"Celebrate your bloom story": An Automedia Analysis of Social Media Influencers

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Abstract

Using 27-year-old Canadian beauty blogger Estée Lalonde as a site of automedia analysis (Maguire 2015), this paper argues that through the enactment of domestic femininity in the public sphere, social media influencers embody postfeminist ideals of individual empowerment while selling their branded selves through networked intimacy (Abidin 2015; Gill, 2016). Methodologically, I approach the case study with an understanding of the intersection between online platforms of the intersection between online platforms, life writing, and constructions of the self. Using cross-promotion, scheduled posts, and self-branding, influencers create a cohesive branded self, emphasizing perceived authenticity and a sense of community among followers. The exercise of self-branding is used to gain cultural and material capital (Hearn, 2008). Understanding postfeminism as an analytical lens through which we can problematize media texts (Gill, 2016), I argue that influencer marketing privileges a one-dimensional, postfeminist representation of an empowered young woman following her life's passion (Duffy & Hund, 2015).

Keywords: postfeminism, influencer marketing, self-branding, femininity.

Estée Lalonde is a 27-year-old Canadian living in London, UK. At 19, she packed her bags and moved across the world to be with her boyfriend at the time. After spending a year in university but being unsure of what she wanted to do with her life, she started a beauty blog and later a YouTube channel, as a way to socialize and share her love of beauty products – a passion which had previously taken roots while working retail part-time (Lalonde, 2016a). Since reaching one million subscribers, she has signed major brand partnerships with Lancôme, Adidas, and Garnier. Estée frequently 'collabs' with other UK influencers and attends prestigious social events in London such as *Vogue*'s 'Inspiring Women in Fashion' (Chapman, 2016). Lalonde is a social media microcelebrity: an influencer who has amassed a lucrative following by creating gendered content reliant on displays of traditional femininity (Duffy & Hund, 2015).

In this paper, I argue that through the enactment of femininity in the public sphere, social media influencers embody postfeminist ideals while constructing their narratives of self. In discussing postfeminism, I position myself alongside Rosalind Gill (2017), understanding postfeminism as a sensibility and a productive lens through which we can understand media phenomena. Critical notions of postfeminism problematize the often-contradictory nature of feminist representations in the current media moment (Gill, 2017). Within the constraints of postfeminism, women are often portrayed as sharing a common set of desires and motivated by notions of traditional femininity (Negra, 2009). As a sensibility, postfeminism is characterized through mainstream media products by perpetuating themes such as self-surveillance and discipline, individualism, choice and empowerment, and emphasizing commodification and consumerism (Gill, 2007). I hope to build on existing work regarding influencers (Abidin, 2016; Duffy, 2016, 2017; Duffy & Hund 2015) while exploring how these young women use various social media platforms in conjunction with one another to foster feelings of authenticity. This is done to capitalize on displays of the private self.

Rather than focusing the analysis on one social media website, I have chosen to use an automedia approach (Maguire, 2015) to understand how Estée Lalonde uses two social media platforms (YouTube and Instagram) together to create a branded narrative of self. This textual analysis will use her YouTube and Instagram profiles as well as the print book that Lalonde released in 2016 titled *Bloom: Navigating Life and Style* (Lalonde, 2016). The print media has been included as it is a crucial part of the narrative the social media influencer is creating and works with her online persona to help establish her as a voice of authority in terms of what femininity and success should look like in a 21st century media context. By approaching the data through an automedia lens (Maguire, 2015), I am able to present a holistic overview of Lalonde's portrayal of self that is both critical and reflective of how the notion of portraying an authentic self online is further complicated by joining multiple social media platforms.

Microcelebrity, Influencers, and Authenticity

Digital media, blogs, and social networking sites have allowed for the production of a unique type of celebrity to succeed online. This "celebrification" – the transformation from normal person to celebrity – requires a performance of accessibility, presence, and ability (Jerslev & Mortensen, 2016). Social-media-afforded celebrity is completely dependent on uploading the supposedly private self. This heavily-curated private self transforms into the online performance of microcelebrity (Jerslev & Mortensen, 2016; Senft, 2008). It requires the constant curation of a persona that feels authentic to the audience (Abidin, 2016). Theresa Senft's (2008) work concerning camgirls in the late 1990s and early 2000s is one of the foundational texts for understanding the online phenomena of microcelebrity, particularly in relation to young women online. Camgirls were early adopters of webcam technology as they used the devices to live stream from their homes. Along with their webcam setups, they often had websites with accompanying blogs and forums. These women relied on an affective relationship with their audiences, bolstered by exclusive fan pages and forums that

allowed their viewers to chat *with* them, not just about them (Senft, 2008). Much like the reciprocity afforded by YouTube and Instagram's platforms, this helped create a sense of authenticity and a down-to-earth persona that seemed attainable but still enviable. Camgirls used their "feminine image as a tool to be used towards the goals of economic and social success, power and self-actualization" (Shields-Dobson, 2008, p.125). Many camgirls claimed their sites were "created for their own personal fulfillment, rather than for an audience" (p. 127). Similarly, influencers often assert that they are not in the business of content creation for the money, but rather creative passionate work (Duffy, 2017). Thus, we may understand beauty influencers as an extension or different manifestation of camgirl culture and microcelebrity based on the ways in which both practices rely on performances of femininity, the cultivation of authenticity and intimacy, and the monetization of performed privacy.

Scholars often use the terms microcelebrity and influencer interchangeably (Abidin, 2016). For the purpose of this paper, influencers can be understood as synonymous with microcelebrities in terms of their dependence on capitalizing the private self. An influencer is an internet user who garners a large following on social media through the public narration of their personal lives. Crystal Abidin's (2015) research regarding influencers in Singapore found that they will refer to their fan base as "followers" or "readers" rather than fans. This fosters a sense of community and closeness, further reinforcing that the influencers are just like those who follow them: they are "normal, just like everyone else" (p. 13). This perceived community allows for the influencer to be regarded as a trustworthy reviewer of products on various social media platforms. A person's status as an influencer is not dictated by the platform they use, meaning an influencer can be active on YouTube and not Instagram or vice versa (Abidin, 2015). Their digital performances of the self are monetized by brand partnerships and advertisements, meaning they receive compensation for their opinions, expertise, and namesake (Abidin, 2015). From the perspective of the brands who hire them, determining their value as advertising partners is about more than having achieved a certain threshold of followers. Instead, it is more important that the influencer's following actively interacts with their content in the form of likes, shares, and comments. This allows for maximum return-on-investment for the brands (Dada, 2017).

My case study, Estée LaLonde, refers to herself as a "lifestyle influencer." A lifestyle influencer is defined as a digital content creator focused on the "everyday, ordinary, and mundane recounts of their lives 'as lived'" (Abidin, 2016, p. 3). Lifestyle influencers are generally self-taught women between the ages of 18 and 35 (Abidin, 2016). They are expected to own nice clothing, shoes, and accessories in order to correctly display femininity on their social media feeds. Overwhelmingly conventionally attractive, these young women supposedly embody a life worthy of demonstration (Duffy & Hund, 2015). It should also be noted that the digital content creation market demands professional grade photography and videography equipment, editing software, a wireless internet connection, and a smartphone in order to stay connected (Duffy & Hund, 2015). Therefore, starting a lifestyle brand requires both social and economic capital from the outset (Duffy, 2017). Though once considered separate entities, I argue that line between what constitutes a lifestyle influencer versus a beauty influencer has become increasingly blurred as the demand for more lifestyle-centric content from viewers has changed the content former beauty influencers create. For example, Lalonde's brand started as a beauty review channel. As her following grew, there was a natural progression in her content from her first video, "My Everyday Skin Routine!" (Lalonde, 2011a) to "The Boyfriend Tag!" (Lalonde, 2011b) – a video featuring her and her boyfriend answering questions about their relationship. The boyfriend tag video remains one of her most watched on YouTube with more than 600,000 views – ranking alongside various makeup tutorials, skincare routines, and a video from her #FEMTALK series about menstruation (Lalonde, n.d.). While her beauty content still accounts for the majority of her views, it is hard to deny the popularity of the lifestyle videos. Her video "HOW TO ORGANIZE YOUR LIFE" (Lalonde, 2016b) has amassed over 1.3 million views. Lalonde has a secondary channel whose covers many topics from "FUN DAY OUT WITH MY MOM"

(Lalonde, 2016) to "Should We Be Worried About North Korea?" (Lalonde, 2017). This trend of moving towards lifestyle content is visible among many of the larger beauty gurus and reflected in the maintenance of dedicated video blog (vlog) channels (Jerslev & Mortensen, 2016). For example, Zoella, a British beauty and lifestyle influencer with over 11-million YouTube subscribers runs a secondary channel, Zoe Sugg. This channel is dedicated to vlogs whereas her main channel, is focused on product hauls and everyday makeup routines filmed 'sit down' style in front of her staged backdrop (Zoella, n.d.). The secondary channel allows for a space in which intimacy with her following can be further established as vlogs are filmed by Zoella herself as she goes about her everyday activities, using a handheld camera.

Content only functions as a way to build intimacy if it is able to be perceived as authentic. The larger Instagram trend of authenticity is concerned with creating content that is perceived as real while remaining highly curated. The photos influencers upload to Instagram "act as proof" that the lives we are seeing online are real (Bergen, 2016, p. 10). The content should be perceived as reflective of their everyday life as lived (Abidin, 2016). For example, in the aforementioned North Korea video, Lalonde admits she knows very little about the political climate other than the fact she is frightened, a sentiment echoed by viewers in the comment section (Lalonde, 2017). By having a separate channel to discuss topics that are of interest to her, Lalonde is able to further establish herself as someone who is relatable with interests that span further than the narrow parameters afforded by a beauty vlogger distinction. An influencer's success relies on not losing one's "ordinariness," because it is this ordinariness that "makes them consumable" (Banet-Weiser, 2017, p. 275). Authenticity is less about conveying a self that is congruent with their offline lives but instead true to their branded self they have created, meaning the content produced must be consistent across platforms. It is a tool that allows the social media influencer to gain social and material profit as a self-brander (Hearn, 2008). Lalonde performs her ordinariness by curating content that portrays her as empowered and successful, Canadian expat with a passion for makeup and fashion who remains relatable through her personality quirks. This purposeful curation can be as simple as matching fonts on her website and YouTube banner, to the more complex in the form of uploaded corresponding YouTube and Instagram content which I discuss further in a later section of this paper.

Automedia and Social Media Biography

Automedia refers to the "enactment of a life story in a new media environment" (Rak, 2015, para. 2). Methodologically, an automedia analysis involves considering the intersections between online interfaces and life writing. Emma Maguire's (2015) automedia analysis of Jenna Marbles, a comedy YouTuber famous for her satirical commentary with over 18 million subscribers at the time of writing this paper, provided an in-depth understanding of one of many "new media entertainers who are using the homemade video publishing site YouTube to gain large audiences and turn their self-representations into profitable personal brands" (p. 73). Maguire describes how Marbles adopts a "hot girl" identity to further her own agenda in her viral video, "How to Trick People Into Thinking You're Really Good Looking." In her analysis, Maguire (2015) emphasizes the production and consumption medium in which the media text circulates, meaning we must consider all aspects of the text's creation from the influencer themselves to the media they use to disseminate their life story. Therefore, the social media platform itself and its affordances should also be considered. Her automedia approach acknowledges that "media technologies shape the kinds of selves that can be represented" (p. 74). Life writing is enmeshed with digital content creation because influencers allow their everyday lives to take the forefront of their digital stories. Lalonde uses her various social media platforms as well as her print book to tell her "bloom story," as she calls it (Lalonde, 2016a). Because realness and authenticity are necessary to the success of these content creators, or influencers, understanding their social media networks as spaces in which they are documenting their everyday

lives is crucial. Life writing can be both fictional or factual, thus the highly curated social media feeds of influencers can be understood as such. These feeds act as representations of supposedly authentic lives and their ability to be perceived as real is crucial to their success (Abidin 2015). Maguire (2015) argues that media technologies allow for different kinds of selves to produced. This applies to my analysis as I understand the self-influencers portray online to be a branded self, separate from who they may be offline.

I use an automedia approach to discuss how Lalonde's Instagram and YouTube profiles allow her to enact her branded feminine identity and position herself as a voice of authority. YouTube is a complex space for identity construction as it celebrates authenticity and realness (Banet-Weiser, 2011). The algorithm privileges content that complies with visibility, rewarding commercially recognized femininized content (Bishop, 2018). Therefore, influencers must create content that allows them to be "seen" by the algorithm while staying consistent with their overall brand. In the case of Lalonde, this is a brand built around relatability. The rise of fashion blogs featuring "real" women, whether they be plus-sized, over the age of 40, or hailing from a small city in Eastern Canada like YouTuber Estée Lalonde, implies that the barrier that once existed in the beauty and lifestyle industries has been broken down paving the way for the average woman (Duffy & Hund, 2015). The celebration of ordinariness is used to establish online personalities and their successes as attainable. The problem with this narrative is that many fashion and beauty bloggers conform to heteronormative standards of beauty: being young, thin, articulate, educated, and white. The young women have enough start-up capital to buy the professional grade equipment needed to ensure success on YouTube and other image-driven platforms like Instagram (Duffy & Hund, 2015). Therefore, YouTube functions as a valuable space in which only certain privileged young women are able to successfully sell their brand.

While unconventional to the automedia methodology, I will also analyze her print book, *Bloom: Navigating Life and Style* (Lalonde, 2016a) to demonstrate how she co-opts her social media conventions and uses them within the parameters of traditional print media to further construct her narrative of self. This is worthy of consideration because publishing a print book has become an increasingly popular trend among influencers. For example, earlier this year British lifestyle vlogger Lily Pebbles released her first book, *The F Word* (2018) which focuses on female friendships in the digital age. Also, Zoella, a British vlogger with over 11 million subscribers on YouTube is set to release *Cordially Invited,* a "beautifully photographed lifestyle book" later this year (cordiallyinvited.co.uk, 2018). An automedia analysis is a useful methodology for understanding social media influencers, as it considers the different aspects of their performed identities. Social platforms have their own vernacular referring to a unique combination of writing style, grammar, and logic that comprise popular communication on the site. Platform vernacular emerges not only from coded platform affordances but also from the way users appropriate them in shared conventions (Gibbs et al., 2015, p. 257). Platforms also impose a standardization of content through their coded limitations such as video length and status or comment character limits (Van Djick, 2012, p. 35). These conventions play a crucial role in the kinds of self-brands influencers are able to create. In this paper, I will explore the affordances of Instagram, YouTube, and print media to better understand how Lalonde creates a cohesive branded self, dependent on traditional notions of femininity.

Canadian Expat Turned Beauty Influencer

Lalonde first started her YouTube channel in 2012 under the pseudonym 'Essie Button.' This was a persona she identified as an online self-presentation separate from her offline self. In an effort to move towards a supposedly more authentic self-presentation, she announced a re-brand in late 2015. A six-minute video titled "LET'S MEET AGAIN" (Lalonde, 2015) was posted to her main channel to announce the re-inventing of Essie Button into the lifestyle influencer, Estée Lalonde. Her content

changed from beauty to lifestyle-focused, allowing her to broaden her to include beauty, fashion, fitness and self-care, design, relationships, and home décor on her channel. With the rebrand, she published her first book *Bloom: Navigating Life and Style* (2016a). It is a non-fiction book that deals with topics such as love, friendship, self-esteem, overcoming adversity (including Lalonde's struggles with mental illness), and styling yourself and your home. The data for this discursive textual analysis was collected from January 1st, 2017 to April 1st, 2017. 86 images were posted on her Instagram account (@esteelalonde) and 17 videos uploaded on her YouTube account (Lalonde, n.d.). Lalonde posts selfies, product posts, and carefully staged food pictures on Instagram on an almost daily basis. These images will sometimes correspond with her bi-weekly uploads on YouTube but are more often glimpses into her private life with Aslan, her boyfriend of several years and their Greyhound, Reggie (they would split later in the year). Her aesthetic favours muted neutrals with pops of colour (see Figure 1).
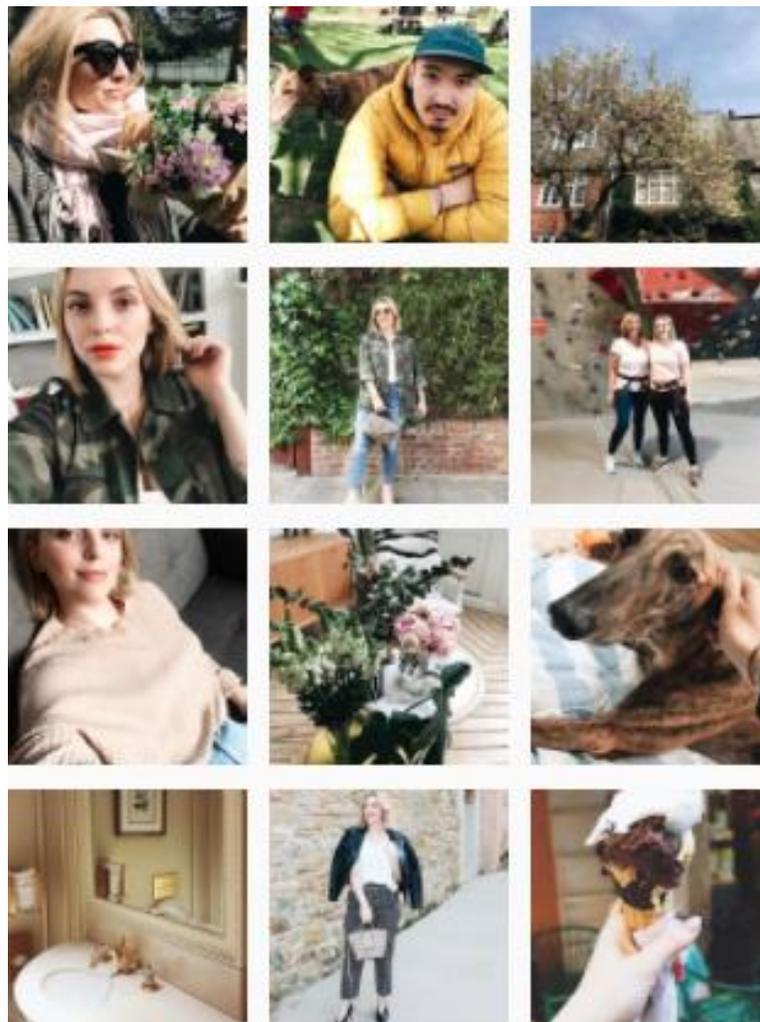

Figure 1 - Screenshot of Lalonde's Instagram profile from @esteelalonde, Instagram; Web. April 4, 2017. https://www.instagram.com/esteelalonde/?hl=en

On Instagram, she often engages in displays of traditional femininity featuring food, clothes, and flowers in various shades of pinks and golds; staged selfies and product posts; and makeup-free

selfies while visiting her family back in Canada. Her relationship with Aslan is shared fairly openly. She posts intimate images of sentimental Christmas gifts and 'throwback' photos of the two of them when he is away from home, noting how much she misses him. Mixed in with her personal posts are branded photos including Burt's Bee's new line of lipsticks, a group photo featuring other influencers for Garnier UK and International Women's Day, an image of Lalonde relaxing in her bathtub using Crabtree and Evelyn products, her with a personal trainer directing followers to her YouTube channel for a new weightlifting routine (sponsored by Adidas), and a one-minute video of her onset at a Lancôme photoshoot. All of these images are marked with the hashtag #ad. Because influencers use Instagram for affiliate marketing, the lines between labour and leisure, and professional and amateur are constantly blurred (Duffy & Hund, 2015). Instagram ads are seen as more personal, and therefore more valuable, than traditional marketing tactics. This is because the influencer claims to have personally tried the products and can speak to their value (Abidin, 2016).

Estée's use of hashtags within the advertisement captions is notable as it is one of the only instances when she uses this particular platform convention. Stylistically, she is more inclined to include a short phrase accompanied by an emoji. For example, on March 31st, 2017 she posted a selfie wearing orange lipstick with the caption: "Orange crush" followed by an orange fruit emoji (esteelalonde, 2017 March 31) (See Figure 2). On March 17th, 2017, she uploaded her hand holding an ice cream cone with the caption: "This was a messy but delicious snack" followed with an ice cream emoji (esteelalonde, 2017 March 17) (See Figure 3). She is consistent with her choices in filters on the images and their layouts. If the image is of herself, it will either be a selfie featuring a lipstick colour or haircut, or it will be a full-length image showing off her outfit of the day. Pictures of food are taken from overhead, with the exception of ice cream cones in which the cone takes centre stage as well as her manicured nails and fingers sporting her signature gold rings. Periodically she uploads posts about London, focusing on greenery and architecture.

The only other image featuring a hashtag is from January 21st, 2017 – the day of the International Women's March. Over 250,000 people are estimated to have attended the March outside of the United States. Marches within the US are said to have attendance somewhere between 3.3 and 4.6 million people (Millstein, 2017). This is a particularly significant post as it features Lalonde in a crowd of people holding a pink and red sign (the block lettering reminiscent of her font and colour of choice for YouTube thumbnails, according to some commenters) reading "Nasty Forever." The caption reads: "It is important to show up [star emoji, peace sign emoji] #womensmarch #womensmarchlondon #useyourvoice" (esteelalonde, 2017 January 21) (See Figure 4). This upload was particularly controversial in the comment section, with her followers debating the merits of the Women's March itself, the existence of the wage gap, and reproductive rights. Some voiced concerns over whether or not she should be posting about the Women's March at all while others commended her for using her influence to help the cause. This post stands out on Estée's feed as it is the only mention of feminist issues in the period between January 1st and April 1st, 2017.

Figure 2 - Screenshot of Estée Lalonde's March 31, 2017 post from her account @esteelalonde, Instagram; Web. Taken January 22, 2019. https://www.instagram.com/esteelalonde/?hl=en

Figure 3 - Screenshot of Estée Lalonde's March 17, 2017 post from her account @esteelalonde, Instagram; Web. Taken January 22, 2019. https://www.instagram.com/esteelalonde/?hl=en

Figure 4 - Screenshot of Estée Lalonde's January 21, 2017 post from her account @esteelalonde,
Instagram; Web. Taken January 22, 2019. https://www.instagram.com/esteelalonde/?hl=en

Lalonde uploaded an average of two videos per week during the data collection period. Some paid posts included her beauty meditation moments sponsored by Crabtree and Evelyn, a beginner's guide to weight lifting in collaboration with Adidas and a lipstick look with date night outfits featuring Burt's Bee's (Lalonde, n.d.). These advertisements are disclosed in the video titles and gain in the description boxes as mandated by the British Advertising Standards Authority (ASA, 2018). These videos usually paired with the aforementioned sponsored Instagram posts. Other noteworthy videos include one featuring Aslan, her boyfriend, getting "real about their relationship" and another where she shows off her latest luxury lingerie purchases. She also uploaded a collaboration with a popular YouTuber from Calgary, Alberta where they discuss their current favourite products including beauty, lifestyle, and fashion (Lalonde, n.d.).

The video thumbnails consistently feature Lalonde's face front and centre (See Figure 5). They are flattering and carefully edited whether she is in her bathtub meditating with a face mask on or lifting weights with her Adidas trainer. Colour-wise, she rotates fairly consistently between pink, red, and teal. She prefers clean block lettering reminiscent of magazine covers. As with most lifestyle vloggers, she frequently uploads "hauls" and "favourites" videos. Consumer goods are front and centre in this particular type of video. During a haul video, Estée will show off the latest products she has purchased from the drug store or high street. Favourites videos will include products she purchased herself or something that was sent through PR companies. She will urge her followers to try the latest beauty launches, her favourite workout gear, or to pick up a 50 Euro notebook to make lists of what they want to accomplish that day. Her vlog channel and main channel are distinct and strictly separated. Advertisements and collaborations are reserved for her main channel only. Her "sit-down" videos take place in her living room with high production value and professional lighting. Her vlogs are done "on-the-go," with natural lighting (Lalonde, n.d.).
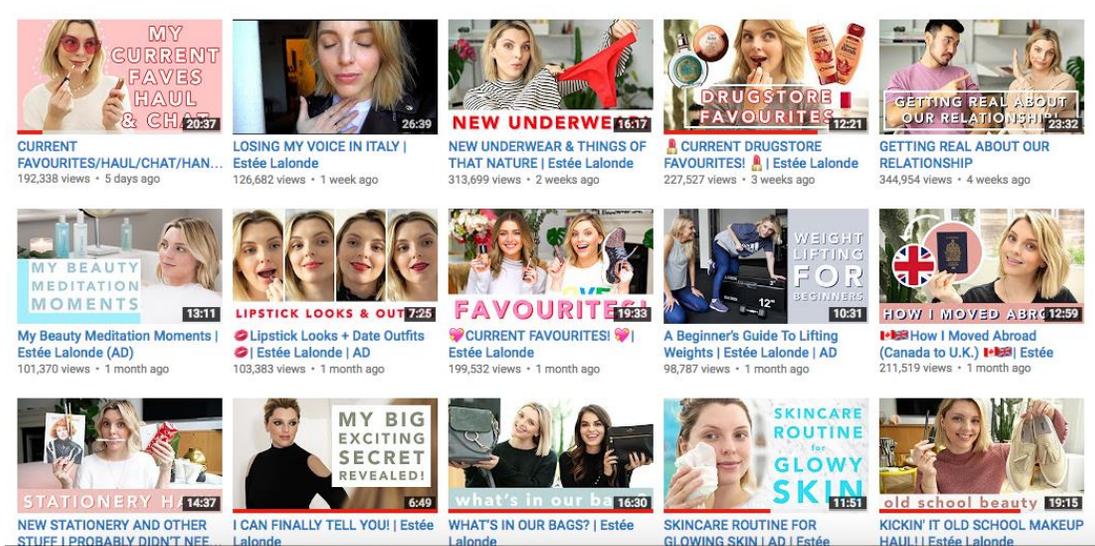
Figure 5 - Screenshot of Estée Lalonde's YouTube thumbnails during the data collection period, YouTube.com; Web. Taken April 4, 2017.
https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCvFyPrPVotqsTlqxUmAOYRw

Bloom is a continuation of her clean, feminine, but minimalist aesthetic in print form. The book prominently features Lalonde sitting in a pink sweatshirt in front of a white background. The inside cover offers the following description:

"In *Bloom*, Estée Lalonde shares the moments, people, and things that have made her who she is today. She reveals her life lessons and offers her tips for surviving life and finding yourself. Celebrate your bloom story and what makes you unique." (Lalonde, 2016a)

There are chapters covering many of the same topics that her digital media content features including life, people, food, beauty, travel, and work. Each chapter is colour-coded in light pinks, purples, corals, and greens. Lalonde shares more intimate details of her life that have yet to be discussed on her channel, including a previously tumultuous relationship with her father that she recently reconnected with, and a chapter titled "The Year I Stopped Laughing" about her battle with depression and anxiety (Lalonde, 2016a). I argue she uses *Bloom* to take her online persona offline in a way to further reinforce the performed authenticity of her branded self. Though she explores some new subject matter like her tumultuous family dynamics, her feminized content is still privileged both in how it is presented and the in-depth discussion it is afforded throughout the book. Her hardships are portrayed as something she is able to solve through blogging, a testament to her resilience and ability to overcome difficulties in her life (Gill & Orgad, 2018). These discussions bolster the notion that she is a complex personality and reinforce her ordinariness in that her life – much like her audiences'– has challenges.

In *Bloom* (2016a), nestled between discussions of her daily work routine and tips for overcoming self-doubt as an entrepreneur, Lalonde discusses feminism. She opens with an anecdote about learning about feminism from her step-sister, a women's studies major. Prior to their discussion, it had never occurred to her that women were something to be "studied," and she admits she really did not know what the feminist movement entailed (p. 99). The 'feminism' section is only two pages long, but within those two pages, Lalonde positions herself as a feminist, albeit a consumable feminist concerned only with female empowerment. Without providing her readers with a definition of how she understands feminism, Lalonde launches into a list of all of the women she

admires: Oprah, Emma Watson, Tina Fey, Amy Poehler, and Sheryl Sandberg among others. Rather than referencing what these women have accomplished in terms of feminist politics, she instead supports them because they are "doing great things" (Lalonde 2016 100). The inclusion of feminism within the 'Work' chapter suggests that her career as an influencer is an integral part of her feminist identity. Through her work, she is empowered as a woman. She frames these women's successes as triumphs for feminism and a testament to the merits of hard work and determination (Rottenberg, 2014). As such, Lalonde performs feminism within the constraints of a neoliberal discourse that emphasizes individual success, and more specifically, professional success (McRobbie 2015; Rottenberg 2014) Lalonde contributing to a larger postfeminist media landscape contradictory to collectivist feminist politics (Gill, 2016).

Postfeminism and beauty in the digital age

Scholars have discussed how digital media can engage in both feminist politics and postfeminist sensibilities (Keller & Ryan, 2018). As such, my goal with this analysis is not to discount the moves towards feminist politics that Lalonde attempts to make, particularly in her book *Bloom*. Instead, I to call into question the larger issue of a postfeminist sentiment espoused by the beauty and lifestyle influencer industry. There is a tension in current media texts in that they often are "antithetical to 'activist feminism' and may or may not engage in postfeminist sensibilities" (Keller & Ryan, 2018, p. 5). This tension makes the continued study of postfeminist texts valuable to scholarship as postfeminism exists as a cultural landscape that has become almost inescapable. I acknowledge that labelling a person or media text feminist or not, or even postfeminist for that matter becomes a complicated issue. My position is that the texts produced and circulated by Lalonde, and other social media influencers, contribute to this larger postfeminist media landscape. As Rosalind Gill asserts (2016), despite feminism's "in status" in our media moment, postfeminism remains "an analytical category to capture a distinctive contradictory-but-patterned sensibility intimately connected to neoliberalism" (p. 610). I understand postfeminism as an analytical term referring to patterns within cultural life that emphasize individualism, choice, and agency (Gill, 2016). Postfeminism insists that self-branding can be empowering but self-branding occurs within the parameters of existing hegemonic conditions, providing a false sense of empowerment (Winch, 2013, p. 193). This is empowerment within a neoliberal context concerned with self-reliance and individual success (Gill, 2017).

Renninger (2018) discusses a new phenomenon in celebrity media coverage in which feminism becomes a topic of conversation in celebrity discourses. In these discourses, feminism becomes less about feminist politics and more about focusing on 'being feminist' as a yes or no response to an interview question (p. 43). This discourse limits understandings of feminism and reduces feminism to an answer to a mere yes or no question rather than a political movement requiring collective action (p.50). I argue this extends to the discourses surrounding influencers. Traditional media outlets do not provide the same high-profile coverage of social media influencers, but their status as feminists is called into question on online forums, especially if the influencer has previously identified themselves as a feminist. This is demonstrated in a thread about Lalonde following her breakup with her long-term boyfriend and users debating whether her post-breakup behaviour makes her any less of a feminist. These posts were concerned with the fact she was posting photos that could be deemed as more sexual, such as one in which she wore a short leather skirt and thigh-high boots (bubblelicious, 2018 April 26) (See Figures 6 and 7). This questioning of her feminist credentials is connected to the postfeminist tendency of scrutinizing and calling feminism into question within sexist media discourses (Gill, 2016). Again, feminism is not a radical political movement, but an identity for women to assume and perform correctly within a neoliberal context that places all responsibility on the individual rather than interrogating larger, systemic issues (Gill, 2016).

Figure 6 - Screenshot of Estée Lalonde's April 5, 2018 post from her account @esteelalonde, Instagram; Web. Taken January 22, 2019. https://www.instagram.com/esteelalonde/?hl=en
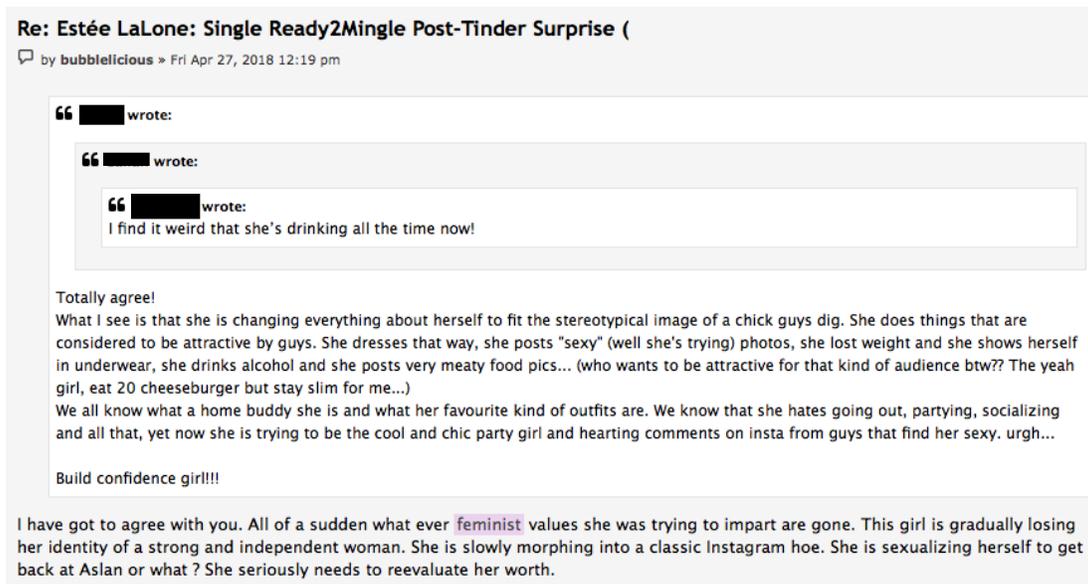
Figure 7 - Screenshot taken from Guru Gossiper, a forum dedicated to gossiping about beauty influencers. Gurugossiper.com. Web. Taken January 22, 2019. https://gurugossiper.com/viewtopic.php?f=163&t=33628&p=3049741&hilit=feminist#p3049741

It is also important to consider the tension between corporate messages of empowerment and the popularity of beauty vloggers (Banet-Weiser, 2017, p. 275). On one hand, brands sponsor these young women to create how-to videos that promote external beauty ideals while simultaneously producing advertising campaigns that emphasize loving one-self just as you are. This dichotomy extends further within the YouTubers themselves who often engage in acts labelled as self-love or self-care, while simultaneously promoting consumer goods, and a work culture that emphasizes providing free labour with the hopes of future economic return (Duffy, 2016), all while performing an aesthetic vigilance that requires self-governmentality (Dosekun, 2015). This constant tension is emblematic of postfeminist tendencies within the online beauty and lifestyle community. With beauty comes the promise of self-confidence and success. Beauty is commodified and external; with enough "effort, skill, and disposable income, beauty is attainable, albeit iteratively" (Dosekun, 2015, p. 170). Beauty, in this sense, is a highly-individualized concept that necessitates dedicated aesthetic labour (Banet-Weiser, 2017). Even 'me-time' is scheduled and is an important aspect of engaging in aesthetic vigilance, which can also be categorized as a form of postfeminist governmentality (Dosekun, 2015, p. 176).

Passionate Work

Duffy and Hund (2015) have identified three interrelated tropes of entrepreneurial femininity among fashion bloggers. While Lalonde may not be strictly fashion, her image embodies many of the same ideals. The first trope is a destiny of passionate work. Empowered women are passionate about their careers and act as evidence that women can overcome systemic gender inequality if only they work hard enough. The second trope is displaying a glam life. Fashion bloggers will emphasize their expensive shoes, clothing, and accessories. Within this glam life, there is usually a heterosexual romance that is touted as an accessory. Finally, concerning their authenticity online, bloggers will have carefully curated social media sharing. Their brand and aesthetic will be consistent across platforms.

Estée's passionate work started as beauty on YouTube but morphed into a lifestyle empire when she rebranded from Essie Button to Estée Lalonde. With this rebrand, she focused on being what she labelled as "authentically" self, which meant moving beyond hair and makeup into food, fitness, and fashion. She was able to make this move because of her dedication to YouTube and her craft. When discussing how she achieved success, Lalonde avoids mention of her privileged position, including having the ability to relocate across the globe, purchase a vlogging and professional camera, and owning the makeup to start her channel in the first place. Her glam life is wrapped up in images of femininity, with brightly coloured fonts and lipstick. The clothing she wears is almost exclusively high-end. Aslan, her boyfriend, features predominantly in her curated Instagram and YouTube videos. She credits their falling in love as one of the reasons for her success (Chapman, 2016). Aslan is an important player in her narrative of authenticity. Her romance with him makes her relatable. They go on dates, share ice cream, and miss each other when apart. She uploads Q & A style videos to demonstrate just how "real" their relationship is. He even helped set up her blog which would later lead to her successful YouTube channel (Lalonde, 2016a).

In *Bloom*'s chapter 'Work,' Lalonde talks about her journey from small-time blogger to influencer. She emphasizes staying motivated, self-discipline, and self-motivation (Lalonde, 2016a). Among her top-ten things she's learned from her business she lists following her heart, the importance of being your own boss, and to work on projects you are passionate about. These are powerful messages of passionate work that make up the online identities of influencers. The emphasis is on self-governmentality in order to achieve success (Duffy, 2016). She details how she spent years building her brand by scheduling her time and regulating herself in order to work from home efficiently (Lalonde, 2016a, p. 79-107). In addition, she disciplines herself by following rigorous hair, skincare,

and makeup routines. These routines span two chapters in her book and include multiple steps and products to achieve a look labelled as naturally beautiful (Lalonde, 2016a). Also, in this chapter is a small section on female empowerment. As previously discussed, her discussion of feminist politics is non-existent. She lists women she is inspired by and in a way, reduces feminism to being supportive of other women. Lalonde's feminism is focused on empowerment and encouraging fellow women. Her choice to include feminism within her chapter about work is interesting in and of itself, and further solidifies her position within the tropes of entrepreneurial femininity as feminism adds to her narrative of empowerment (Duffy & Hund, 2015).

Performing public femininity

Lalonde engages in what Banet-Weiser (2011) has labelled a visual and virtual postfeminist identity of public femininity. This identity is antithetical to activist feminism as it is centred on self-promotion and self-branding, two individualistic acts that go against the collectivist goals of feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2011). Lalonde portrays herself as a self-reliant woman and empowered consumer. She becomes a product to be bought and sold within a neoliberal context. Because neoliberalism is concerned with individual promotion, the presence of commercial brands as structuring narratives for her videos indicates a reliance on branded goods under the guise of being a liberated, empowered female (Banet-Weiser, 2011). This self-branding occurs within hegemonic conditions that create a false sense of empowerment (Winch, 2013).

   While Lalonde is no doubt successful, her success relies heavily on discourses of traditional female beauty and consumption. The brands become references not only as commodities but necessities for everyday life. Influencers provide "feminine labour that hinges on commercial intimacies," focusing on homosocial friendships and paid posts (Abidin, 2016, p. 5).

   Historically, a woman's place has been in the home performing domestic duties. Lifestyle influencers reinforce this discourse by locating themselves firmly within the domestic sphere. Lifestyle blogging brings women back home after second-wave feminism encouraged them to seek work elsewhere (Negra, 2009). Postfeminism influences how young women conceptualize personal satisfaction. Satisfaction does not have to come from working outside the home but rather from finding a life-work balance (Sandoval, 2014). The notion of "doing it all" is at the forefront of the post-second-wave understanding of what it means to be an empowered woman. Despite growing economic and political agency, this postfeminist behaviour online suggests that gender expectations continue to affect women (Sandoval, 2014). Lalonde embodies a "public self-expression and self-branding (...) validated by the cultural context of postfeminism which, among other things, connects gender empowerment with consumer activity" (Banet-Weiser, 2011, p. 280). Her social media content is still largely focused on beauty, self-improvement, and shopping. *Bloom* includes eight chapters, four of which are concerned with the historically feminine spheres of beauty, fashion, home, and food. Even the chapter about work calls back to how beauty has allowed her to pursue her creative passions (Lalonde, 2016a).

Conclusion

In considering the production, consumption, and platform vernacular (Maguire, 2015; Gibbs et al. 2015), Lalonde's YouTube and Instagram pages offer a look into the nuanced world of femininity in the vlogosphere. Through the enactment of public domestic femininity, influencers embody postfeminist ideals about what it means to be empowered and successful. Using her passionate creative work and romance with her long-term boyfriend as the backbone to her success, she relies on affective feelings and the curation of authenticity through YouTube's unique platform affordances and paid posts on Instagram to establish her branded narrative of perceived authenticity (Abidin,

2016). She relies on feelings of connectedness and a "you could be here with me" style of vlog and photography to attract and maintain a loyal fan base, as well as position herself as a voice of authority. The narration of her life story allows for feelings of intimacy which further establishes her credibility with her audience (Abidin, 2016). Her successes rely heavily on discourses of hegemonic femininity and women's traditional domestic role working in the home. By engaging in these discourses, influencers use their feminine image as a way to further their economic and social goals online (Shields-Dobson, 2008). I argue these enactments of postfeminist ideals relate to larger conversations about feminism that are ongoing both in scholarship and popular media (Banet-Weiser, 2015; Keller & Ryan, 2018; Renninger, 2018). The popularity of beauty and lifestyle content and establishing of these influencers as voices of authority on political issues necessitates continued critical discussion of these online practices.

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