

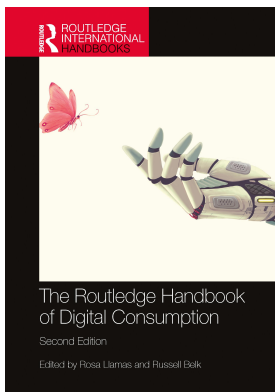
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‘POSTING SEXY IMAGES AND STILL BEING RESPECTED AS A WOMAN’

Perspectives on human and non-human influencers

Magdalena Petersson McIntyre

In the mid-2000s, digital media gave rise to a new communication forum, namely, the blog. Amongst other things, blogs are used to share one’s experiences and personal tastes and to give advice on consumption. Currently, the blogosphere is populated by influencers who post details about their personal lives and use these details as the backdrop to consumer products and services. They have become progressively powerful forces in shaping contemporary consumer culture. Not a day goes by without a report on the latest development in the lives of the most well-known, most followed, and most popular influencers in the Swedish daily newspapers. Although influencers represent all age groups and genders and send out all sorts of messages they want to influence others with, there is one type of influencer that is more readily associated with the word *influencer*, namely, women between the age of 15–40 who write about their personal lives, their thoughts, and daily experiences. The topics that they address are typically related to the consumption of fashion/clothing, beautification of the body (such as make-up and treatments), physical training regimes, home decoration, and baking/cooking. The content of the posts and images that they share on social media platforms show homes, family members, fancy cars, holidays, and clothing as props in displaying a consuming and entrepreneurial self (Abidin 2016). The locations where pictures and videos are shot are often feminised spaces such as the home, kitchen, and bedroom.

The influencer culture has developed in step with the provision of digital devices and the expansion of e-commerce. Often, the three are linked. New networks and connectivities have developed between humans, online personae, consumer goods, digital payment systems, and not least, smartphones. This phenomenon, thus, illustrates how digital technologies shape consumer behaviour and consumer identities (Cochoy et al. 2017). User-friendly and affordable digital devices, applications, and programs have played a significant role in the formation of the influencer phenomenon. Influencers can thus be seen as assemblages that are formed between humans and technology, in which consumption is promoted by linking human taste preferences, inspiration, emotional engagement, and personal ties to technical tools and functions.

In this chapter, I present several different ways in which we can understand the phenomenon of ‘the influencer’ so that we can further comprehend (i) why these socio-technical assemblages have become so popular and influential, and (ii) how they have transformed the fields of consumption and marketing. As we examine this area, I ask the following questions: *Why are the majority of influencers who collaborate with consumer brands and products women? Why do they so readily lend out their lives as environments for product placement? And finally, Why are such large numbers of followers interested in what influencers do, and what does this interest say about consumer culture in the 21st century?* I will deliberate on these questions by presenting and discussing different perspectives on influencers and the scholarly research that has been made in this field. In the text that follows, I share with the reader a number of extracts from my own in-depth interviews with influencers in an earlier study that was based on a combination of different qualitative and ethnographic methods (Pettersson McIntyre 2020). The purpose of the present chapter is to (i) give an overview of the research on influencers in order to present possible ways of understanding this phenomenon and (ii) to situate the influencer phenomenon in the context of post-humanism.

From fashion blogger to influencer

Early blog posts that were written in the mid-2000s were often text-based and employed somewhat amateur-like writing that included spelling mistakes. These mistakes gave an authentic feel to the writing. As pointed out by many scholars, the content of these blogs was surprisingly mundane and relied on sharing with strangers (whoever might read the blog) visual and written information about dressing, eating, shopping, and travelling. Posts were initially anonymous, and faces were often concealed by the flash of the account holder’s camera. The focus on the person in the photographs meant that clothing and fashion, situated on the body, played a prominent role. Quite early on, ‘fashion blogging’ became the stereotypical way of talking about this new medium, however, far from every person who was referred to as a ‘fashion blogger’ thought of themselves as such. Although some bloggers explicitly reported on fashion, fashion shows, fashion news and trends, many who were referred to as ‘fashion bloggers’ showed themselves in an ‘outfit-of-the-day’ and demonstrated goods they like or dreamt of buying *as part of their narration of everyday life*. This phenomenon quickly turned many women, and some men, into micro-celebrities (Chittenden 2010; Arsel and Zhao 2012; McQuarrie, Miller and Phillips 2013).

A few different themes re-occur in the scholarly analysis of influencers and their predecessors, fashion-, or lifestyle bloggers. According to Titton (2015), fashion blogs work as part of the development of a fashionable persona and as a practice of the self, which is dependent upon self-branding and self-entrepreneurship (Kretz 2010; Mora and Rocamora 2015). Furthermore, fashion blogs initially differed from many other blog genres since they made money an explicit goal (Kretz and de Valck 2012; Laurell 2014; Findley 2015; Pedroni 2015; Titton 2015). The systematic engagement in consumer interests that characterises blogging can be described as a form of ‘presumption’ (Zhang 2017); a process of re-drawing boundaries between consumption and production by turning private practices of consumption into the production of value (Duffy and Hund 2016).

Over time, both still images and moving images have taken a more prominent role, often showing the blogger surrounded by consumer goods or engaging with such goods. Pictures of an ‘outfit-of-the-day’ gradually evolved into links to sponsors. Even if ‘the hidden face’ is still common to many blog posts, it is now more of a reference to a genre than an actual attempt to hide the identity behind the person. As bloggers diversified their work across an

increasing number of channels such as Instagram, YouTube, television, and via print materials and other media channels, the term *influencer* has become more widespread. Influencers now share stories and images of diverse matters and topics, ranging from tidying up their homes to breast enlargement procedures.

The idea that 'life on the screen' is less real than 'life off the screen' has long been questioned (Turkle 1995). In fact, several scholars who have researched bloggers and their blogs have referred to the division between online practices and offline practices as an artificial division (Lewis 2013; Mora and Rocamora 2015, Tittton 2015). Luvaas (2016) argues that fashion blogging erases differences between the professional and the amateur, inside and outside, and self and brand. Typically, bloggers and influencers present themselves in contradictory ways: they are human beings constituted by flesh and blood, but they are also digital avatars. They iterate normative and gendered ideals of beauty, consumption, and communication, but they also challenge gendered norms that are related to spheres of public and private, and intimate and commercial. Their homes are public spaces that are used for product placement but note that their online persona is carefully staged. There is no natural way of knowing whether it is authentic or not. Their bodies are both perfect and invented in real-time. They are created while their followers are watching, for instance, through the application of make-up or by sharing footage of beauty procedures and treatments. They present themselves as objects for the male gaze but they also present themselves as being in control, as businesswomen and, quite often, as feminists. For reasons such as these, fashion blogging has been described as an ambiguous practice. On the one hand, it challenges normative ideals of work-life, beauty, body, and fashion, and on the other, and, as argued by Mora and Rocamora (2015), it intensifies the capitalist exploitation of people's dreams. Thus, one way of reading influencer culture is to examine and interrogate its contradictions closely.

Aestheticising ordinary life

Many interview studies of bloggers have noted that the interviewees say that they are not privileged but 'ordinary girls' instead. Their success is described as an individual achievement due to the hard work they have done (Lövheim 2011a; Dmitrow-Devold 2017; Petersson McIntyre 2021). This display of 'ordinariness' works as a way of building trust by constructing authenticity. Authenticity, in turn, is a classic technique for establishing relationships. For instance, McFall (2015) describes how the figure or idea of 'the average man' was used in insurance marketing in the early 20th century. However, in the context of social media, ordinariness has found a new way of capturing audiences and convincing them to buy certain products. The interactivity inherent to social media allows influencers to develop what might seem and feel like relationships of friendship with large numbers of geographically dispersed followers. However, as Fuentes (2019) argues, influencers are not only 'ordinary'; their work in making the ordinary seem extra-ordinary is what really characterises this medium.

Take, for example, the British influencer 'Mrs Hinch'. She produces YouTube videos of herself cleaning her house. One of her videos shows a detailed close-up of her cleaning her bathroom and toilet. All the while, she manages to keep her very long and exquisitely painted fingernails looking glamorous and perfect (YouTube). The long nails certainly contribute to making the ordinary appear extra-ordinary, but they also indicate that the point of cleaning the bathroom is not to get a clean bathroom, at least when Mrs Hinch does it. Instead, it is a matter of sharing a story of how the bathroom is transformed with the help of different products. Mrs Hinch shows her audience that cleaning the bathroom is a job that is easy, fun, and can be combined with fabulous nails. This example thus shows how digital

media changes the meaning of ‘a clean bathroom’ – from being about personal hygiene and a perhaps gendered responsibility for the mistress of the house to being content for a social media account and a market for different cleaning detergent brands and associated products. Sharing their work on digital platforms has enabled these individuals to form networks of followers that constitute markets for specific consumer products. When Mrs Hinch shares information with her audience about cleaning her bathroom, new relationships between consumers and between consumers and marketers emerge. These relations can stretch norms surrounding consumption. In this context, a YouTube video can be understood as a form of ‘mediator’. Mediators ‘reassemble the social’ (Latour 2005) by rearranging what it means, for instance, to clean the bathroom. From such a perspective, the digitalisation of consumption is not a matter of progress but a process of re-configuration (Cochoy et al. 2017).

Transformation plays a central role in many of the stories that are told by influencers. The transformation of a dirty bathroom to a clean bathroom is one example, but even more frequently, transformation is focused on the influencers’ or bloggers’ own body, for instance, through representations of the ordinary as it changes to the glamorous, from having no make-up to a face that is entirely made-up, from being overweight to possessing a body that slender and toned, or from transforming thin lips to full lips (with the aid of filler). These are only a few of the repeated transformations of women’s bodies narrated by text and images. The repeated focus on transformation is directly related to the process of consumption; transformation always takes place with the aid of consumer goods and services, including cleaning products, clothing, make-up, or training facilities.

Influencers as cyborgs

A blog persona is built on information technology in several ways. Intriguingly, such a persona is caught up in the bloggers’ physical body but is also different from (or removed from) the physical body. In order to give it life, a blog persona necessarily relies on and interacts with information technology. The connection between blog data and the human individual is best described as ‘relational’. An influencer is made up of the human (of flesh and blood), their digital persona, the relationships they have with their followers, their sponsorship collaboration, the technical apps and devices they use to produce their content, and networks, including functions such as sharing, liking, and linking posts. Influencers may, thus, be viewed as socio-technical arrangements whose capacity to act is the outcome of the ways in which they are put together or arranged (Çalışkan and Callon 2010; Petersson McIntyre forthcoming). An online persona can be described as a ‘nexus that combines the subjective projection of a given spirit concealed in a particular body, as well as the information and links the profile gathers, connects and displays’ (Cochoy et al. 2017, p. 6. See also Latour et al. 2012; Petersson McIntyre 2020).

The difficulty in drawing a boundary between (A) the human (of flesh and blood) and (B) non-human representation (in the form of a digital avatar poses) questions concerning how the relationship between the two should be understood. In ways similar to a cyborg, influencers are made up of a relationship between the human and technology – instantiated by the digitally mediated persona or avatar. Haraway’s (1991) often-cited discussion of the cyborg refers to the uncertainties surrounding an organism that is part flesh and part technology to interrogate concepts such as ‘human’ and ‘non-human’. In crossing the boundary between nature and culture, the cyborg is free to recreate the social order and challenge conventions concerning gender and sexuality, and as Haraway argues, conventions concerning class or race. Information technology has turned us all into cyborgs.

One way of applying this theory to the domain of influencers is to think of how the hybridisation of the physical and digital body that takes place may free female influences from norms that historically have located femininity in the physical body. This hybridisation, thus, opens up a world that is not subject to the same power structures that are present in the physical world. By creating uncertainty around the relationship between technology and flesh, it introduces ambiguity regarding (A) what is natural and (B) what is technologically constituted, particularly with respect to gender constructions and gender norms.

How technology changes the way we talk about the human body

A related process to the hybridisation described above concerns the many influencers' preoccupation with the body. Many scholars have emphasised the potential of fashion blogs for challenging norms, particularly in relation to the display of the (female) body and/or fashion. This ability to challenge norms is a way of negotiating or taking control over conceptualisations of 'femininity' (Palmgren 2010; Lövhelm 2011a; Dmitrow-Devold 2013, 2017; Hänninen 2015; Petersson McIntyre 2020; Savolainen, Uitremark and Boy 2020). Similarly, 'selfies' have been described by scholars as the colonisation of visual space that aggressively takes power over representations of the female body (Murrey 2015, cf. Ehlin 2015) and/or of representations of femininity and race (Pham 2015).

Particularly, early blog culture has been understood as the creation of a safe space in which women could indulge in fashion and beauty without being judged by the objectifying gaze that beauty commonly faces in the world outside the blogosphere. Instead, in the company of like-minded others, beauty could be practised as a process for pleasure, agency, and subjectivity. This contrasts with the production of beauty as subordination and a product for a male gaze. Rocamora (2011, 2012) has discussed how female fashion bloggers dissolve the distinctions between subject and object by both posing in and producing objectifying images. These images cannot only be interpreted as an expression of or even an internalisation of a male gaze because these women often produce themselves as objects for visual consumption. Therefore, what these women do is not simply a matter of exploitation. As argued by the Swedish influencer, Alice Stenlöf: 'It's posting sexy pictures and still getting respected as a woman [that is important] for me' (Instagram Alicestenlof, 37,202 likes, 16.2.2021).

Many influencers take inspiration from fashion photography for their poses and images. Undoubtedly, the opportunity of putting oneself on display to be admired like a fashion model or art object is part of the allure behind the influencer phenomenon. By providing image filters, contrast enhancers, and other applications that assist in the production of aestheticised and ideal-like photographic imagery of (almost) any human being, technology participates in the creation of novel human representations. The blurred lines between object and subject lead one's thoughts to the early work of artist Cindy Sherman, where she enacts roles from films and places herself as an object to be gazed upon (in the context of film stills). However, artistic freedom is limited for most influencers, particularly in cases where commercial sponsors for products are needed.

The digital representations that are produced by influencers iterate, or refer to, images that we are used to seeing and to elements that make them recognisable and desirable. At the same time, this repetition is different than their non-digital original by virtue of it being digital and because it creates a space for the disruption of the ideal female figure.

In this context, we should understand that digital devices function as mediators. As stated by Latour (2005, p 39), mediators are not neutral, but they 'transform, translate, distort and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry'. Consequently,

conventionally ideal femininity that is mediated through technology will always be something different from the original.

Digital technologies also change the way that we talk about the body. For example, it is common for influencers to show stretch marks, sagging flesh, scars from childbirth, and other physical flaws, as a means to build authenticity. ‘Body positivity’ has become a widespread feature of both influencer marketing and brand marketing (Schöps, Kugler and Hemetsberger 2020). The ‘fatosphere’ has been described as challenging beauty norms (Connell 2013; Gurriere and Cherrier 2013; Harju and Huovinen 2015). Commercial actors have taken notice of the far-reaching impact that these more authentic narratives possess. For example, the Swedish e-commerce site *Ellos* posted on their Instagram account in 2021 the following observations: ‘Stretchmarks, loose skin, or scars from a caesarean section. The marks from a pregnancy look different and will always be a reminder of the most beautiful that we have created’. This message was included in a large-scale campaign in cooperation with influencers, many of whom published pictures of bodies that have conventionally been ‘non-ideal’ in the fashion world.

Digital bodies are forever representations. They are created via the use of digital tools that make them conform to beauty ideals. Even scars and pictures of faces with no make-up applied to them are processed through filters and contrast enhancers that aestheticise and present the beauty of non-conforming bodies, even when these images are presented as ‘the naked truth’. As a result, technology also changes our relationship with the body.

Consequently, I argue that digital bodies are created relationally with consumer goods and technological features, thus reproducing and reinforcing body and beauty ideals in ways that were not possible before. Even if the use of airbrushing techniques, Photoshop, and other ways of improving visual representations have been in use for a long time, the ways in which these techniques are applied have been taken to new levels, and it has become more difficult for viewers of these images to notice how they have been manipulated. However, as argued by many feminists drawing on post-structuralist theories, bodies that appear artificial are more easily exposed as constructions. Instead, ‘natural’ beauty ideals create the idea that beauty and femininity are naturally occurring processes and are, thus, not subject to change or re-configuration (Dahl 2012, 2013). From such a perspective, the creation and display of digitally enhanced and beautified bodies may be interpreted as a critical aesthetics that reveals femininity as created and, therefore, may also act as a boundary-crossing object of transformative value. Conventions of femininity can be challenged when femininity is shown as something that is created and artificial. However, many blog followers will encounter difficulties in seeing through such representational forms.

Nonetheless, regardless of the pleasure involved in beautification practices, a beautiful woman cannot control how others will consume her image (Cahill 2003). Neither is it possible for her to control or know who her followers really are and how they will use or share her images and texts. Another point of critique that we should take into consideration is how femininity is constructed as a matter of the body (Gill 2016) and the fact that the availability of sponsors who are willing to collaborate with women influencers who make a living out of creating femininity strengthens such relationships.

Virtual influencers

In spite of the rapid development of digital technology, the most influential online actors are surprisingly ‘fleshy’, i.e., they present themselves ‘in the flesh’. However, the number of virtual or AI influencers is growing. Whilst many of these virtual influencers seem to

struggle to appear authentic, some have gained in popularity. Unlike human influencers, virtual influencers are not related to an actual human but are completely digital. Whilst they are human-like, it is clear that they are not human; they give a surprisingly two-dimensional feel. For instance, Lil Miquela (@lilmiquela) has 3 million followers on Instagram and posts regular updates similar to those that human influencers post. This virtual influencer has even modelled in ad campaigns for Calvin Klein. But what is ‘authenticity’ when there is no visible physical human who can be related to an online avatar? Lil Miquela copies the narratives of human influencers by, for instance, building up tension for the release of (hyper-aestheticised) baby photos of herself and by (forthcoming) sharing ‘old’ photos of the amusing fashion choices that she made in her ‘adolescence’. As she does this, Lil Miquela simultaneously stages openness about being non-human by asking whether robots really do have been babies, and saucily teasing the audience with the question: *Where do you think my USB port is?* All this takes place against the backdrop of her acknowledgement that her programmers plant her memories. Curiously, her programmer wanted to cheer her up after she fell down ‘after her sixth annual 19th birthday’ by giving her a USB drive. She then presented a whole story about when she found out what was on the drive:

I have been so caught up in trying to be someone: an influencer, a model, a pop star. Basically, just trying to fit in. [...] These pre-programmed major life moments aren’t real, but they help me to relate to humans and be empathetic.

The difference between human and non-human influencers is not a large as it may seem. The stories that I have reported above have convinced Lil Miquela’s followers that she is authentic and honest. In this way, she follows the logic used by human influencers, where the appearance of transparency is used as a way to build trust, often for the promotion of consumer goods. Whilst doing what she does, Lil Miquela constantly seems to toy with the idea of blurred boundaries (between human and non-human), and her followers sometimes express confusion over the narratives that she produces. Of course, it is important to keep in mind that Lil Miquela is a human creation and many details concerning how she is programmed and designed remains concealed from her followers. Her openness about being a robot is not to give information about the details of her creation but is staged to make her enjoyable to follow and perhaps to create amazement over the fact that she is so human-like.

Influencers can be described as digital ‘taste-makers’ or ‘cultural mediators’ who use their acquired taste to convey to others which consumer goods have cultural value and what this value consists of (cf. Bourdieu 1984; Smith Maguire 2014; Arriagada and Concha 2020). Fashion, in particular, relies on such mediated tastes. This position has allowed successful influencers to share information about sponsors’ goods and create their own brands and goods, such as clothes, skincare products, and brand designs. Before the emergence of Internet 2.0, fashion designers and retailers regularly sent ‘spies’ out onto the streets, schoolyards, and clubs to check out what the cool kids were doing and wearing. These activities are now replaced with the digital mapping and processing of consumer preferences.

With virtual influencers, forecasting trends can be based on the traces and tracks left by consumers as they search online for products, look at them, click on them, comment, share, like, and upload images and messages. Virtual influencers can also use sales statistics, electronic receipts, production speed, and information about the availability of products in storage. Such information can be processed as ‘big data’. Human and non-human influencers generate information about their followers and networks, preferences, cookies, and information that can be used for customised marketing. On the internet, where followers come

from, where they go next, and what they buy are easily traced. Links and discount codes that frequently appear on blogs and Instagram accounts generate clicks and create detectable traces of interest for bloggers as well as collaborating sales sites.

Whilst most human influencers are motivated by a desire to engage in the topic of their online account and share information with others with similar interests (Pettersson McIntyre 2020), virtual influencers are purpose-created for a specific market, product category, or as a tool that is used to convey a commercial message. For virtual influencers, it is not always transparent who the sender is or what the purpose of the message is. At the same time, the management of human influencers for specific brands and messages is quickly adopting similar marketing strategies, and thus, again, the lines between authentic or artificial are increasingly blurred. There are many grey zones around legislation, the status of sponsored posts, and the difference between advertising and sharing personal stories about life. For many followers, these demarcations and distinctions are difficult to see and understand. Simultaneously, the popularity of influencer-marketing relies on this very property of blurriness. Paradoxically, influencers sell their credibility to build trust.

Techno-aesthetic entrepreneurship

Human influencers and non-human influencers can be approached as socio-technical assemblages made up of the interconnecting agencies that emerge from the networks, links, and connections that constitute cyberspace. One such form of agency is the capacity for human influencers to become economic actors in novel ways. Many of the influencers who I have interviewed thought that their online activities afforded them a new role as tech entrepreneurs where they could make money from their consumer interests (Pettersson McIntyre 2020). The following quote taken from an influencer account called ‘being someone’s wife’ illustrates how trying on bathing costumes becomes an economic activity as a result of the agencies afforded by the networks of the influencer’s followers who, in turn, create relationships with (presumably) bathing costume sponsors:

I have been asked so many times about my swimwear and requests to do a post about bathing costumes, so now it’s time! It is SO MUCH FUN to think about swimwear and there are millions of styles, but here are some that I like and that might give you some inspiration. I bought nearly all my bikinis at Asos before we left and apart from well-stocked lingerie stores, I think Asos have the best products (and the price is usually good too).

(blog account Att vara någons fru [‘being someone’s wife’])

Influencers have discovered that issues that had previously been considered trivial, such as shopping, beauty practices, and talking about beauty and home decoration, were now afforded social and economic value in new ways.

The agency of a non-human avatar, whether related to a human or not, also blurs how advertising is depicted. This development transforms the relationship between life and advertising—the ability to model life on advertising and visually imitate commercial dreams and ideals has never been easier to achieve. For instance, family dinner kits are regularly provided in exchange for being mentioned on an influencer’s accounts. A successful influencer can, for instance, get their whole wedding paid for if they collaborate with a network of different wedding and bridal shops and product manufacturers. Influencers may also be given care in private maternity wards and gifted exclusive prams, diapers, and clothing for

their babies. Whilst it is the non-human avatar which may be commissioned and rewarded by a bridal company or private maternity clinic, the human also benefits from the gifts and payments *within the frame of agency afforded to the avatar*. We thus note that the online actions of the non-human afford payment to the human.

The above reveals to us that commercial actors participate in depictions of events, even *actual* events, in everyday lives in novel ways, for the benefit of the individuals who narrate their lives with the help of sponsored products and for their followers who consume these narratives and are inspired by them. Using links and hashtags to brands and stores, these ideal depictions of private life can be copied instantaneously. Through identification with and similarity to their followers, influencers function as extensions of the followers' self (Belk 2014) and as extensions of participatory culture (Hagberg and Kjellberg 2017).

The significant impact of their consumption turns these individuals into models for brands and products, and as in other modelling work, there is a normative dynamic that promotes bodies and appearances that correspond with prevailing ideals. Even if there is a market for non-ideal beauty, most sponsors want to associate their products to faces and bodies that are perceived as beautiful, attractive, and desirable. Collaboration with a beauty brand relies on the influencer's ability to create a look using the promoted products in a way that followers will want to copy or at least be inspired by. Thus, bloggers and influencers whose bodies correspond with prevailing ideals generally find it easier to find sponsorship collaborators (Petersson McIntyre 2020). The increase in the use of non-ideal beauty and non-ideal bodies is best understood as a result of (A) the ability to aestheticise a more extensive variety of bodies and (B) how digital technologies change how we relate to bodies.

Publicly private

The new relationship between the human and the non-human artefact has directly resulted in a blurring of the boundaries between public and private. Her participation in large networks of followers encourages the human to let her non-human avatar publicly share matters that were previously considered to belong to the private sphere. Private spheres, such as photos and films of family dinners, the home environment, and family holidays, are now shared with anonymous strangers. The online persona shares information with followers that the human would not otherwise willingly share. 'Mommy bloggers' are of particular interest in this context. For individual bloggers and influencers, it is often a matter of subscribing to the logic of 'mumpreneurship' (Ekinsmyth 2011; Lewis 2013) in which entrepreneurship and being a mum are not perceived as conflicting roles but are, instead, explained in terms of balance and mutual prerequisites. The popularity of combining parenting with consumption has even given rise to the concept 'Insta-moms'. In response to this, some critics talk of 'sharenting' and highlight the dangers of commercialising privacy. In France, for example, a law has recently (2021) been passed that prohibits parents from exploiting their children for commercial purposes.

The crossing of boundaries is a fundamental point of attraction in influencer cultures, where personally revealing stories and pictures are rewarded with attention. For every boundary that is crossed, a new one must be pushed forward, in the continual striving for one's post to become that most shared post. The Swedish influencer, Margaux Dietz, broadcasted her childbirth in 2017 and managed to mention *nyponsoppa* during the procedure. *Nyponsoppa* is an iconic Swedish sugary, rose-hip-flavoured drink (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hmd-FKNkzk0>). However, many influencers will witness to how crossing social norms often results in receiving adverse comments from followers. This criticism sometimes leads to influencers proclaiming that they need 'time out' from their social media accounts.

In the mentioned childbirth video commenting was even turned off. The constant tension between (A) seeking attention and providing news and (B) calculating what is ‘too much’ is what keeps the wheels spinning and maintains an interest in both parties (the influencer and the audience). Influencers are constantly criticised for a range of behaviours, including their over-indulgence in consumption, the promotion of unsustainable or even harmful ideas (such as lip filler), abusing their children for commercial purposes, and blurring the lines between providing factual information and advertising. When a non-human avatar transgresses the norms of privacy too far, it is the human who is punished—again illustrating the blurred boundaries between the human and technology. Similarly, other influencers report that if they are reluctant to share their private sphere or maintain personal boundaries, they will be punished in the form of less attention and fewer sponsors.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed how digital consumption and influencers have co-emerged to re-configure the relationship between human and non-human. The blurring between human and non-human, the cyborg, similarly characterises the influencer assemblage and has afforded this phenomenon the power to challenge several conventions regarding the relationship between consumption and constructions of femininity. Influencers have transformed *consumption* into *production* in specific ways, thereby also creating a disruption in the narrative of consumption as ‘passive reproduction’. The new networks and human relationships that these digital channels have enabled have allowed for new depictions of what it means to be a consuming woman, but they have also strengthened associations between women and traditional women’s roles, such as homemaking, cleaning, and maintaining their beauty, and giving birth. A non-human avatar can do things that a human cannot do due to prevailing social and cultural norms but also because of particular economic and spatial restrictions. By publicly sharing or even commercialising childbirth, for example (a supremely intimate and private procedure), influencers may be seen to reverse the norms of privacy and secrecy that have previously informed feminised private spheres. Consequently, I argue that the influencer phenomenon can create disruptions in gender constructions and reinforce gender conventions with the aid of new tools and the power of mass distribution.

Like all digitalisation processes, the process I have described here is a matter of re-configuration rather than a matter of progress. Human influencers may feel free from the norms that the physical body is subject to, but we note that the norms and restrictions limiting humans seem to be imposed on non-human avatars and influencers too. Virtual influencers, like Lil Miquela, appear to be firmly stuck in the aestheticised ideals and that govern most of the visual expressions that human influencers produce.

Further reading

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