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"Exploring Feminine Identities on Instagram"

by

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Abstract

This is an undergraduate thesis, which explores feminine identity performance on Instagram. This thesis aims to answer how young women engage in practices of gendered identity performance on Instagram and what motivations they have to do so. For this research, an ethnographic approach was taken. Five participants partook in semi-structured qualitative interviews, as well as provided their Instagram profiles for a discursive textual analysis. A feminist theoretical framework guided this thesis. From the data collected and analyzed, I discovered that a postfeminist sensibility guides practices that are being displayed on Instagram. This includes displays of the body, beauty practices, independence and traditional events.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Instagram is an online photo sharing application that has quickly taken the social media world by storm. On July 16th, 2010, Instagram founders Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger released the photo-sharing platform, which soon evolved into a selfie-filled, multi-billion-dollar beast used by over 500 million people (Bruner 2016). A unique aspect of this application is the reliance on visuals, which have no boundary in regards to expression and language. The platform allows users to create a friends list, also known as followers, which is a key component of social media (boyd 2007). As stated by danah boyd (2007), "by allowing youth to hang out amongst their friends and classmates, social network sites are providing teens with a space to work out identity and status, make sense of cultural cues, and negotiate public life" (p 2). Users share photos with their followers, which may be enhanced by filters and accompanied by captions or hashtags.

According to Pew Research Center (2015), women continue to be more likely than men to be Instagram users. In addition, the largest percentage of users is in the age range of 18-29 years: "55% of online adults age 18-29 use Instagram" (Duggan 2015 para.3). These demographics of Instagram helped in determining the target group for this research.

Not only are young adults using Instagram, but they are also relying on it as a form of self- expression and discovery. In a study conducted by Tyler Becker (2016), it was found that "53% of Instagrammers in the study say the platform helps them define who they are" (para. 5). Posting pictures is a form of expression in which the image conveys meaning or reflects the identity of the user. As discussed in Becker's research, users are steadily adding pictures to their profiles, "And they do it creatively, curating moments and artistically filtering their images to display life at its best" (2016 para. 6).

This notion of displaying life at its best ties in to the concepts expressed in what Rosalind Gill (2007) calls a "postfeminist sensibility", which I will further discuss in the literature review.

This research aims to contribute to the existing body of scholarship around the concept of postfeminism. Building off of feminist media scholars' research on postfeminist sensibility in media cultures, I strive to add to the scholarship of postfeminist sensibility (Negra 2008, Gill 2007, Banet-Weiser 2012). In addition, I aim to contribute to the research in the field of identity performance on social media (Hearn 2008, Marwick 2015, boyd 2007). This research differentiates by specifically looking at the social media application Instagram, which is less readily available in the existing body of scholarship.

This research will focus particularly on the concept of identity performance on Instagram. Since young women continue to dominate the user base of Instagram, postfeminist sensibility will be analyzed on the application. This research was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do young women engage in practices of gendered identity exploration on Instagram?
2. What are the motivations for young women to engage in identity exploration on Instagram?

Based on this research, I hope to discover what themes and aspects of gendered performances are being produced and displayed on Instagram. Additionally, I hope to discover any incentives that may curate these performances.

Methodology

For this thesis I used an ethnographic approach. As stated by Patricia McNamara (2009), "It is generally accepted that ethnography constitutes the exploration of culture and subculture through application of qualitative research methods designed to produce thick description" (p. 164). As stated by Rosalind Gill (2007) feminism has become part of the cultural field, which influenced my choice to use an ethnographic approach. When examining feminist ethnography in particular, McNamara (2009) discusses the use of ethnography to examine the individual's experience, and also explores how the broader social relations have shaped such experiences. For my ethnographic approach, I conducted a series of five semi-structured qualitative interviews. In addition to these interviews, a discursive textual analysis of 125 pictures was conducted. The data set for the textual analysis is comprised of 25 pictures from each of the five contributors that participated in the interviews. These 25 pictures are the most recent 25 pictures each participant had posted, prior to the date of each interview. Any pictures added after the time of interview were not analyzed.

The approach for these methods is situated in a cultural studies framework. This framework was chosen as it allowed for me to take an ethnographic approach in my research. The cultural framework was also chosen because the practices analyzed on Instagram were a series of everyday cultural practices, including the social phenomena's of gender and identity. This allowed me to understand identity as performative and fluid, as I'll discuss further in my theoretical framework.

There have been recent studies of identity practices on social media, which utilized an ethnographic approach. Lee Farquahar (2012) used an ethnographic approach

that was situated completely in a cyber context. Referring to this methodology as a cyber-ethnography, Farquahar researched how identity is performed and interpreted through images on social media. Many scholars researching the field of identity practices on social media incorporate some sort of textual analysis into their study. Alice Marwick (2015) conducted a study on the concept of achieving "Instafame" on Instagram. Her study was composed of a textual and visual analysis of 40 Instagram profiles. Similarly, Brooke Erin Duffy and Emily Hund (2015) completed a qualitative textual analysis of Instagram pictures. They found women were depicting the idea of "having it all" which draws upon postfeminist sensibilities and self-branding. These ideas will be discussed further in the literature review.

The previously discussed studies are all useful because of their focus on the relationship between social media and identity; however, none of these scholars were studying the practices of young women in particular. Therefore, this thesis will also be informed by scholars, such as Diane Negra (2008), who have studied media representation and social behavior of females in particular.

My ethnographic approach was strictly situated within one qualitative interview per participant. By utilizing a snowball sampling method, I was able to gain five female participants, who were all Instagram users between the ages of 19-25 to partake in this research. These participants all committed to an interview and gave approval for their Instagram accounts to be analyzed for data collection over a six-week period. During the interview participants were led through a semi-structured discussion in which they were asked questions pertaining to, and stemming from, their Instagram profiles. They were asked general questions about the social media practices they engaged in on Instagram, as well as more specific questions such as identifying favorite pictures from their profiles.

These interviews lasted between thirty and forty-five minutes and were audio recorded. Each interview was transcribed from the audio recording prior to data analysis.

After the interviews were conducted, additional data was collected through a discursive textual analysis. The textual analysis consisted of 125 pictures. The data chosen consisted of 25 of the most recent pictures added to each participant's Instagram profile at the time of their interview. The textual analysis allowed me to examine what was discussed in the interviews, as well as compare and contrast specific details amongst all five participants.

One limitation of this methodology is the limited scope of racial diversity amongst the participants. Four of the five participants identified as white, and the fifth identified as a mixed-race Asian-white. This lack of diversity must be taken into account when understanding my analysis results.

Theoretical Framework

Feminist theory is utilized as a framework for this research. Feminist theory is committed to critiquing and challenging gender inequalities, as well as other instances of oppression. bell hooks (2000) provides a simple definition of feminism, describing it as a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression. As a theoretical framework, hooks highlights the importance of critically examining how women feel and think about their bodies, while offering constructive strategies for change (p.31). This particular aspect of feminist theory will be utilized for this thesis.

An important factor of feminist theory is intersectionality, which Patricia Hill Collins (2004) discusses in detail. Collins states that, "Intersectional paradigms view

race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and age, among others, as mutually constructing systems of power" (p. 11). With the awareness of intersectionality, we can begin to better understand the differences amongst us presented in feminist theory as more than gender differences. It is important for this thesis that intersectionality is acknowledged.

This thesis coincides with feminist theory by focusing explicitly on the identity performance of young women on Instagram. As discussed by Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier (2003), feminism as a theoretical framework "…calls into question the very idea of a unified self, it allows for playful incorporation of performed identities, even when they contradict one another" (p. 16). These ideas presented by Dicker and Piepmeier provide additional support for the idea that performed identities remain fluid and in some cases perhaps contradictory, reflecting a poststructuralist orientation towards identity. In addition, this research focuses on women's representations of the self, interests, hobbies, bodily display and promotion of sexual freedom as displayed through images. With all of these aspects the notion of choice is apparent, which is another key component to feminist theory. In addition, feminist theory proposes that these feminist practices and problems exist cross-culturally. This works well as a framework for Instagram, which also moves freely across cultures.

Feminist theorist Judith Butler (1990) has discussed how there is an assumed existing inherent biological identity representing all women. Butler (1990) challenges this idea by stating, "That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality" (p. 185). Following Butler, the research presented in this thesis challenges this idea by understanding young women's Instagram profiles as performative, rather than indicative of an authentic identity or biological nature. As Butler explains, feminist theory

acknowledges that there is this notion of common identity shared amongst women, however, it is also acknowledged as a problem; "…there is the political problem that feminism encounters in the assumption that the term women denotes a common identity" (Butler 1990 p. 6). This thesis hopes to support what Butler presents by demonstrating not only the similarities of women's identity performance on Instagram, but also the differences. Using feminist theory as guidance, this research aims to analyze the choices women express and how gender is performed on the social media platform Instagram.

Erving Goffman (1956) provides theoretical framework on the ways in which the self is presented in everyday life. Goffman discusses the individual desires, adhered to impression management and identity performance. Goffman states, "We have been using the term 'performance' to refer to all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers" (1956 p. 13). Goffman provides a framework in which performance and everyday identity performance can be analyzed. Other new media scholars, such as Marwick and boyd (2010) have used Goffman's work as a framework. For this research I too will be influenced by Goffman and the framework he presents in regards to everyday identity performance.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this literature review I will explore three thematic areas. The first theme is the visibility of a postfeminist sensibility in media culture, including social media. The second theme will be the notion of identity performance through media. In particular, this theme will explore how women perform identity through different media forms. The final theme of this literature review aims to look at texts and studies focusing on the specific practice of self-branding.

Postfeminist Sensibility

Postfeminism is a hegemonic cultural sensibility that suggests feminism is no longer necessary due to perceived gender equality (Negra 2008, Gill 2007). It has generated a new context of self-expression and representation of gender through media culture, including film, television, magazines, and digital media. As discussed by Rosalind Gill (2007), "The notion of postfeminism has become one of the most important and contested terms in the lexicon of feminist cultural analysis"(p. 5). Gill suggests that postfeminism should be conceived as a sensibility rather than an identity or point in time. She writes, "The notion that all our practices are freely chosen is central to postfeminist discourses which present women as autonomous agents no longer constrained by any inequalities or power imbalances whatsoever" (p. 12). Diane Negra (2008) adds, "Crucially, postfeminism often functions as a means of registering and superficially resolving the persistence of 'choice' dilemmas for American women" (p. 2). Negra expands on this idea by adding that there is an importance in expressing personal lifestyle and even more so, having the ability to chose the commodities to attain this. Therefore,

postfeminist sensibility is aligned with the notions of women being free to present their lifestyle choices as a symbol of freedom from gender inequality. Gill suggest that this notion of 'being oneself' and 'pleasing oneself' is essential to the postfeminist sensibility of contemporary Western media culture.

A postfeminist sensibility understands femininity as a bodily display, expressed through markers such as high heels, short skirts and cleavage-revealing tops. Gill argues, "In a shift from earlier representational practices it appears that femininity is defined as a bodily property rather than (say) a social structural or psychological one" (2007 p. 6). When it comes to media content, the surveillance of how women are displaying their bodily property constitutes a large portion of what is both produced and consumed. As previously discussed, postfeminist sensibility highlights the freedom to express sex appeal and bodily display amongst media platforms. For example, women may take pictures in the mirror to display their bodies. As pointed out by Brooke Erin Duffy and Emily Hund (2015), the practices of beauty do echo some aspects of traditional femininity, however the extent to which bodily display is used as a representation of personal liberation has grown.

Although new media has cultivated a platform for the display of women's bodies, Duffy and Hund make sure to mention that new media also allows a platform for traditional feminine practices. Duffy and Hund state, "The last decade has witnessed a proliferation of socially mediated cultures of creative production located in the traditionally feminine domains of fashion, beauty, parenting and craft" (p. 1). These domains of fashion, beauty, parenting and craft are also part of postfeminism, which demonstrates the continued value of traditional feminine interests. This idea reaffirms the

notion of postfeminism as a sensibility and not as a replacement of the previous feminist movements.

Women are able to use social media to depict the postfeminist idea of "having it all" (Duffy and Hund 2015). This idea of "having it all" is problematic in that it often reflects white, privileged, heterosexual women. As discussed by Negra (2008), "Popular culture insistently asserts that if women can productively manage home, time, work, and their commodity choices, they will be rewarded with a more authentic, intact, and achieved self" (p. 5). Therefore, class, race and sexual orientation all come into play when presenting one as "having it all," yet are rarely acknowledged. Negra discusses these limitations when she states, "Postfeminist culture has endowed some white female demographic groups with greater visibility but it has tended to reinforce racists and classists exclusions" (p. 10). The exclusion of certain women from this postfeminist sensibility representation is problematic.

As pointed out by Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012) and Negra (2008), postfeminism as a cultural sensibility is prevalent in popular culture, including social media. Negra gives credit to popular culture for asserting that women can be rewarded with an achieved self if they are able to manage home, time, work, and commodity choices. Negra examines a variety of ways in which media plays a role in fostering shifts in social norms and the behavior of women. As Banet-Weiser (2012) notes, postfeminism is a strategy of engaging with the world, which can go hand-in-hand with the associations of social media. To further justify this concept, Banet-Weiser (2012) defines postfeminist self-empowerment as the capacity to move between and within media platforms while being producers of media. Social media has provided a domain for these practices and displays

of postfeminist sensibility to be produced and therefore is an important concept for anyone studying young women's social media practices.

Identity Performance in Media

According to Kristina Abiala and Patrik Hernwall (2013), postmodern identity is not set in stone; rather it is fluid, non-stable and nomadic. This idea originated with Stuart Hall (1989) and his ideas about identity being fluid. Hall suggests we think of identity as a production, which is always in process, "instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished historical fact" (p. 704). Cultural identity is under constant transformation, which is subject to the continuous influence of history, culture and power (Hall 1989).

When it comes to the notion of identity on social media, previous research has suggested that identity remains fluid and that there are multiple dimensions that come into play. Kirsty Young (2013) states that, "There is widespread consensus that online social networking sites are a relevant and valid means of communicating identity and exploring impression management and indeed impression management appears to be one of the main functions of social networking sites" (p. 3). Young discusses how these identities are molded through features on social media, including texts, pictures, graphics and audio, all of which are purposefully selected. In accordance with Young, Abiala and Hernwall (2013) add that, "Constructing an online body-self is an intentional act often using and mixing different semiotic elements such as typographic text, images, sound, graphical style, and the composition and integration of these semiotic elements" (p. 956). These semiotic elements are all features available in the social media platform Instagram.

Social connections and social context play a key role in how identity is presented online. Lee Farquhar (2012) acknowledges the importance of identities in social structure

and how there is a strong desire for social acceptance. Therefore people tend to align themselves with particular groups, all whilst avoiding any identification with another group; "In many social groupings, identities form the basis of in-groups and out-groups" (Farquhar 2012 p. 448). An individual identifies as a member of an "in-group", whereas the individual does not self identify with an "out-group". Alice Marwick and danah boyd (2010), agree that social context plays a vital role in how we present ourselves differently based on the context and interaction. This is an action Erving Goffman conceptualized as "frontstage" and "backstage," which is a continual performance. In accordance with the notion of frontstage, Marwick and boyd suggest that this identity performance is continually balanced to maintain positive impressions and come across as authentic to others. Similar to frontstage and backstage, Young (2013) uses the expression actual-self versus ideal-self. Farquhar (2012) uses the notion of actual-self versus ideal-self and states "Facebookers tend to desire social acceptance. They seek this acceptance by presenting themselves in the best light possible" (p. 2). This best light possible would be represented as the ideal-self.

The imagined audience is often heavily relied on when navigating impression management and identity. As discussed by boyd (2007), impression management allows us to alter our identity performance once we have assessed the responses from our audience. Marwick and boyd (2010) explain that every communicative act has an imagined audience. They continue by stating, "Studies of identity presentations on profile-based sites, such as social network sites and personal ads, have demonstrated that profile owners are attentive to audience" (p. 2). However, it is important to realize that "technology complicates our metaphors of space and place, including the belief that audiences are separate from each other" (Marwick and boyd 2010 p. 2). Similarly to the

research conducted by Marwick and boyd, I too will take a poststructuralist position when I research the fluidity of identity presentation for young women on Instagram.

Neoliberalism and Self-Branding

Neoliberalism is an updated take on classical liberalism, which emphasizes the business of choice and a free market, including the deregulation and privatization of industry (McChesney 2001). As described by David Harvey (2006), neoliberalism proposes, "human well–being can best be advanced by the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, free markets and free trade" (p. 145). Harvey goes on to suggest that neoliberalism has become incorporated into the way we live and the way we understand the world. Lisa Duggan (2003) would agree with this idea, by adding that neoliberal practices are implemented through culture, "reinforcing or contesting relations of class, race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, or nationality" (p. 9).

As Rosalind Gill (2007) states, "Neoliberalism is increasingly understood as constructing individuals as entrepreneurial actors who are rational, calculating and self-regulating" (p. 26). Therefore, neoliberalism promotes individuals as economic actors that should be disconnected from state resources. Roger Foster (2015) believes that there are incentives for individuals to enterprise themselves. When it comes to neoliberal practices evident on social media, self-branding highlights the practice of enterprising the self, through self-discipline.

Alison Hearn (2008) argues that self-promotion is not new, however the concept of the commodification of oneself in a virtual context for consumption is a relatively new phenomenon and daily practice. Hearn defines this commodification of the self as self-

branding: "Self-branding involves the self-conscious construction of a meta-narrative and meta-image of the self through the use of cultural meanings and images drawn from the narrative and visual codes of the mainstream culture industries" (p. 2). Similarly, Alice Marwick (2015) defines self-branding as a self-presentation that relies on viewing oneself as a consumer product and selling this image as a product to others. On Instagram specifically, Marwick states how photographs in particular are important for impression management and "while Instagram users take pictures of all sorts of things, many of the most followed accounts are packed with selfies" (p.5). Marwick claims that this is due to a shift away from photographing others for self-consumption, to instead photographing the self for consumption by others.

Duffy and Hund (2015) find that women and girls will engage in self-branding practices constructed through bodily display. danah boyd (2007) also discusses the use of bodily display: "In everyday interactions, the body serves as a critical site of identity performance" (p.11). For example, the women may use facial expressions, or clothing to present identity. On Instagram in particular, we see young women engaging in mirror pictures, which display their outfit. As previously discussed, postfeminism highlights the freedom for women to engage in bodily display and other forms of expression. These mirror pictures often display either the body, or the beauty practices that women chose to express. Akane Kanai (2015) agrees by adding that beauty practice and focus on bodily shape are practices used to improve one's feminine self-brand. However, Kanai (2015) adds that an important context to this is inhering individuality; "Following this logic, gendered practices which may improve one's feminine 'self-brand' such as attention to beauty practices and body shape, must be cast as for 'oneself' and part of one's 'true desires'" (p.1).

Given my interest in young women's identity performance online, this research provides a necessary foundation for which I hope to build on through my study. The notions of postfeminist sensibility, identity performance in media, neoliberalism and self-branding will be reflected upon throughout this thesis.

Chapter 3: Analysis

Five participants were sought to partake in one qualitative interview about their Instagram practices. Each interview lasted between 15-20 minutes and was conducted one-on-one in person at the University of Calgary. Interviews were audio recorded, allowing for later transcribing of each interview. Each participant granted me access to their Instagram feed, which formed the basis for my textual analysis.

Demographics of Participants

Anna

Anna is a 25-year-old white female. She has long brown hair, green eyes and is a proud owner of her cat Rico. Anna is a graduate of Mount Royal University who is now a working professional employed by Calgary Sport and Recreation. Anna is a heterosexual female, who identified as single at the time of this interview. Anna has been an active user of Instagram for approximately just under five years. Her first active post to her account was on August 29th, 2012.

Beth

Beth is a 22-year-old white female. Beth has blonde hair and blue eyes. She is a current student at the University of Calgary. Beth is currently in a heterosexual relationship. Beth has a passion for travelling and would consider herself a bit of a foodie. She has had an Instagram account for approximately five years, posting her first picture to her account on February 7th, 2012.

Cate

Cate is a 20-year-old white female, with brown hair and brown eyes. Cate is a current student studying at the University of Calgary while working part time as a server. Cate identifies as a heterosexual, however she is not currently in a relationship. Cate enjoys spending time with her friends and partaking in various outdoor activities. Cate has been an active member of Instagram for approximately five years, posting her first picture on August 12th, 2012.

Danielle

Danielle is a 22-year-old mixed Asian-white female with long brown hair and brown eyes. Danielle is a current student at the University of Calgary who also works part-time as a receptionist. After spending a semester abroad in South East Asia, Danielle has acquired a passion and desire for travel. Danielle is currently in a heterosexual relationship. Danielle has been an active member of Instagram for approximately five years, posting her first picture to her account on June 3rd, 2012.

Esther

Esther is a 21-year-old white female, with blonde hair and brown eyes. Esther is a current student at the University of Calgary. Esther identifies as a heterosexual female, who is currently not in a relationship. Esther enjoys spending time outside with her dog Zelda. Esther has been an active member of Instagram for approximately two years, posting her first picture on January 2nd, 2015.

An important demographic to acknowledge for all these participants is social class. All five women could be considered middle to upper-middle class, which allows them an additional privilege that not all women have. First, all participants are (or were) university students, which is not a financial option for all women. Secondly, it was a requirement for the participants to have an Instagram account. In order to have an Instagram account, the user must have Internet access and a device to connect to Instagram, whether that is a computer, tablet or smartphone. These participants all belong to a social class in which these requirements were accessible.

After analyzing my interviews and textual data, I noticed four themes: girlfriend culture, bodily display and aesthetics, independence, domesticated practices and traditional events, which I will explore in more detail below. Before I begin to unravel these themes, I will briefly discuss when participants joined Instagram and why they were motivated to do so.

Joining and Using Instagram

When the participants were asked about their motives to join Instagram, all participants relayed their decision to sign up back to their friends. Either they chose to sign up because all of their friends were on it or it was another way to connect with friends. As discussed by danah boyd (2007), teens join social network sites to maintain a connection with their friends. The connections built with friends on social media sites are displayed on each individual's profile, which boyd claims provides meaningful information about that person. In this sense, my participants reflect what has been demonstrated by previous research – that offline peer networks are significant in shaping online lives.

Four out of the five participants joined Instagram in the year 2012; which is two years after the initial launch of the platform. The fifth participant, Esther, started using the platform in 2015, although she does reference that she had downloaded the app prior but never used it until 2015. This information is useful for my analysis because it demonstrates that four of the five participants have been using Instagram for approximately five years, which has allowed them to navigate and establish habits for their Instagram practices.

During the interview process, each participant was similar when it came to the amount of time spent browsing on Instagram, as opposed to posting pictures. Every participant stated that they view and browse Instagram daily. Danielle estimated being on Instagram roughly 12 times per day. In response to the prompt of "how often are you on the platform?", Danielle responded, "daily basis, multiple times a day, multiple times an hour if I'm not doing anything." However, when asked how often they are on the platform posting images, there was a common consensus that it was much less frequently. Both Anna and Esther estimated that they post about once a month. However, none of the participants had a specific rule when it came to posting, therefore there were instances when participants may have posted more frequently than average.

Girlfriend Culture

The first theme I noticed when analyzing my interviews and textual data was the prevalence of "girlfriend culture." As previously mentioned, friends played an instrumental role in providing motivation for the participants to join Instagram. After interviewing each participant, I discovered that friends were an important aspect of my participants' lives, which they wanted to display on their profile as well. When asked to

elaborate on which aspects of themselves they felt were accurately presented through their Instagram profile, Anna, Beth, and Cate all made reference to their friends. Anna stated that her profile accurately presented, "Mostly that I enjoy spending time with my friends". Similarly, Beth said, "I think it showcases that I travel and it shows that I'm with my friends a lot". Cate also made reference to her friends adding, "And my friends, it shows that I have diverse friends".

Although men do make an appearance in some of these group/friends pictures, I found that pictures with fellow young women were most prominent. Of the 25 pictures of each participant analyzed, this was the breakdown for how many are with two or more females: Anna has 15 photos, Beth has 5, Cate has 14, Danielle has 8 and Esther has 10.

As demonstrated by these statistics, both Anna and Cate have girlfriend pictures for more than 50% of their most recent 25 posts. These statistics adhere with the notion presented by Akane Kanai (2017) and Alison Winch (2014), in regards to what they call a postfeminist girlfriend culture, which produces and enables feminine normativity and feelings of belonging (Kanai 2017, Winch 2014). As discussed by Winch (2014), girlfriend culture does not rely on the idea of a heterosexual "happily every after" but instead privileges female friendships and sociality. Kanai agrees by adding, "Boyfriends and husbands are sidelines as hapless extras to the center stage relationship of two normatively complementary heterosexual girlfriends in a relationship portrayed to be fun, loving and free from patriarchal control" (2017, p.2). In displaying girlfriend culture, individuals are investing in themselves by displaying normativity as well as feminine sociality.

For instance, Anna has one picture with herself and three other women, all of whom are white. All four women featured in the picture are displaying beauty practices;

they all have their hair done, are wearing makeup and are wearing dresses, one of which happens to be a wedding dress. One could assume that a wedding celebrates a man and a woman, yet the presumed groom is not present in this photo. Weddings are presumably expensive, which demonstrates a sense of privilege amongst these women. I would argue that this photo demonstrates feminine normativity based on their race, privilege and beauty practices, all whilst highlighting a feminine sociality.

A second photo, which depicts both normativity and feminine sociality, is one photo that Cate has on her Instagram profile: it shows Cate kissing her girlfriend on the cheek. Both women in this picture are displaying normative beauty, in which both have their long hair down, are wearing makeup and are dressed in clothing that displays their bodies. One woman is wearing a low cut shirt, while the other woman is wearing a short cut dress. Once again, we see that race comes into play for this feminine normativity, in which both these women are white. Feminine sociality is highlighted in this photo, through the comfort evident between these two girl friends. Cate is kissing her girlfriend's cheek, while her girlfriend is hugging her and showing a smiling, comfortable face. I would argue that this photo demonstrates not only feminine sociality, but also the closeness and intimacy of these platonic feminine relationships.

Bodily Display and Aesthetics

The second theme I noticed when analyzing my interviews and textual data was the notions of bodily display and aesthetics. In neoliberal postfeminist culture, the body being discussed is often a normative body; suggesting it is able, white, middle class, thin and active (Winch 2014). All five participants would fit this definition of having a

normative body. Some pictures on their Instagram profiles display these able and active bodies engaged in exercise, such as running, swimming, yoga and climbing.

By simply looking at each participant's profile, it becomes clear that some are more comfortable with displaying their bodies than others. There may be several motivations and restraints behind this. For instance, Danielle discussed how she kept her account private because she was aware of her audience and didn't want people, such as her co-workers, seeing her in a bikini. Yet Cate felt very comfortable posting pictures of bodily display even though her account is public and anyone can view it. Of the 25 pictures Cate has eight pictures that are either of her in a bikini or in an outfit that displays her midriff. Although not as frequent, Danielle and Esther also have bikini pictures in their most recent 25 photos.

Aesthetics was a point of discussion for all participants. Instagram allows users to apply filters and perform edits on pictures before posting them to their profile. All the participants admit they use filters, however, there were mixed motivations as to why. Anna described how she picks filters that make her look more tanned. Danielle, made note of the importance of carefully filtering everything so it looks pretty. Cate was the only participant who uses a different application to edit her photos before posting them on Instagram. She uses an application called Visco because she says it allows her to do more filtering and tuning. Cate mentioned that she even photo-shops and face tunes some of her pictures. She will often edit the pictures to make her arms skinnier, teeth whiter, define her cheekbones, cover blemishes and fix red-eye. Upon occasion she has even gone so far as to make her waist smaller and buttocks larger.

It would seem that each participant does care about how they present themselves aesthetically, which ties into the girlfriend culture and how females often police each

other aesthetically in both a critical and encouraging manner. Girlfriend culture has an emphasis on policing and peer control, which is mutual in a neoliberal postfeminist culture (Winch 2014). For girlfriends, "Their intimate networks of comparison, feedback, and motivation are necessary in controlling body image" (Winch 2014 p.2).

Within the discursive textual analysis, an exploration of the comments following each picture evoking bodily display, or aesthetics, shed light onto this policing or reinforcing. The following are comments found on such pictures, all of which were written by females: "Yowzaaa," "Looking good ladies!", "Your dress is beautiful", "That booty (heart)", "Titties Mcgee", "Beautiful", "Babes", "Beautiful girls", "I just saw this you look bomb af omfg", "You're the cutest", "Perfect", "Bunch of swimsuit models oh my god". I would argue that comments acknowledging "booty" and "titties" and "swimsuit models" all encourage images of normative feminine bodily display, highlighted by thinness, prominent breasts and buttocks, long hair, a tanned body and a clear complexion. Comments such as the ones stating "looking good ladies" and "beautiful girls" demonstrates females supporting each other and supporting feminine sociality, for these comments acknowledge all women in the photo.

This idea of policing, in ways such as comments on Instagram, was particularly important for Cate. Some of Cate's favorite pictures were the ones that received the most likes and comments, which happen to be one's of bodily display. Therefore, these reinforcing comments are fueling her desire to continue to post pictures that display the body.

Independence: Travel and Selfies

The third theme I discovered when analyzing my interviews and textual data was the prevalence of independence, through travel and selfies. There was a reoccurring theme across the profiles of portraying adventure, exploration and travel from all participants. Most notably, participants Beth and Danielle heavily rely on travel and adventure pictures to represent themselves through their Instagram profile. Beth mentioned in her interview that she can combine the type of pictures she posts into travel posts, which is something she describes as a passion and representation of herself. Of Beth's most recent 25 pictures, 14 of them are travel related. Danielle intentionally posts pictures that show her being adventurous, although she questions if she actually is. Danielle states, "It looks like I am taking risks with my life because I was known as someone who wouldn't take risks." This statement helps to verify that Danielle is purposefully choosing which pictures she posts to her profile because she feels the need to present herself as adventurous. This notion relates back to Goffman's (1956) idea of the imagined audience, in which we curate ourselves in conjunction with who we believe is watching our performance. Of Danielle's most recent 25 posts, 22 of them represent her travelling adventures from her time spent in South East Asia. Anna, Cate and Esther also have pictures of themselves travelling, although not as prominently. Adventure is also displayed throughout these profiles in other forms, including, feeding wild animals, quading and rock climbing. I would argue that this demonstrates that women are free to choose active, independent lives. Postfeminist sensibility suggests that young women are no longer expected to commit to a home life, usually entailed with a husband and children. Instead, young women are able to choose an independent active life before settling down with a husband and children.

Another aspect of independence that aligns itself with the world of social media is selfies. In consensus with a large portion of today's society, there seems to be mixed feelings on selfies amongst my participants. Both Cate and Esther acknowledged that they do take selfies and have some on their Instagram profiles. Anna made a point to state that she rarely ever posts pictures of just herself and that if she does "there's something in the background to divert the attention away." When Beth was asked why she proclaimed that she doesn't take selfies, she replied, "I don't really like taking selfies, so it's usually pictures of me with other people or pictures that I've taken of things and landscapes." Somewhat contradictorily, Danielle, who previously claimed to post pictures of herself as the most common posting practice, explains that she will not post selfies but will post pictures of herself doing activities instead. Danielle goes on to further explain how she believes that "selfies have this stigma behind it where it's 'camera whore.'"

Through the textual analysis of each participant's most recent 25 posts, I was able to analyze what type of selfies were being presented on these participants' Instagram profiles. Amongst all five participants, there were no selfies solely of themselves within the pictures being analyzed. All the selfies contained at least one other person. These selfies portrayed events such as a dinner with friends, a wedding, a sporting event and even beauty practices where one participant has a selfie of herself and a girlfriend with face masks on.

Anne Burns (2015) argues that the selfie is discursively constructed as a gendered practice, which enables it to be devalued as it is assumed to be associated with feminine vanity and triviality. For these reasons, Burns suggests that this enables the imposition of rules for governing how and when to take selfies, in order to avoid gendered stereotypes. Burns claims, "there is a connection between the discursive construction of selfie practice

and the negative perception of selfie takers" (2015 p.1). I would argue that the selfies displayed by the five female participants in my study demonstrate that perhaps the women are trying to avoid being identified as vain or trivial, which is why they stated they either never post selfies or only post if there is something detracting the attention away from them in the background. This is reinforced in my analysis of each participant's last 25 photos, in which not one participant has a selfie with themselves as the only subject of the photo.

Traditional Events and Domesticated Practices

The fourth and final theme I found when analyzing my interviews and textual data was the representation of traditional events and domesticated practices. There is evidence of traditional events and domesticated practices being incorporated and presented on each participants Instagram profile. For example, there are pictures of common traditional events, such as weddings, in which Esther has a few pictures. There are also pictures and references to birthdays. Some participants, such as Cate, post pictures of individuals on their birthdays, regardless of if the account holder is in the picture or not, as an acknowledgment to their friendship.

As previously mentioned, each participant identifies as heterosexual. Both Beth and Danielle are currently in heterosexual relationships, a privileged form of relationship in contemporary society. Beth and Danielle have pictures of themselves with their male partners displaying affection in both body language, as well as, in the captions. Danielle has four pictures with her boyfriend in her most recent 25 photos. In every one of the four pictures, they are either embracing or hugging. One captions reads, "He is my favorite."

On the other hand, Beth has five pictures with her boyfriend but they are only embracing in one of the pictures.

Another way in which these females present a traditional image is through their clothing choices. Anna, Beth, Cate, Danielle and Esther each have pictures of themselves in their most recent 25 posts wearing a dress, which would be considered traditional attire for a female.

In addition to these traditional events are the representations of domesticated practices. Although none of the participants are neither married, nor a mother, there are representations of these domesticated practices being displayed on each individual's profile. For instance, Anna and Esther are both proud pet owners and listed their pet first when asked about the type of pictures they post. They both have pictures that show themselves caring for their pets in a motherly manner, such as feeding, bathing and holding their animals. Of their most recent 25 photos, Anna has five of her cats and Esther has eight of her dogs. Anna and Esther both also have a picture of themselves holding a baby, which is reflective of a maternal side of them. It is important to note though, that there are no comments or captions reinforcing this motherly nature on any of these pictures.

Another domesticated practice reflected by Cate, is a picture of her and a girlfriend cooking. Cate has commented on the photo "wifey material", which further illustrates the intention for this photo to be viewed in a domesticated way. I would also argue that this demonstrates that Cate believes in a traditional feminine role as a wife, at least to the extent that women are the one who cook and prepare the meals. This picture also happens to be one of Cate's favorites and has 426 likes.

Chapter 4: Discussion and Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, I explored the ways in which young women use Instagram to perform aspects of the self. This was done through a series of five qualitative interviews and a discursive textual analysis of 125 Instagram photos. Through my analysis, I discovered that many of these aspects are related to gender and are in line with what scholars have called postfeminist sensibility (Gill 2007). As I described in the literature review, postfeminist sensibility refers to the self-expression and representation of gender, of which are freely chosen (Gill 2007, Negra 2008, Banet-Weiser 2012). My analysis demonstrates that postfeminist sensibility is still prevalent and being performed in the ways young women are presenting themselves on Instagram. This was demonstrated through normative representation of femininity, such as beauty practices, bodily display and independence.

This thesis revealed how the representation of the self on Instagram is carefully orchestrated. Every post on these young women's Instagram account has been given careful consideration and serves a purpose to their whole Instagram representation of the self. The platform has features that allow for the self to be vigilantly curated, including photo-editing tools where women can add filters to enhance the colors, or even go so far as to alter their body shape depicted in the image. Much detail is also put into the captions that accompany each picture, to make sure the right persona is being portrayed along with the image. Furthermore, certain pictures, such as selfies, have their own set of rules and regulations, which young women are trying to navigate. The audiences' reaction helps to navigation these rules and regulations, from feedback such as comments and likes.

Going into this research, I held the assumption that young women often post things on social media without much thought as to who may see it or how it may impact them. For instance, young men and women are often forewarned about what they post on social media because potential employers may see it. These warnings come with the assumption that the audience is not considered when posting on Instagram, however this thesis challenges that notion. My analysis has demonstrated that not only are Instagram users able to freely choose the pictures they add to their profile, but they do so with intention and an awareness of their audience. As discussed in regards to selfie regulations and girlfriend policing, the audience plays a significant role in shaping young women's Instagram profiles. These aspects of my analysis reinforced the ideas of Erving Goffman's (1956) imagined audience, which I used as a theoretical framework for my research.

I believe that this research demonstrates that each participant is engaging in self-branding. As discussed in the literature review, Alice Marwick (2015) defines self-branding as a self-presentation that relies on viewing oneself as a consumer product and selling this image as a product to others. To begin, this would suggest that the individual is aware of the audience as the consumer. This aligns with the findings in my analysis, which demonstrated the young women did have an awareness of their audience. Self-branding also suggests that the individual is being curated to present the self in a certain way, which as previously mentioned is a prevalent aspect of young women's Instagram practices. Akane Kanai (2015) added that a focus on beauty and the body are used to navigate one's feminine self-brand. As analyzed in this thesis, each participant had set practices and self-regulations when it came to bodily display, which would suggest that they do so as a way to navigate their self-brand.

There were a few limitations to my thesis that I would like to recognize. As acknowledged in my thesis and reinforced by scholars (Collins 2004, Negra 2008) the components of race, class, sexuality and having an able and normative body, play a role in these postfeminist practices. In regards to my thesis, my sampling pool of participants was limited and homogenous. All participants belong to the middle-upper class, are heterosexual and have normative bodies. Only one of my participants was of mixed race: whereas the rest identified as white. In addition, all participants are Calgarian and were, (or are) university students in Calgary. Having access to attend a Canadian university also provides each woman with additional privileges, for not everyone is able to afford this level of education or is able to take the time away from other necessities, such as work, to obtain the education. As a result of the small scope of my participants, this discussion cannot be applied to all young women.

Another limitation for this thesis was in correlation with ethics approval. Approval for ethics is a timely process. Since I was unable to begin data collection and analysis until receiving full ethics approval, my time was limited. With more time, this thesis could have broadened the sampling size, with the potential to broaden the scope and diversity of the analysis. In addition due to ethics, I was unable to include photographs in this thesis, for it would diminish the anonymity of my participants. I consider this to be a limitation, for it would have made my analysis more transparent having the images I was describing situated in the text.

For my research, I found that in my discussions with each participant I was able to gain the most insight into their social media practices and behaviors. I believe more young people should be talked to about their social media practices, for these discussions provided me with ample insight and data for this thesis. I was unsure about choosing

interviews as a method, for ethics would be required and participants needed; however, the interviews I conducted provided meaning to my textual analysis and were a crucial component to this thesis. Although each interview was not of substantial length, they all still provided copious amounts of data to be analyzed and discussed.

This research is significant because it was able to add to the conversation of other scholars who have studied postfeminist sensibility, identity performance on media and the use of Instagram by young women in particular. As previously mentioned, Instagram has not been heavily researched; therefore this research has provided new insight and data about young women's identity performance on Instagram in particular. This research could potentially help users to better understand Instagram practices or even help the Instagram platform to better curate towards the trends and desires of young women's social media practices.

Plenty of room has been left for expansion on the research presented in this thesis. This research should be expanded to different demographics, including different races, classes and sexual orientation. Although my thesis focused specifically on women, this research should be expanded to cover masculine gendered practices for a comparison and contrast to the feminine practices examined in this thesis. This research could even expand to incorporate an analysis of the discourse in comments made from males in comparison to the ones made from females. In this sense, there is much more work to be done in terms of researching young people's identity practices on social media platforms.

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