

CHALLENGING IDEAS OF FEMALE EMPOWERMENT ON INSTAGRAM USING  
MCROBBIE'S THEORY OF POST-FEMINIST DISARTICULATION INSIDE  
POPULAR CULTURE

by

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## Abstract

Given the recent resurgence of feminist topics within popular media, the purpose of this MRP is to interrogate the theory of post-feminist disarticulation put forth by Angela McRobbie in *The Aftermath of Feminism* in order to understand fashion's role in the disarticulation of young women in a contemporary context. By examining how the post-feminist tropes identified by McRobbie have evolved in the last decade alongside the rise of app-based social media and neoliberal feminism—more specifically, how prominent female influencers use fashion and beauty to disseminate post-feminist rhetoric from within their feeds on Instagram (IG)—this MRP will contribute to the literature on fashion and post-feminism within the digital economy. With this research, I intend to shed light on how fashion and beauty influencers are effectively acting as double agents of the patriarchy by interpellating new generations of young women into damaging post-feminist discourse.

In McRobbie's seminal text, she argues that institutional gains made by feminism in the 1970s and 1980s are, in this century, being undermined by what she describes as a new form of gender power: a regime that co-opts young women into spearheading their own process of disarticulation by leading them to believe equality has been achieved through education, employment, and notional sexual freedom. Disarticulation is defined by McRobbie as “a force which devalues, or negates, and makes unthinkable the very basis of coming-together (even if to take part in disputatious encounters), on the assumption widely promoted that there is no longer any need for such actions” (26). These ideas are disseminated through popular media sources—at the time of her research, these included TV, film and fashion magazines—and serve as a substitute for feminism

by subverting ideas of agency and choice with an individualistic discourse centred around consumer culture, self-management, self-enterprise, and self-transformation. McRobbie posits that while these concepts appear to offer the possibility of freedom and change in the status of young women, they are simply new tools for groups seeking to re-establish unequal gender and power hierarchies (2). These forces, she explains, are part of a patriarchal system of economic power and domination, despite appearing as progressive forms of governmentality (2). After McRobbie, within this MRP these forces will be collectively referred to as ‘the new regime’.

This MRP seeks to test and explore the limitations of McRobbie’s framework by examining how this process is currently playing out on hyper-visible IG fashion feeds with a million followers or more. A theoretical interrogation of her existing framework will be updated and applied to IG in order to analyse how influencers use fashion and beauty concepts to participate in the disarticulation of other women. While McRobbie’s research looks at how consumer culture limits our so-called female freedoms by entrenching women in post-feminist neurotic dependencies, my research will focus on fashion and beauty’s role in solidifying new post-feminist tropes that serve to stabilize the traditional hierarchy of gender power.

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<b>AUTHOR'S DECLARATION FOR ELECTRONIC SUBMISSION OF A MRP .....</b>	<b>II</b>
<b>ABSTRACT .....</b>	<b>III</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....</b>	<b>V</b>
<b>LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.....</b>	<b>VII</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>LITERATURE REVIEW .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>FASHION AND POST-FEMINIST TROPES, THEN AND NOW .....</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>79</b>
<b>WORKS CITED .....</b>	<b>87</b>

## List of Illustrations

- 1) Instagram post from March 8, 2018 by @ambervscott. Feminist-themed portrait with roses. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/BgEtevAFu9B/>
- 2) Instagram post from December 5, 2018 by @manrepeller. Portrait of Leandra Medine with hat, barrettes and sunglasses. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/BrAr0YYH10y/>
- 3) Instagram post from January 22, 2019 by @manrepeller. Portrait of Sara Jessica Parker in New York City. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bs859jceneeL/>
- 4) Instagram post from January 27, 2019 by @iamcardib. Portrait of Cardi in elevator. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/BtJavlwFcwQ/>
- 5) Instagram post from February 16, 2019 by @iamcardib. Video of Cardi on couch wearing Moschino. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bt9z6Q-g0tk/>
- 6) Instagram profile pic by @iamcardib. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/iamcardib/>
- 7) Instagram post from September 17, 2018 by @chrisellelim. Portrait of Chriselle Lim wearing CL Collection. Retrieved from [https://www.instagram.com/p/Bn1wG73Bi\\_H/](https://www.instagram.com/p/Bn1wG73Bi_H/)
- 8) Instagram post from January 17, 2019 by @chrisellelim. Portrait of Chriselle Lim holding breast pump outside Chateau Marmont. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/BswQ67FBE1B/>
- 9) Instagram post from April 16, 2019 by @hudabeauty. Portrait of Huda Kattan. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/BwThhuplwxC/>

- 10) Instagram post from February 24, 2019 by @hudabeauty. Portrait of @laviedunprince. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/BuQnaUiF31y/>
- 11) Instagram post from February 12, 2019 by @hudabeauty. Video makeup tutorial about nose contouring by Huda Kattan. <https://www.instagram.com/p/BuQnaUiF31y/>



## Introduction

*Why McRobbie, why now?*

Dr. Angela McRobbie, FSA, FBA, is a Professor of Communications at Goldsmiths, University of London. Her feminist critiques of the fashion industry and consumerism have positioned her as one of the leading feminist thinkers of our age within the arena of communication and culture. While much of her early work is fashion-focussed (*British Fashion Design*; “Fashion Culture”) more recent research on the subject of the global fashion industry and new forms of labour in the creative economy (*Be Creative*) is highly relevant to the field of fashion studies and re-establish her as an important voice in this area.

In *The Aftermath of Feminism*, McRobbie builds upon Stuart Hall’s theory of articulation to put forward a theory of post-feminist disarticulation. In Hall’s definition, articulation is where marginalised groups form alliances with other similarly disenfranchised groups, bonding over common interests to create larger, more resistant structures (25). According to John Clarke, “(i)n developing his work around the concept of articulation, Hall always emphasised a double meaning, in which the ideas of ‘to give voice to’ and ‘to connect’ are always implied and always co-present” (277).

Disarticulation in a post-feminist context, then, prevents women of different ages, ethnicities, and economic groups from forming a united power base or exchanging information that could assist in making any significant gains against the new regime.

In what McRobbie describes as a double movement (26), once these women have been successfully isolated, they must also be led to believe that equality has been achieved. Isolation is achieved through a new sexual contract, whereby education,

employment, and the appearance of sexual freedom denies young women the right to challenge existing gender hierarchies because they should be grateful for these notional freedoms (82). The commercial domain—within which reside the spheres of fashion, beauty, body culture, and popular media—is the face of the new regime, tasked with reinforcing patriarchal norms and authority, and acting as a source of judgement for young women. “In the language of health and well-being,” says McRobbie, “the global fashion-beauty complex charges itself with the business of ensuring that appropriate gender relations are guaranteed” (61).

The overarching themes addressed by McRobbie within *The Aftermath of Feminism* appear in some of her earlier research, and her insights into ways that neoliberal government policies affected women in British cultural industries (“*British Fashion Design*”; “Feminism and Youth Culture”) particularly resonate with me. As an art and fashion student in London from 1998 to 2003—roughly the same time period examined by McRobbie—I have direct, experiential knowledge of the cultural trends she described: youth-targeted hype around the New Labour government and a ‘Ladette’ culture that glamorised hedonistic promiscuity, binge drinking, and drug abuse, all enticingly repackaged with trendy new street fashions—baggy Maharishi parachute pants, embroidered denim jackets, bucket hats and Nike Air Max 95s were worn as a unisex uniform as an illusory expression of gender equality—and promoted by Britpop icons under the nationalistic banner of ‘Cool Britannia’.

The climate of competition between women described by McRobbie—fuelled by concepts of class, education, and employment, and disseminated through female magazines, TV and film—were likewise palpable in London from the late 90s onwards,

although I was completely unaware of the role these played in my individual process of disarticulation. Instead, I increasingly subscribed to the modalities of popular feminism and neoliberal culture of the time, with a *Sex and the City* (HBO, Seasons 1–6, 1998–2004) inspired focus on fashion consumption, self-governance, and self-transformation. As an active participant in my own post-feminist process of disarticulation, I felt that women should be responsible for themselves, refusing assistance from the state or other organizations. I believed that in a western meritocracy, women possessed the power to overcome racism and sexism; this notion impacted my work as a fashion marketer, and I then disseminated the same concepts to other young women. An ever-increasing dissonance between the promised outcomes of a neoliberal approach (equity in exchange for hard work and adherence to specific gendered norms) and the realities I faced in the fashion industry steadily marred my self-esteem and self-worth. Instead of considering the broader dynamics at play across my education and career, I blamed myself for not measuring up to (the seemingly numerous) exemplars of successful women in fashion.

Even so, it is important for me to acknowledge that as a slim, White, straight, cisgendered woman, the negative impact of these dynamics has been necessarily lesser than that shouldered by racialised, LGBTQ+ or otherwise marginalised individuals living and working in similar spaces. McRobbie's framework does not discuss how the post-feminist process of disarticulation affects non-binary, transgender or other female-identifying groups; it is unfortunately beyond the scope of this MRP, but given the prominent role of the fashion and beauty complex in the formation of feminine identities, this subject merits further research within the feminist academy and fashion studies.

While McRobbie's research is British-centric, I conduct my research with an American lens, as the latter country is playing a pivotal role in what the popular media has dubbed a new women's movement. McRobbie's research coincides with Britain's New Labour government, led by Tony Blair from the mid-1990s to early 2000s after 18 consecutive years of Conservative rule. She describes how Labour promoted the idea of a post-feminist meritocracy within the U.K. by taking advantage of the powerful sway that pop culture, fashion, and new media holds over young voting demographics. As the youngest prime minister since 1812, Blair was seen as a hip figurehead capable of shaking up an out-of-date Parliamentary system. His party's triumphalism manifested in popular print magazines like *Vanity Fair*, with playful commentary like that of the 1997's cover story *London Swings! Again!*. "Say hello to shirt-sleeved, smiling Tony Blair, the leader of the ascendant Labour Party. The Right Honourable Tony is just 43 years old and has an outlook to match. 'The hope that change will bring,' he says, 'is outweighing the fear of change'" (Kamp). Looking back, McRobbie describes how while Blair was Prime Minister,

Feminism was put into cold storage as women were expected to be smiling and compliant 'Blair babes.' I recall this time well, when even female students who were otherwise interested in questions of work, employment, gender and sexuality nevertheless repudiated feminism, feeling that they could do just as well without it. It was fashionable to affect a kind of 'phallic femininity' by acting like a young man, with a flask of whisky in the back pocket, happy to hang out in a lap-dancing club. ("Anti-feminism, then and now")

Much like New Labour's influence on the formation of McRobbie's tropes, Barack Obama's governmental rhetoric directly influenced how these tropes have evolved or resurfaced in a contemporary context. His presidency marks the beginning of profound social and technological change in the U.S. and, like Blair, he leveraged popular media as a primary communication modality and relied heavily on social media channels<sup>1</sup> to reach youthful voters both throughout his campaign and as president—including announcing his vice presidential pick on Twitter. Given the historical significance of Obama's presidency this may, at first glance, seem trivial—until we consider how smartphones and app-based social media allow for such rapid dissemination of hyper-targeted content that vulnerable groups such as young women can be relentlessly exposed to incredibly fine-grained tools of social control.

### *The Intersection of Fashion, Feminism, Politics and Pop Culture*

In the case of both Blair and Obama's governments, a facade of progressive governmental discourse concealed neoliberal policy that effectively stymied any real advancements towards greater gender equality.<sup>2</sup> Performative fashion statements for various causes are increasingly common within the new women's movement, and politicians now regularly use online fashion platforms like *Glamour.com*, *Vogue.com* and *Teenvogue.com* as a communication modality to target young women with post-feminist ideals disguised as feminism to solicit support for their campaigns. Their use of fashion platforms to reach female voters indicates that politicians recognise just how deeply young women are entrenched in consumer culture and choose to capitalise on this; this

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<sup>1</sup> The way Americans experienced the news changed significantly while Obama was in office—by 2016,

<sup>2</sup> From 1997 to 2007 the gender pay gap in Britain only decreased by 3% (House, Eland et al.); between 2010 and 2015 in the U.S., by only 2.7% ("Women's Earnings" 3)

means that fashion, politics and the particular brand of feminism proffered by this movement are now inexorably linked. “This is what a feminist looks like,” proclaimed Obama, referring to himself in an article he penned for *Glamour.com*<sup>3</sup> four months before the 2016 presidential election. In a final attempt to encourage young voters to support his party’s female candidate, he explained how “(w)hen you’re the father of two daughters, you become even more aware of how gender stereotypes pervade our society. You see the subtle and not-so-subtle social cues transmitted through culture. You feel the enormous pressure girls are under to look and behave and even think a certain way.” While his message is important, Obama’s use of an online fashion platform to reach young women validates the fashion and beauty system’s influence over this demographic.

Hillary Rodham Clinton (HRC), the Democratic candidate in the 2016 election, was famously supported by fashionable celebrities identified by popular media as feminists, including Lena Dunham, Beyoncé, and Lady Gaga (Filipovic; Valenti; Saddiqui). Amy Chozick credits HRC with igniting a new feminist movement—by losing. “(A) fervour has swept the country, prompting women’s marches, a record number of female candidates running for office and an outcry about sexual assault at all levels of society.” Like Obama, HRC also chose a popular fashion platform to address young women after losing the election to Donald Trump. As Guest Editor of *Teen Vogue*, *Volume IV*, a self-described “celebration of resistance and resilience”, HRC explained to the magazine’s youthful readership that “Teen Vogue takes teen girls seriously and understands that style and substance aren’t mutually exclusive”, describing how she

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<sup>3</sup> This essay was first published online in August 2018 and appeared in the following month’s print edition of the magazine.

“love(s) seeing articles about the search for the perfect makeup remover next to essays about running for office” (Hillary Rodham Clinton).

According to McRobbie’s theories, it is exactly these types of paradoxical statements that engage young women in activating their own disarticulation. McRobbie has since acknowledged that the optimism she shared in *Feminism and Youth Culture: From Jackie to Just 17* (1992) grossly overestimated the potential for a new generation of politically conscious women taking the helm of women’s magazines to advance feminist thinking. She writes that the power of global capitalism and advertisers was too strong to allow for a subversion of consumer culture within the spheres of fashion and beauty, and that instead an aggressive form of individualism took hold (“The Aftermath” 5). “This breaking up has accelerated [...] young women are now targeted as having a special role to play in the dismantling and modernisation process” (“The Aftermath” 24). Some 27 years later, the same issues are playing out across fashion and beauty’s digital footprint, as evidenced in my exploration of IG fashion influencers.

Has this new women’s movement moved us any closer to ending female oppression? I argue that while this issue is multi-faceted and complex, it has not. In a 2013 podcast with Nigel Warburton, McRobbie explains that despite an increase in feminist topics within popular media,

the presence of this fashion-beauty complex comes to be oddly obsessive about femininity, at a time when it seems as though there has been the chance for women to actually achieve a greater degree of equality. And what I see this kind of orchestrated, hyper-femininity doing, is absolutely limiting the possibilities that young women have to participate in political culture. (“Angela McRobbie on”)

While the new women's movement is labelled Fourth Wave feminism by some (Grady; Williams; Maclaren; Munro; Solomon) and criticized by others as being the reserve of middle-class Whites (Grady; Williams; Munro), it can loosely be traced back to 2008 when social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter achieved mass consumer adoption, and feminist blogs like Jezebel had gained a significant readership of young women on the web. Jezebel alone had over 10 million monthly page views by 2007 (Grady; Smith). Some assert that if a fourth wave of feminism does indeed exist, it is an online phenomenon (Solomon).

This could be attributed to a shift in the way popular culture content is produced and consumed. While McRobbie's research considered film, television, pop culture and women's magazines, web-based blogging platforms were not included within the scope of her work, despite their prevalence at the time of *Aftermath*'s publication. This omission is significant because with the rise of the style blogger,<sup>4</sup> initially lauded as a signal of increasing democratisation in fashion, there was potential for McRobbie's unrealised vision of a subverted consumer culture to flourish. Anyone with access to a computer could use platforms like Blogger.com to create content where standards of beauty and fashion were not dictated by publishers and advertisers. More importantly, these style bloggers could reach millions of readers around the world for free.

Free online publishing platforms may have initially offered spaces for articulation, reinforcing community and bolstering human connection, but their operation within a neoliberal context ensured a swift evolution into competitive spaces characterized by commoditization and individualistic discourse. As advertisers came to

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<sup>4</sup> Notable examples include Susie Lau of Style Bubble, a personal style blog launched in 2007, and 11 year old Tavi Gevinson of Style Rookie, launched in 2008 (Lewis).



understand the reach and influence of prominent style bloggers, the most popular brokered lucrative advertising contracts and became yet another mechanism within the fashion and beauty advertorial machine. Then, in 2010, the first generation of web-based content sharing platforms gave way to a much more powerful tool: native applications that could be accessed 24/7 via any smartphone. Instagram (IG) launched in October of that year, and within 3 months had some 1.5 million users (Lagorio-Chafkin). A free photo and video sharing app that can be downloaded onto virtually any mobile device, IG allows users to share photos, videos, and live content with all or select groups of their followers, and users can like and comment on these posts. Audio/visual notifications can be enabled so that users are kept tethered around the clock, and hash tags—a concept borrowed from Twitter—allows users to easily find thematic posts. A speedy scrolling functionality means users aren't redirected to another page to see more content, thus eliminating loading time. Furthermore, as the user interface was designed primarily for mobile and not desktop, all content fits neatly on a phone screen, meaning users can easily access it anywhere.

As of October 2018, 50.4% of IG's active one billion users are women (*Statista.com*). Online personas are constructed through a carefully considered selection of photos, and studies have found female users consider presenting themselves as friendly, sociable, attractive and wearing pleasing attire as more important than male users do. Female users also display more photos compared to male users, so within the sphere of fashion and beauty IG is the perfect platform for young women to continually share content with one another (Feltman and Szymanski 312). IG's guidelines suggest a minimum user age of 13, but fashion influencers as young as three years old have been

profiled by the media (Moss). I argue that women are more susceptible to concepts of self-monitoring and self-regulation within the fashion and beauty complex; why and how this plays out on IG will be discussed in my literature review.

IG quickly became a massively popular social media platform, second only to Facebook. Some of the feminist concepts that flourished within the new women's movement garnered their own hash tags for use on IG as they went viral—and those that promote feminism as an identity seem to be most prolific (at the time of my research, some 5,728,175 posts have been tagged #feminist). Inside and outside of the confines of IG, feminist ideas are presented to young women through fashion items; images of young women wearing variations on “feminist” slogan tees were, for a time, seen across IG feeds worldwide.<sup>5</sup> Both #imwithher (a reference to one of HRC's campaign slogans in 2011) and #iamanastywoman (in response to Trump's derisive name-calling during the third presidential debate) became commonplace IG captions and subsequently appeared on everything from sew-on patches to a plethora of slogan tees. Specific garments and accessories were paired with hash tags and reimagined as visual forms of protest: #pantsuitnation riffed off comments made within the popular media about HRC's pantsuits, inspiring thousands of young women (including Beyoncé and Lena Dunham) to post images of themselves in pantsuits on IG in solidarity; hash tags like #thispussygrabsback accompanied images of women wearing hand-knit pink ‘pussy’

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<sup>5</sup> A noteworthy example is Dior's S/S 2017 “We Should All Be Feminists” slogan tee quoting Black Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's “We Should All Be Feminists” viral essay and Ted Talk. Part of the proceeds from the sales of this restrictively priced fashion product (about \$710 USD) went to Rihanna's charitable foundation, but in the three months following the tee's debut within the brand's IG feed (on a White actress) this tee shirt appeared 14 more times on White women, compared to only four times on women of colour and once on a Black man.

hats<sup>6</sup> to protest Trump's inauguration in the fall of 2016; and #timesup announced a cohort of famous actresses wearing black gowns at the 2018 Golden Globe Awards in a show of protest against gender inequality in Hollywood as part of the 'Time's Up'<sup>7</sup> movement. In all of these examples, images of women using clothing as a visual challenge to the new regime spread globally via IG.

Leveraging fashion items as emblems of women's movements is, of course, not a new concept. Take the suffragettes' white garments in the early 1900s, for example, or 1970s Second Wave feminist tees that proclaimed 'The Future is Female'. Reimagined under the lens of Fourth Wave feminism, both were transformed into paradoxical feminist statements: HRC wore white pantsuits during her campaign, directly alluding to suffragettes even as her feminist credentials were frequently called into question;<sup>8</sup> reprints of 'The Future is Female' tees were worn by celebrities and fashion influencers with high-heels and red lipstick (Meltzer), demonstrating a lack of awareness of the Lesbian feminist origins of the shirt's message and why styling it in such an overtly feminine way might contradict its intended statement.

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<sup>6</sup> To protest a leaked tape of Trump captured during a filming for Access Hollywood in 2005, groups of women knit pink hats with cat-like ears and sold them through online marketplaces such as Etsy. He explained to host Billy Bush how he forced himself on women: "(a)nd when you're a star, they let you do it," he said. "You can do anything. Grab them by the pussy. You can do anything" (Dickinson).

<sup>7</sup> According to the movement's website, "TIME'S UP is an organization that insists on safe, fair and dignified work for women of all kinds. In the fall of 2017—as revelations of widespread abuse and misbehavior at the hands of powerful men sparked a global reckoning—a group of women in entertainment began to meet. Artists, executives, producers and other leaders came together to talk about what we could do to prevent abuse and ensure equity for working women. As they grappled with the reality that 80 to 90 percent of leadership in our industry was male—and largely composed of white men—we realized systemic change was necessary" (*Timesupnow.com*).

<sup>8</sup> McRobbie responded to HRC's loss by questioning the validity of the argument Clinton was out of touch with ordinary women voters. She argues this does not explain why so many women willingly voted for a man "prepared to limit their rights to reproduction and thus impede their very ability to take part in the workplace on any kind of equal level with men. This phenomenon is only explicable if we take anti-feminism more fully into account" ("Anti-feminism, then and now"). Her theorizing of a postfeminist sexual contract appears in other post-election analyses of HRC's failed political campaign: young women can subscribe to the belief they can be anything they want so long as they act as though gender is no longer a restriction (Rudy).

These types of actions are problematic because post-feminist visual cues send the message that one can conform to standards of femininity set by traditional power structures and still be considered a feminist. In this way, commodity feminism appears to mitigate potentially disruptive feminist ideals (Caldeira 14), because when a feminist statement is co-opted by fashion it becomes performative and replaces other, more concrete forms of action.

This MRP argues that post-feminist disarticulation is being enacted on IG in such a way that no group of women is exempt; however, all women are not affected proportionately. White privilege, in the context of McRobbie's theorizing of a new sexual contract ("The Aftermath" 9) has contributed to the inaccurate and dangerous notion that we live in a post-sexist and post-racial society—a damaging concept that perpetuates the ongoing oppression of different marginalised groups. Working towards similar outcomes for various groups of women does not necessarily mean there needs to be a total agreeance, but an idealistic envisioning of feminist articulation would account for all voices and experiences.

Within post-feminism and popular culture, and particularly within the sphere of fashion and beauty, McRobbie points to a nostalgia for Whiteness in the early 2000s. Citing the popularity of burlesque performer and model Dita Von Teese and a spate of high fashion advertisements that offered "a kind of looking back to periods of time 'undisturbed' by the need to take the politics of race and multiculturalism into account", she writes that this eliminated "the need for White to register as ethnic as it is the norm by which all else are 'other' (42). Black and Asian fashion consumers were then (and continue to be) largely ignored by mainstream fashion and beauty publications, and,

under New Labour's assimilation policies, encouraged to abandon multi-cultural differences and find ways of identifying with the majority. If they made the personal choice to turn to their own Black or Asian magazines, this suggests that racial boundaries were being reconsolidated (42). Furthermore, within the pages of Black women's magazines, light-skinned women and discouragement of overtly radicalised hairstyles and clothing led to a resurgence of "colonial-induced racial self-hatred" and "the re-instatement of familiar racial hierarchies within the field of femininity" (43). More recently, however, some of these rejected physical characteristics and styles have become fashionable for both Black and White women. The role this trend plays in the post-feminist process of disarticulation will be further discussed within my discussion of contemporary post-feminist tropes.

I argue that the new women's movement is post-feminist, not feminist, because young women are being led to believe that feminism is an identity that can be created with a tee shirt, a hat, a white suit, or a black gown instead of understanding feminism as a political commitment. bell hooks suggests we avoid using the phrase "I am a feminist"—which infers feminism can be a personal aspect of identity and self-definition—and should instead state, "I advocate feminism." (31). The post-feminist process of disarticulation relies on there being no clear delineation between feminism and post-feminism: young women must remain unsure of whether or not sexist, racist, and classist oppression has ended. McRobbie refers to this tension between post-feminism and feminism as a double entanglement ("The Aftermath" 26).

Given that the underlying intention of the post-feminist process of disarticulation is to prevent marginalised groups of women from unifying to form larger power

structures, my research prioritizes the research of feminist scholars who challenge patriarchal authority within the academy. Therefore, following Sara Ahmed's citation standards, I have made a conscious choice to not reference the work of any White men, defined by Ahmed as an institution of patriarchal Whiteness (15), as my primary sources have already reviewed the most significant literature from this group informing this topic (notably Foucauldian theories of individualization, self-monitoring, and neoliberalism (Elias & Gill; Gill; Marwick; McRobbie; Rutherford; Scharff). I support Ahmed's assertion that "citations can be feminist bricks" and that feminist scholarship must acknowledge its antecedents with intention in order to challenge conscious and unconscious assumptions that all important ideas originate with White men (16). Marginalization in neoliberal climates is notable for its insidiousness and invisibility; by prioritizing work by underrepresented groups in academia, my intention is to demonstrate that feminist scholarship offers a solid foundation from which to approach the realm of fashion studies.

McRobbie identifies four key tropes in *The Aftermath of Feminism* as being largely accountable for spearheading the post-feminist process of disarticulation amongst young women. These tropes are derived from what she describes as the attribution of post-feminist freedoms to largely First World scenarios; paradoxically, these 'freedoms' are devised to induce the undoing of feminism ("Top Girls" 719). She theorizes that under the guise of post-feminist equality, young women are attributed with capacity. They are urged to become hyperactive across the three key sites where this newfound visibility is centred (718): the field of consumer culture, the realm of sexual freedom, and the fields of education and employment. From within these categories emerge the Post-

Feminist Masquerade, tied to consumer culture and so pervasive it reappears within the other tropes; the Phallic Girl, who arises from her notional sexual freedom; and the Working Girl and the Global Girl, tied to the spaces of education and employment. Fashion and appearance play a pivotal role in helping these tropes find form, and my research explores how, in a contemporary context, fashion and IG gives these tropes even greater voice and traction within the global community and validates them within an increasingly entrenched neoliberal paradigm.

### **Literature Review**

This MRP draws from the literature of several disciplines to dissect how distinctive tropes emerging or evolving on IG have activated and encouraged a post-feminist process of disarticulation. While the same communication and fashion and consumerist paradigms find embodiment in the individuals who reinforce the four tropes identified by McRobbie, these tropes now touch more racially diverse groups of women than they did at the time of her theorizing; this will be addressed within my discussion of the literature. Furthermore, the ways that post-feminist concepts affect women outside of the U.S. must also be re-examined now given the phenomenally global reach of IG as compared to the popular media sources referenced by McRobbie.

McRobbie's work has been reviewed by numerous scholars in their discussions of fashion, feminism, and creative labour within the digital economy. While some of these studies—and other literature that informs my research—are published outside of critical studies of fashion and beauty and found within feminist media studies, gender studies and cultural studies, fashion's role in the formation and dissemination of post-feminist concepts is a recurring theme across these areas of academia. I argue that this diverse

literature crosses over boundaries into the realm of fashion studies, a relatively new field that includes voices from various facets of the academy to provide a richer contextualization and understanding of the fashion and beauty complex and its role in contemporary society. Furthermore, given that popular culture and the media play an important role in the dissemination of information to young women, I also look to articles published within the popular media to add depth to my analysis with commentary from sources who are directly affected by the concepts I discuss.

To define feminism, I turn to bell hooks: “Feminism is the struggle to end sexist oppression. Its aim is not to benefit solely any specific group of women, any particular race or class of women. It does not privilege women over men” (23). She also questions the notion of gender equality:

Since men are not equals in (W)hite su--premacist, capitalist, patriarchal class structure, which men do women want to be equal to? [...] Implicit in this simplistic definition [...] is a dismissal of race and class as factors that, in conjunction with sexism, determine the extent to which an individual will be discriminated against, exploited, or oppressed. Bourgeois (W)hite women interested in women's rights issues have been satisfied with simple definitions for obvious reasons. Rhetorically placing themselves in the same social category as oppressed women, they are not anxious to call attention to race and class privilege. (19)

In 2002, Anne Cranny-Francis et al. optimistically argued that the term post-feminist could better be defined as “post-second-wave-feminist”,



a challenging of earlier feminist movements which silenced and suppressed marginalised groups, allowing them to now form alliances and position their own feminist critique specifically within their own cultural background [...] (to) explore the nature of both their differences and similarities [...] and work towards the elimination of the inequities that separate women—racism, homophobia and classism. (68)

Sarah Ahmed argues that feminism, then, is still necessary because sexist, racist and classist oppression have not ended, and feminism must be intersectional to be effective (5). I will later discuss intersectional feminist critiques of McRobbie's theories, which denounce some of her tropes for centering the White experience.

*Fashion, Beauty and Intersectional Feminism: Situating Black Women within the Contours of Post-Feminism*

Rosalind Gill posits that while McRobbie attempted to think intersectionally, within her research the female subject centred by post-feminism is, by default, White and middle class ("The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of post-feminism" 613). According to Gill, the term post-feminist is contested by many academics who argue that it should be removed from our critical vocabulary as it does not take into account all female voices and implies that equality has been achieved (611). Gill explains how the new cultural prominence of feminism lends weight to the argument we should radically rethink 'post-feminism'. We are, however, far from being "post-postfeminism" (611); she argues that post-feminism is increasingly hegemonic due in part to the way it is able to both operate through, and coexist with, a revitalized feminism (620). I agree that the term is still highly relevant and look to Gill's theorizing of post-feminism as a distinctive kind

of gendered neoliberalism, a sensibility with the “ability to change and mutate in relation to new ideas” (611).

Within feminist studies, Jess Butler refutes the idea that women of colour are not included within post-feminist popular culture (48). She cites several reality TV shows centred around Black Women—within the realm of fashion and beauty, this includes Tyra Banks’ *America’s Next Top Model*—that embody and enact post-feminism by embracing ideas of heteronormative femininity and the excessive consumption of fashion and beauty products, all while promoting an individualistic discourse centred around independence, choice, empowerment, and sexual freedom. Within the Black community these concepts are compounded by the highly sexualized and successful music and entertainment careers of women like Beyoncé, Rihanna and Nicki Minaj, making it clear that the postfeminist “‘girls’ who are going ‘wild’ are not all (W)hite and middle class” (48).

Feminist media scholar Dayna Chatman builds upon Gill’s theorizing that a lack of intersectional interrogation and the definition of the term as a signifier of the end of feminism has led to the contestation of the term post-feminism (927); however she cites both Gill and McRobbie’s research in her discussion of the relevance of the term as both a discourse and sensibility that includes diverse women within its contours and embodies the contradictory nature of the female experience now that social equality is presumed to have been achieved (928).

Chatman explores the contours of a post-feminist gender regime that champions Black women like Beyoncé in order to extol women as self-governing subjects with the power to make acceptable choices within their career, marriage, and motherhood; women

must be empowered, autonomous, self-governing subjects with the ability to multitask between motherhood and career—and as such are valuable assets within global-capitalist society that must maintain an active population of producers and consumers (927).

Beyoncé's expressions of sexual agency and the celebration of her body within the popular media are valuable to Black women; however, Chatman argues that because the Black female body is presented as a site of excess within dominant visual culture, the way she challenges attempts to regulate her body could be interpreted as offering up her body as commodity fetish. "The former is a feminist project," explains Chatman, "while the latter is a post-feminist one" (937). By exhibiting discipline within the sphere of fashion and beauty, the Black female body plays a key role in transforming and normalizing post-feminist representations of young Black women.

By leveraging the narrative of Beyoncé's life to position professional Black women as ideal citizens and mothers, post-feminist authority reconfigures and normalizes representations of the Black family. Social capital may restrict the Black woman's ability to be recognized as a post-feminist subject (931), however Chatman argues that the media can interpellate certain Black women into post-feminism (930). She builds on McRobbie's theorizing of a new regime of gender power by pointing to how the popular media celebrates Black women like Beyoncé to show individuals how her choices with regards to marriage, motherhood, and career demonstrate successful self-governance in line with a neoliberal rhetoric (928).

Chatman argues that within the pervasive discourse of women "having it all", popular media utilises celebrities like Beyoncé to "strategically and ideologically interpellate women in general, and Black women in particular, into the current post-

feminist gender regime” (932). Black women are also subject to the same post-feminist anxiety as White women with regards to finding Mr. Right and having children. This anxiety is furthered increased by statistics—20 percent of White women in their early thirties had never been married, versus more than 50 percent of Black women the same age—and because the popular media tells Black women heterosexual marriage may be out of reach (932). Black women too, then, can be participants in the Post-Feminist Masquerade—but the new sexual contract they have entered into is more fraught than their White counterparts. Chatman argues that when Black women position themselves as post-feminist subjects, it is problematic because they take a position outside of the Black feminist political agenda that challenges racist and sexist oppression” (937).

Within feminist media studies, Simelele Dosekun addresses McRobbie’s theorizing that post-feminist culture and sensibility emerged in the West as a direct response to Second Wave feminism, but refutes McRobbie’s claim that post-feminist sensibilities emerging outside of this context are simply a mimicry of western behaviours (“The Aftermath” 88). Dosekun argues that this sensibility is easily circulated transnationally by global neoliberal institutions (968) and is not necessarily a reaction triggered by a historical precedent within the women’s movement.

Dosekun’s research points to a pervasive post-feminist sensibility in Lagos, Nigeria, despite the fact that the region has not experienced the same ‘waves’ of feminism as the West: her interview subjects drew on ideas and self-descriptions that would be as recognizably post-feminist as if their provenance were in any western capital city. She disagrees with McRobbie’s assertion that in the non-western world, post-feminism manifests itself as a more subdued and naive copy of the western version: girls

playing dress up with what little they have, versus the empowered, sexually and economically liberated women of the West (963).

Dosekun argues that McRobbie's Global Girl trope does not take into account or allow for difference between non-western women. She states that "post-feminism is readily trans nationalized [...] broadcast and sold across borders" (961), available to women around the globe who possess "the material, discursive and imaginative capital to access and to buy into it" (966). It is not, she argues, that any woman, anywhere in the world can "perform a post-feminist identity" at will, but rather that "post-feminism sells transnationally—from 'Beyoncé' to 'boob jobs' to 'Brazilian waxes,' from Shanghai to Mexico City to London to Lagos" (966). I agree with Dosekun's assessment that post-feminist disarticulation affects non-western women with the same nuanced complexity as it does western women and this is now visibly playing out in fashion influencer feeds on IG with the contemporary Global Girl.

Also within feminist media studies, Karen Wilkes addresses McRobbie's theorizing of the merging of feminism and neoliberalism and how they play into notions of agency and choice. Wilkes proffers that "by virtue of their ethnicity", White women are the beneficiaries of structural racism and broadly tend to have more economic power (25). By conforming to narrow, patriarchal standards of beauty, these women can access greater status and privilege. Dominant paradigms purport to offer a wider range of representation, but these tend to be deployed strategically and selectively; ethnic representations that are closest to European standards of beauty most closely resemble those in power and are therefore more socially valued (10). Post-feminist femininity must be girlish, non-threatening, and appeals to patriarchal paradigms of beauty (McRobbie

“The Aftermath”) or, says Wilkes, a White, blonde, blue-eyed thin type of beauty (26). Wilkes points to how post-feminism privileges an ideal gendered Whiteness and how the ability to purchase luxury products and have choices within the realms of motherhood and career is now defined as having it all (30). This is the contemporary version of the new sexual contract theorized by McRobbie that many young White women make with this new regime of gender power: a woman may brand herself as feminist so long as she puts in the time and effort to craft a self that is ‘desirable’ within the traditional patriarchal paradigm of beauty and consumer culture. This invitation to share power in exchange for status and worthiness is persuasive and seductive, a tactic that, as I will explore within my discussion of the contemporary Post-Feminist Masquerade, has proved to be highly effective.

Within communication and cultural studies, Erica B. Edwards and Jennifer Esposito argue against post-feminism’s assertion that we live in a post-racial and post-sexist world. They point to how digital platforms are mediated by the same inequalities that shape real life:

Social media is a point where the discursive meets the material; where meanings are articulated and re-articulated and bodies that are physically/materially/actually oppressed within a sexist/racist society may be interpreted in multiple ways, including, perhaps, in ways that reimagine the material world. However, we believe that because the world is neither post racial nor post sexist, there will always be limits to how Black female bodies are articulated and re-articulated.

(342)

Displays of sexuality have been progressively normalised within contemporary popular culture—particularly within the spheres of fashion and music—contributing to the rampant hyper-sexualisation of young women on platforms like IG. Young women must create and maintain erotic capital; sexual performance and self-objectification are integral to new paradigms of creative labour within a digital economy. With post-feminism’s assertion that gender equality has been achieved, post-feminism connects hyper-femininity with power; women are positioned as neoliberal subjects that must be hyper-feminine and hyper-sexualised in order to be powerful (342). Edwards and Esposito concur with McRobbie’s theorizing of a new sexual contract and its allure for women as “those who display, celebrate, or promote their beauty and sexuality are praised for using sexual currency in exchange for power” (342). Black girls are perceived as less innocent and less in need of protection than White girls the same age, and this ‘adultification’ (Salam, 2019; Shapiro, 2017) means that not only are they subject to post-feminist anxieties from a younger age, but also are at an increased risk of racial violence. The potential rewards seem to outweigh the dangers for many young Black women, and from here arises the contemporary version of McRobbie’s Phallic Girl.

The thin, White Eastern European model of the early 2000s is no longer the sole paradigm of beauty; now, extreme proportions of the Kim Kardashian and Kylie Jenner variety are also deemed desirable. Within Fashion and Beauty Studies, Elizabeth Wissinger explains how bodies, just like the shape and silhouette of garments, go in and out of fashion. Historically, “the adolescent asexual model of beauty” (143) was an indicator of class, a way for women to distance themselves from the “pornographic associations of the hourglass figure” popularised within the theatre and by other working

class pursuits. She cites the popular media's claim that we have moved into a post-fashion moment, where the designer body—sculpted by personal trainers and plastic surgeons—has replaced designer outfits (143-144). This designer body can only be achieved through hard work and money, and is indicative of how neoliberal concepts of self-management and self-transformation are thriving with this new, post-feminist paradigm of beauty.

Wissinger looks at Internet celebrity Kim Kardashian to define the concept of 'glamour labour'. Glamour labour is a phenomenon of the digital age (145); this work requires investing time and effort into the crafting of a body and self that matches the filtered and manipulated version of one's online life. This is the new American Dream, "democratically available to all who are willing to work for it" (145). The 'wages of glamour' are earned by crafting a body and personality that meets prescribed standards of heteronormative femininity, however this labour is speculative and financial rewards are not guaranteed. This 'labour theory of beauty' leads young women to believe that hard work democratizes the potential to achieve a standard of beauty that offers social legitimacy. On platforms like IG, self-management and personal branding bifurcated: no longer just a fashion marketing strategy, it also became a framework for success. This framework is sold to the general public as a foolproof path to accumulating social and material capital, even as it disregards the myriad structural factors contributing to an individual's success or failure.

Within fashion and beauty studies, Katherine Appleford examines trends that are influencing Black women's perception of beauty and body image, and discusses the formation of young Black women's desire for a look that has become known as 'slim-



thick’ within popular culture. This trend is embodied by the body type of Kim Kardashian, and Appleford argues that Kardashian exerts a remarkable influence over young women’s ideals of attractiveness because she is self-situated as an ‘exotic other’ that crosses over traditional racial boundaries. Her body shape is not the pornographic hourglass identified by Wissinger; and her slim-thick look is a distinctly post-feminist and post-racial hybrid of Black and White aesthetics—the “(W)hite aesthetic of thinness” merged with the Black appreciation of “a fuller shape” resulting in both races idealizing a petite waist and cosmetically enhancing their derrières (194).<sup>9</sup>

Appleford posits that this phenomenon is the result of cultural assimilation (194). This MRP elaborates on this idea, theorizing that by co-opting innate physical characteristics that were once considered excessively racialised as aspirational, White women are benefiting the sexual contract they have made with the new regime. This ability to be able to take on an identity that can be picked up and put down at one’s leisure both contributes to the continued oppression of racialised women in the U.S. and plays a significant role in the formation of new post-feminist tropes.

Black journalist Charlie Brinkenhurst-Cuff critiques how “Vogue established in 2014 that big bums were back in fashion, while in 2015 the Guardian asked if big lips were the new bushy brow. What isn’t often mentioned is how these ‘trends’ are intimately tied to (B)lack people’s bodies”. She argues that White people don’t go out of fashion, and that Black women are forced to watch as White women co-opt and

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<sup>9</sup> This trend is alarming: in 2016, 18,489 buttocks augmentations were performed by licensed doctors in the United States (a 26% increase from 2015) and 2,999 buttocks implants (an 18% increase); illegal medical clinics offer silicone injections for thighs and buttocks for as little as \$800. Multiple women have died in the U.S. as a result of botched underground procedures (Winston).

popularize Black physical characteristics. She cedes that while she knows it is antithetical to her feminist values,

Part of the reason I've become more accepting of my own body shape is because it's become societally desirable [...] although my (B)lackness is not a fad, and the (B)lack body comes in many shapes and sizes despite the stereotype of us having big bums and lips, this is a massive step up from the historic, animalistic portrayal of us as 'grotesque' thanks to our natural shape." (Brinkenhurst-Cuff)

Furthermore, she wonders, how will she be able to love her body, when these physical characteristics associated with Blackness are no longer in fashion?

Her experience is in line with McRobbie's assertion that the fashion and beauty system has taken the place of traditional modes of patriarchal authority ("Top Girls" 718), and I argue that this type of appropriation is evidence of a widening gap between different groups of women and an intensification of the process of disarticulation. White women who participate in the co-opting of physical traits for financial gain fail to understand whom these types of actions harm and whom they benefit. The increasingly visible appropriation of Black cultural markers by White and White-coded influencers on IG embodies and implies a distinctly post-feminist and post-racial idea: equality has been achieved, and capitalising on these visually specific fashion and beauty traits is a neutral exchange, not a damaging of appropriation. This will be further explored in my discussion of the contemporary Phallic Girl.

#### *Neoliberal Feminism and the so-called Fourth Wave*

Catherine Rottenberg argues that mainstream liberal feminism is being disarticulated into neoliberal feminism, and this new brand of feminism proffered by the

new women's movement fits within this category. The female participants are feminist in the sense they are cognizant of the ongoing inequalities between men and women, but remain highly individuated and neoliberal because they choose to ignore the social, cultural and economic forces that produce this inequality and accept total responsibility for their own well-being and self-care. The neoliberal feminist subject, says Rottenberg, “is thus mobilized to convert continued gender inequality from a structural problem into an individual affair” (“The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism” 420).

The pervasiveness of neoliberal feminist rhetoric validates Rosalind Gill’s claim that a post-feminist sensibility is now hegemonic (“The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Postfeminism” 616). This is evidenced by the massive success of self-described ‘feminist manifestos’ like Sheryl Sandberg’s *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* and, more recently, Ivanka Trump’s *Women Who Work: Rewriting the Rules for Success*—evidence of the widespread adoption of neoliberal feminist values (“The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism” 419). In later research, Rottenberg argues that

neoliberalism’s colonization of feminism is simultaneously producing a very clear distinction between female subjects who are worthy because they are aspirational and thus convertible and the majority of female subjects, who are deemed irredeemable due to their insufficient aspirations and responsabilization.” (“Neoliberal Feminism and the Future” 340)

Young, middle class women are encouraged to prioritize their careers over children; for some women, this means freezing their eggs so that they can continue to work unfettered by children until after they have been judged to have achieved an adequate amount of professional success (“Neoliberal Feminism and the Future” 338).

Women now operate within a climate of competition that has dramatically intensified because of how platforms like IG offer a window into the achievements of others. McRobbie's new meritocracy ("The Aftermath" 73) has reached the extreme; young women now see their twenties as a period of unencumbered striving ("Neoliberal Feminism and the Future" 342).

Much has been written on why young women make ideal neoliberal subjects, embracing ideas of agency and choice in exchange for taking full responsibility for their own self-management and self-transformation (Gill and Orgad; Rutherford; Scharff). While neoliberal policies and economies benefit the less-visible patriarchies, this rhetoric has contributed to the profoundly individualistic discourse on IG, implemented through aggressively promoted consumerism and the promotion of the monetisation of every facet of women's lives. "A key feature of neoliberalism," McRobbie explains, "is the implanting of market cultures across everyday life, the relentless pursuit of welfare reform, and the encouragement of forms of consumer citizenship which are only beneficial to those who are already privileged ("The Aftermath" 29).

### *Feminism, Digital Self-Monitoring and Appearance Studies*

Self-objectification and body surveillance have been consistently linked to increased levels of body shame and appearance anxiety, decreased internal state awareness and poor mental health amongst young women. Chandra Feltman and Dawn Szymanski examine the relations between the use of IG, self-objectification and body surveillance amongst young women by looking at experiences on this platform that could precede self-objectification and body surveillance. They found that the anticipation of the male gaze, increased exposure to sexually objectifying media and interpersonal

experiences of sexual objectification via body evaluation specifically on social media platforms like IG are linked to more self-objectification and body surveillance (311).

Interestingly—particularly given that the forms of popular media examined by McRobbie included, television, film and fashion magazines—Feltman and Szymanski found that prime time TV programmes and fashion magazines considered to be sexually objectifying were not associated with self-objectification or body surveillance. This suggests that the requirements of self-directed visual attention related to one's own appearance and body while engaging with social media platforms like IG may provoke increased levels of body surveillance (313). The image sharing component of this platform encourages the presentation of an idealized self; given the societal pressures already placed on women to reach unattainable ideals of beauty and appearance they argue that women may take on an observer's perspective on their bodies and appearance and it is therefore likely that links between IG use and self-objectification and body surveillance is arbitrated by engagement in social comparison (313). In the context of my research, these findings imply that the patterns of post-feminist disarticulation identified by McRobbie are amplified and intensified on IG.

Their findings also indicate that feminist beliefs can mitigate IG's effect on body surveillance: higher feminist beliefs play a protective role, whereas lower feminist beliefs play an intensifying role (314). Therefore, women who subscribe to a feminist identity may be provided with a critical perspective on appearance-related messaging and are less likely to internalize the ideals presented to them on IG (314). As I stand with bell hooks' theorizing that women should advocate feminism rather than treating feminism as a personal identity (31), this could indicate that those women who, in the context of acting

as fashion and beauty influencers, use fashion to construct a feminist identity on IG are—whether consciously or unconsciously—primarily doing so in order to present an idealized version of self, and are therefore not exempt from damaging appearance-related messaging on this platform.



Fig.1

Take, for example, this carefully constructed IG post from March 8, 2018 (fig. 1) by @ambervscott, a fashion and beauty micro-influencer<sup>10</sup> (at the time of this post, her feed had 84.4K followers). Her girlish pose and the hyper-feminine styling of her hair, make-up, and environmental props and in direct contradiction of the message on her tee-shirt,

<sup>10</sup> Within the advertorial parameters of IG, marketers typically classify those with less than 100K followers as 'micro-influencers' based on the potential reach of their feed.

indicating that this was simply another piece of thematic content to her (March 8 is known as International Women's Day) devoid of any real political meaning.

Ana Sofia Elias and Rosalind Gill argue that with the advent of beauty apps like IG,<sup>11</sup> young women are now subject to an unprecedented regulatory gaze brought about by digital self-monitoring and "post-feminist modalities of subjecthood" (59). In-app filters allow young women to alter the appearance of images so that they more closely resemble images of ideal or normative femininity; 74 percent of young women ages 18 to 25 said they used filters when taking self-portraits (67). While this type of selfie-filtering could be seen as a tool for shaping individual identity, Elias and Gill state that "it is inarguably a self-monitoring practice, complicit in the disciplinary intentions of neoliberal post-feminism that perpetuate social injustice" (67). As they point out, these filters assist in the creation of new racialised bodies by allowing skin tones to be lightened, and also help nostalgic aesthetics to find form in a digital context. The latter assertion validates McRobbie's assertion that the Post-Feminist Masquerade relies on a nostalgic, light-hearted refrain of femininity ("Top Girls" 723). Within the regime of McRobbie's theorizing of 'the perfect' ("Notes on the Perfect" 74), the filtering capabilities of IG find form within the cultural filters of post-feminism, and contribute to the intensification of aesthetic surveillance and labour amongst young women (68).

### **Fashion and Post-Feminist Tropes, Then and Now**

McRobbie's four tropes arise from her theorizing of the new sexual contract young women must make in order to participate in the male-coded worlds of work and pleasure: they will be granted notional freedoms and attributed with a wage-earning

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<sup>11</sup> IG is considered within this research as a beauty app because a variety of in-app filters allow women to modify the appearance of their selfies.

capacity so long as they cede feminism (720). Under the guise of post-feminist equality, young women are attributed with capacity and urged to become hyper-active across the three key sites where this newfound visibility is centred (718): the field of consumer culture; the realm of sexual freedom; and the fields of education and employment. From within these categories emerge McRobbie's tropes: the Post-Feminist Masquerade is tied to consumer culture—and is so pervasive it reappears within the other tropes; the Phallic Girl arises from her notional sexual freedom, and both the Working Girl and the Global Girl are tied to the spaces of education and employment. It is my contention that these tropes and dynamics are heavily co-opted, reinforced and promoted by the fashion industry to encourage hyperactive participation within consumer culture with the goal of maintaining traditional gender hierarchies.

While McRobbie discusses these tropes at length in *The Aftermath of Feminism*, she references them extensively in other published works ("Post-Feminism and Popular Culture"; "Top Girls?"; "Young women and Consumer Culture"; "Notes on the Perfect"). For this research I draw upon all these sources in order to dissect the characteristics of each trope; given the current prevalence and complexity of feminist topics within popular culture and media I hope to better understand their origins by looking at how McRobbie reframes or responds to her own theorizing in a variety of contexts.

McRobbie addresses the recent resurgence of feminist topics within the popular media but identifies "an amplification of control of women, mostly by corporeal means, so as to ensure the maintenance of existing power relations" as though masculine hegemony could somehow slow the advancement of feminism ("Notes on the Perfect" 3). Male dominance is secured and disguised through the fashion and beauty complex with



the aim of encouraging the self-regulation of young women, and feminist concepts must now adhere to neoliberal narratives of individualisation and competition. Women are expected to seek ‘the perfect’, and this is promoted within popular culture through “relatively manicured and celebrity-driven idea of imperfection or failure” (3). Given how visible these societal pressures are to young women as they are relentlessly promoted by the fashion and beauty industries across multiple platforms but particularly on IG, I argue that post-feminist anxieties within young women are now so heightened that there is urgency in identifying new patterns of disarticulation on IG.

### *The Post-Feminist Masquerade*

The Post-Feminist Masquerade explicitly aligns with fashion’s presence within IG, as it functions as the facade that assists women in presenting a curated, illusionary version of themselves within this digital space. The Post-Feminist Masquerade resides within the field of consumer culture, where the fashion and beauty system have replaced traditional channels of patriarchal authority (“Top Girls” 718). This trope is highly visible across the commercial domain (within McRobbie’s research, this includes TV, film, and fashion magazines) and serves as an interpellative device; with a familiar—or even nostalgic, and somewhat ironic—light-hearted refrain of femininity, women are relocated “back inside the terms of traditional gender hierarchies” (723). The impeccably groomed young woman in masquerade (“The Aftermath” 8) has been encouraged to dissociate herself from the now-discredited political identity associated with radical feminists in order to re-stabilise gender norms and undo any previous feminist gains (“Top Girls” 723). McRobbie cites the work of psychoanalyst Joan Rivière that explores how “women who wish for masculinity may put on a mask of womanliness to avert anxiety and the

retribution feared from men” (Rivière qtd. in “The Aftermath”, 35); and proposes that the Post-Feminist Masquerade is a strategy or device for the re-securing of patriarchal law and masculine hegemony.

The term ‘masquerade’ refers to its own artifice, says McRobbie (“Top Girls” 723), and Post-Feminist Masquerade derives its meaning from those so-called glory days of White Hollywood glamour and from the conventions of high fashion glossy magazines like *Vogue* (“The Aftermath” 71). For the woman in masquerade, expressing hyper-femininity through fashion by wearing vertiginous stilettos and pencil skirts that hobble her does not in fact mean entrapment, since it is now done by choice rather than out of obligation—women who adopt these types of markers in their dress do so with the intention of expressing that this is a freely chosen look (“Top Girls” 723). This celebration of exaggerated femininity is put together by young women using their independently earned wages in order to create a facade that subverts any ideas of accruing power based on economic capacity (“Top Girls” 725).

McRobbie references Bridget Jones, the British-American romantic comedy film series character determined to improve herself while she looks for love in a year while documenting her exploits in a personal diary (Zellweger, Renée, Performer. *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, Miramax, 2001). Bridget’s Post-Feminist Masquerade manifests in the workplace via a “flirty presence” “nervous girlish gestures” and “‘oh silly me’ self-reprimands” (“Top Girls” 725) and her fashion and beauty choices are symbolic of both her professional and personal failings. Viewers see her struggle to put on girdle-like underwear; turn up at a costume party in an ill-fitting Playboy bunny suit; and over apply her blush in a desperate bid to look attractive.

McRobbie also points to one of the most influential fashion icons of the late 90s and early 2000s to illustrate how the alluring facade of the masquerade interpellated an entire generation of grown women via “the little girl demeanour of the figure of Carrie Bradshaw” (“Notes on the Perfect” 12) in HBO’s popular series *Sex and the City* (*SATC*). “(T)he opening sequence of the show saw her dressed in a kind of ballerina tutu dress, and playing around like a pre-pubescent girl, almost falling into puddles on the street and getting splashed by passing traffic” (12). Throughout the series, Carrie performs “an endless masquerade (glancing in the pocket-mirror, touching up her make-up, catching sight of herself in shop windows, doing girlish twirls in front of the full size mirror)” (“Young Women and Consumer Culture” 541). These behaviours are intended to restabilise gender norms; Carrie’s fragile femininity is reinforced in season four’s “A Vogue Idea” (*Sex and the City*, Season 4, Episode 17, HBO, 2002). In this episode, viewers are introduced to her first editor at *Vogue* Magazine, a fifty-something, no-nonsense, power dressing—and therefore, it is insinuated, likely a feminist—named Enid. We are encouraged to dislike Enid after she tells Carrie her first article is too self-involved, meandering, and not up to the magazine’s usual standard. Carrie is then reassigned a male editor who attempts to sexually assault her in the magazine’s fashion closet, before being unceremoniously placed back with Enid. In a later episode, Enid laments to Carrie how she cannot find a man and asks for her help in finding one—reinforcing the idea and post-feminist anxiety that women in powerful positions who do not conform to traditional standards of femininity with their dress and demeanour will never be able to find a partner (“Splat”, *Sex and the City*, Season 6, Episode 18, HBO). Other post-feminist themes, such as Carrie’s financial incompetence, are highlighted as

directly relating to her fashion consumption—specifically, her enormous collection of Manolo Blahnik stiletto shoes (“A Woman’s Right to Shoes”, *Sex and The City*, Season 6, Episode 9, HBO, 2003). While Carrie’s profligate fashion consumption is framed as simply a charming habit with no real consequences, I argue that by encouraging an entire generation of women to spend the equivalent of a home down payment on stiletto heels, then lightly chastising them with the assertion that it is a woman’s right to spend phenomenal amounts of money on fashion, women are ultimately forced to rely on men to achieve financial security. As Carrie smokes cigarettes, drinks endless Cosmopolitan cocktails, sleeps with whomever she chooses and works from home as a newspaper columnist—a career known as a long-standing bastion of masculinity—these behaviours could destabilize traditional power structures if left unchecked.

McRobbie posits that the girlish behaviours put forth by young women to counteract their supposed liberation serve to assuage their own fears that if they position themselves as equal to men within the labour market, they will no longer appear sexually desirable (“Top Girls” 725). She explains that

The Post-Feminist Masquerade is a knowing strategy which emphasises its non-coercive status; it is a highly-styled disguise of womanliness now adopted as a matter of personal choice. But the theatricality of the masquerade, the silly hat, the too short skirt, are once again means of emphasising, as they did in classic Hollywood comedies, female vulnerability, fragility, uncertainty and the little girl’s ‘desire to be desired.’” (“Top Girls” 725)

The masquerade functions to reassure male power structures by minimizing and softening any perceived aggression on the part of women as they take on positions of

power (“Top Girls” 726). McRobbie explains that this trope is particularly effective because the young women participants put forth the appearance that they do not fear male retribution; in this case, however, dressing for the male gaze has been replaced by dressing for the fashion and beauty system—meaning if a look is widely admired by those who work in fashion, the young woman has acquired the validation she needs to feel desirable (“Top Girls” 725). However, McRobbie describes the masquerade as a double movement: its voluntaristic structure works to conceal that patriarchy is still in place, while the requirements of the fashion and beauty system ensure that women are still fearful subjects, driven by the need for ‘complete perfection’ (“Top Girls” 726). On IG, this idea has now evolved into a contradictory statement where women are supposed to appear perfect by being imperfect—evidenced by ‘no makeup selfies’ and hash tags like #iwokeuplikethis, or the posting of self-deprecating accounts of fashion and beauty mishaps.

I ask—and will address in my discussion of contemporary post-feminist tropes—what does it mean when women themselves are using fashion and beauty as a vehicle for producing and sharing these images of performative female vulnerability and fragility today on IG? In the following section, I will explore what this looks like within one of the most prominent fashion influencer feeds on IG today and address how this type of content serves to interpellate other young women while offering a lucrative source of income for those women who disseminate it.

McRobbie argues that the “luminosities of femininity” (“The Aftermath” 70), are unashamedly White, noting that Black and Asian girls have a limited presence within the Post-Feminist Masquerade and may only be included so long as they comply with the

requirements of the fashion and beauty system (70). That Black and Asian women are excluded from these concepts could be attributed to the fact that the White women who dominate feminist discourse lack an understanding of “(W)hite supremacy as a racial politic, of the psychological impact of class, of their political status within a racist, sexist, capitalist state (hooks 4). There were no Black girls in *SATC* until the token addition of singer/actress Jennifer Hudson as Carrie’s assistant; *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, too, “evokes a landscape of Whiteness with barely a gesture towards London as a multi-cultural city” (71). There are some permitted paths for the Other to relocate themselves within the Post-Feminist Masquerade—McRobbie points to the intermittent Black celebrity featured as a style icon on a glossy magazine cover as an example—but the Post-Feminist Masquerade as defined by McRobbie is primarily a tool that repositions White femininity as submissive to White masculinity, while securing extant racial divisions by eliminating ideas of multiculturalism (70). According to McRobbie, young, non-White women are only permitted to mimic their White, post-feminist counterparts and the White visual economies of the fashion and beauty system are tantamount to racial violence (71). Whether or not this divisive pattern has changed in the intervening years will be addressed with my analysis of the contemporary Post-Feminist Masquerade within the next section.

*The New Post-Feminist Masquerade: Leandra Medine of @ManRepeller*



Fig. 2

If the Post-Feminist Masquerade of the early 2000s is exemplified by the girlish figure of Carrie Bradshaw and the character's glorification of conspicuous fashion consumption, the enduring popularity of the themes proffered to young women by *SATC* is evidenced on IG with popular feeds like @everyoutfitonsatc (580K followers at the time of my research), dedicated to dissecting the outfits worn by the four main characters on the show. Carrie Bradshaw's final appearance in the second *SATC* movie in May 2010 coincided with the launch of the blog *Man Repeller* by Leandra Medine in that same month, followed shortly by her adjunct IG feed, @manrepeller, with 2.1 million followers as of April, 2019 (see fig. 2). In 2017, Medine told *Fashionista.com*

When I launched Man Repeller, what I was doing was essentially just commenting on fashion trends that I found to be man repellent, and every now and then I would post a photo of myself in a pair of shoes or trying on a jacket. They were really low-fi pictures, but those stories always gained so much more traction than the ones without pictures of me in them. I was like, “Oh, the internet is voyeuristic. If I just keep posting more pictures of myself, this site will get bigger.” So I started doing that. I tried to be really self-deprecating and sardonic about it, because it felt too real and too serious if I wasn’t. After Instagram started to become popular, and organic virality was happening on that platform, too, I thought to myself that it was not going to be long before websites or personal style blogs would become extinct, because all of the intrinsic benefits, or all of the inspiration that you were able to cull from a website, you could now cull from your mobile device. (McCall)

I argue that Medine embodies the new Post-Feminist Masquerade, having taken over the task of stimulating the post-feminist process of disarticulation amongst young women from the *SATC* series. Her self-deprecating tone—a deliberate attempt to prevent her from being taken too seriously—replicates Carrie’s tone in both her fictional column and her storylines. In Medine’s case, her Post-Feminist Masquerade is dispensed from a new online platform multiple times per day and is all the more enviable because she is a real person. Medine’s quirky yet aspirational aesthetic—centred around a wardrobe of expensive designer clothes and accessories—is reminiscent of Carrie’s, and that both speak to young women from New York City bolsters Medine’s designation as Carrie’s successor.





Fig. 3

A post on the @manrepeller IG feed dated January 22, 2019 features an image of Sarah Jessica Parker—the actress who plays Carrie Bradshaw in the *SATC* franchise—wearing a contemporary version of the girlish tutu and leotard ensemble from the show’s main title sequence described by McRobbie as the embodiment of the Post-Feminist Masquerade (“Notes on the Perfect” 72). This @manrepeller post is accompanied by the caption: “If you were wondering how Carrie Bradshaw would dress in 2019, @sarahjessicaparker just served up the answer – and yes, the tutu is back” (see fig. 3).

Given that luxury department store Barneys New York currently collaborates with @everyoutfitsatc to recreate contemporary versions of the original looks from the show for purchase via a link on IG to their web store—and Medine also has an

eponymous shoe line sold exclusively through the same retailer—I argue that this is evidence the fashion system colludes with the power structures that encourage the dissemination of the same post-feminist concepts put forth by first by the *SATC* franchise and now by @manrepeller. The only difference between Medine and the fictional characters profiled by McRobbie is that Medine does not appear to smoke, drink, or sleep with multiple partners; raised in the Orthodox Jewish household, she married at age 23 (Wallace 2014) and had twin girls in March 2018 (@manrepeller).

Eight months after Medine created the Man Repeller blog, *The New York Times* published a profile piece:

Since April, Ms. Medine, 21, has been publishing photos of herself wearing these pieces on her blog, the Man Repeller, as well as shots of similarly challenging recent runway looks: fashions that, though promoted by designers and adored by women, most likely confuse — or worse, repulse — the average straight man.

These include turbans, harem pants, jewelry that looks like a torture instrument, jumpsuits, ponchos, furry garments resembling large unidentified animals, boyfriend jeans, clogs and formal sweatpants. (Aleksander)

In fashion terms, Medine's Post-Feminist Masquerade looks exactly the same as the masquerade of two decades ago: a young woman in masquerade with silly accessories and garments the average person would consider ridiculous. As with Carrie Bradshaw's Post-Feminist Masquerade, this type of theatrical styling serves to emphasise "female vulnerability, fragility, uncertainty and the little girl's 'desire to be desired'" (McRobbie "Top Girls" 725).

Nine years after its launch, @manrepeller boasts 2.8 million followers and the bio reads: “The cherry on top! Instant connection for an unconventional network of spectacular ppl with interesting taste + smart opinions. Mirror selfies welcome” (2019). It is now run as an online fashion magazine of sorts by the Man Repeller editorial team (the blog’s masthead currently lists 15 employees excluding Medine), and features advertorial posts and fashion and lifestyle-oriented content. Instead of a steady stream of ‘outfit of the day’ posts featuring Medine like the IG feeds of many other high-profile fashion influencers, the content is varied, but—just as with those pervasive #ootd<sup>12</sup> posts—is designed to drive traffic either directly to her advertisers’ web stores or back to the blog. I argue that a typical @manrepeller post serves to interpellate young women into post-feminist neoliberalism: take a post from February 28, 2019 featuring the quote “How did we get to the point where free time is so full of things we have to do that there is no time for the things we *get* to do?”. The accompanying caption tells us

The most-read article on Man Repeller this month comes from contributing writer @moxiequinn, “The Modern Trap of Turning Hobbies Into Hustles,” a treatise on why we feel the need to take something that gives us pleasure in our private time and turn it into productivity. Drop your 2 or 3 cents below, and read the full piece – link in bio. (@manrepeller)

The paradoxical nature of this post is concerning as it acknowledges the neoliberal pressures of self-management and self-enterprise but comes from a source (Medine) that turned a hobby into a multi-million dollar fashion empire: “I feel like people can do whatever they want with their social media following so long as they’re adhering to

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<sup>12</sup> This commonly used hashtag stands for ‘outfit of the day’ and is typically applied to posts of mirror selfies that document daily head-to-toe looks.

FTC<sup>13</sup> regulations”, she says in defense of her approach (Diamond). With this statement, she is effectively invalidating her messages of empowerment or ethics she allegedly subscribes to as a so-called ‘woke’ influencer.

Whether or not a designer look appears to have been created for the male gaze, I argue against the idea that any garment created from within the fashion system can serve as a non-performative feminist statement. The Post-Feminist Masquerade resides within the field of consumer culture, where the fashion and beauty system is merely a substitute for traditional modes of patriarchal authority (McRobbie “Top Girls” 718). With her concept of ‘man-repelling’, Medine puts forth the appearance that she does not fear male retribution for; here, just as with McRobbie’s original theorizing of the Post-Feminist Masquerade, dressing for the male gaze has been replaced by dressing for the fashion and beauty system. Furthermore, Medine garnered the admiration of the most elite facets of the fashion industry so quickly that the validation she needed to feel desirable came almost immediately, therefore eliminating the need to question the effects of the concepts she disseminates. In 2015, she told *Cosmopolitan* magazine that the “currency of my success is still not measured in dollars. It’s totally measured in respect” (Manning), thus confirming the power of the fashion and beauty system over both her business and self-worth.

While McRobbie’s Post-Feminist Masquerade was White, out of the multiple voices behind @manrepeller at least one is Black (production manager Crystal Anderson) and the visual content on the feed includes posts featuring diverse women. I argue that

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<sup>13</sup> A letter written by the director of the U.S. Bureau of Consumer Protection to the U.S. Federal Trade Commission states “what is clear to anyone who browses popular Instagram profiles, (is that) Instagram has become a platform for disguised advertising directed towards young consumers” (Rich and Engle).

this is not necessarily indicative of positive progress, rather, it could be an indication that Black women are now subject to the same post-feminist anxieties as White women.

The voluntaristic structure of Medine's Post-Feminist Masquerade conceals the presence of the patriarchy, but the pressures of the fashion and beauty system ensures that she and her followers are driven by the need for perfection—albeit under the guise of imperfection. Unlike many of her peers, Medine typically forgoes makeup or professionally styled hair, and while this purports to be a rejection of public approval I argue this is simply part of a carefully crafted image devised to sell high-end clothing and beauty products to other women. As she told the New York Times in 2010, “I’m really happy that people understand that man-repelling is a good thing [...] I was afraid people would think I was mocking fashion, and it’s like, ‘No, I swear, I’m wearing feathered sleeves as I write this!’” (Medine qtd. in Aleksander).

### *The Phallic Girl*

McRobbie's “sexy adventurous Phallic Girl,” (“The Aftermath” 8) arises from her theorizing of the new sexual contract:

On the condition that she does not reproduce outside marriage or civil partnership, or become the single mother of several children, the young woman is now granted a prominence as a pleasure-seeking subject in possession of a healthy sexual appetite and identity. (“Top Girls” 732)

The Phallic Girl follows patterns of male behaviour as a post-feminist gesture; she puts forth an appearance of equality with her male counterparts by demonstrating that “she can play them at their own game”. She refutes feminism, and because she feels she has been granted some male privileges sees no reason to challenge patriarchal authority.

While McRobbie points out that while this trope was by no means new at the time of her research, it had evolved with the self-perception of young women that equality with their male counterparts had been achieved. She argues that within this illusory form of equality, unresolved sexual antagonisms within contemporary heterosexuality find new form (732). Central to McRobbie's trope is the so-called 'ladette' culture that took root in Britain with pop stars like Geri Halliwell and Mel B. of the Spice Girls. In the 1996 video for their first number one hit single, "Wannabe" the girl group exemplify Phallic Girl behaviours by causing a ruckus at the posh St. Pancras Hotel in London as they dash through the halls and dining room, upending staff and guests while singing the refrain "if you wannabe my lover". Their wardrobes within this music video incorporate both elements of the Post-Feminist Masquerade—Gerry Halliwell, known as Ginger Spice within the pop group, wore a sequin leotard reminiscent of a circus performer—and the Phallic Girl is on display with the masculine-inspired track pants, sneakers and crop tops worn by Mel B. (Sporty Spice) and Mel C. (Scary Spice). Their antics within the hotel are to be literally interpreted as upending the patriarchy, allowed with the caveat that proper gender relations are maintained and this is reflected by their dress. Young women inspired by the genre of messaging put forth by the Spice Girls were "asked to concur with a definition of sex as a light hearted pleasure, recreational activity, hedonism, sport, reward, and status" ("The Aftermath" 83).

This "playful female phallicism" is darkened by the possibility of a number of punishments, contributing to an increase in post-feminist anxiety and fear of male retribution for not playing by the rules ("Top Girls" 733). The ability to simultaneously perform masculinity without forgoing the feminine traits that make them appeal to men is

no easy feat (“Top Girls” 732), but this is expedited by both the fashion and beauty system and the leisure industries; consumer culture plays a key role in interpellation of young women into this trope by inviting them to “overturn the old sexual double standard and emulate the assertive and hedonistic styles of sexuality associated with young men” particularly within the permissive confines of British binge drinking culture (“Top Girls” 732).

The Phallic Girl and her entrenchment within the fashion and beauty system is perfectly portrayed in luxury British department store Harvey Nichols’s Christmas commercial in 2011. Various young women are portrayed returning home in the early hours of the morning wearing revealing dresses and heels—in one case, vertiginous heels are held in a girl’s hands as she walks barefoot on the street; another is shown eating a kebab to stave off her hangover—enacting what is commonly known as ‘the walk of shame’<sup>14</sup> within popular culture. In this wildly successful campaign (the YouTube video quickly went viral) Harvey Nichols claims to have the solution—buy more appropriately demure, designer attire from us and no one will know what mischief you’ve been up to—illustrated at the end by a model wearing a sophisticated dress returning home at dawn with smile (Rawi 2011).

The strap line ‘Avoid the walk of shame this season’ tells young women it’s not a problem to have a one night stand, so long as you don’t look ‘slutty’ while doing so. Harvey Nichols’s Marketing Director explained that a “fabulous dress teamed with a great pair of shoes will atone for a multitude of sins in our eyes; nobody will be looking at your morning after make-up [...] or lack thereof!” (Rawi 2011).

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<sup>14</sup> This expression is used to describe a person returning home after spending the night at a sexual partner’s house, wearing their outfit from the night before.

The Phallic Girl must outwardly exhibit “boldness, confidence, aggression and even transgression” in that these qualities refute the feminine deference of the Post-Feminist Masquerade (McRobbie “Top Girls” 732), but this is not to say the Phallic Girl cannot look feminine; in fact, she must, lest she be labelled either a feminist or a lesbian (732). Take, for example, how both Sporty and Scary Spice ensure their perfect physiques are on display despite their masculine-inspired sportswear by pairing baggy pants and sneakers with miniscule crop tops. As for lesbianism itself, this sexual preference is repositioned as a fun, sexy, and light-hearted activity for Phallic Girls “within circumscribed scenarios for male pleasure” (733).

The Phallic Girl’s extreme behaviour—recklessness, aggression, the seeming disregard for society’s perception of her—may appear fun and glamorous within the confines of pop culture, but more often than not took a more sinister turn when enacted in real life:

heavy drinking, swearing, smoking, getting into fights, having casual sex, flashing her breasts, flashing her breasts in public, getting arrested by the police, consumption of pornography, enjoyment of lap dancing clubs and so on but without relinquishing her own desirability to men, indeed for whom such seeming masculinity enhances her desirability since she shows herself to have a similar appetite to her male counterparts. (“The Aftermath” 83)

McRobbie’s Phallic Girl is decisively White, and Black women are positioned as the disadvantaged counterpart to White privileged femininity. McRobbie suggests that both the figurations of the postfeminist masquerade and the Phallic Girl are indicative of subtle processes of exclusion and re-colonisation (“The Aftermath” 88). She theorizes



that Afro-Caribbean young women do not participate in Phallic Girl dress or behaviour because “being drunk and disorderly while dressed like a prostitute is not a risk worth taking” (87). Expressions of sexual autonomy and enjoyment by young Black women are only permitted within the subcultures of Black music such as hip hop or within Jamaican dancehall culture (88). Young (British) Asian women, too, are excluded from McRobbie’s trope, as the Phallic Girl purports to reject this culture’s assumed submissiveness—within the racist imagination—to patriarchal and religious authority. The Phallic Girl is the embodiment of the sexual freedoms granted to young Western women; yet her active pursuit of sexual gratification remains subject to patriarchal authority and is in line with the requirements of the apparently liberalised heterosexual matrix (88) which means her ‘beat them at their own game’ bravado can only ever be performative.

The Phallic Girl is the post-feminist incarnation of the phallic lesbian, a female trope permitted to operate as licensed phallus-bearers in an imitation of their male counterparts (83). Under the guise of equality, displays of aggression and unfeminine behaviour go seemingly without punishment (83). The Phallic Girl found her next incarnation within Britain’s so-called glamour model, girls who started their career on Page 3 of tabloids like *The Sun* and moved on to magazines like *Maxim*. Those that made it to the top of this genre leveraged their success in soft porn to launch their own brands with items like perfume, underwear and other low-priced accessories.

The Phallic Girl’s position is dependent on the logic of the consumer culture, the withholding of criticism for their male counterparts and their assurance that they are complicit with the new paradigms of leisure culture where sexuality is re-designated to

the “tabloid language” of male pleasure and satisfaction (“Top Girls” 733). As with the Post-Feminist Masquerade, these requirements are disguised by the language of personal choice so that young women spearhead their own process of disarticulation. I ask, and intend to explore within my analysis of the contemporary incarnation of this trope: in the age of #metoo, has the Phallic Girl had to adjust her behaviour or dress?

*The New Phallic Girl: Cardi B. of @IamCardiB*



Fig. 4

As with those high profile Phallic Girls of the 1990s and early 2000s, the contemporary Phallic Girl often finds fame from within the world of music and entertainment. The Phallic Girl is only permitted to become a fashion influencer once she has been judged to have adequately achieved success as a singer, model or entertainer, and this status is afforded with the caveat she remains at the top of her game. Young Afro-Caribbean women were excluded from McRobbie’s trope because of the fear of

gendered racial violence against them, and expressions of sexual autonomy and enjoyment on the part of young Black women were only permitted within Black music subcultures such as hip hop (87). I argue that the new Phallic Girl has arisen from precisely this sphere, one that at the time of McRobbie's theorizing was a subculture but today is both mainstream and a dominant force within popular culture and fashion.

Dominican-American rapper Cardi B. embodies the qualities and aesthetic of the Phallic Girl at a level much more extreme than those pop stars like Geri Halliwell referenced by McRobbie; her emulation of the assertive and hedonistic styles of sexuality associated with young men are apparent in virtually everything she puts forth in the popular media. The bio on her IG feed, @iamcardib (43.2 million followers as of April 2019), boasts "IHAVE GRAMMYWINNINGVAGINA" (see fig. 4) and her lasciviousness is regularly celebrated within the popular media: Rolling Stone magazine describes how

In the year or so since she's become hip-hop's breakout star, Cardi has come to represent the best of what we value as a country: She's our irrepressibly cute, sexy, silly, filthy-mouthed Cinderella who bootstrapped her way from the streets to celebrity [...] she's an ex-stripper with butt injections who's after your money; she's a possible former member of the Bloods and such a city girl that she never got a driver's license and says today that she still carries a knife. (Grigoriadis)

Within the confines of Cardi's IG, self-commentary on her heavy drinking is commonplace, she swears unabashedly, and over a ten-day period in October 2018 she and rapper Nicki Minaj posted multiple videos—which have since been deleted—taunting each other over an alleged physical altercation between the two in a New York

City nightclub. Many posts show her in skimpy stage costumes or lingerie showing off highly suggestive dance moves reminiscent of her days as a stripper. On December 23, 2018, she posted a video taken while she lay on a couch, long blue hair fanning out behind her, heavily made up eyes and lips, a diamond choker and the top of a green sequin bustier peeking into the frame. Lip syncing the words to a track with aggressively sexualized lyrics, she waves her 3-inch nails suggestively at the camera. Her caption reads, “When you drink 2 presidentes [...] I need to leave this country”.

When an iCloud hack caught her husband, the rapper Offset, in a compromising position with another woman, Cardi defended her decision to forgive him by telling a magazine “I ain’t no angel” (Gigoriadis), in line with the Phallic Girl’s obligation to withhold criticism of her male counterparts. While the new sexual contract theorized by McRobbie dictates the Phallic Girl must not reproduce, this limitation is only imposed on those non-famous Phallic Girls. Now that Cardi has been judged to have adequately achieved within music, entertainment and fashion, she was able to have a baby at age 25 without criticism—but it is worth noting that despite growing up in the New York borough with the highest rate of teen pregnancy (O’Uhuru et al.), she did not have a child. This indicates that from a young age she too was influenced by the post-feminist, neoliberal pressures of consumer culture, self-management, self-enterprise, and self-transformation, and in early agreeance with the terms of McRobbie’s theorizing of a new sexual contract.

Her IG feed is a celebration of both her sexual appetite and a penchant for diamonds, 3-inch long nails, and designer clothing. A post from February 16, 2019,

shows Cardi on her knees on a couch, tongue out and thrusting her pelvis back and forth while dressed in an ensemble by Moschino.



Fig. 5

This clip is accompanied by the caption: “It’s so tight he think he slipped in my butt I don’t swallow plan B I just swallow the nut [...] #Thotiana Mix with a little bit of PleaseMe...” (see fig. 5). As a former stripper, Cardi B. is well aware of the power of clothing—or her lack thereof—and a spate of appearances on fashion and pop culture magazine covers in from 2018 to 2019 (including the high-fashion tomes *Vogue*, *W Magazine* and *Harper’s Bazaar*) not only solidifies her status as fashion influencer to a young female demographic but gives a duplicitous fashion and beauty system permission to validate the fashion and beauty styles and body types they appropriate. Nigel Lezama points to certain hip-hop scholars who argue representations and performance of counter hegemonic female sexuality are in fact an act of empowerment for (B)lack women, but he

cites oppositional research that “considers commodity exchange for sexual access the selling of racialized fantasies for a primarily (W)hite, male, and suburban consumer” and links sexualized images such as those proffered by Cardi on her IG as a glorification of capitalism that perpetuates racialised marginalisation (8).

Fashion consumption is a recurring theme in her career and on her IG feed: in her first hit song “Bodak Yellow” she calls Louboutin shoes “red bottoms”; within months this expression became commonplace in popular culture. Lezama argues that to Cardi, Louboutin shoes signify both her newfound success and her status outside of habitus structured consumption (13). When manipulated by female rappers, he says, luxury commodities differ from their male counterpart’s positioning of the luxury trope in that they are very personal artifacts experienced without reification. He explains that in this track, her lyrics are in alignment with the common hip hop practice of linking high and low culture, thereby transforming the meaning of cultural capital and dominant cultural habitus in this context (15).

Cardi told the New York Times she received her first pair of Louboutins on her 19th birthday from an admirer at a strip club where she worked, and was stunned at the \$800 price tag—the most she had ever spent on shoes was \$300 for a pair of Jeffrey Campbells (Nikas). However, Lezama posits that

While the black female rapper harnesses the luxury object’s value to express a certain kind of dominance, she does not insist on its ideological value to shore up habitus or express aspiration to improve personal status. In her hands and on her body, luxury provides an aesthetic experience that shields her from patriarchal and capitalist reification. (17)

While Lezama believes that Cardi B. does not link the power inferred by status symbols such as Louboutins to an innate quality or an elite status (14), certain commentary on her IG feed may indicate that as she continues to receive validation from the White-coded fashion and beauty system, she is being increasingly seduced by the new privileges afforded to her by this patriarchal voice of authority. Consider how when Cardi launched her own sell-out collection with urban fast-fashion e-tailer Fashion Nova in the fall of 2018, she rapped about it in her song “She Bad” with the lyrics “I could buy designer, but this Fashion Nova fit.” However, in a video posted on February 17, 2018, she appears to be reconsidering this stance as she thanks @mandfredthierrymugler of the French couture house @muglerofficial for dressing her in archived 1995 Mugler Couture for the 2019 Grammy Awards and @voguemagazine for covering the fittings. The ensemble lent to her by Mugler is reminiscent of a burlesque costume from the 1950s—though I argue as a couture look designed for the runway and not the stage it remains within the realm of high fashion, not costume. A sheer mesh and sequin bodysuit, black satin mermaid skirt that peels away at the waist to reveal a pink satin lining reminiscent of a shell, full length pink satin gloves, a multi-strand pearl choker, and strands of pearls wrapped around a top knot positions this look within the Post-Feminist Masquerade and marks a shift from Cardi’s Phallic Girl posturing. “It’s a big moment for the fashion industry,” she tells her followers,

I just wanna say thank for choosing me, for choosing like, Cardi, for me to wear those pieces that you don’t lend to nobody, and you know a lot of people who are at home don’t understand how much this means to me because a lot of y’all [...] too simple, yeah simple, everybody thinking that Gucci, that Prada, Versace is the

only high end name brands, so you know [...] y'all don't understand, like for me, this is a big fashion moment for me [...] I don't think anything will ever top this."

(@iamcardib)

In this post, she seeks to distance herself from her urban followers who wear these brands as a uniform and who aren't either savvy enough to know who Mugler is or in the position to purchase couture. This could indicate that as she receives validation from the patriarchal authority of the fashion and beauty system, she is increasingly dissociating herself from Black fashion trends or other Black fashion influencers and now attributes certain luxury commodities with elite status.

On March 3, 2019, she posted an image of her wearing a stage costume consisting of a pink sparkly bra top and bikini bottoms, a pink cowboy hat and fringed jacket, pink chaps and cowboy boots with the caption "LET ME HEAR YOU SAY ! Fit by @bryanhearns I weigh 118 pounds now I need some food and [two eggplant emojis].<sup>15</sup>

While Cardi famously got silicone injections into her buttocks from an unlicensed practitioner before she was famous, her weight and shape appears to be changing in order to conform less with the slim-thick ideal body shape of women in pop culture and more in line with the White model figure required to wear couture. This indicates that as with McRobbie's trope, Cardi's playful female phallicism is subject to the same fear of punishment, evidenced by her acknowledgement of the post-feminist anxiety about her weight and fear of male retribution if she does not play by the rules ("Top Girls" 733). In this case, however, these are not the rules of her male contemporaries within hip hop culture, rather the rules of the White fashion and beauty system. As to the question of

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<sup>15</sup> The eggplant emoji is commonly used within social media to indicate a phallus.



whether or not the Phallic Girl has had to adjust her dress in the age of #metoo, I argue that Cardi's highly sexualised fashion choices and posturing inhabits a space outside of the concerns of this movement and serves as a protective armour of sorts; if a woman purports to be the aggressor, then sexual assault and harassment cannot find form within this narrative. Cardi herself has said "(e)ver since I started using guys, I feel so much better about myself. I feel so damn powerful" (Nikas).

The ability to simultaneously perform masculinity without forgoing the feminine traits that make them appeal to men is not easy ("Top Girls" 732), and there is a tension between the lingerie-heavy ensembles that appear repeatedly throughout Cardi's feed and the fashion and beauty styling of her IG profile picture: her outfit, hair and makeup are reminiscent of a 1960s politician's wife.



Fig. 6

In this image, she sports a blond, Marilyn Monroe-style bob, boxy pink jacket thrown over her shoulders, wearing a white ruffled blouse buttoned to the neck and the stiff handle of what could be an Hermès Birkin bag is apparent on the right hand side of the image (see fig. 6). Her increasing adoption of more conservative fashion and beauty stylings indicate the recolonisation of the phallic fashion influencer; I argue that this

trope could be a stepping-stone to the more respectable subordination of the Post-Feminist Masquerade. Once Phallic Girls like Cardi have received validation by the White fashion and beauty system, they must distance themselves from overtly racialised styling and phallic posturing in order to be granted permission to participate in the masquerade. McRobbie's theorizing that the patterns of racialised retrenchment embedded in spaces of femininity that invite male power and control resurrect norms of White heterosexuality (88) stills holds strong, however, Black women are no longer excluded. I argue that they are now invited to participate by the fashion-beauty complex in order to validate the appropriation of Black coded fashion and beauty.

### *The Working Girl*

The same sexual contract that binds McRobbie's Phallic Girl and Post-Feminist Masquerade has also permeated the fields of education and employment. The young Working Girl embodies the values of New Labour's meritocracy—having taken advantage of the equal opportunities available to her (with a particular emphasis on an individualistic and competitive discourse within education)—she emerges from a diverse range of social and cultural spaces to be considered a subject worthy of investment (“Top Girls” 722). Unconstrained by class or ethnicity, young women are now “motivated and ambitious, they have clear plans about what direction they might hope to follow from a young age” (“The Aftermath” 77). The government has created direct links between education and employment that emphasise work experience, employability and enterprise culture; young women's occupational status is a key feature in the presentation of self (“The Aftermath” 77). Furthermore, powerful, attractive working women are now

ubiquitous within popular culture and media, setting the bar for young women to judge themselves against within the world of work (“The Aftermath” 78).

The Working Girl is now situated within governmental discourse as much for her productive as reproductive capacities (“The Aftermath” 59); with this re-designation complete, so long as she does not challenge existing gender hierarchies she will be permitted to occupy positions of visibility in the world of work (“The Aftermath” 72).

With government now taking it upon itself to look after the young woman, so that she is seemingly well-cared for, this is also an economic rationality which envisages young women as endlessly working on a perfectible self, for whom there can be no space in the busy course of the working day for a renewed feminist politics. (“Top Girls” 732)

The young women who figure within this trope are typically middle class, and are encouraged to celebrate their individual successes and reject their social inferiors (“The Aftermath” 72). TV makeover shows like *What Not to Wear*, a British TV show popular at the time of McRobbie’s research, gives the Working Girl license to disparage low-income women’s habits and appearance (“The Aftermath” 73). Young women are discouraged from pursuing traditionally gendered and low-paid jobs such as hairdressing (“The Aftermath” 59). The Working Girl must also put off motherhood until she has amassed a significant enough portfolio that she is judged to have adequately achieved within the professional realm; young, single mothers who require assistance from the state are judged harshly (“Top Girls” 732).

The idea of ‘the perfect’—touched upon within my summation of McRobbie’s Post-Feminist Masquerade—is also a highly visible pressure for the Working Girl.

McRobbie describes ‘the perfect’ as a constantly recurring refrain within contemporary femininity, citing a tabloid’s account “of the headmistress of a high achieving girls’ school warning about how dangerous it was for girls to embrace the idea that they could somehow achieve perfection in their lives” (“Notes on the Perfect” 4). I argue that the notion of perfection is now totally entrenched within contemporary femininity, and this will be substantiated with my examination of the contemporary Working Girl in IG.

The Working Girl’s quest for perfection does not stop with her education and a total dedication to her work: “the new temporalities of women’s time mean that they are called upon to attend to body image and personal skills so that they will remain presentable in the workplace and employable in the longer term” (“The Aftermath” 73). It is not surprising that these young women’s high levels of academic performance are often accompanied by pervasively low self-esteem (“The Aftermath” 73). Again, the Working Girl must not let her ambition be perceived as too masculine in nature; she must uphold the Post-Feminist Masquerade as a feminine performance in order to be allowed to participate in the world of work (“The Aftermath”, 79). McRobbie references the two competing female figures in the American film *Working Girl* (1989)— a “middle class, feminist-influenced executive figure (Katherine) [...] who is eventually eclipsed by her rival and social inferior in the typing pool (Tess) [...] who studies her closely, and learns how to dress so that she too embodies complete perfection, but who remains endearingly feminine and succeeds in work and in love by these means” (“The Aftermath”, 78). Katherine’s expensive wardrobe does not adequately mask her feminist leanings; she presents herself as equal to men in her style and her manner, and does not adjust to the requirements of masculine domination. She neglects to maintain the visible fragility and

conventional femininity that ensures she remains desirable to men (“The Aftermath” 79). Despite this reference being 30 years old at the time of my research, while some advancements have been made I argue that the popular media—and mainstream society— still expect women to display a visible fragility and conventional femininity and those that don’t—either within their behaviour or by adopting a style of power dressing that is considered threatening to men—are branded as lesbian feminists or worse, straight women who will never find heteronormative love. The new patriarchal authority of the fashion and beauty system uses this post-feminist anxiety to perpetuate the ongoing oppression of women.

*The New Working Girl: Chriselle Lim of @ChriselleLim*



Fig. 7

In the age of IG, performing glamour labour (Wissinger 145) is a requirement for achieving commercial success—or more succinctly, how much one can charge to promote a fashion and beauty product—on this platform. Given that IG had not yet been developed at the time of her research, McRobbie’s *Working Girl* was found in more typical office jobs; in a contemporary context, the category of digital fashion and beauty influencer has evolved into a highly desirable job for young women and for many, extremely lucrative—the top influencers in these categories have by now amassed fortunes of hundreds of millions of dollars (Jedrzejczak). While the offline fashion industry has historically taken full advantage of the governmental rhetoric cited by McRobbie—with an emphasis on “work experience, internships, employability, and enterprise culture” (“The Aftermath” 77)—the digital fashion landscape was built off the back of enterprising bloggers who decided to take their own professional success within the sphere of fashion and beauty into their own hands.

Stylist and digital influencer Chriselle Lim—described on her website as “one of the most influential tastemakers on the web”—now boasts 1.1M followers on Instagram but started her fashion career as a wardrobe stylist before founding a popular YouTube fashion and beauty tutorial channel. Her personal style blog, *The Chriselle Factor*, was created in 2011 “to chronicle her daily musings and personal style” (Lim). A 2017 profile in *Fashionista.com* describes how

The 32-year-old has a range of industry experience that's contributed to her success thus far. With a merchandise and marketing degree from the Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising in Los Angeles, Lim had plans of becoming a buyer—until she took math classes in college and realized that wasn't

quite the path for her [...] She worked as (a stylist's) assistant while building her own portfolio, and then earned her "big first job in fashion" as (a) fashion editor." (Houlis)

In Lim's own words, her goal is "to encourage, educate, and inspire all women across the globe through her personal style, runway trends, beauty secrets, and fashion tips and tricks" (Lim). I argue that what she is actually encouraging is the post-feminist process of disarticulation amongst her followers by promoting the excessive consumption of fashion and beauty products as well as unattainable ideas of the perfect. Her IG feed—which dates to November 14, 2011—serves as a mechanism to drive followers to three places: first, her blog; then to a feed dedicated to a clothing line she launched in September 2018 (@chrisellelimcollection) (see fig. 7); and finally to her commercial studio-for-hire's feed, @cincstudios. Her posts on both platforms yielded 6.9 million impressions for global multi-brand fashion e-tailer Revolve in 2017, and her site sends 15,000 to 20,000 clicks per link to beauty products from brands like La Prairie, Caudalie and Malin + Goetz (Houlis).

As the Founder and Creative Director, Chriselle is featured in almost all of the content within her IG feed, although her husband and two children make frequent appearances—between February 7 and February 23, 2019, out of 30 posts only four do not have Lim in the shot. Like McRobbie's Working Girl—found "(a)cross the boundaries of class and ethnicity" ("The Aftermath" 77)—first generation Korean-American Lim is not the stereotypical White girl of the Post-Feminist Masquerade. Lim resembles McRobbie's Working Girl trope in that she is undeniably motivated and ambitious, but unlike McRobbie's girl she did not have clear plans about what direction

she wanted to follow from a young age. She draws parallels between her early ambitions and her current career, stating that

Because I came from more of a professional background, my outlook was always as a teacher. I want to teach my followers something versus saying, ‘This is what I’m wearing.’ When I first started, it was about letting me teach them about how to do this in fashion, or how to make it in fashion, or how to become a stylist, or how to get that job you want with the outfit you're wearing [...] Back then, it was purely out of just for the love it; there was no money in it. It was just because I wanted to share my knowledge and hopefully impact and help some people out there. (Houlis)

Lim epitomizes the characteristics of those individuals who are successful within the realm of glamour labour: she is the ‘CEO of Me’, responsible for her own success, is adaptable, original, professional, looks the part, in charge of her own destiny, and went on to become a social media superstar. She puts forth her best self, not only physically but also emotionally and personally (Wissinger 145).





Fig. 8

If she does bring up topics that are mentioned as a form of stress, it is generally treated in a light-hearted manner—see Chriselle Lim holding her breast pump on January 17, 2019 outside Chateau Marmont because she lost the cap (see fig. 8), or posting a side view of her breastfeeding on October 6, 2018 to show that she cannot zip up the side of the dress she is advertising—but it always has to be fun, light and studied.

Powerful, attractive working women are now ubiquitous within popular culture and media, but it is women like Lim that now set the bar for young women to judge themselves against within the world of work (“The Aftermath”, 78). By using herself as the subject for her own ‘makeover’ style content she is simply reframing the message imparted by the makeover TV shows cited by McRobbie—that your look is unacceptable and you must improve it (“The Aftermath” 124). This post-feminist concept encourages

young women to become active participants both in the labour market and consumer culture, as disposable income allows women to shop. Lim's IG feed is no longer used solely to impart fashion and beauty "tips and tricks", but to sell clothing and beauty products to her followers. If an IG post is about what she is wearing or her beauty routine, every item or product is tagged with a link to the brand's feed or web store. The same governmental rhetoric adopted by the offline fashion industry now permeates the digital fashion landscape, and influencers like Lim take advantage of young women who wish to pursue the same career by hiring them as unpaid interns. Her IG feed is now run in the same manner as the print magazines analysed by McRobbie and serves the same purpose—to make money from advertisers who wish to reach young women.

Lim may now be a powerful figure within the fashion system, but within her IG she ensures that she does not threaten hetero-normative gender roles by demonstrating a visible fragility and conventional femininity through her hair, makeup and wardrobe choices (the colour pink, floral decorations and a plethora of printed dresses give a soft, feminine look to her feed). While she keeps her captions light and fun, on her blog she acknowledges that

I know that sometimes my posts (especially on Instagram) can make motherhood look a little bit too glam to be real, but honestly in this digital media age, what you see isn't the whole truth. Fact of the matter is, I'm still learning how to fine tune my life as a career woman and my role as a mom." ("20 Things They Don't Tell You About Pregnancy")

As Lim has built a multi-million dollar business off working on a perfectible self, posts like this indicate she likely has no space in the course of her working day for a

renewed interest in feminist politics (“Top Girls” 732). As with McRobbie’s *Working Girl*, Lim put off motherhood until she amassed a significant enough portfolio to self-judge adequate achievement within the professional realm (732). However, success came at a relatively young age for Lim so she was spared the post-feminist anxiety of late motherhood (she had one child at 30 and a second at 33); in this case it is her followers who may feel inadequate if they do not achieve similar results in their own personal life.

In September 2018 (the same month her second daughter was born), she launched her eponymous clothing line, aptly marketed on her IG feed with the hash tag “#CLWorkingGirl”. To promote the collection on this platform, she posted a look book video featuring former K-Pop singer and actress Sara Son (@sarasohn) on September 27, 2018 with the caption

@chrisellelimcollection stands for strong, powerful, and confident working women. Women who are on the go and on the move. Proud to announce to you our latest campaign for @chrisellelimcollection called “REAL WOMEN WHO WORK” Spotlighting women who are truly making a difference in their industry and their community. Meet Sara Sohn aka @mommasohn. She is a full time mom (yes, full time moms are working moms too! In fact they have the hardest and most important job!) and also a successful actress on the side. She has two kids ages 5 and 7. A typical day consists of pick-ups and drop offs, getting dinner ready for the family and occasional castings in between. She is a true boss lady because she always puts family first and is the epitome of a strong, modern day mom. #CLWorkingGirl #chrisellelimcollection. (@chrisellelim)

This caption is the perfect manifestation of neo-liberal post-feminism at work: the #CLWorking Girl is portrayed as the woman who simultaneously manages a successful career, raises a family and still looks chic by wearing a variety of mid-priced garments designed with this purpose in mind. Notions like this serve to reinforce unattainable ideas of the perfect and encourage the post-feminist process of disarticulation amongst young women. Fashion, in this case, offers an illusory access into the neoliberal paradigm of female achievement in both the domains of professional success and motherhood.

### *The Global Girl*

McRobbie's Global Girl is described as the pleasing counterpart of the western Working Girl, found within the rapidly developing factory systems of those countries relegated to so-called Third World status ("Top Girls" 718). She is at once friendly and unthreatening, beautiful yet pliable, and emanates good will ("The Aftermath" 59). In order to ensure that this attribution of capacity and illusory freedom does not upend traditional gender hierarchies, the Global Girl is forbidden to question hegemonic masculinity and any associations with feminism must be abandoned ("The Aftermath" 8).

McRobbie's Global Girl arises from the space of globalization and the increasing visibility of commercial femininities in the developing world, and her newfound economic freedom and ability to participate within consumer culture is only permitted so long as she gives up on the "more social democratic gender-mainstreaming and human rights based model" of economic freedom ("Top Girls" 718). Labour and the capacity to work are key features of this trope, as young women are assigned central role in the new global labour market. So, other than having been granted permission to participate in consumer culture, what does fashion have to do with McRobbie's Global Girl? "The

chains of expropriation”, she says, “of the knowledge and resources on the part of global corporations [...] intensify the disadvantage and dependency of non-First World women” (“The Aftermath” 55).

McRobbie’s theorizing could be attributed to an increase in female workers hired to make garments and accessories for fast fashion brands like H&M, Joe Fresh and Zara in countries like Bangladesh, India, China, Cambodia and Vietnam. In Bangladesh, for example, these numbers have grown dramatically since the first garment factory opened in 1976: out of the 3.5 million workers in 4,825 garment factories who produce goods for export to primarily North America and Europe, 85% are female (*Waronwant.org*). The garment industry in this country has been a key factor in uplifting large numbers of poor and vulnerable women, as employment helps prevent early marriage and in turn, reductions in fertility (*Worldbank.org*); Kanchi Hazi, a

24-year-old with a gap-toothed smile left her home village seven years ago to take this factory job. She sews pockets on blouses and works as many hours as she can get. “I like it here,” she said, arms akimbo, with fists on her hips. “I make my own decisions. I can earn money and help my family.” With overtime, she makes \$78 a month and sends half of it home [...] Every few months, she makes the three-hour bus ride home to visit her family. She gets mixed reactions from villagers. Some adults praise her, she said, because “I’m the only wage earner in the family.” Others scold her for taking a job in a factory where men and women work together [...] But when she steps off the bus, younger village girls dance around her. “They see me as a role model,” Hazi said. “I can do whatever I want. I can enjoy myself. I have freedom.” (Weiss)

Girls like this validate McRobbie's theorizing of a new sexual contract in the context of the disadvantaged, Third World factory girl who emanates good will ("The Aftermath" 59), however it is hard to imagine these girls, who live in a strict Muslim society and are required to send a large part of their income home to their family, being able to actively participate in consumer culture—particularly within the sphere of fashion and beauty.

According to McRobbie, the Global Girl gained visibility in the 1980s and 90s through advertising images from fashion companies like Benetton, famous for using their campaigns as a vehicle to address social issues by putting forth imagery that intimates we live—or should be living—in a post-racial, post-sexist and post-religious society. She also points to the increase in international editions of fashion and gossip magazines like *ELLE*, *Marie Claire*, *Vogue* and *Grazia* as an indication that the Global Girl willingly seeks to emulate the styles, fashion and, in so far as is culturally permissible, the lifestyle choices of her western counterpart. Young women in developing countries are therefore positioned as enthusiastic about partaking in and belonging to a new type of global femininity ("The Aftermath" 88).

The Global Girl, explains McRobbie, is thoroughly modern, and through her wage earning capacity is able to indulge her enjoyment of beauty culture and popular culture. She has none of the sexual bravado of the Phallic Girl, nor has she taken the awkward mantle of femininity of her post-feminist masquerading counterparts (89). The Global Girl is both natural and authentic, loves feminine self-adornment, and is at once playfully seductive and innocent with the suggestion of a youthful sexuality that has yet to be discovered ("The Aftermath" 89). The promotion of western post-feminist concepts,

explains McRobbie, “is the underlying (and recolonising) aim of the promotion of Global Girlhood by the global media, the commercial domain (the fashion-beauty complex) and through specifically neo-liberal forms of governmentality” (“The Aftermath” 59). Unlike her American or British counterpart, however, McRobbie says the mobilisation of the Global Girl is not reliant on governmental discourses because her increased mobility allows her a sort of transnational status (89). The Global Girl is interpellated by consumer-led discourse, but she does not threaten the West with “migration and uncontrolled fertility, instead they stay put and yearn for the fashion and beauty products associated with Western femininity and sexuality (89).

While I agree with the idea that a Global Girlhood promoted by a global media can be attributed to the pervasiveness of neoliberalism, I argue that this trope is problematic and doesn't really find form—then or now—as it conflates women across a multitude of contexts and flattens different realities. Furthermore, I find it difficult to imagine those so-called Third World female factory workers spending any of their income on the international editions of magazines like *Grazia* or *Vogue*.

Simidele Dosekun concurs with McRobbie’s theorizing that post-feminist culture and sensibility emerged in the West as a direct response to Second Wave feminism, but she refutes the claim post-feminist sensibilities emerging outside of this context are simply a mimicry of western behaviours.<sup>16</sup> She argues that this sensibility is easily circulated transnationally by global neoliberal institutions and is not necessarily a reaction triggered by a historical precedent (968).

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<sup>16</sup> It is noteworthy that in a study of 12 international editions of four top beauty and fashion magazines, Yan and Bissell found Asian countries were relatively independent in their framing of models and stories but magazines distributed in Latin America and South Africa were being assimilated into the Western norms of beauty (194).

Dosekun's research points to a pervasive post-feminist sensibility in Lagos, Nigeria, despite the fact that the region has not experienced the same 'waves' of feminism as the West: her interview subjects draw on ideas and self-descriptions that would be as recognizably post-feminist as if their provenance were in any western capital city. She disagrees with McRobbie's assertion that in the non-western world, post-feminism manifests itself as a more subdued and naive copy of the western version: girls playing dress up with what little they have versus the empowered, sexually and economically liberated women of the West (963).

Dosekun argues that McRobbie's *Global Girl* does not take into account or allow for difference between non-western women. She states that "post-feminism is readily transnationalized [...] broadcast and sold across borders" (961), available to women around the globe "who have the material, discursive and imaginative capital to access and to buy into it" (966). It is not, she argues, that "any feminine subject, anywhere in the globe can perform a post-feminist identity' at will, but rather that 'post-feminism sells transnationally—from "Beyoncé" to "boob jobs" to "Brazilian waxes," from Shanghai to Mexico City to London to Lagos" (966). I concur with Dosekun's assessment that post-feminist disarticulation affects non-western women with the same nuanced complexity as it does western women. While further exploration of how this process plays out in a variety of national contexts is outside the scope of my research, I will, in the next section, discuss one incarnation of the new *Global Girl* that appears within the confines of IG, a trope that takes into account how McRobbie's identification of the transnational status of the *Global Girl* (89) has increased in the intervening years, while strengthening



Dosekun's assessment that the Global Girl isn't simply playing dress up in mimicry of her western counterpart.

*The New Global Girl: Huda Kattan of @HudaBeauty*



Fig. 9

On the IG Rich list of 2018—a compilation of the platform's highest-earners based on what they are able to charge for a paid post—Brazilian model @camilacoelho is the only one from outside of the U.K., U.S. and Europe to make the list of the top 10 Global fashion influencers (*Hopperhq.com*). The list of the top 10 Global beauty influencers is even less diverse—bar one European, all of the influencers are American. Yan and Bissell argue that the dissemination of western media content across societies and cultures worldwide has led to the globalization of a beauty and appearance ideal; the new cross-culturally accepted standard of ideal beauty requires a narrow face, small nose, large eyes, high eyebrows, and high cheekbones. They surmise that these westernized

ideals have eroded the national beauty standards in countries like Japan, Saudi Arabia, and Brazil, “where the appearance norm is quite different from that of Caucasian women” (195). However, they warn against the exaggeration of the cultural assimilation of fashion, as they identified a clear distinction in dress consistent with the boundaries of Asian and American culture, for example (having spent four years working within the Indian fashion industry, I can confirm that ethnic dress is still the dominant paradigm within that country). Yan and Bissell’s research could explain why no non-Eurocentric IG fashion influencers have as of yet managed to achieve the same critical mass of followers as those who operate within the sphere of beauty.

I have, therefore, chosen an Emirati/American beauty influencer as the best representation of the new Global Girl in part because of her Iraqi heritage, but also because the incredible global reach of her IG feed (see fig. 9). Now-billionaire beauty mogul Huda Kattan (on IG her primary feed is @Hudabeauty, with 36 million followers as of April, 2019) exemplifies the transnational status of the Global Girl as outlined by McRobbie—and for this reason she most accurately represents the contemporary version of this trope.

Born in Oklahoma, Huda Kattan is the daughter of Iraqi immigrants to the U.S. and moved to Dubai in 2006 shortly after getting married (Ghanem). As with many IG fashion and beauty influencers, Kattan found her initial audience on her beauty blog and YouTube channel in 2010, and she launched the HudaBeauty line in 2013, which now offers a range of products that includes liquid lipsticks, highlighter palettes, false nails and eyelashes and a collaboration with Tweezerman (Ghanem). Her IG feed helped her grow her number of fans exponentially, and by 2017 she was said to be the highest paid

non-celebrity beauty influencer on that channel in 2017 (Ghanem). Kattan's considerable global influence within the sphere of beauty could be attributed to her transnational status—she has ties to the U.S., Iraq and the United Arab Emirates. In terms of her appearance, she exudes an exotic Otherness: her looks exemplify the cross-culturally accepted standard of ideal beauty with a narrow face, small nose, large eyes, high eyebrows, and high cheekbones. That she does not conform to the Eurocentric White, blond paradigm of beauty serves to increase her international appeal as young women of diverse ethnicities may be able to see an element of her appearance within their own.

Her IG bio reads: “PROVING DREAMERS CAN MAKE IT...MUA<sup>17</sup> & Blogger, turned Business Woman” (@hudabeauty). Her feed is also incredibly diverse; she frequently uploads videos and content sent to her by her legions of fans that show themselves using her products, including non-binary or trans members of the LGBTQ+ community from around the world.

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<sup>17</sup> MUA is an acronym for makeup artist, commonly used within social media.



Fig. 10

Posts include a makeup look by transgender Mexican beauty blogger @laviedunprince from February 24, 2019 (see fig. 10); a makeup tutorial by British Black male fashion and beauty blogger @theplasticboy (February 28, 2019); another shows an image of Lebanese beauty blogger @lepetitbeirut wearing hijab and showing off her range of Huda Beauty lipstick (March 6, 2019).

Interspersed are images of Huda herself, sometimes with her husband and daughter; she regularly posts comedic memes that make fun of the excessive hair and makeup requirements of her day-to-day life, which indicates that she, too, subscribes to the girlish femininity and self-deprecating tone required of the Post-Feminist Masquerade. Despite the inclusive nature of her feed, she is undeniably promoting a

universal standard of beauty characterized by an excessive, hyper-feminine aesthetic and is actively contributing to the phenomenon of cultural assimilation within the sphere of beauty. One such post shows her followers how to give their nose a more refined appearance using contour powder.



Fig. 11

The exuberant caption (see fig. 11) reads

Hey Guys! Check out my super easy tutorial on how I keep my nose looking SNATCHED! Even though I've had my nose done I still love the way it looks when it's contoured! Let me know what tutorials do you guys want to see next! Comment below! #fakeanosejob. (@hudabeauty)

Her choice of the adjective 'snatched' is interesting as typically this slang now refers to a woman's small waist; this indicates that stringent standards of shape are no longer strictly corporeal. Another meme shows a pair of long, elegant hands reaching out

from PVC Louis Vuitton sleeves and complete with three-inch pink manicure; opposite, there is an image of the bare plastic, pudgy fingers of a child's doll. A text overlay reads "How women feel when they have their nails done, VS. when they don't" (February 16, 2019).

It could be argued that the diverse nature of her feed means she is not, at the very least, perpetuating the ideal gendered Whiteness of the fashion and beauty system and for this she should be applauded. However, by encouraging cisgendered women, queer, transgender and non-binary young people to deeply entrench themselves within consumer culture and the fashion-beauty complex, perhaps she should be considered all the more dangerous. I ask, is she still activating post-feminist disarticulation if other marginalised groups are included within her messaging? While understanding how the post-feminist concepts put forth on her IG feed affect diverse followers bears further research within critical fashion studies, I believe it is possible to disarticulate any marginalised group. Those young women and members of the LGBTQ+ community interested in fashion and beauty in developing countries as discussed by McRobbie no longer need to wait for the international editions of their favourite glossy magazines to see what is fashionable in the West; why would they when they can simply open IG and see content they can self-identify with posted in feeds like Kattan's? What is certain is that the beauty concepts put forth by Kattan and her followers are as recognizably post-feminist as if their provenance were in any western capital city. Kattan's feed validates Dosekun's theorizing that post-feminism does indeed now sell transnationally.

## Conclusion

While Angela McRobbie's theory of post-feminist disarticulation has been interrogated by scholars in the realms of feminist media studies, gender studies, and cultural studies, few have approached her ideas from the context of fashion studies despite the central role of the fashion-beauty complex in disseminating damaging post-feminist rhetoric to young women. While two of the examples she uses to illustrate her four post-feminist tropes—book and film character Bridget Jones, and *Sex and the City*'s protagonist, Carrie Bradshaw—have been extensively reviewed and discussed in literature on post-feminism within popular culture, there are few critiques of how McRobbie's tropes have evolved in the years since *The Aftermath*'s publication. While my research could also be situated within culture and communication studies because of the influence I attribute to politics and the new women's movement on the evolution of McRobbie's tropes, the findings of my research validates the role of the fashion and beauty complex in reinforcing patriarchal authority as well as its part in promoting an isolating neoliberal feminism. This research therefore seeks to fill a significant gap in critical fashion studies and insight into the role of feminism in the digital economy. Given how visible these societal pressures are to young women as they are relentlessly promoted by the fashion and beauty industries on IG, post-feminist anxieties within young women are now so heightened that there was an urgency for the identifying new patterns of disarticulation on this platform. Disarticulation is now being enacted on IG in such a way that no group of women is exempt; however, all women are not affected proportionately. White privilege within the context of the new sexual contract has contributed to the pervasive and dangerous notion that we live in a post-sexist and post-

racial society—and this serves to perpetuate the ongoing oppression of different marginalised groups and prevent female articulation. McRobbie's research was criticized by intersectional feminist scholars who argue that certain Black women can be interpellated to post-feminism, furthermore, her theorizing of the Global girl trope is problematic as it conflates women across a multitude of contexts and flattens different realities. My research aligns with Simelele Dosekun, who theorizes that post-feminism circulates transnationally, and Dayna Chatman, who posits that Black women are not exempt from damaging post-feminist discourse.

Three out of McRobbie's four tropes were easily identifiable amongst the most prominent fashion influencers on IG today. Leandra Medine of @Manrepeller is the contemporary Carrie Bradshaw, a young woman who turned the Post-Feminist Masquerade into a multi-million dollar fashion business largely through her presence on IG. The entire premise of 'man-repelling' hinges on the theatricality of the masquerade as described by McRobbie: ridiculous high fashion garments and accessories that purport to deter the male gaze. In this case however, the male gaze as the traditional patriarchal authority has simply been replaced by the fashion and beauty system. The frivolity of Medine's Masquerade serves to mitigate any fears that her influence within this sphere could destabilise a traditional gender hierarchy.

Medine's aesthetic was immediately validated by the fashion world when her blog was profiled by the *New York Times*; this endorsement confirmed the fashion and beauty system's patriarchal authority over her and her young female followers. While her style is often described as quirky, it still fits within the paradigms of heteronormative femininity and this has allowed her to achieve commercial success both as a fashion marketer and



product designer. As her IG feed gained traction, she was able to monetize her content with paid advertorial posts and use @manrepeller as a vehicle to redirect followers to Manrepeller.com—now ranked 19th on luxury online fashion retailer Net-a-porter.com’s list of top referrers (Strugatz). While @manrepeller has evolved from #ootd posts featuring Medine into an editorial-style feed run by Medine’s employees, it still serves to interpellate young women into neoliberal, post-feminist concepts such as encouraging young women to seek the potential rewards of glamour labour and promoting the excessive consumption of fashion products. What makes Medine’s Masquerade different from McRobbie’s original trope is that while Carrie Bradshaw’s character disarticulated young women from within a fantasy world on TV and movie screens, Medine’s (somewhat illusory) accessibility as a real woman makes the dissemination of post-feminist fashion and lifestyle content incredibly potent—and therefore more damaging to young women.

Rapper and IG Influencer Cardi B. (@iamcardib) is the contemporary incarnation of McRobbie’s Phallic Girl; she resembles the high profile women situated within McRobbie’s original theorizing in that she found fame within the entertainment industry—first as an exotic dancer, before becoming one of the most influential performers in rap. Young Afro-Caribbean women like Dominican-American Cardi were excluded from McRobbie’s trope because of the danger of gendered racial violence against them; however young women like Cardi are the new flag-bearers of this trope—with the misguided belief that becoming the sexual aggressor eliminates the potential for harm. This is a concept she has embraced with enthusiasm, and her IG feed is a celebration of sexual enjoyment, excessive fashion consumption and heavy drinking.

These behaviours (at least the sexual bravado and excessive drinking) though present in McRobbie's theorizing, were more often found within the non-famous Phallic Girl—at the time of her research, it was still too risky for those young Phallic women in the public eye to be arrested for fighting or to be repeatedly seen acting drunk and disorderly for risk of jeopardizing their careers. It is precisely these behaviours—along with the highly sexualized nature of her persona—that propelled Cardi to stardom as a reality TV star before she achieved almost instantaneous success as a rapper.

Now that she has been judged to have adequately achieved in this area, she has been embraced by the fashion and beauty system as an influencer, though I argue this positioning gives a duplicitous fashion and beauty system permission to validate the fashion and beauty styles and body types they appropriate—in this case, a 'slim-thick' body type achieved through silicone injections in one's backside. However, I have identified this trope as a stepping stone to the White, lady-like paradigm of The Post-Feminist Masquerade, and this is evidenced by Cardi's publicly distancing herself from both accessibly priced and high fashion brands popular within urban culture from her IG feed and aligning herself with White coded brands like Mugler Couture. This transition requires her to adopt the thin White body shape typical of the Post-Feminist Masquerade and reject the slim-thick ideal popularized by those exotic Others; Cardi's weight loss is documented on IG along with her adoption of a high fashion aesthetic. Given her incredible influence over a young female demographic, this is the most troubling aspect of her co-option by the White fashion and beauty system, as when this patriarchal authority decides racialised bodies are no longer 'on trend', those young women who aren't able to pick up and put down a body shape as they would a new jacket could suffer

immense damage to their self-esteem and self-worth. This, of course, is the goal of the post-feminist process of disarticulation: to strengthen the divide between diverse groups of young women in order to prevent them coming together to enact significant change against the new regime of gender power.

The Contemporary Working Girl found a new niche within the professional world in the years following McRobbie's research: the concept of glamour labour within the digital sphere allowed this trope to diversify from the traditional office job favoured by young, middle class, well-educated women in the 90s and early 2000s. Neoliberal strivers like Korean-American fashion influencer Chriselle Lim found new form with the advent of style and beauty blogging; her designation of IG, an important channel for her advertorial fashion and beauty content, allowed her to build a multi-million dollar fashion empire by diversifying into self-branded products. As with McRobbie's Working Girl, new Working Girl Lim is not the stereotypical White girl of the Post-Feminist Masquerade. Lim exemplifies other characteristics of this trope with her self-described goal of encouraging, educating, and inspiring all women across the globe with her personal style and beauty secrets; her rhetoric infers to young women that they are responsible for their own self-transformation and self-governance in the relentless quest for 'the perfect'. Not only does she leverage the most damaging aspects of the fashion-beauty complex for financial gain, but her portrayal of marriage, motherhood and a high-powered fashion career sets a restrictively high standard of achievement for her young female followers.

Within the neoliberal meritocracy, young women like Lim promote the concept that one's twenties are a period that must be dedicated to unencumbered striving, which

serves to increase post-feminist anxieties if one has not been able to self-judge as having adequately achieved by the time they are thirty. Lim has adopted the same governmental discourse that characterizes the offline fashion industry, with an emphasis on work experience, portfolio building, and unpaid internships. Her IG feed is subject to the same rules as the print magazines analysed by McRobbie—Lim must answer to the patriarchal authority of her fashion and beauty advertisers. Lim's eponymous clothing line, marketed under the hash tag #CLWorkingGirl, positions her as one of the worst offenders in this category. By employing the post-feminist concept of the working woman who can both have and do it all, she situates herself firmly within the neoliberal paradigm and stimulates the post-feminist process of disarticulation exactly as described by McRobbie.

McRobbie's original concept of the Global Girl has been criticised by scholars for conflating women across a multitude of contexts, and flattening complex and varied realities. However, my research found only one fashion influencer in the top ten global rankings from outside the U.S. or Europe; given that Yan and Bissell argue that particular countries are at risk of cultural assimilation within the sphere of beauty, I turned to IG beauty influencers to locate the contemporary version of this trope. Emirati/American Huda Kattan (@Hudabeauty), an Iraqi-American now settled in the United Arab Emirates, best represents the new Global Girl. One of the first beauty influencers to build a billion dollar beauty empire, she exemplifies the transnational status of the Global Girl as outlined by McRobbie but validates Dosekun's theorizing that a post-feminist sensibility is both global and hegemonic. Kattan's appearance exemplifies the trans-racial, exotic paradigm of beauty popularised by influencers like Kim Kardashian—and freely admits this look is constructed with plastic surgery and a great deal of contour

powder. With this, she is contributing to the cultural assimilation of a globally-idealized type of beauty: her success may be attributed to how she leads young women of diverse ethnicities to either see an element of her appearance within their own or feel that with money and significant amount of effort, they too can be responsible for their own self-transformation. Kattan has adopted elements of the Post-Feminist Masquerade within her own look and the information she disseminates from IG, with the use of comedic memes and a self-deprecating tone across her captions and videos. While her feed is diverse and inclusive, she persistently promotes the excessive consumption of beauty products and neoliberal concepts of glamour labour, self-governance and self-transformation. I question whether or not broader representation in this context is indicative of a positive shift or whether it signifies that damaging post-feminist rhetoric has found a powerful new channel to disarticulate young people from a variety of marginalised groups.

My analysis of the evolution and defining characteristics of McRobbie's post-feminist tropes on IG begets the question: can young women participate within the fashion and beauty system as influencers and still advocate feminism with any real conviction? The findings of my research indicate that this sphere is entirely post-feminist in nature, designed to ensnare young women within the gender stabilizing confines of a heteronormative style of femininity that rejects any of the gains made by radical feminists since the 1970s. Furthermore, the new women's movement has done little to reduce ongoing female oppression, largely because participants are predominantly White, middle class women<sup>18</sup> who have been led to believe that we live in a post-racist society and that a feminist identity can be constructed through particular items of clothing.

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<sup>18</sup> Take, for example, the demographics of protesters at the Women's March in Washington on January 21, 2017 (the day following Trump's inauguration); respondents of an on-site survey conducted by researchers

Similarly, IG influencers promote fashion and beauty concepts and products by leveraging post-feminist anxieties just as fashion marketers always have—aging, motherhood, marriage, excessive body surveillance, a desire for unattainable levels of perfection—with the goal of selling more to young women. Now that IG is firmly embedded within the fashion-beauty complex because of influencers like Leandra Medine, Chriselle Lim, Cardi B. and Huda Kattan, this platform has taken on an almost sinister dimension with its global reach and hyper-targeting capabilities. IG enables influencers, brands and marketers to keep young women entrenched in the excessive consumption of fashion and beauty products with messaging that speaks directly to diverse groups. I argue that even those influencers like Kattan that take an inclusive approach with their feed and product promotion have simply reframed post-feminist rhetoric to suit their desired audience; how post-feminism affects the LGBTQ+ community on this platform bears further examination within critical fashion studies. Furthermore, the digital fashion sphere—within which IG is the dominant force—is now replicating the same pervasive gender inequalities found within the offline business of fashion. Despite the fact that fashion is a feminized industry, men generally hold positions of power within the most influential fashion and beauty companies; those women at the top collude with male-dominated executive boards to ensure traditional gender hierarchies are maintained.<sup>19</sup> Just as with the print magazines prevalent at the time of McRobbie’s research, the power fashion and beauty advertisers now have over IG influencers means that no significant feminist gains are likely to be made on this platform.

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from the University of Maryland “were predominately white and highly educated; only one-quarter of respondents reported being Asian, black, Latino or multiracial” (Fisher et al. 2017)

<sup>19</sup> See “The Glass Runway” by Allyson Stokes.

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