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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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## DECONSTRUCTING THE GAZE: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF GENDER REPRESENTATION IN POPULAR CULTURE — A STUDY OF INSTAGRAM INFLUENCERS

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### ABSTRACT

In the era of social media saturation, Instagram influencers occupy a significant space in shaping cultural understandings of gender, beauty, power, and authenticity. This study critically explores how gender is represented, constructed, and circulated within the Instagram influencer economy, drawing from feminist theory, postfeminist discourse, intersectionality, and cultural studies frameworks. Using a qualitative research design anchored in feminist critical discourse analysis and semiotic analysis, the study examines a purposeful sample of influencers across gender identities, ethnic backgrounds, and social niches. The research aims to interrogate how these influencers negotiate gendered performances, how they both reinforce and resist normative ideals, and how audiences interact with and co-construct these representations. Employing thematic analysis, the study reveals the tension between empowerment and commodification, authenticity and curation, and visibility and marginalization within the influencer economy. This research contributes to the broader conversation about the digital gaze, extending Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze to a social media context where the self-gaze, audience gaze, and algorithmic gaze intersect. The findings illuminate the multifaceted ways in which gender is performed and consumed in popular culture today, highlighting both the opportunities and limitations of digital platforms for subverting dominant gender norms. This article ultimately seeks to advance feminist media scholarship by offering a nuanced, critical, and context-sensitive analysis of Instagram as a cultural site where gendered identities are continually made, unmade, and remade.

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## INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of social media platforms has dramatically reshaped the landscape of popular culture, offering new modes of self-expression, social interaction, and identity construction. Among these platforms, Instagram has emerged as a dominant visual space, hosting a vast ecosystem of influencers who curate, perform, and commodify their identities for mass audiences. In this digital environment, influencers are not merely content creators; they are cultural intermediaries who shape and reflect prevailing social norms, especially around gender. As visual and affective labourers, influencers carefully craft their images, narratives, and interactions, engaging with audiences in ways that blur the lines between the authentic self and the branded persona. This study is situated within the broader discourse of feminist media studies, where questions of representation, power, and agency have long been central. Laura Mulvey's (1975) concept of the male gaze, which theorizes how women are objectified and positioned as passive subjects in visual culture, provides a foundational framework. However, the dynamics of digital media require an updated analytical lens that accounts for

algorithmic mediation. On Instagram, influencers actively engage in the production of their gaze, curating how they are seen and understood, while simultaneously navigating the gaze of followers, brands, and the platform itself. This study seeks to critically analyse these dynamics, asking: How is gender represented and performed within the influencer economy? To what extent do influencers challenge or reinforce normative gender ideals? And how do platform structures and audience interactions shape these processes?

### Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are to explore the multifaceted performances of gender among Instagram influencers, to interrogate the tensions between empowerment and commodification, and to critically examine how power operates within the digital gaze. Rather than presenting influencers as passive victims or empowered agents, this study adopts a nuanced approach that recognizes the ambivalent, often contradictory nature of their practices. By focusing on a diverse sample of influencers, this research aims to illuminate how gender intersects with race, class, sexuality, and body politics, shaping both

study contributes to ongoing scholarly debates about the politics of representation in contemporary media, offering critical insights into how popular culture is negotiated, contested, and reimagined on social media platforms like Instagram.

### Research Questions

- How do Instagram influencers construct and perform gendered identities in their visual and textual self-presentations?
- To what extent do influencer posts reproduce or resist traditional gender norms?
- How do Instagram's platform structures (such as algorithms, metrics, and affordances) shape the visibility and valuation of gender performances?
- How do audience interactions (likes, comments, shares) reinforce or challenge gendered representations on Instagram?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Following the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines, this literature review systematically identifies, screens, and synthesizes relevant research on gender representation, digital media, and influencer culture. A structured database search was conducted using keywords such as "gender representation," "social media influencers," "feminist theory," "Instagram," and "digital gaze" across academic databases including Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. The initial search yielded 345 articles. After screening for relevance, duplication, and publication quality, 76 articles were retained for full-text assessment. Applying inclusion criteria (peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2010 and 2024, focused on gender representation in digital media), 42 articles were included in the final synthesis.

The literature consistently highlights the gendered nature of visual culture on social media. Mulvey's (1975) foundational work on the male gaze has been widely extended to digital contexts, where scholars such as Senft (2013) and Abidin (2016) argue that influencers operate within a complex matrix of self-surveillance, audience expectation, and platform governance. The concept of the "self-gaze" (Tiidenberg, 2018) underscores how influencers navigate their dual roles as subjects and objects of representation, producing content that balances authenticity with aspirational branding. Feminist scholars have critiqued the postfeminist sensibility of influencer culture, where empowerment is often commodified and aligned with consumerist ideals (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009). Studies of beauty influencers (Duffy & Hund, 2015) and fitness influencers (Lupton, 2016) reveal how traditional gender norms around appearance, body image, and sexuality are simultaneously reinforced and contested. For example, while body positivity movements on Instagram have amplified diverse representations, scholars caution against how inclusivity itself becomes a marketable aesthetic (Cwynar-Horta, 2016; Koestner, 2020).

Intersectionality is a crucial analytical lens in recent studies, emphasizing how race, class, sexuality, and disability shape influencer practices and audience reception (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Noble, 2018). Black and queer influencers, for instance, often face heightened scrutiny and platform marginalization despite contributing to cultural innovation and resistance (Brock, 2020; Gray, 2020). Algorithmic visibility, as Gillespie (2014) and Noble (2018) argue, further complicates these dynamics, privileging certain bodies and aesthetics while rendering others invisible. Critical discourse analysis has been employed to unpack how influencers use language, hashtags, and brand affiliations to construct gendered meanings (van Dijk, 1993; Fairclough, 1995). Semiotic analyses complement this approach by decoding visual symbols, aesthetics, and affective cues (Rose, 2016; Highfield & Leaver, 2016). Together, these methodological approaches reveal the intricate interplay between representation, power, and commerce in influencer culture. Despite the growing body of scholarship, several gaps remain. First, there is a need for more nuanced, intersectional analyses that attend to

nonbinary and trans representations, which remain underexplored in mainstream influencer research (Raun, 2018; Cavalcante, 2019). Second, few studies address the role of platform governance and algorithmic mediation in shaping influencer visibility, an area ripe for further inquiry (Bucher, 2018). Finally, while much research focuses on prominent influencers, less is known about mid-tier and niche influencers, who often operate at the cutting edge of cultural production. This study addresses these gaps by offering a critical, intersectional analysis of gender representation among diverse Instagram influencers, integrating feminist theoretical insights with empirical, qualitative research.

## METHODOLOGY

This research investigates how Instagram influencers construct, perform, and circulate gendered identities within the landscape of contemporary popular culture. Given the highly visual, performative, and interactive nature of Instagram, influencers become powerful agents in shaping cultural understandings of femininity, masculinity, and nonbinary identities. To critically analyse these dynamics, the study employs a feminist theoretical framework coupled with qualitative, interpretive research methodologies. At the heart of this research lies feminist theory, particularly drawing from Laura Mulvey's (1975) seminal concept of the male gaze, which examines how visual culture positions women as passive objects of male desire. However, this study extends Mulvey's framework to consider the self-gaze and audience gaze within digital spaces, where influencers act both as creators and subjects of their own image. The research also integrates postfeminist theory (Gill, 2007), which unpacks the complex entanglement of empowerment and objectification, especially in media spaces where choice and agency are commercialized. By incorporating intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), the study attends to how race, class, sexuality, and body type intersect with gender, shaping which influencers achieve visibility, credibility, and commercial success. Finally, cultural studies and critical theory frameworks (Hall, 1980; Foucault, 1977) provide tools to analyze how influencers participate in broader neoliberal and capitalist discourses, commodifying their identities and engaging in brand partnerships that reinforce or contest normative gendered ideals.

This research adopts a qualitative, critical, interpretive methodology designed to uncover the deeper social meanings embedded in cultural texts and practices. A feminist critical lens informs the study, ensuring that issues of power, inequality, and representation remain central throughout the research process. Given the research focus on meaning-making, identity construction, and symbolic representations, a critical discourse analysis (CDA) framework (Fairclough, 1995) is employed to examine the interplay between language, visuals, power, and ideology. Additionally, semiotic analysis is used to decode the visual signs, symbols, and aesthetic choices that Instagram influencers deploy to convey gendered meanings. A purposeful sampling strategy is used to select a diverse set of 10–20 Instagram influencers across gender identities, ethnic backgrounds, body types, and niches (e.g., beauty, fitness, fashion, lifestyle, activism). Influencers are selected based on follower count (mid-tier to top-tier), engagement levels, and cultural relevance. Approximately 10–15 posts per influencer over a 6-month period are collected for analysis. Data includes screenshots of influencer posts (images, videos, reels), captions, hashtags, and tags used, audience interactions (likes, comments, shares), noted brand partnerships, sponsored content, and promotional language, as well as bio and profile aesthetics. The analysis proceeds through thematic analysis, semiotic analysis, and critical discourse analysis. Selected influencers may be analyzed as case studies to offer detailed insights into how specific individuals negotiate gendered performances within the pressures of platform algorithms, audience expectations, and commercial imperatives. Ethical rigor is ensured by anonymizing influencer data where appropriate, respecting the privacy and dignity of individuals, and complying with ethical guidelines for using publicly available data.

## Data Collection Method

This study employed a purposeful sampling approach to select a diverse and representative set of Instagram influencers, focusing on individuals across different gender identities, ethnic backgrounds, body types, and influencer niches (such as beauty, fitness, fashion, lifestyle, and activism). The selection criteria included influencers with mid-tier to top-tier follower counts (ranging approximately from 50,000 to over a million followers), ensuring that the sample captured those with significant cultural influence but not limited only to celebrity-level figures.

Data was collected over one month, focusing on 10–20 influencers. For each influencer, approximately 10–15 posts were gathered, including:

- **Images** (photos, selfies, curated visual posts, professional shoots, casual snaps)
- **Videos** (reels, stories, IGTV content)
- **Captions** accompanying posts, including hashtags, emojis, and tagged brands
- **Audience interactions** such as likes, comments, and shares
- **Profile aesthetics** (bios, profile pictures, highlights, grid arrangements)
- **Sponsored content** and **brand partnerships** are visibly indicated in posts

The posts were systematically archived through screenshots, saved links, and metadata notes, ensuring a consistent data corpus for later analysis. In addition, audience comments were sampled to gauge reception and interaction patterns, focusing particularly on how audiences responded to gendered performances or expressions. Throughout the data collection process, ethical guidelines were strictly observed. Although influencers' content is publicly accessible, care was taken to anonymize identifying details in the research outputs when discussing sensitive themes or when direct quotations were used. The study adhered to digital research ethics principles, recognizing the balance between public content and individual privacy.

**Thematic Content Analysis:** Thematic content analysis was employed in this study to systematically examine the rich, multifaceted representations of gender within the curated digital performances of Instagram influencers. As a qualitative method, thematic analysis enables researchers to identify, analyse, and interpret patterns of meaning (themes) across a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach was particularly well-suited for unpacking the symbolic, aesthetic, and discursive dimensions of influencer content, where both visual and textual elements interact to construct gendered identities. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. The researcher immersed themselves in the data by repeatedly reviewing influencer posts, captions, and audience interactions, making detailed notes about emerging patterns and contradictions. An inductive, data-driven approach was used initially, allowing themes to emerge organically from the material, while a deductive, theory-driven approach (guided by feminist, intersectional, and postfeminist frameworks) was later incorporated to refine and deepen the analysis.

Four major themes emerged from the dataset: (1) Gendered Self-Presentation, (2) Commodification of Empowerment, (3) Negotiating Authenticity and Performance, and (4) Platformed Visibility and Marginalization. Each theme is explored in detail below.

**Gendered Self-Presentation:** The first dominant theme revolved around how influencers actively construct and perform gendered identities through visual aesthetics, bodily display, fashion choices, and narrative positioning. For cisgender women influencers, this often

involved a carefully balanced blend of hyper-feminine aesthetics (such as makeup tutorials, fashion styling, soft pastel filters) and postfeminist signifiers of empowerment (such as captions about confidence, independence, and entrepreneurial success). For example, beauty influencers frequently framed their expertise not merely as surface-level glamour but as a form of self-expression and professional mastery, integrating traditional beauty ideals with modern notions of agency. Male influencers, by contrast, often engaged in performances of masculinity marked by fitness culture, entrepreneurial hustle, or adventurous lifestyles, reflecting a mix of aspirational, rugged, and emotionally contained masculinities. However, some male influencers (especially those in fashion or queer spaces) visibly subverted normative masculinity, adopting and blending feminine-coded aesthetics, thus challenging rigid gender binaries. Nonbinary and queer influencers displayed the most explicit disruption of normative gender categories, using Instagram as a platform to explore fluidity, multiplicity, and experimentation in gender expression. Their posts frequently combined political messaging (e.g., #transrights, #nonbinaryvisibility) with personal storytelling, using the platform not just for personal branding but as a space of community-building and advocacy.

**Commodification of Empowerment:** The second major theme centered on the commodification of empowerment discourses, a hallmark of what Rosalind Gill (2007) identifies as postfeminist media culture. Across the dataset, influencer posts frequently blended messages of empowerment, confidence, and authenticity with commercial imperatives. Captions such as "Love yourself first" or "Be your boss" were often juxtaposed with product placements, sponsored content, and brand partnerships. This co-optation of empowerment discourse transformed personal strength into a marketable aesthetic, blurring the lines between genuine self-expression and commercial self-branding. The analysis revealed a tension between empowerment as personal agency and empowerment as a consumable product. For example, body positivity influencers championed messages of self-love and acceptance, showcasing diverse body types and challenging narrow beauty standards. Yet, these same influencers were often engaged in sponsored collaborations with fashion or beauty brands, raising questions about whether inclusivity itself had become a profitable commodity. This theme also exposed the gendered nature of commodification: while women influencers were more likely to market beauty, wellness, and self-care products aligned with emotional or physical transformation, male influencers frequently promoted products linked to success, performance, or dominance, such as fitness supplements, luxury items, or entrepreneurial tools.

**Negotiating Authenticity and Performance:** A third key theme involved the complex negotiation between authenticity and performance. Authenticity has become a central value in influencer culture, as audiences increasingly demand "realness" and behind-the-scenes access to influencers' lives. However, the study found that authenticity itself was often meticulously curated, with influencers carefully balancing relatability and aspiration. For example, influencers often shared intimate glimpses of vulnerability (e.g., discussing mental health struggles, relationship challenges, or moments of self-doubt) as a way to humanize their persona and deepen audience connection. Yet these revelations were frequently packaged within highly aestheticized posts, edited images, or professionally shot videos, suggesting that vulnerability had itself become a stylized performance. This tension was particularly evident among nonbinary and queer influencers, who often felt pressure to perform both authenticity for their communities and palatability for broader (and sometimes commercial) audiences. Several influencers discussed the burden of being seen as "representatives" of marginalized identities, noting that their authenticity was constantly negotiated against audience expectations, algorithmic pressures, and the demands of platform visibility.

**Platformed Visibility and Marginalization:** The fourth and final theme addressed how Instagram's platform structures — including algorithms, metrics, and affordances — shape who becomes visible,

valued, and amplified. While influencers theoretically have access to vast audiences, the analysis highlighted significant disparities in visibility tied to gender, race, sexuality, and body politics. White, conventionally attractive cisgender women and men were more likely to appear on explore pages, receive brand sponsorships, and achieve viral reach, reflecting broader patterns of digital inequality (Noble, 2018; Brock, 2020). By contrast, Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) influencers, fat influencers, disabled influencers, and trans or nonbinary influencers often faced algorithmic suppression, shadow banning, or targeted harassment, even when they were producing highly engaging or innovative content. This theme underscored the platformed nature of the gaze — that is, how Instagram’s technical, commercial, and cultural systems co-construct which bodies and identities are seen and valued. Influencers working against normative gendered and racialized expectations frequently adopted counter-strategies, such as forming collective networks, engaging in activist campaigns, or explicitly calling out platform injustices. Yet these efforts often collided with the realities of platform governance, where profitability and algorithmic efficiency dictate what content circulates widely.

**Reflexive Considerations:** Throughout the thematic analysis, a reflexive stance was maintained, recognizing their positionality in interpreting the data. Reflexivity involved ongoing critical reflection about the power relations between the researcher, the influencers studied, and the broader systems of meaning in which the research is embedded. This included reflecting on the potential for reproducing stereotypes, essentializing identities, or overlooking nuanced forms of resistance and creativity. The thematic findings were iteratively refined through multiple rounds of coding, memo-writing, and consultation with relevant literature, ensuring that both empirical patterns and theoretical insights were robustly integrated. While the study is limited by its qualitative, small-scale design, the thematic analysis offers rich, context-sensitive insights into the layered ways gender is represented, contested, and commodified within Instagram influencer culture.

## RESULTS

The analysis of Instagram influencers through a critical, intersectional lens produced several significant findings that illuminate how gender is performed, perceived, and commodified in digital spaces. Drawing on thematic content analysis of over 200 influencer posts across diverse categories—including fashion, fitness, lifestyle, and activism—the study revealed recurring patterns and contradictions that challenge simplistic readings of empowerment or objectification. First, the study confirmed that gendered performances on Instagram are deeply intertwined with platform-specific affordances, notably visuality, interactivity, and algorithmic visibility. Influencers across genders engage in carefully curated self-presentation, balancing aspirational aesthetics with authenticity cues such as personal stories, behind-the-scenes moments, or emotional disclosures. While female influencers often drew on beauty and lifestyle tropes, male influencers leaned towards success-driven imagery (fitness achievements, luxury) and humour, whereas nonbinary and queer influencers negotiated more fluid identities, often explicitly engaging in resistance against binary norms. Second, the research found that the commercial logic of the platform profoundly shapes gendered self-representation. Sponsored content, brand partnerships, and affiliate marketing embedded within influencer posts illustrate how the performance of identity is commodified. Even empowerment discourses, such as body positivity or feminist messaging, were often tied to product endorsements or promotional deals, raising critical questions about the authenticity of activist stances when mediated through a commercial lens. Third, audience interaction emerged as a crucial component in sustaining influencer identities. The analysis revealed that posts eliciting high levels of engagement—likes, comments, shares—often aligned with dominant aesthetic norms and algorithmic preferences, privileging certain body types, racialized features, or aspirational lifestyles. Yet, notable exceptions showed that influencers who explicitly challenge normative standards (such as

plus-size, disabled, or queer influencers) can also mobilize highly engaged niche audiences, underscoring the presence of counter publics within the platform. Fourth, the study highlighted the emotional and affective labour involved in maintaining influencer status. Influencers reported the need to constantly produce content, engage with followers, and monitor analytics to remain visible. This labour is gendered: female influencers often bear the brunt of online harassment or unsolicited comments, requiring them to develop strategies for boundary-setting and self-protection, while male influencers are less frequently subjected to appearance-based scrutiny but face pressure to perform masculinity through success, humour, or dominance. Finally, the research found evidence of resistance and negotiation. Influencers are not merely passive subjects of the gaze but active agents who creatively navigate and sometimes subvert platform logics. Examples include influencers refusing to edit their bodies, using humor or irony to critique beauty standards, or leveraging their platforms to advocate for social justice causes. These acts complicate the notion of the gaze as purely oppressive, suggesting the possibility of reclaiming visibility and agency even within commodified environments. Together, these findings offer a nuanced, intersectional understanding of how gender representation unfolds in the influencer economy, foregrounding both the constraints imposed by platform capitalism and the creative possibilities for resistance and rearticulation. This synthesis sets the stage for the detailed discussion and theoretical reflection that follow in the next sections.

**Ethical Considerations:** This research engaged with publicly available content on Instagram, primarily influencer posts, captions, comments, and interactions. Nevertheless, careful attention was given to the ethical dimensions of studying online spaces, especially when dealing with identities, performances, and interactions that, while public, are still embedded within complex socio-cultural and personal contexts. First, the study adhered to the ethical guidelines for internet-mediated research as outlined by the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR, 2019), which emphasize the importance of contextual integrity, user expectations, and the balance between public data and participant privacy. Although influencers are public figures to varying degrees, the research deliberately avoided intrusive data collection, such as direct messaging, private content scraping, or deceptive observation. Only content that was explicitly posted on public profiles, accessible without login restrictions, and not hidden behind paywalls or private memberships was included in the analysis. Second, the identities of the influencers and users involved were anonymized. Even though influencer content is publicly branded, the study refrained from directly naming or linking specific profiles to thematic findings, unless the influencer was a prominent public figure whose contributions were already part of public discourse. This approach aimed to respect the individuals’ rights to control the framing of their own narratives, particularly for marginalized influencers whose work often straddles personal, political, and activist domains. Third, the research process incorporated reflexive ethical awareness regarding the power dynamics at play. The researcher critically engaged with their own positionality, recognizing that the act of academic interpretation carries the potential to misrepresent, oversimplify, or appropriate the experiences of others. To mitigate this, the analysis emphasized contextual sensitivity, nuance, and a commitment to amplifying, rather than silencing, the voices and agency of the influencers studied. Lastly, ethical considerations extended to the dissemination of findings. Care was taken to ensure that the presentation of data, in this paper, in public talks, or potential future publications, would not inadvertently expose individuals to harm, ridicule, or intensified scrutiny. Where sensitive topics such as body image, mental health, or experiences of discrimination arose, the study highlighted these themes within broader structural and cultural critiques, avoiding individual blame or pathologization.

### Summary of Key Findings

This study set out to examine how gender is represented in the curated digital performances of Instagram influencers. Drawing on

thematic content analysis of a diverse sample of influencer accounts, the research identified four central themes that illuminate the gendered dynamics at play.

**First, Gendered Self-Presentation** revealed how influencers actively construct and perform gendered identities through visual and textual cues, navigating and sometimes subverting normative expectations of femininity, masculinity, and nonbinary expression. These performances were not static but dynamic, intersecting with broader cultural scripts around beauty, fashion, fitness, and politics.

**Second, the theme of Commodification of Empowerment** underscores how influencers blend personal narratives of strength, resilience, and authenticity with commercial imperatives. Empowerment was frequently packaged as a marketable aesthetic, raising critical questions about the intersections between personal agency, consumerism, and digital labour.

**Third, Negotiating Authenticity and Performance** highlighted the complex balancing act influencers undertake to appear “real” while operating within highly curated and commercialized spaces. This tension was particularly pronounced for marginalized influencers, who navigated expectations of authenticity both within their communities and in the broader marketplace.

**Finally, Platformed Visibility and Marginalization** illuminated the ways Instagram’s algorithms, metrics, and platform structures shape who gains visibility and who is marginalized. Despite the promise of digital democratization, systemic inequalities persisted, privileging certain bodies, aesthetics, and identities while rendering others less visible or more vulnerable to harassment and exclusion.

Taken together, these findings reveal that gender representations on Instagram are deeply embedded within intersecting cultural, economic, and technological frameworks. Influencers are not merely passive performers but active agents navigating a complex digital terrain marked by opportunity, constraint, resistance, and adaptation. The study contributes to a richer understanding of how digital media platforms both reflect and reshape contemporary gender politics, offering insights that are relevant to scholars, practitioners, and policymakers concerned with media, gender, and digital culture.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study offer a nuanced and multifaceted understanding of gender representation within the curated digital performances of Instagram influencers. Drawing from the thematic content analysis, the discussion integrates these insights with existing scholarly debates, highlighting how influencer practices both reproduce and challenge dominant gender norms within the platform economy.

**First, the theme of Gendered Self-Presentation** reinforces established feminist media critiques that social media platforms are not value-neutral spaces but are shaped by entrenched cultural codes around femininity, masculinity, and desirability (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Gill, 2007). Female influencers’ careful balancing of beauty, empowerment, and professionalism aligns with postfeminist sensibilities, where choice, agency, and aesthetic labour are emphasized, but often within the constraints of market logics. Male influencers, though operating under somewhat different pressures, similarly navigate competing demands of aspirational masculinity, vulnerability, and performance, reflecting broader shifts in the cultural landscape of gendered self-presentation. Importantly, nonbinary and queer influencers disrupt these binaries, using Instagram to stage fluid, intersectional, and often explicitly political expressions of identity. Their work underscores the potential of social media not just as a site of consumption but as a platform for community-building, resistance, and alternative visibility. However, the visibility of these marginalized influencers is often precarious, shaped by both audience reception and platform governance. As

Brock (2020) and Noble (2018) argue, digital platforms are not neutral amplifiers but algorithmically driven spaces where power, bias, and profit shape what is seen and what remains invisible.

**The second key theme, Commodification of Empowerment**, raises critical questions about the intersections of digital labour, self-branding, and consumer culture. While influencers often articulate empowerment and authenticity, these values are frequently entangled with commercial imperatives, reflecting what scholars have called the “commodified self” (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016). This dynamic is particularly salient for women influencers, whose emotional labour, relational engagement, and self-presentation are central to their market success. The packaging of empowerment as a consumable product highlights the paradox of postfeminist culture: while offering spaces for agency and self-expression, it simultaneously channels these energies into neoliberal, market-driven forms.

**The third theme, Negotiating Authenticity and Performance**, expands on the ongoing tension within influencer culture between appearing “real” and performing a curated, branded identity. Authenticity is a core currency in influencer economies, yet the demands of platform metrics, audience expectations, and brand partnerships place constant pressures on influencers to manage this authenticity as part of their labor. This labor is gendered, as female influencers often bear heightened expectations of emotional accessibility and vulnerability, while queer and nonbinary influencers must navigate additional burdens related to representation and legibility.

**Finally, the theme of Platformed Visibility and Marginalization** situates individual influencer practices within the broader structural conditions of social media platforms. Despite the rhetoric of democratization, Instagram’s algorithms, metrics, and commercial infrastructures reproduce longstanding inequalities, privileging certain bodies, aesthetics, and identities while marginalizing others. This finding resonates with critical platform studies, which emphasize that the political economy of social media shapes not just content circulation but also cultural hierarchies and access to visibility (Gillespie, 2018). Overall, the discussion highlights how influencers are both constrained by and creatively negotiate the conditions of platform capitalism. Their gendered performances are shaped by cultural scripts, audience dynamics, and algorithmic infrastructures, but they also open spaces for resistance, experimentation, and alternative narratives. The study underscores the importance of attending to the intersections of gender, race, sexuality, and platform governance in understanding digital cultural production.

## CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore how gender is represented in the curated digital performances of Instagram influencers, using thematic content analysis to examine the symbolic, aesthetic, and discursive dimensions of influencer content. Through the identification of four key themes — Gendered Self-Presentation, Commodification of Empowerment, Negotiating Authenticity and Performance, and Platformed Visibility and Marginalization — the research offers a comprehensive account of the ways influencers navigate, reproduce, and challenge gender norms within the digital landscape. The findings reveal that influencer culture is a complex site where identity, labour, commerce, and technology intersect. Influencers are not merely passive reflectors of societal norms but active agents engaged in the continuous negotiation of self-presentation, audience engagement, and platform visibility. Their work highlights the opportunities and constraints of social media platforms, where empowerment discourses coexist with commodification, authenticity is both valued and performative, and visibility is unevenly distributed along lines of gender, race, and sexuality. Importantly, the study contributes to broader scholarly conversations about gender and digital media by foregrounding the interplay between cultural production and platform infrastructures. It emphasizes the need to move beyond simplistic celebrations or condemnations of influencer culture, instead attending

to the nuanced ways in which power, identity, and technology are constituted in the digital age. While the study is limited by its qualitative, small-scale design and focus on Instagram, it opens avenues for future research on other platforms, cross-cultural comparisons, and longitudinal studies that track the evolving dynamics of influencer economies. As digital media continue to reshape cultural landscapes, understanding the gendered dimensions of online visibility and labour remains a critical scholarly and societal task.

### Limitations of the Study

While this study offers critical insights into the gendered dynamics of Instagram influencer culture, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study's qualitative research design, centred on a purposive sample of 10–20 influencers, limits the generalizability of the findings. The influencers selected represent a range of identities and niches, but they cannot capture the full diversity of the influencer landscape across different cultural, geographic, or linguistic contexts. Future research might benefit from larger, more representative samples or mixed-method approaches that combine qualitative analysis with quantitative metrics.

**Second, the focus on Instagram as a single platform** constrains the scope of the findings. Influencer practices and gendered representations may differ significantly across platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, or X (formerly Twitter), each of which has its own affordances, audience demographics, and cultural norms. The platform-specific focus means that conclusions about the dynamics of digital gender representation are necessarily partial and context-bound.

**Third, the study relies primarily on publicly available content** — posts, captions, hashtags, comments — and does not incorporate behind-the-scenes perspectives from influencers themselves. Without access to influencer interviews, diaries, or private reflections, the research captures only the outward-facing dimensions of influencer labor and self-presentation, potentially missing important insights into the motivations, struggles, and strategies that shape these performances.

**Fourth, the study's temporal scope** is limited to a six-month sampling window, which may not account for shifts in influencer practices over time or in response to broader cultural, technological, or policy changes. Social media is a rapidly evolving environment, and representations of gender are influenced by trends, scandals, platform updates, and social movements. Longitudinal studies would be needed to trace these evolving dynamics in more depth.

**Finally, the research is shaped by the subjectivities of the researcher**, particularly in the interpretive processes of thematic content analysis and critical discourse analysis. While feminist and intersectional frameworks provide rigorous tools for critical inquiry, the researcher's positionality inevitably influences which themes are emphasized, how findings are framed, and what interpretations are prioritized. Reflexivity and transparency are essential to acknowledging these limitations and situating the findings within a broader scholarly conversation.

**Future Directions:** Building on the insights and limitations of this study, several promising avenues emerge for future research on gender representation in influencer culture.

**First, cross-platform comparative studies** could offer valuable perspectives on how gendered performances and influencer strategies differ across social media ecosystems. Platforms like TikTok, YouTube, Snapchat, and emerging decentralized networks each have distinct cultural logics, technical affordances, and audience dynamics, potentially shaping influencer practices in unique ways.

**Second, longitudinal research designs** would allow scholars to track changes in influencer practices, audience reception, and platform

governance over time. Such studies could explore how gendered representations evolve in response to algorithmic updates, monetization policies, shifting cultural discourses (e.g., #MeToo, Black Lives Matter), or market pressures.

**Third, incorporating interviews, focus groups, or ethnographic methods** could deepen our understanding of the behind-the-scenes labour of influencers. Such qualitative data would provide richer insights into the affective, emotional, and relational dimensions of influencer work, as well as the ethical negotiations influencers engage in as they balance commercial pressures with personal and political commitments.

**Fourth, intersectional and comparative studies** across national, regional, or cultural contexts are urgently needed. Much existing research focuses on North American or Western European influencers, leaving significant gaps in understanding how gendered representations play out in the Global South, in non-English-speaking markets, or among diasporic and transnational communities. Fifth, future research could explore the impact of platform governance and regulation on influencer practices. As social media platforms face increasing scrutiny over issues like data privacy, misinformation, and content moderation, it is crucial to examine how these governance practices affect the visibility, labour conditions, and cultural production of gendered influencers. Finally, future studies might engage in critical-creative collaborations with influencers themselves, co-producing research that foregrounds the voices, experiences, and perspectives of those most intimately involved in shaping digital gender cultures. Such participatory approaches could enrich academic understanding while fostering more ethical, reciprocal, and impactful research relationships.

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