of Personal Failure," *Critical Social Policy* 36, no. 1 (2016): 21–37.

media cultures since the 1990s. However, as iterations of influencer cultures have developed and evolved over the last nine years, there is a need for more research, which seeks to critically understand audiences' engagement with the increasingly wide-ranging influencer cultures young people are exposed to (and, indeed, they themselves create). The current literature dedicated to analyzing these spaces suggests that they are often used to reproduce gendered, classed, and racialized identities that reentrench postfeminist and neoliberal norms in contemporary digital spaces.