Q. ‘Consuming the Self’: A discourse analysis of the self-representation of Instagram bloggers and its relationship to consumer culture

Student Number: 200869907

Sophie Rose Davies

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree
BA (Hons) Communication and Media

School of Media and Communication, University of Leeds

May 2017

Supervisor: Dr. Chris Paterson

Word Count: 11,996
# Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... 3

Acknowledgements ......................................................................................................................... 4

1. Introduction .................................................................................................................................. 5

1.1 Research aims and objectives ................................................................................................. 6

2. Literature Review ....................................................................................................................... 10

2.1 Political Economy of Social Media ......................................................................................... 10

2.2 Instagram ................................................................................................................................. 13

2.3 Identity and Self-representation ............................................................................................. 14

2.4 Commodification of the Self: Branding a Postfeminist Identity ........................................ 16

3. Methodology .............................................................................................................................. 19

3.1 Discourse Analysis: A Foucauldian approach ....................................................................... 19

4. Findings and Analysis .................................................................................................................. 24

4.1 ‘A material girl in a material world’: Postfeminist Consumption and Commodity Fetishism ........................................................................................................................................................................... 25

4.2 Fashioning the consumer lifestyle and the consumer identity: ‘Having it all’................... 31

4.3 Consuming the (authentic?) self: The blogger as a passionate worker ......................... 36

4.4 Bourgeois Femininity: Aspirational Consumption ............................................................ 41

5. Conclusion .................................................................................................................................. 47

5.1 Summary of findings ............................................................................................................... 47

5.2 Possible Recommendations .................................................................................................... 49

Bibliography .................................................................................................................................... 51

Appendix .......................................................................................................................................... 57
Abstract

Alongside the practices of social media, fashion bloggers have become increasingly popular on sites like Instagram. Mainly young women, bloggers post photographs of themselves, their lifestyles and their outfits, using self-branding techniques to promote themselves and their blogs in what Hearn (2010) calls an “online reputation economy” that is situated within consumer culture. By conducting a discourse analysis of 10 commercially successful Instagram bloggers, this dissertation argues that bloggers construct their self-representations in a way that is entirely reflective of consumer, capitalist ideologies. Four themes are identified: (1) Postfeminist consumption and commodity fetishism, (2) Fashioning the consumer lifestyle and the consumer identity, (3) Consuming the (authentic?) self and then finally, (4) ‘Bourgeois Femininity’ and the theme of ‘aspirational consumption’. By imaging highly desirable products and lifestyles, bloggers present a discourse that celebrates female consumerism in order to ‘look’ and ‘feel’ good which together, articulates a form of femininity that draws upon postfeminist, neoliberal sensibilities around female self-branding and self-commodification that reinforces a disciplinary control onto the female body. As a result, this dissertation argues that the self-representation of Instagram bloggers is inextricably tied to consumer culture through the purchasing and fetishization of consumer goods, which re-establishes normative beauty ideals into the online sphere.

Key Words: Instagram, fashion bloggers, self-branding, self-representation, consumer culture, postfeminism, political economy, discourse, power
Acknowledgements

Special thanks go to my supervisor, Dr. Chris Paterson, for his support and guidance throughout this year. I would also like to thank the teaching staff at the School of Media and Communication at the University of Leeds for making my three-year degree thoroughly enjoyable and rewarding.

Finally, I would like to thank my family for their unconditional support and encouragement not just in my time at Leeds, but through life. I would also like to thank my friends and my boyfriend George, as without them, my social and academic life would never have been the same!
1. Introduction

In recent years, platforms such as Instagram have become an avenue where retailers and advertisers can market consumer goods in a way that will influence consumer spending. With the rise of user-generated platforms like YouTube and Instagram, there has been a steady rise in so-called ‘micro-celebrities’ (Marwick, 2016) or ‘Influencers’ (Abidin, 2016a) who have become Internet famous on social media. In particular, fashion and beauty bloggers, most often young women, have become increasingly popular amongst other women and brands, accumulating a wide following on blogs and their social media profiles by using fashion and beauty products as a way of expressing their identity as well as cultivating a commercially successful blogging career. According to Duffy and Hund (2015:1), bloggers represent the widespread growth of “socially mediated cultures of creative production located in the traditionally feminine domains of fashion, beauty, parenting, and craft,” reflecting a postfeminist identity where women have a more “liberated sense of self by expressing consumer choices” (Nathanson, 2014:136). As Nathanson (2014:137) argues, bloggers are “everyday girls (who) celebrate the potential for the individual to become a successful entrepreneur through online work in consumer culture…by transforming shopping into a kind of pleasurable work.”

This dissertation moves away from looking at self-representation as a concept, to exploring it as a practice by looking at how young women, specifically fashion and lifestyle bloggers, use digital platforms like Instagram to perform femininity in the context of Foucauldian (1988) ‘technologies of the self’. By uploading photos, creating videos or displaying a brand’s products, bloggers are generating a “substantial (and ever-increasing) amount of value and capital” within capitalist modes of production (Duffy and Hund, 2015:3). To prove how popular and commercially successful bloggers have become, Leaper (2016) states that bloggers such as Zoe Sugg who has 10.3 million followers on Instagram and Tanya Burr with 3.1 million, are reportedly earning a respective £50,000 and £20,000 a month from product placements and advertising revenue from their channels.

As of last year, it was estimated that Instagram had accumulated 400 million users since its development in 2010 having recently been bought by the Facebook owner Mark Zuckerberg for $1 billion (Oreskovic, 2016). It is also estimated that Instagram’s mobile ad revenues will reach $2.81 billion by the end of 2017, with brand engagement being 10 times
higher on Instagram than it is on Facebook (Smith, 2016). Due to these factors, it is important to consider how self-representation is *mediated* and “how political economic structures might actually shape the kinds of self-representation” (Thumim, 2012:140) that takes place on sites like Instagram. In this way, following the research by Duffy and Hund (2015:2) and many others, this thesis asks, how might Instagram encourage women like bloggers to “engage in self-branding practices which draw upon the codes, processes, and market logics of mainstream culture industries”? Given the commercialised nature of sites like Instagram and the relationship between women’s self-representation and consumer culture (Arthurs, 2003; Dobson, 2015; Duffy and Hund, 2015; Nathanson, 2014), it is important to study bloggers *discursively* to understand what politics is at play and how this becomes apparent in women’s practices and uses of social media more generally.

1.1 Research aims and objectives

The aim of this research is to understand how the self-representation of popular and commercially successful Instagram bloggers is *shaped* and is reflective of consumerist, capitalist ideologies. It aims to contribute to existing research around self-representation, but to uncover precisely how these representations are constructed on platforms that are in themselves, commercial by nature. Although academic research has been conducted on Instagram and fashion bloggers, very few have reflected on what influences are *shaping* these identities and how these self-representations are *expressed* through consumer culture. By adopting Foucault’s (2002) discourse analysis and his ideas around power and ‘technologies of the self’ (1988), theories around political economy and postfeminist ideas of identity and self-representation, this dissertation explores how Instagram bloggers are both media and cultural producers who construct and perform their identities in a way that is bound to a capitalist system. To this end, following the postfeminist concerns of Tasker and Negra (2007), I argue that bloggers construct their self-representation, and perform their femininity in a way that is anchored in consumption as a strategy for the ‘production of self’.

This dissertation analyses the self-representation of 10 Instagram bloggers (n= 10 author narratives) and their Instagram images and captions (n= 100 Instagram images) over a three-week timeframe. In doing so, it asks what *power relations* are at play in the consumer discourses employed by each blogger and how this is exercised through technologies like Instagram. By adopting a Foucauldian lens, this study explores how the self-representation of
Instagram bloggers may uncover or reveal unspoken and unacknowledged aspects about the ways female self-representation is conceptualised, how this self-representation is gendered, and how this identity is built around consumption. Drawing on various scholarly arguments, this research argues that the representational processes seen in the self-representation of bloggers holds a particular social harm to women’s identity and understandings of the ‘self’ within digital culture. As Gill et al. (2012:145) asserts, within arguments of choice, independency, agency and empowerment, postfeminist identity is situated well within consumer discourse where “women and girls are positioned as powerful citizens where shopping for girlie products such as clothes and shoes assumes status as an expression of empowered choice”. In other words, postfeminist culture as argued by those like Tasker and Negra (2007) situates female empowerment and female identity within a commodity market that produces women as consumers. Within this discourse is the notion that women are encouraged to view themselves as subjects that require constant self-monitoring via consumer spending. As Arthurs (2003) supports, consumption has often been a typically feminine practice, but it is also a capitalist activity that works in disciplining control over the female body. Central to the ‘empowerment’ discourse is also the idea that women are now in control of expressing their femininity, and they do this through fashion and makeup. However, Gill et al. (2012) argues that whilst women’s consumption can be empowering - it is fun and can boost women’s self-esteem, as well as enabling a better standard of living for those who make a career out of blogging, it also re-establishes normative expectations of femininity, which are most often defined in patriarchal terms.

In order to understand how consumer culture intersects with the self-representation of Instagram bloggers, two research questions have been formulated:

1. How is the self-representation of bloggers articulated through consumer culture? In what ways is this achieved?
2. Do the written discourses accompanying each image, i.e. the Instagram captions articulate a certain self-expression? If so, what ideas do these discourses put forth? In order to answer these questions and relate it to broader issues, other questions include:

- What socio-economic, structural forces are shaping the self-representation of Instagram bloggers? How is this reflected discursively?
What meanings and values do Instagram bloggers attach to consumption in their Instagram captions? What are the main themes identified in these discourses, and what do they tell us about the kind of ‘self’ bloggers perform? What ‘femininity’ is being portrayed?

Are bloggers complicit with the aestheticized values and ideals of consumer culture? In other words, are these women “enthusiastically performing patriarchal stereotypes of sexual servility in the name of empowerment”? (Tasker and Negra, 2007:3)

According to Foucault (2002; 1982), if discourses do not reflect but shape social reality, what reality is reflected in these bloggers’ images? What is valued and what is not, and what power relations are at play in these self-representations?

In an increasingly commercialized media landscape, this dissertation argues that the self-representation of Instagram bloggers is constructed in a way that reflects consumer culture, where the identity of bloggers and their Instagram content co-exists with the act of consumption more generally. I argue that bloggers construct their ‘self’ through discourses that are seemingly empowering and authentic, reflecting postfeminist values i.e. a preoccupation with one’s own body and femininity as a bodily property that celebrates women ‘no matter who they are’ and encourages women to become successful ‘female entrepreneurs’ (Duffy and Hund, 2015; Nathanson, 2014). However, I also argue that whilst these messages are positive and allow an alternative way of thinking about female self-representation, this ‘self’ is nonetheless rooted in commodification and self-branding practices that reinforce consumer capitalist ideologies. I also argue that the self-representation of bloggers presents an internalised and embodiment of the aestheticized ideals of consumer culture as presented in commercial beauty culture, i.e. slim, white, middle-class women who find pleasure (and happiness, it is suggested) through the purchasing of consumer goods, for example, designer shoes, makeup and clothing. In this case, the emphasis on consumerism that is made explicit in the self-representation of Instagram bloggers becomes both a source of pleasure and power that can be used to increase the bloggers’ reputation and social standing in what Hearn (2010) calls the ‘online reputation economy’.

By weaving together various theories on identity, self-representation, political economy and postfeminism, this dissertation contributes to existing scholarly arguments, but is interested in the political and ideological implications of bloggers’ self-representations to
understand how it intersects with consumer culture and consumerist ideologies. The Literature Review brings together a range of arguments around concepts like self-branding and self-commodification, digital labour and identity performance. The methodology examines Foucault’s (2002) use of discourse and power, how the research was conducted and the possible implications for future study. The findings offer a close, textual discourse analysis of the Instagram captions, asking what *power relations* are at play within bloggers’ self-representations, with the conclusion providing a condense summary of the research overall.
2. Literature Review

The following literature review aims to support the academic value of this dissertation by building upon the theoretical discussions around identity, self-representation, digital culture and the political economy of social media. Section 2.1 explores social media’s political economy, looking at scholars such as Fuchs (2014), Hearn (2008), and Cohen (2008). Section 2.2 looks at Instagram, exploring how images play a role visually in how identity is constructed online. Section 2.3 builds upon the current literature around identity and self-representation. Section 2.4 then considers the self-representation of blogger’s in terms of self-commodification and self-branding, using postfeminism as a key backdrop to understand how these self-representations and femininities are articulated through consumer culture.

2.1 Political Economy of Social Media

In order to understand how self-representations are constructed on sites like Instagram, it is important to examine the political economy of social media. In her analysis of digital culture and self-representation, Thumim (2012:142) argues that processes of mediation are central to how self-representations are performed, that “in instances of self-representation mediation is not removed, but rather the processes of mediation shape self-representations in ways that vary according to particular contexts.” Following the critique of a Marxist political economy perspective, it is necessary to address the underlying economic relations that shape and determine the social media landscape within capitalist society, and in the context of where self-representations are produced and circulated. As Cohen (2008:7) states, digital platforms encode particular theories of the ‘self’, and whilst social media offers a medium that it is participatory and interactive, “the social relations present can obscure economic relations that reflect larger patterns of capitalist development.” For those like Fuchs (2015; 2014) and Cohen (2008), the political economy of social media is an approach that studies the production, circulation, and consumption of information and labour in the context of capitalism and institutions of power, and examines how market forces shape and determine the environment in which self-representations are performed.

Political economy investigates social media as economic organizations that operate according to the logic of a capitalist society (Fuchs, 2015; Hermida, 2015, Hearn, 2010). According to Fuchs (2014:98), political economy problematizes the ‘revolutionary’ and
‘interactive’ discourse surrounding social media by asking, just how participatory can corporate social media be? And to what extent do capitalist interests shape the structures of the Internet and social media? Following this critique, Hermida (2015:1) reflects on the increasing surveillance and commodification of user data, stating that “the inconvenient truth about social media is that most tweets, photos and videos simply wither in the perpetual onslaught of information.” In his analysis of Facebook, Fuchs (2015:93) also expresses the issue of how users can become producers-consumers of information who provide content that is a valuable source towards capital accumulation and the commercial interests that shape social networking sites. Complementing Foucault’s (2002) ideas around discourse and power, Cohen (2008), Hearn (2010; 2008) and Fuchs (2014) explain political economy with concepts like prosumption and digital labour. They argue that, instead of viewing social media as something neutral, political economy understands social media as a tool that embodies and constitutes social and economic power relations. In particular, Hearn (2008) and Banet-Weiser (2012) have explored the notion of ‘self-branding’ when addressing the commercialisation of the Web and the ubiquity of branding within contemporary society, arguing that this certain type of self-representation contributes to a specific form of capitalist production that is valued against the individual’s generation of capital. This is also echoed by Thumim (2012:142) who states that “commercial interests frame self-representation” to the extent that the “aesthetic, moral and political decisions are made by people other than the person representing him or herself.” Together, scholars like Cohen (2008:8) highlight how corporations can exploit its users to fit with their own commercial interests so that the individual “works by learning to desire and generate demand for and consuming mass-marketed goods and services.”

Since many social networks collect large amounts of data on user preferences and consumption habits on behalf of advertisers, scholars have expressed their concerns around user privacy and surveillance. Fuchs (2015:117) develops the concept of digital labour and states that, rather than social media being interactive, it is in fact highly ideological where individual

“leisure time is turned into labour time… more disposable time means more time for consumption, creativity and leisure… consumption time becomes production time.”

To this end, the role of users in social media is not just of content providers, but of data and information providers too, therefore contributing to a vast ‘information economy’ (Fuchs,
Fuchs (2015) adds to this and argues that corporate social media sites commodify user labour time so that we are all ‘prosumers’, stating that the structure of social media is built in a way that makes users produce as much data as possible, i.e. uploading images, retweeting ‘hashtags’ or liking a picture. Linking this to self-representation, Thumim (2012:141) notes that self-representation is a fundamental and necessary aspect that makes participating on social media possible, and that mediation is never removed from these representations. Abidin (2016b) further echoes the concerns of Fuchs (2015) by coining the term ‘visibility labour’ in her analysis of ‘Influencers’ in Singapore. She explains that fashions bloggers, i.e. ‘Influencers’ are working from an extremely commodified sphere, e.g. fashion, beauty and clothing, and are complicit in a labour that is immaterial: ‘visibility labour’ is the “work individuals do when they self-posture and curate their self-presentations to be noticeable and positively prominent among prospective employers” (2016b:90). Examining this notion, scholars like Banet-Weiser (2012), Hearn (2008) and Duffy and Hund (2015) have examined a range of self-presentation techniques used by bloggers such as self-branding, authenticity, and the rise of the ‘micro-celebrity’ (Marwick, 2015). Together, these techniques incorporate the practices of branding and advertising to the extent that bloggers function as a ‘promotional apparatus’ for brands (Carah and Shaul, 2015).

By reflecting on the arguments above, political economy is a necessary backdrop for understanding how self-representation may be linked to different discursive forms of power, and how bloggers might create an online persona that embodies “the entrepreneurial subject of neoliberal capitalism” (Marwick, 2013b:7). As Foucault (1982:793) argued, “power relations are rooted in the system of social networks,” leading one to suggest that social media operates according to its own power agenda and more specifically, its own commercial interests. In this case, if social media platforms are bound to a capitalist system as political economy scholars like Cohen (2008), Hearn (2008) and Fuchs (2014;2015) argue, bloggers may construct their self-representations in a way that “adopts a neoliberal subjectivity that applies market principles to how they think about themselves, interact with others and display they identity” (Marwick, 2013a:7). With this in mind, self-representation may be shaped according to power relations across and within institutions like social media, and in what Foucault (1988) terms ‘technologies of the self’.
2.2 Instagram

Developed in 2010, Instagram is an app that enables its users to create, share, and upload photos or videos and to link them onto other social media websites such as Facebook and Twitter, and is becoming one of the fastest growing social media applications of the present century (Becker, 2017). Against the concerns of political economy scholars, Instagram (2017) describes itself as the “home for visual storytelling for everyone and anyone with a creative passion.” However for those like Marwick (2015:139), Instagram presents a “convergence of cultural forces: a mania for digital documentation, the proliferation of celebrity and micro celebrity culture and conspicuous consumption” whose ideology and ‘creative labour’ “serves an important purpose in relation to the creative industries themselves” (Arvidsson et al, 2010:297).

Although self-representation has always been part of our culture, from museums to reality TV (Thumim, 2012), images are playing an increasing role in our visual communication and in our construction of identity (Rose, 2000). As Rettburg (2014:2) supports, “digital cameras, smart phones and social media make it is easier to create and share our self-representations” by allowing individuals to document and visually narrate their everyday lives. With the ability to edit and digitally alter images on Instagram, some have even argued that it is much easier to present an idealized version of the ‘self’, particularly in terms of the ‘selfie’ as Baym and Senft (2015) explore. Along with its commercial marketing, Instagram allows its users to edit and filter their images using a range of tools such as ‘Snapseed’ or ‘Boomerang’ and, seven years after its creation, has become situated well within popular culture (Becker, 2017) as an “aesthetically stylized site for photo sharing, microblogging, networking, and commercial exchange” (Abidin, 2016a:7). Although the figure may not entirely be accurate, it is estimated that Instagram has over 500 million users and that 1.7 of every 10 hashtags are branded (Beese, 2016). Due to its commercial setting, Phua et al. (2017) also found that Instagram users scored highest for showing affection, following fashion, and demonstrating the highest brand engagement. Marwick (2015:157) also found that Instagram was “designed for personal visual display” where images played a central part in the aesthetic self-representation of ‘micro-celebrities’.

When looking at Instagram as a visual platform, the site enables its users to visually display purchased commodities and glamorous lifestyles, for example, posting designer clothes or designer shoes, and is something that many fashion and lifestyle bloggers actively
engage in. Yet, as Marwick (2015) argues, the images Instagram encourages its users to upload are deeply political and *gendered*, as she argues that these images are designed to emulate those of celebrity culture, leading those like Hearn (2008) to assess the notion of *self-commodification*. As Giddens (1991:196 in Hearn, 2008:199) writes, self-commodification is to treat the self as though it were a *commodity* or product and is illustrated through the “possession of desired goods and the pursuit of artificially framed styles of life.” Davis (2003:41) also states that self-commodification is “mediated by the consumption of goods and images” and is often enacted through the practices of self-branding. Looking at the self-representation of ‘influencers’ on Instagram, Abidin (2016a:7 italics original) says that Instagram contributes to the “labouring over *purposefully staged* images to portray a particular persona and lifestyle aesthetic.” Schwarz (2010: 165 in Marwick (2015:141 italics added) also states that platforms like Instagram represent a shift from “photographing others for self-consumption to photographing the self *for consumption by others*.” If we consider this shift, we can see how Instagram shapes self-representation in specific ways, one that can be heavily stylized and aesthetically pleasing to a range of audiences, something which bloggers act in accordance to. As Becker (2017:104) supports, visual texts have a political and social significance as they can structure ideologies and allow individuals to circulate images with their own narrative. Susan Sontag’s (2002) observations are particularly relevant here of the ways in which the ‘self’ is always edited and *manipulated* according to the photographer’s preferences. Indeed, Instagram’s culture of ‘visual storytelling’ reinforces Sontag’s (2002:10) observations in that in today’s society, “photography has become one of the principal devices for experiencing something, for giving an appearance of participation.” Although photographs have always been used to express identity, it is images which create and generate meaning (Rose, 2000), and platforms like Instagram prove how we are using these networks to display ourselves more than ever.

### 2.3 Identity and Self-representation

If we view self-representation from the perspective of ‘identity performance’, Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical approach remains pertinent when understanding how processes of identity construction differ across different online environments. Goffman’s (1959) approach was that all social interaction is *performative*, and whilst his analysis was developed against the more traditional face-to-face communication, the notion of the ‘front’ and ‘back’ stage
remains useful when understanding how bloggers’ identity co-exist against these two spheres. Goffman’s (1959:30) theory of ‘impression management’ was that individuals frequently adopted a ‘mask’ when ‘performing’ in situations that they might be judged, and that in such situations, individuals often project a desirable image of themselves: “the mask is our truer self, the self we would like to be”. Developing Goffman’s (1959) theory into the online environment, Hogan (2010:377) argues that while Goffman’s approach focused on situations, social media frequently employs exhibitions; “the world is not merely a stage but also a participatory exhibit.” However, moving away from this approach, Thumim (2012:6) argues that it is important to distinguish between presentation and performance of the ‘self’- they are both subject to mediation but they are separate, because when a self-representation is produced and circulated online, it is much more reflexive as “it becomes a text that has the potential for subsequent engagement.” Dobson (2015:9) adds to this and says that “via media, one is required to use text and images to symbolize the self... this is generally assumed by viewers to require a higher degree of consciousness and reflectivity about the self than conventionally required in face-to-face self-presentation.”

Following the research questions in the introduction, many scholars have found Foucault’s (1988; 2002) work fruitful when looking at identity in the online environment (Dobson, 2015). Moving away from Goffman’s (1959) theory of identity performance, Foucault (1988) suggested that the ‘self’ is conditioned by “dominant notions of the ‘body’ and ‘being’” (Hearn, 2008:198). For Foucault (1988), the body is implicated in discourses and practices and power is exercised rather than possessed through discourse and the formation of knowledge (Sawicki, 1991). In other words, identity is never fixed and is always subject to particular power relations (Sawicki, 1991:52). To link back to Thumim’s (2012) argument that self-representation is always mediated by political and economic processes, it is necessary to explore how bloggers may embody capitalist power relations and consumerist ideologies by creating and expressing an identity that is embedded in consumer culture. As Dobson (2015:12) supports, “girls and young women are centrally caught up in power struggles as they interact with, via, and in postfeminist techno-social mediascapes to produce self-representations in the course of everyday life.” From this perspective, Marwick (2015) argues that the self-representation of bloggers is gendered and that ‘Influencers’ use entrepreneurial strategies drawn from commercials and celebrity culture so that they become a ‘micro-celebrity’. As social media offers a space for users to construct self-representations in highly stylized and profitable ways like on Instagram, and to share them to millions of
people across the world - identity within this framework, Dobson (2015:12) notes, becomes much more fabricated and constructed than it may have been in an offline context. As Thumim (2012:6) suggests, self-representation is something individuals do and construct themselves rather than something we are, “bounded” and multidimensional, but whose identities are always open to constant change and manipulation.

2.4 Commodification of the Self: Branding a Postfeminist Identity

The notion of ‘self-branding’ and ‘self-commodification’ has recently been linked to gendered discourses around women’s identity in consumer culture and the logic of post feminism. Postfeminism has been conceptualised from an array of perspectives - as a feminist backlash, a historical moment and more recently linked to neoliberal ideologies around the various choices available to women (Arthurs, 2003; Gill, 2007; Tasker and Negra, 2007). For Gill (2007), postfeminism is understood as a ‘sensibility’ and focuses on the absences of feminism by placing its emphasis on the individual and by claiming that women’s empowerment can be achieved through consumption. This notion of ‘empowerment’ is central to the consumer discourse as embodied in the self-representation of bloggers, as Nathanson (2014) argues that in postfeminist media culture, shopping is often constructed as though it were a pleasurable activity that can ‘reveal’ one’s inner self. Keller (2016:11) explains:

Postfeminism can be characterized by several themes, including femininity as a bodily property; shift from objectification to subjectification, an emphasis on surveillance, monitoring and self-discipline, a rhetoric of individualism, choice and empowerment, a dominance of makeover paradigms, and a resurgence of ideas about natural sexual difference

In this case, women’s consumption is positioned in postfeminist culture as though it is ‘empowering’ because women can now express their identity in varied and more ‘playful’ ways (Lazar, 2009), however, as Tasker and Negra (2007:3) argue, it also situates female identity within a commodity market that limits ideas of beauty to patriarchal ideals. Of course, there are dangers when women like Instagram bloggers voluntarily support such representational processes, as Arthurs (2003:87) argues that not only is there an “unequal structuring of the ‘look”, but women are “invited to share this male gaze” so that it is “internalised in women’s narcissistic relation to their own bodies.” In such discourses, Gill
(2008: no pagination) argues that within postfeminist culture, women are invited to become “liberated and take control of their own lives by acts of individual consumption- rather than collective struggle for social and political change.” As Keller (2015) notes, postfeminist discourse privileges consumerism via its emphasis on the female body and the makeover paradigm so that the ‘self’ becomes a project of *bodily improvement* and ‘governmentality’ (Foucault, 1982). According to Todd (2012:48), “consumption is intimately tied to the creation and production of a sense of self,” and this is no more apparent than in the self-representation of bloggers. To revisit Baudrillard’s (1998:13) analysis,

The body emerges as something that can be used to sell commodities and services as well as being itself a consumed object. In order to be used as an object to sell things, the body must be ‘rediscovered’ by its ‘owner’ and viewed narcissistically rather than merely functionally.

Exploring this issue, Banet-Weiser (2012:66) argues that women are increasingly encouraged to brand themselves through normative and hegemonic ideals of femininity, and that women’s self-representation is *shaped* according to the “commercial context of branding and advertising.” Nathanson (2014) also asserts that in the self-representational practices of fashion bloggers, consumption becomes fused into a mode of *production* and a form of pleasurable work by transforming the act of blogging into a commercially successful career. Nathanson (2014:144) suggests that “online spaces like fashion blogs offer a platform for the production of an individual brand that promises to help an everyday girl realize a sense of self,” and is intertwined with a *neoliberal* ethos of ‘entrepreneurialism’ that complements the individualistic postfeminist subject (Tasker and Negra, 2007).

Considering this notion, Duffy and Hund (2015) coin the term ‘entrepreneurial femininity’ when looking at how successful fashion bloggers gain popularity by depicting the role of consumerism as a form of *work* or rather, a form of ‘free labour’. Duffy and Hund (2015) suggest that with the rise of fashion bloggers on Instagram, discourses around women’s entrepreneurialism is increasingly attached to modes of consumption which becomes articulated through status-seeking techniques like self-commodification and self-branding. As Banet-Weiser and Arzumanova (2012:168) illustrate

The feminine body in this sense becomes not only a vehicle for the curated display of commodities, but also a brand unto itself… involved in a deep interrelation, the body of the postfeminist author in hauler videos cannot be visible, indeed, is not legible without commodity goods, and commodity goods take on new meaning through their display on the body.
With light to the previous section on identity, we can understand postfeminism as working to construct bloggers’ self-representations as bound to a capitalist system where femininity is inscribed within consumer culture - where women are increasingly using consumption as a way to describe themselves and as a “strategy for the production of self” (Tasker and Negra, 2007:2). However, many have argued that these self-representations are exclusionary and depict a very limited picture of what femininity is and should be. As Tasker and Negra (2007) support, postfeminism is white and middle-class by default as it privileges those with existing economic capital and on women who can afford to conform to the aesthetic standards perpetuated within mainstream media. As the findings discuss, bloggers use consumption to construct their self-representations as to embody a certain aesthetic ideal of beauty that is heteronormative and which privileges young, slim, attractive middle-class women who can afford to buy designer products.
3. Methodology

The aim of this research is to understand the self-representation of Instagram bloggers and its relationship to consumer culture. The following section will outline the reasons why discourse analysis was chosen, its strengths and weaknesses, and how the research was conducted.

3.1 Discourse Analysis: A Foucauldian approach

The theoretical approach of this study is rooted in ideas around discourse and power (Foucault, 1988; 2002). Discourse analysis is concerned with “all forms of talk and texts” (Gill, 1996:141) and views language as constructing rather than reflecting reality (Foucault, 2002). It is a qualitative, interpretative process (Deacon et al, 2007) and is concerned with how power operates in a given society (Foucault, 1982:781). As Hall (2001:73) writes, “discourse is not about whether things exist but about where meaning comes from,” and is interested in:

relations and structures of power embedded in the forms of everyday language use, and thus how language contributes to the legitimisation of existing social relations and hierarchies of authority and control (Deacon et al. 2007:154).

This research adopts Foucault’s (2002) ideas of discourse as the key methodological framework for this study. In doing so, it explores how the discourses used by bloggers “represent a kind of knowledge about what goes on in a particular social practice, why it is the way it is and what is to be done” (Machin, 2013:352). According to Foucault (2002), discourse views the ‘self’ as more of a cultural construct rather than a natural phenomenon, as “discourse produces subjects… discourses are articulated through all sorts of visual and verbal images and texts, and also through the practices that those languages permit” (Rose, 2000:136). To this end, this study asks, how might these power relations manifest itself in the self-representation of bloggers? For Foucault, power operates within institutional apparatuses and in its technologies. In this case, we can see how technologies like Instagram permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and semis, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality (Foucault, 1988:18).
Since these self-representations are performed visually on Instagram, it is important to acknowledge how “visual imagery is never innocent, it is always constructed through various practices, technologies and knowledges” (Rose, 2000:32). As such, this research argues that discourse analysis is a suitable choice of methodology as it allows the researcher to think critically about where power resides and how it is manifested in performances of the self. Along with a feminist critique, discourse analysis also allows the reader to understand how bloggers’ self-representation may uphold and contribute to a patriarchal, ideological system “that interacts in complex ways with corporatist and consumerist ideologies” (Lazar, 2005:1). In this way, it is important to study the self-representation of bloggers to understand their portrayal of a consumer identity which is deeply ideological, and which naturalises a specific, female consumer identity.

**Collection of data**

In order to ensure enough data was gathered, the research was conducted over a three-week timeframe in January 2017, collecting 10 Instagram captions from 10 Instagram bloggers. In selecting which bloggers would be analysed, the study looked at a wide range of websites and online fashion magazines such as ‘Vuelio’ (Hodges, 2016) and ‘Glamour’ (Fearn, 2016) who provide a list of the most ‘influential’ and followed fashion and beauty bloggers. Along with this approach, I also went onto the Instagram homepage and the ‘explore’ tab to see what bloggers would feature first. Since the research was focused on Instagram bloggers who had built a career from their blogs, the 10 bloggers were identified mainly on the amount of subscribers they had (see Table 1), and all happen to be from the UK. Each of these bloggers produce content that is mainly promotional, in the sense that they promote branded products and lifestyles that have been made possible through paid advertorials. For all of the blogs, the Instagram accounts target female consumers through the promotion of items like makeup, clothing, and designer goods, and as such, construct a female readership.
### Table 1. List of Blogger’s

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blogger</th>
<th>Number of Instagram subscribers as of 27/01/2017</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tanya Burr @tanyaburr</td>
<td>3.1 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoella (Zoe Sugg) @zoella</td>
<td>10 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fleur de Force @fleurdeforce</td>
<td>780,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria In the Frow @inthefrow</td>
<td>741,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Anna Edit @theannaedit</td>
<td>355,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lily Pebbles @lilypebbles</td>
<td>359,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estee Lalonde @esteelalonde</td>
<td>697,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amelia Liana @amelialiana</td>
<td>325,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suzi Hello October @helooctoberxo</td>
<td>194,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I covet thee @icovetthee</td>
<td>155,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most of the bloggers are between the ages of 21-30, a majority being white and middle-class with only @amelialiana appearing to be half-British and half-Iranian. Due to this, the research found that all of the bloggers conformed to a heteronormative, Western ideal of beauty (slim, young, and light-skinned).

**Evaluation of Methods**

As with any research, one of the limitations of discourse analysis as noted by Wodak and Meyer (2016) is that it can often be subject to individual interpretation. Although the research acknowledges this, Wodak and Meyer (2016:5) also state that discourse analysis is “dependent on social structures and that criticism can by no means draw on any outside position” (Wodak and Meyer, 2016:5). However, Deacon et al (2007:138) argue that “objectivity in any absolute form is an illusion,” suggesting that as with any other qualitative approach, any interpretation will always be influenced by the analysts’ position, values and beliefs. When practicing discourse analysis, it is also important to acknowledge the researchers position as adhering to the tradition of social constructivism (Gill, 2007), which claims that reality does not exist on its own but is built by subjects (Deacon et al, 2007). In other words, discourse analysis in Foucault’s (2002) terms is a method used to deconstruct
the text to understand not *what* is said, but *how* it is said. In the case of self-representation, discourse analysis allows the researcher to understand how “practices and relations are constructed from and in the interests of a particular point of view, a particular conception of social reality” (Deacon et al, 2007:151). As Dobson (2015:23) supports, social media self-representations “make explicit and implicit claims to truth and authenticity,” therefore indicating that self-representation needs to be understood as a representational *text*, and as a performance.

As with any research, the ethics of this study is incredibly important, as the bloggers are real women who have not willingly chosen to be part of this analysis. It is worth noting that the images used in this research have been made publicly available on the site Instagram, and can be accessed through a simple ‘search’ on the Instagram search engine, or by locating them on the bloggers’ account. To avoid any potential conflict of user privacy, the images and accounts have been directly referenced (see Appendix) and been viewed from an objective standpoint. This is to ensure that a fair dealing is applied, and that the research remains professional from an academic perspective.

Rather than interviewing the bloggers themselves, the research was concerned with how consumer culture was reflected in the self-representation of bloggers, and how this was presented on commercial sites like Instagram. To this end, the research was interested in how bloggers shaped their self-representations around *objects of consumption*, i.e. designer goods, glamorous lifestyles and attending high-profile events by designer brands, and in particular, how this contributed to a discourse around self-improvement and the staging of a consumer identity. Since discourse analysis believes that meaning is never fixed, and does not provide any tangible answers to problems or questions, all this research can do is hypothesise these issues through *interpretation*. For Deacon et al (2007:189), textual analysis “cannot make safe assertions about the intentions of a text’s producer, nor can it validly infer the impact of the text on readers, viewers or listeners.” Therefore, all this study can do is offer a compelling analysis of the processes and power relations at work. It was not interested in speaking to brands and the reasons why they promote their products through bloggers, neither was it concerned in speaking to bloggers themselves, although this study does contend that speaking to bloggers in future study may offer a deeper insight into their motivations and understandings. Rather, it was interested in looking at the naturally occurring language bloggers used to express their identity by looking at the text “from within” (Chouliaraki, 2008:674). By looking at self-representation in this way, I hope this study will shed light on
“relations of domination and subordination which are reproduced and justified” (Gill, 1996:156). Although there are weaknesses of using discourse analysis, it was felt that by using any other methodology, the overall aims and questions of this research would not have been sufficiently met. Therefore, this study is left open-ended for others to develop, and it is hoped that others in the field will contribute to the issues brought forth in this study that may have otherwise been left untouched.
4. Findings and Analysis

Discursive themes

Within the self-representation of Instagram bloggers, the analysis revealed a range of discourses surrounding women’s self-improvement, self-branding, self-commodification, blogging as a form of entrepreneurialism, as well as the pleasure and enjoyment that can be gained through women’s consumption. It also found that, when looking at the self-representations, bloggers often constructed a consumer identity that was mostly gendered in the form of having a glamorous lifestyle from being able to buy and own designer goods. To this end, all of the bloggers performed a postfeminist identity using the commercial sphere of Instagram as a way of depicting their consumption of fashion and beauty products as a strategy for “the production of the self” (Tasker and Negra, 2007:2). As Banet-Weiser and Arzumanova (2012:166) support, crafting one’s identity through consumption allows women, such as fashion bloggers, to become “empowered” to use their creative voices—indeed, to articulate their ‘authorship’ as a way to establish themselves as particular kinds of cultural experts.” I explore these discourses with a critical eye, asking what implications these self-representations may have outside the context of Instagram. To reiterate the research questions in the introduction, this dissertation asks (1) how is the self-representation of bloggers articulated through consumer culture? (2) Do the written discourses accompanying each image, i.e. the Instagram captions articulate a certain self-expression? What meanings and values do Instagram bloggers attach to consumption in their images and Instagram captions?

Sections 4.1- 4.4 explore themes such as commodity fetishism, fashioning the ‘self’ through gendered products such as makeup and designer clothes, as well as commodified authenticity by presenting consumption as a form of pleasurable work in the form of self-branding, rather than a form of capitalist, digital labour like many political economy scholars would suggest. Lastly, bloggers use consumption as an identity constructor where purchasing branded goods is supposed to reveal one’s inner self. In this theme, I explore bloggers’ use of aspirational consumption that depicts a certain postfeminist ‘bourgeois femininity’ (Arthurs, 2003) where women are encouraged to ‘have it all’, so long as they express their femininity through commodity culture that re-establishes normative ideals of female attractiveness.
4.1 ‘A material girl in a material world’: Postfeminist consumption and commodity fetishism

For many bloggers, there is happiness and pleasure to be gained from buying products, and the act of consumption as Lazar (2009) notes, becomes a form of ‘pampering’ and ‘pleasuring’ for oneself. Yet aside from this, the self-representation of bloggers revealed that products are often imbued as though they have magical powers, with bloggers often developing emotional connections to the brands they love. Products like mascara and jumpers are described as ‘amazing’ and, like most of the bloggers in the study, these women don’t just like the products they display, they ‘love’ them, and describe their shopping experiences with words like ‘cute’ or ‘perfect’, and label certain brands as ‘their absolute favourite’ (@FleurdeForce, see Figure 10). In this case, feelings of love and admiration, even excitement for consumer goods is reminiscent of Marx’s (1974) term ‘commodity fetishism’. Originally coined by Marxist scholarship, commodity fetishism is when products are imbued as though they have magical or symbolic qualities (Davis, 2003), and is the idea that products, and consuming products and brands, will somehow offer the individual happiness (Gill, 2010, Banet-Weiser and Arzumanova, 2012). In her analysis of advertisements, Kilbourne (1999:81) notes that products are not only selling a fantasy that says, “buy this and it will love you,” they now persuade the consumer with a message that says “buy this product and it will love you and you will love yourself.” The 10 bloggers in this study all played and internalised this idea by integrating consumer culture into their self-representations. Narratives of passion and examples of commodity fetishism can be seen in the Instagram captions below:

Figure 1: @TanyaBurr
Figure 2: @IntheFrow

Figure 3: @IntheFrow
Here, we see bloggers like @IntheFrow and @TheAnnaEdit showing excessive descriptions of products (heeled boots and Armani lipstick) which are both products designed to be consumed and used by women. In Figure 4, @IntheFrow seems knowledgeable about...
brands and products as though she is an expert of personal style, and uses the jumper as a reflection of her personality. Not only that, but consumption is deemed to become a form of production which is *pleasurable* and can boost the self-esteem of the blogger and other women who follow their blogs, as evident in @EsteeLaLonde’s caption:

> Pink pick me up 💖 // 💋 I got so many compliments on my @lancomeofficial pink lip today! 🌸
> L’Absolu Rouge in the shade 381 Rose Rendez-Vous 💖 (@EsteeLaLonde, caption 1)

@EsteeLaLonde is not only constructing her viewer as a consumer themselves, but by actively directing her followers to the name of the lipstick, she herself is constructing a specific feminine identity. In an image that pictures designer perfumes, @EsteeLaLonde also says “my fragrance obsession is real 💖” (caption 2, see Appendix). Using emoji’s, which are digital images used to express certain emotions and feelings, @EsteeLaLonde uses a love heart to express her admiration of her own perfume collection, suggesting that it is something which holds a particular importance in her life. Such expressions, it can be argued, are typical of the ways women use language. For example, Figure’s 2 and 3 by @IntheFrow indicate that she has a habit of dreaming of products that she admires, typical of perhaps girl-like behaviour. In Figure 3 she states how important it is to “feel a million dollars” in the clothes you love, and then in Figure 2 she expresses her satisfaction for having finally found designer boots she loves, illustrating a common trope within consumer culture that feeling happy and satisfied with one’s image is only achieved after a purchase has been made.

Many bloggers also had access to luxury, high-end goods, whether it was given to them by advertising companies or PR sponsorships, or by simply purchasing the goods themselves. By depicting a certain lifestyle on their Instagram accounts, what Duffy and Hund (2015) call a “having it all” lifestyle, all of the bloggers engaged in attention-seeking practices by either presenting a highly desirable image by wearing designer clothes, or by tagging an expensive location as a way of depicting a higher social position. Interestingly however, in all of the bloggers’ self-representations, products were not only tagged onto the images, but quite literally ‘placed’ onto the body. For example:
For Figure’s 6 and 7, the captions that accommodate the picture bears little resemblance to the meaning of the Instagram post. Choosing to tag Chanel onto her lips offers @Hellooctoberxo a way to evoke an aura of luxury, and to let her viewers know that in typical postfeminist culture, she can afford to enjoy the pleasures of being able to buy such a high-end brand, even though for most women, such pleasures are not always financially
accessible. To link back to Foucault’s (1988) ‘technologies of the self’, Figure’s 6 and 7 situate the blogger’s identity as implicated in a discourse around consumerism, and more specifically that of brand culture. This is further emphasised in the ways brands have literally been attached to parts of the body in Figure 8:

![Figure 8: @EsteeLaLonde](image)

Banet-Weiser and Arzumanova (2012:168) argue that “displaying the products on the body is at once displaying the authored body…the body of the postfeminist author cannot be visible- indeed, is not legible, without commodity goods, and commodity goods take on new meaning through their display on the body”. From Figure’s 6-8, it can be argued that all of these designer goods (dresses, jumpers and cosmetics) as seen by @EsteeLaLonde and @HelloOctoberxo all add to a staging of a postfeminist identity in which the blogger’s purchasing and wearing of brands all generate some form of social currency. In Figure 8, each item of clothing has been linked with the specific brand. Not only do these women tag brands, but they tag them onto physical aspects of the body, as though the body itself is a commodity as noted by Davis (2003) and Gill (2010). Additionally, for many of the bloggers, designer goods were often a ‘gift’ from brands themselves, for instance, @TanyaBurr stands in a picture before an event and writes:
To this end, staging a glamorous or highly desirable lifestyle (in the form of going to a high profile event) exists primarily through the aesthetics and language of commercial brands, and the meanings these brands have attached to them culturally. In this case, listing the designer for each item of clothing and makeup product (Figure 9) has the power to generate its own social currency because, as I would argue, it is inextricably embedded in the consumer sphere of commercial beauty culture. The message that is implied here is – ‘if you wear these brands and buy these products, you can look just like me!’ and, judging from @TanyaBurr’s comments, this message is something which her followers actively take on board. It is here in which the notion of personal transformation via consumption is made apparent, particularly in the ways bloggers conform to quite limited ideals of female attractiveness.

4.2 Fashioning the consumer lifestyle and the consumer identity: ‘Having it all’

This section looks at the ways bloggers celebrate a consumer identity through commodity goods, and how bloggers express femininity through gendered products like lipstick, designer bags, and shoes, which all feed into a postfeminist subjectivity of ‘empowered femininity’ as
noted by Lazar (2009) and Nathanson (2014). It will revisit the arguments discussed in section 2.3 and 2.4 by thinking critically about what power relations are present in the self-representation of bloggers. It is here in which I argue that the process of self-commodification is made apparent in the form of ‘aspirational consumption’ as a form of ‘aspirational production’ as noted by Marwick (2015). In other words, following Nathanson’s (2014) observations, the act of shopping for bloggers becomes a form of pleasurable work, but this ‘work’, i.e. taking pictures of their outfits or latest fashion hauls only downplays the labour and wealth necessary to emulate the standards which bloggers often claim to be accessible to ‘anyone’ and ‘everyone’.

Looking at ‘Sex and the City’, Arthurs (2003:87) reminds us that postmodern consumer culture is “characterised by the commodification of the individual’s relation to the body, self, and identity” and that “a consumer lifestyle is presented not as a series of commodities to be bought, but as an integrated lifestyle to be emulated” (2003:90). For bloggers, the clothes and shoes which are displayed in the images are not just goods, they become something which can express personality as well as femininity, for example:

![Figure 10: @FleurdeForce](image)

Figure 10: @FleurdeForce
In the first image, @FleurdeForce expresses her enthusiasm for her Chanel handbag by claiming that it is “still her favourite”, suggesting that she has many other designer handbags in her collection. In the second image, @AmeliaLiana poses against a brightly coloured, very ‘girlish’ pink wall in Los Angeles holding an Yves Saint Laurent lipstick. Symbolically, wearing lipstick has traditionally been used to portray women’s sexual attractiveness, yet there is no suggestion of this by @AmeliaLiana as her use of the word “excitement” and heart emoji’s illustrates that performing femininity through consumption is somewhat fun and enjoyable. Additionally, the fact that bloggers seem knowledgeable about their favourite bag or favourite shade of lipstick illustrates how consumption offers some kind of social belonging, particularly to the blogging community on Instagram and to Instagram’s aesthetic nature of the site. It also demonstrates how bloggers place themselves as experts of fashion and style, as illustrated in the Figure’s below:
Figure 12: @Icovethee

Figure 13: @LilyPebbles
In Figure’s 11, 12 and 14, there is a suggestion that consumption is not only an identity constructor, but is a method of expressing the self. Both images display products targeted towards the female consumer, and are implicated in discourses around female transformation that is so often perpetuated in the woman’s ‘makeover’ on mainstream television, i.e. the idea that women can ‘buy into’ an ‘empowered’ femininity through consumption (Keller, 2015). In light of this, Gill (2010) and Lazar (2009) argue that within postfeminist culture, there is an over emphasis on transformation and spending over the female body. In Figure 12, @Icovetthee says that “it's not an easy feat to narrow down a hoarders paradise of beauty products to these five”, and then gives her advice on why those five products deserve to be bought. Such a description indicates that her top five beauty products are capable of generating positive feelings and experiences, and that such products are an essential part of any young woman’s life. Words that are used to intensify descriptions such as the word “cult,” which connotes religiosity and worship - even sinful indulgence, as well as “essential” in Figure 13, only furthers this idea. In Figure 13, @LilyPebbles reflects on her various choices as a consumer by stating that “there are so many new products launching it can be overwhelming.” It is important to note here that, in Figure’s 12 and 13, these products, limited down to a “top 5,” are designed to make women appear more desirable and attractive, either for men, or for women themselves. Of course, ideas around ‘beauty’ and beauty standards have changed throughout history, but consumerism has often been used as a
method to which women are encouraged to improve their appearance and self-worth (Banet-Weiser, 2012) - implicated, as it is, in a discourse of self-discipline. This is particularly problematic, I would argue, because within this discourse is the idea that the more a blogger invests financially in her appearance, the better her career chances are of succeeding as a successful fashion blogger. As Duffy and Hund (2015) and Nathanson (2014) point out, women are now in control of their own self-representation and with this agency, they know how to construct an image that makes themselves look ‘good’ having internalised patriarchal ideologies from mainstream media. In the next section, I will look at the ways the female subject is implicated in such discourses outlined above, particularly in the ways the promotion and consumption of feminine commodities limits women to a system that reinforces gender discourses within patriarchal capitalism.

4.3 Consuming the (authentic?) self: The blogger as a passionate worker

This section looks at how consumption is often used as a means of expressing authenticity, as though through consumption, bloggers can become closer to ‘who they really are’. It also examines how bloggers narrate their self-representations in what Banet-Weiser & Arzumanova (2012) call a ‘confessional culture’, often describing fashion and blogging with descriptions of individual feeling, as though through commodity culture, women can ‘find’ themselves on a more authentic, ‘spiritual’ level.

Developing her concept of the ‘digital reputation economy’, Hearn (2017:62) argues that “forms of selfhood and modes of self-presentation have become increasingly and complicatedly conditioned by the advances of capitalism… subjectivity is both imminent to and constitutive of its operations.” Within the study, many bloggers wrote about themselves as though they knew themselves well and used consumption as an ‘identity search’ (Foucault, 1988) by writing about products as though they somehow reflected their personality. Others, on the other hand, narrated their images with auto-biographical language and gave detailed personal stories about their lives:
Figure’s 15 and 16 demonstrates Hearn (2008; 2010) and Banet-Weiser’s (2012) notion of commodified ‘authenticity’, i.e. when ‘authenticity’ is sold within brand culture and the consumer marketplace. It also demonstrates the idea of self-branding and the bloggers’ investment in a labour that is emotional and which depends on their own personal confessions. As Hearn (2010:425) explains, emotional labour “demands that the worker put his or her own life experience, communicative competency, and sense of self into the job.” In Figure 15, @LilyPebbles writes fondly about her childhood experiences on the London tube.
in a somewhat confessional, very open manner. Such auto-biographical language here creates a sense of intimacy, positioning the reader as a friendly listener whose ‘authenticity’ is articulated through individual experience and emotion. Interestingly, the point of sharing this aspect of her personal life is somewhat banal, as there are no tagged brands in the image, but the brand-like culture remains as she encourages her followers to “share their best tube story too!” To this end, @LilyPebbles uses *emotion* to encourage her followers to actively engage in her ‘self-brand’, and in a form of labour that requires the user to share a photo of their personal experience. In Figure 16, @Zoella asks her followers if they also “miss Autumn,” and then apologizes for wanting to post lots of photos over the coming days. By presenting candid images of their lives in a way that makes them appear more *relatable* and ‘real’, Figure’s 15 and 16 is in contrast to the more ‘glamorous’, professional images one may find in magazines like ‘*Vogue*’. In relation to brand culture, Banet-Weiser (2012:10 italics original) argues that “what is understood (and experienced) as authentic is considered such precisely because it is perceived as not commercial.” The above two figures, though seemingly ordinary, position the bloggers as more ‘authentic’ and ‘honest’ as though they are *everyday girls* who achieved fame unexpected, creating a message that ‘anyone can achieve success as long as you work hard’, a typical message which is central to postfeminist, neo-liberal discourse (Tasker and Negra, 2007:7). Exploring this theme, Duffy and Hund (2015:9 italics original) found that appearing ‘real’ and ‘authentic’ were central to bloggers’ integrity, and that within the blogging community, “bloggers moderate representations of the “glam life” with images that make them seem *just like us*”, something which is exemplified below:
However, within this notion of ‘authenticity’ are also processes of self-commodification. Instead of viewing fashion blogging as a form of ‘free labour’ as many political economy scholars would suggest, many bloggers in this study portray their career as something they were almost ‘destined’ to do, as though fame came to them ‘naturally’ because they were ‘passionate’ for all things fashion and beauty. In Figure 17, @Icovetthee offers a more ‘real’ insight into her personality and blogging career, saying that she wants to “step outside her comfort zone” so that she can be “happy” with the content she “put’s out to the world”. Although she says she is “excited” about what the year can bring, she also suggests that her blogging career as ‘@Icovetthee’ is not always as glamorous than may at first appear, as she indicates how stressful and time-consume blogging can be.

In terms of self-branding, bloggers frequently adopt branding technique’s to create brands in their own name. To reiterate, Hearn (2010:427) explains self-branding as “a form of affective labour that is purposefully undertaken by individuals in order to garner attention, reputation and potentially, profit.” Yet, problematizing this practice, Keller (2015:275) argues that self-branding “must be viewed not as an ‘authentic’ presentation of self, but a mediated performance situated within a culture that demands girls and young women to self-brand.”

Figure 18: @TanyaBurr
Figure 19: @Zoella

Figure 20: @FleurdeForce
Figure 21: @TheAnnaEdit

Figure’s 18-21 illustrates how bloggers have managed to cultivate a brand in their own name. Figure 18 pictures @TanyaBurr in a selfie with a ‘Tanya Burr cosmetics’ lipstick on, a brand that is sold across UK ‘Superdrug’ stores nationally. Figure 20 shows @FleurdeForce looking happy as she reveals that she has just created her own lipstick with the brand ‘MAC’, and she enthusiastically claims that her invention is her “DREAM lipstick colour, #MACxFleurDeForce.” From the images above, self-branding is positioned here as though, just like commercially branded products, bloggers benefit from having a unique selling point, or a public identity that appears ‘authentic’, honest, and likeable, designed to the needs and interests of their target audience, i.e. the women who follow them. In other words, femininity is expressed here through the practice of bloggers’ self-branding whereby bloggers actively create gendered products like lipstick and female jumpers, all of which are marketed to increase women’s self-esteem or appearance in some shape or form. What is problematic about this form of self-branding however, is that these representations only serve to articulate women’s online visibility as “anchored in the consumer marketplace” (Banet-Weiser, 2012:64), something which is highlighted even further in the next section.

4.4 Bourgeois Femininity: Aspirational consumption

This section looks at personal transformation and the discourses around self-improvement that bloggers depict in the form of aspirational consumption. By constructing an ‘ideal’ self that can be made possible through purchasing material objects, I argue that via
self-promotion and self-branding, bloggers can become *objects of desire* for women to aspire and potentially ‘live up to’. This is important because many of the bloggers in this study are potential role models for many of the young women who follow them, and can perhaps have an influence over the ways consumption is valued in their self-representations. The term ‘*bourgeois femininity*’ is taken from the work of Arthurs (2003) and looks at the ways postfeminist consumption is often linked to female middle-class privilege where celebrity-like images are constructed as though they were to be *emulated* as a form of female ‘empowerment’. Here, we can consider how bloggers’ consumption “offers the image of the transformed self, and consumption offers the means of effecting that transformation” (Todd, 2012: 49).

![Image](image.png)

**Figure 22:** @FleurdeForce
Figure 23: @InTheFrow

Figure 24: @HelloOctoberxo
Reflecting on Todd (2012), Figure’s 22-26 show bloggers portraying consumption in the form of having a glamorous lifestyle. It is important to note that, staging this ‘glam life’, which most often includes networking, travelling, and attending branded events, are all aesthetically displayed on social media as being part of the bloggers’ career- a fashionable one too. Figure 22 shows @FleurdeForce smiling at the camera in New York before attending a Dior event. Figure 23 is a selfie by @InTheFrow where she links her viewers to a GRWM (Get ready with me) video before an event. In these videos, bloggers talk to the camera and quite literally transform themselves physically as they apply lipstick, mascara, and foundation. Unlike the shows seen on mainstream television, these videos are set in domestic environments such as the bedroom or bathroom, and viewers are addressed as though they were friends also taking part in this makeover transformation, as well as being constructed as potential consumers by the bloggers themselves.

Like the images discussed in previous sections, shopping is discursively constructed as a pleasurable activity (Lazar, 2009), but it is also a form of work that relies on women’s emotional and financial engagement in capitalist, consumer culture (Nathanson, 2014). In GRWM videos, the production of the blogger’s self-brand very much relies on her
consumption of fashion and beauty products, however, in these constructions of femininity, bloggers subject themselves to be desirable and ‘to-be-looked-at’ from the audience’s gaze, whether it is male or female. For example, in such images, there is an implied assumption that viewers will be able to afford the assortment of products bloggers feature in their videos and apply to their body, and it is here in which the postfeminist ideal of ‘girly femininity’ (Gill et al. 2012) is articulated here.

In Figure’s 24 and 25 @HelloOctoberxo and @TanyaBurr picture themselves as living a celebrity-like lifestyle, drinking wine in New York and staying at a top, 5* hotel in Miami. In some form or other, both images work in advertising the hotels they are staying at, but they also work in constructing a sense of fantasy and escape from the real world, a repeated trope that many mainstream advertisements sell to consumers. It also works in constructing what Marwick (2013a) calls ‘aspirational production’, a practice whereby blogger’s try and generate attention as a way to increase their online social position. To this end, these images and self-representations emulate the style and aesthetic of commercial advertisements as a way to make their lives and blogging careers something to aspire to. However, in these performances of femininity, i.e. dressing up to go to an event, applying lipstick, putting on designer dresses and shoes, are all idealised images of femininity that are complicit, and actually embody quite hegemonic ideals of female attractiveness and female beauty. As we have seen from section 4.1, all of the bloggers are white, slim and predominantly middle-class, who use their body to display commodity goods and who all engage in self-commodification practices.

To link back to the theories around the postfeminist subject, Duffy and Hund (2015:9) remind us that “having it all” is part of the carefully constructed, deftly managed, and constantly renegotiated self-brand.” As I argue here, far from being an ‘authentic’ self-representation, the practices seen within fashion blogging are increasingly hierarchical, as it is market-driven and depends on a woman’s financial engagement in their appearance and self-performance online. To this end, the bloggers’ portrayal of ‘aspirational consumption’ also illustrates a form of ‘aspirational labour’ (Marwick, 2013b) whose activities and whose economic capital (from blogging as a career) positions women as fully immersed, yet unable to remove themselves from consumer culture, because it is consumer culture to which bloggers’ performances of the ‘self’ rest upon. Whereas bloggers portray ‘aspirational consumption’ through buying luxury goods and having a ‘glamorous lifestyle’, which all work in reinforcing these women’s’ online social status and reputation, ‘aspirational labour’,
or perhaps, the woman as a ‘passionate worker’ (Nathanson, 2014), marks bloggers as creative producers or ‘entrepreneur’s (Duffy and Hund, 2015) who will one day compensate for their ‘hard work’. As Marwick (2015:139) notes, “those successful at gaining attention often reproduce conventional status hierarchies of luxury, celebrity, and popularity that depend on the ability to emulate the visual iconography of mainstream celebrity culture.” In Figure’s 22-25, the central message here is that in these bloggers’ self-representations, women should not only consume, but they should be *seen* consuming too. To this end, we must question the ways imaging technologies like Instagram are linked to ideological conceptions of seeing and performing, specifically the performance of femininity that re-establishes women’s identity to consumer culture.
5. Conclusion

The aim of this research was to contribute to the field of self-representation by exploring its relationship to consumer culture, namely the self-representations of female Instagram bloggers. Specifically, its aim was to uncover how consumer culture influenced the ways in which the self-representation of bloggers was expressed and performed on the site Instagram. The research questions were the following: (1) how is the self-representation of bloggers articulated through consumer culture? In what ways is this achieved? (2) Do the written discourses accompanying each image i.e. the Instagram captions articulate a certain self-expression? If so, what ideas do these discourses put forth? In the following, I will revisit the research objectives outlined in the introduction to ask if this research has answered these questions. In order to assess whether these objectives have been met, this section will reflect on the research process overall whilst also making recommendations for future academic study.

5.1 Summary of findings

To recap, this thesis began by reviewing the key literature and debates around self-representation and consumer culture - the backdrop to which this thesis is based. In the first part of the Literature Review, it explored the political economy of social media to understand how the commercial setting of Instagram could influence the ways self-representation was performed. Looking at female self-representation specifically, the focus was then placed onto consumerism as an identity constructor, i.e. that consumerism played an integral part in women’s understandings of identity, particularly within postfeminist culture. The findings revealed that for many of the bloggers’ self-representations, the act of consumption was central to the narration and performance of the ‘self’. Four themes were identified:

(1) ‘Postfeminist consumption and commodity fetishism’ focused on the ways commodities were given symbolic or magical qualities, as though they revealed the bloggers ‘inner self’

(2) ‘Fashioning the consumer lifestyle and the consumer identity: ‘Having it all’ focused on the ways bloggers celebrated a consumer identity and how this manifested itself within performance of femininity
‘Consuming the (authentic?) self’ looked at the concept of ‘authenticity’ as something which bloggers employed in their confessional, often autobiographical narration of selves.

‘Bourgeois Femininity’ then explored the term ‘aspirational consumption’ using various scholarly arguments as the backdrop for understanding how bloggers could be idols for women to aspire to.

In light of the analysis so far, it seems fair that the commercialisation of social media plays a central part within the identities of Instagram bloggers. Rather than these representations being banal or trivial, we need to critique relations of power so that we can understand where the social harm may reside in women’s understandings of the ‘self’. The scholarly arguments that have been deliberated on throughout this dissertation highlights this issue, particularly in how the structural forces of capitalism which shapes the social media environment is becoming increasingly powerful in encouraging its users into becoming successful self-branders. In the case of Instagram bloggers, it also appears that self-promotion and a successful blogging career depends largely on how invested these women are within consumer culture, and the commercial environment which social media is embedded in.

Throughout, I have argued that bloggers construct their self-representations as enterprising female consumers who actively work on their body through self-improvement and self-discipline, and it is through this which personal happiness and some form of authenticity can supposedly be achieved. When exploring the relationship between self-representation and consumer culture, I have also suggested that social media is a powerful medium for its intensive surveillance of the female body, particularly in terms of the discipline and wealth that is needed to obtain the glamorous and expensive lifestyles bloggers portray. Thus, not only are the self-representation of bloggers entangled within postfeminist tropes around consumer identity, but they are also made much more complicated by the neoliberal logic that accompanies the environment in which these identities are performed.

My aim was to challenge and think critically about the role of consumerism within self-representation, specifically those of female Instagram bloggers. It also aimed to offer a new approach to self-representation by thinking about how it may be rooted within capitalist, consumerist ideologies. Bloggers are both producers and consumers of media texts, and it is important to acknowledge the ways in which their self-representations may influence other women’s understandings of the world. Whilst these bloggers depict postfeminist tropes of
‘having it all’, it is only if you **buy into** consumption that their success is deemed ‘valuable’ to the brands they work with. At the same time, the discourse of relatability that bloggers often depict conceals the time, money, resources and capital that goes into the success of being a high-ranked, well-earning Instagram blogger.

### 5.2 Possible Recommendations

There are several shortcomings in this research, for example, although both images and captions were analysed for the discussion, further analysis between the two could have been explored in more detail. Secondly, the discourses in all 100 photos were not analysed due to the space in which this dissertation allows, and although observations were made prior to the three-weeks, such a short time-frame is unable to fully explore the relationship between consumer culture and self-representation. As bloggers upload a high amount of content, this research was concerned with only the most recent self-representations from late January to early February 2017. Lastly, as discourse analysis is subjective and is an **interpretive** research methodology (Deacon et al. 2007), consulting others for their analysis of the texts would have ensured interpretive validity, although this research has maintained an objective standpoint throughout.

To conclude, future research could explore the relationship between self-representation and consumer culture by looking at a larger sample, however the findings of this dissertation would predict that for almost all of the self-representation of bloggers, consumption becomes a key factor in women’s construction of identity, and whose femininity is rooted in the consumer marketplace. A more interesting approach for political economy studies is to see whether or not the popularity of Instagram bloggers remains the same *without* the consumption of commodity goods, i.e. would bloggers still be as commercially successful if they did *not* buy and display commodity goods? If not, what does this say about the kind of ‘self’ which is privileged online?

Following McRobbie (2009) and Duffy and Hund’s (2015) ideas, I want to conclude this research by arguing that young women are particularly susceptible to influences in social media, and the highly glamorous, yet often **staged** representations Instagram bloggers portray may only advance this issue. To this end, we must consider how the performances of femininity as seen in the ten bloggers are bound to a capitalist system whose self-branding
techniques do not deviate far from women’s role as a consumer and to the aesthetic standards of beauty perpetuated within mainstream media. The power dynamics that are present on sites like Instagram only reinforces the ways bloggers construct their identities and self-representations in highly profitable and commodified ways. Now we must look forward and question who gets to decide which blogger’s achieve fame and those who do not. Could it be the case that female self-representation is already gendered so that women are scrutinised to fit a more or less hegemonic ideal of femininity? With the increasing commercialisation of social media, self-representation needs to be interrogated alongside the political as well as the power relations in society more generally. Only then can we view self-representation as different to what it is now, one which is removed from the social and ideological control over the female body- a world where women do not have to follow an endless cycle of consumption which is only complicit with a specific beauty ideal.
Bibliography

https://www.instagram.com/about/us/


Alix: I covet thee. @Icovetthee. Blogger. Instagram Profile. Accessed Online from:
https://www.instagram.com/icovetthee/?hl=en

Amelia Liana. @AmeliaLiana. Blogger. Instagram Profile. Accessed Online from:
https://www.instagram.com/amelialiana/?hl=en


Gill, R et al. (2012). ‘The whole playboy mansion image’: Girls’ fashioning and fashioned selves within a postfeminist culture. Feminism and Psychology. 23 (2) 143-162


Oreskovic, A. (2016). *Everyone thought Mark Zuckerberg was crazy to buy a 13-person app for $1 billion — now Instagram looks like one of the most brilliant tech acquisitions*


Appendix

Images of Fashion Blogger’s


Figure 17. I covet thee. (2017). [Accessed 10\textsuperscript{th} January 2017]. Instagram link unfound - Facbook link available from: https://www.facebook.com/ICovetThee/photos/pb.172848399537218.-2207520000.1483997675./755896494565736/?type=3&theater


