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### Policing “Fake” femininity

Authenticity, accountability, and influencer antifandom

**Citation for published version:**

Duffy, BE, Miltner, KM & Wahlstedt, A 2022, 'Policing “Fake” femininity: Authenticity, accountability, and influencer antifandom', *New Media and Society*, vol. 24, no. 7, pp. 1657-1676.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221099234>

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.1177/14614448221099234](https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221099234)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

New Media and Society

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

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**“Fake” Femininity?: Gendered Authenticity Policing in Influencer Hateblogs**

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*Though social media influencers hold a coveted status in the popular imagination, their requisite career visibility opens them up to intensified public scrutiny and—more pointedly—networked hate and harassment. Key repositories of such critique are influencer “hateblogs”-- forums for anti-fandom often dismissed as frivolous gossip or, alternatively, denigrated as conduits for cyberbullying and misogyny. This paper draws upon an analysis of a women-dominated community of anti-fans, Get Off My Internets (GOMI), to show instead how influencer hateblogs are discursive sites of gendered authenticity policing. Findings reveal that GOMI participants wage patterned accusations of duplicity across three domains where women influencers seemingly “have it all”: career, relationships, and appearance. But while hatebloggers’ policing of “fake” femininity may purport to dismantle the artifice of social media self-enterprise, we contend that such expressions fail to advance progressive gender politics, as they target individual-level--rather than structural--inequities.*

**Introduction**

In March 2020, as the coronavirus pandemic began to upend societies, economies, and politics on a global scale, one social media personality was abruptly cast as the “internet’s best example of privilege in the age of Coronavirus”: Instagrammer Arielle Charnas (Pearl, 2020). Charnas—an American fashion influencer with more than 1.3 million followers—had become a target of online ire earlier that month after sharing content on her Instagram feed that made evident she had defied local shelter-in-place orders, fleeing the nation’s viral epicenter for the Hamptons—a known getaway destination for well-heeled New Yorkers. In addition, Charnas leveraged her social connections to secure a then-scarcely available CoVID-19 test, which revealed that she had, in fact, contracted the virus. The critical blowback Charnas received was staggering, with expressions

of vitriol ranging from mockery to death threats to the pronouncement she had been--to invoke a faddish term--*cancelled* (Griffith, 2020).

Casting aside moral judgements about Charnas's behavior, we wish to instead call attention to the nature and character of such outrage and, specifically, the recurrent accusations of artifice and fakery waged at women in the digital public sphere. Influencers—cultural tastemakers who generate profit by integrating sponsored products and services into mediated depictions of their aspirational, albeit “real lives”—have emerged as especially prominent targets of gendered authenticity policing.<sup>1</sup> Not only did critics allege that Charnas “faked” her test results (Stern, 2020), but she—like the wider community of social media personalities--has been subjected to continuous scrutiny for self-presentations deemed *inauthentic*, *fraudulent*, and/or *phony*. Accordingly, a *Vanity Fair* feature on the uncertain fate of influencers framed the controversy over Charnas as a contestation over “realness” and “authenticity” (Bryant, 2020). Several months later, online pop culture site *Refinery29* detailed the swift rise of “internet-personality watchdogs” who “[make] a hobby of dismantling influencer culture” (Munro, 2020). These so-called “callout” accounts spotlight individuals or activities deemed “shady”—be it excessive photo-manipulation or, more concerningly, the defiance of coronavirus-related public health mandates. As the anonymous creator of Influencers Truth justified, “I think that everyone is tired of these influencers presenting a version of life *that just isn't reality*” (ibid, para. 5, italics added).

To be sure, critiques of this ilk are by no means unique to a moment wrought by the pandemic; rather, they emerged in tandem with the cult of personality that propels social media (Marwick, 2013) and gained momentum vis-à-vis buzzy pop culture outlets (i.e., *Buzzfeed*, *Bored Panda*); dedicated Instagram accounts (i.e., Influencers in the Wild, Celeb Face, Diet Prada); well-orchestrated efforts to “cancel” public figures like Charnas; and—above all--influencer

“hateblogs” (i.e., GOMI, Tattle Life, Guru Gossip), wherein community members dissect the activities of highly visible bloggers, Instagrammers, YouTubers, and TikTok stars. With tens of thousands of registered members (Hunter, 2015) and monthly visitor counts upwards of 1.8 million (SimilarWeb, 2020), GOMI—a site launched in 2009 as a shorthand for Get Off My Internets—is perhaps the best-known influencer hateblog. And, crucially, the site is markedly gendered: not only are the forums dominated by feminized genres of social media production (i.e. fashion/beauty, parenting, lifestyle), but an overwhelmingly majority of the threads focus on women influencers who have amassed a significant following on Instagram, YouTube, Tiktok, and/or a personal blogs. Though the pseudonymous nature of the sprawling community makes it difficult to discern the actual gender composition of GOMI members and readers, we follow an approach to anonymous online communities offered by Phillips (2015): more relevant than participants’ “real” identities are the narratives and discourses that circulate in the communities—especially those that symbolize gender, race, and/or class subjectivities. Accordingly, GOMI was dubbed in 2013 by *Forbes* as “One of the Best Sites for Women” (Cassery, 2013); more recent media coverage describes it as a hub for “mean girls” and “the cruel site for female snark” (van Syckle, 2016).

Despite academic attention to GOMI (McRae, 2017; Hunter, 2016) and other gendered anti-fan communities (e.g., Jane, 2014; Marwick, 2013; Miltner, 2017), such sites have failed to register the same level of inquiry as other modes of online antagonism—most especially male-dominated, toxic technocultures such as Gamergate, 4chan, and Men’s Rights Activists, most of which are interrelated (Sobieraj, 2018; Lawson, 2018; Banet-Weiser, 2019; Phillips, 2014; Massanari, 2015; Nakamura, 2015). Furthermore, both scholarly and popular assessments of GOMI tend to be totalizing. To some, hateblog communities of this ilk are forums for frivolous gossip or “snark” (a neologism for *snide remark*); from this perspective, GOMI supplies members

with a productive outlet for their legitimate frustrations (Hunter, 2016). To critics, meanwhile, hateblogs are venues for those with “crazy obsession[s]” (Grose & Chen, 2012) to wage online abuse and engage in cyber-bullying.

These perspectives are not only polarizing, they also fail to fully account for the role of gender-coded norms in the functioning of sites like GOMI. A key aim of this paper, then, is to offer an alternative analysis of influencer hateblogs that takes seriously the gender politics of the discourses that populate them. Drawing on a qualitative analysis of GOMI, we spotlight the recurrent nature of hatebloggers’ critiques of influencers, namely accusations of duplicity or “fakery” across three traditionally feminized areas: career, relationships, and personal appearance. Together, such critiques cast influencers as deceitful and avaricious charlatans who unfairly profit from ersatz performances of womanly perfection. But while these criticisms are deployed in discussions of *individual* influencers and their *specific* performances of feminine ideals, they are ostensibly rooted in broader sociocultural critiques connected to gendered constructions of authenticity, labor, and privilege. In other words, the targeted influencers serve as individual scapegoats for the hatebloggers’ ire at the existence and reproduction of problematic, narrowly defined ideals of femininity, domestic life, and the possibility of “having it all.” In this way, the GOMI community functions as a moral text (Gray, 2005) aimed at dismantling the tropes of entrepreneurial femininity that circulate on social media (Duffy & Hund, 2015).

More broadly, we argue that hatebloggers’ patterned critiques may be understood as a form of displaced rage. Amid a wider surge in representational identity politics and feminist activism, prominent scholars and thinkers have highlighted various instances and expressions of women’s anger and outrage in recent years (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Kay & Banet-Weiser, 2019; Chemaly, 2018; Cooper, 2018). That women today are, in Traister’s (2018) words, “Good and Mad” marks

a significant response to “the many inequities to which women and those around them have been exposed” (page xxiii). However, both the expression and reception of anger are gender-coded, particularly for women. As Chemaly (2018) notes to this end, “Gender-role expectations, often overlapping with racial-role expectations, dictate the degree to which we can use anger effectively in personal contexts and to participate in civic and political life” (p. 15). Women are not “supposed” to get angry; consequently, women’s anger is often suppressed-- both by women themselves as well as by external forces. Moreover, because women are denied the opportunity to openly express their anger, it can be “[rechanneled] in inappropriate directions” (Traister, 2018, p. 442).

Crucially, the re-directing of women’s anger has a history that well predates the churn of digital activism. More than twenty-five years ago, Elaine Duffy (1995) suggested that when structurally oppressed groups--such as women--perceive themselves as powerless to effect change within a particular context, they engage in *horizontal violence*, a type of aggressive behavior directed laterally *within* the oppressed group instead of at larger structural concerns (p. 5). Moreover, even when the group acknowledges the problematic nature of such violence, it is justified as a response to victims’ individualistic personality traits or specific behaviors (ibid). It is precisely in this vein that the hateblogging activities exemplified by GOMI can be considered a form of *digital horizontal violence*--enacted by women antifans, and directed toward feminine-coded influencers. Through this framework, the gendered authenticity policing that structures the community represents an expression of collective anger about the norms of capitalist patriarchy; importantly, such anger is directed at individuals (in this case, paragons of entrepreneurial femininity) instead of at the larger systems perpetuate these norms. As part of this displacement, influencers who possess certain traits (e.g., the privilege of hiring childcare) or engage in particular

behaviors (e.g., photoshopping) bear the brunt of hatebloggers' animosity toward gendered norms and practices.

As suggested by the earlier-mentioned quote from the Influencers Truth founder, hatebloggers--including GOMI participants--routinely justify their spirited critiques as services which expose the artifice of social media and the "shadiness" (i.e., unethical behavior) of individual influencers (Marwick, 2013; Miltner, 2017; McRae, 2017). Despite these stated efforts to disillusion blinkered audiences, their method for achieving such aims does little for progressive gender politics. While the underlying critiques circulated on GOMI may be rooted in a type of feminist anger, the way that these critiques are expressed can--and often do--cause genuine distress amongst the targeted influencers. Moreover, in their efforts to challenge ostensibly regressive feminine ideals by casting influencers as "fake," the hatebloggers inevitably construct a different, albeit still narrow, definition of "authentic" contemporary womanhood. We thus conclude by highlighting the limitations of this expressive act—one that seeks to liberate women from gendered constraints while simultaneously engaging in gendered forms of symbolic violence.

### **Influencer Culture: Gendered Visibility and its Backlash**

Critical attention to influencers--and the wider realm of social media celebrity--has abounded in recent years; such research both draws from and contributes to literature across fame/celebrity studies (Marwick, 2015; Abidin, 2016; Khamis et al., 2017; Hearn and Schoenhoff, 2017); sociologies of work and labor (Duffy & Hund, 2015; Duffy, 2017; O'Meara, 2019); and media industry studies/entertainment (Bishop, 2019; Cunningham and Craig, 2019), among others. A key theme of this work is the expressly gender-coded influencer subjectivity: not only do reports suggest that close to 80 percent of influencers are women (Geseneus, 2019), but cultural

assumptions about this sub-culture--from their devalued status and caricatured frivolity to their championing of consumer culture--are unabashedly feminine (e.g., Abidin, 2016; Duffy, 2017; Lawson, 2020). Duffy and Hund (2015), for instance, note how blogger-Instagrammers showcase patterned tropes of entrepreneurial femininity, which express a socially mediated version of “having it all.”

*Having it all* is, of course, an ideal that has animated discourses of post-feminism since at least the 1980s (Gill, in Banet-Weiser, Gill, & Rottenberg, 2019) by circulating the seductive promise that women can seamlessly meld the personal and the professional, and feminism and femininity. As Campo (2005) summarizes of this broader mythos:

'Having it all' was the promise that women could take on the role of 'career woman' (never just 'worker') without having to sacrifice either their femininity (they could still wear a skirt to the office and still be taken seriously) or their desire to have children (who could be fitted in between promotions and cared for by other 'child carers' — never by their father). The idea was that women, no longer confined to domesticity, could simply take on the new roles opened up to them by feminism without relinquishing their old ones, and by working hard and organising well, women could have the *ultimate trifecta* of career, children and marriage, [while] retain[ing] their femininity (p. 64, italics added).

While such ideals have been heavily critiqued (e.g., Faludi, 1991; Slaughter, 2012)--especially in the wake of the gender inequity wrought by the COVID 19 crisis (e.g., Dickson, 2020)—the dream of the “ultimate trifecta” is alive and well on Instagram, where fashion/lifestyle bloggers, “momfluencers” and other women-identifying influencers profit heartily from curated personae and feeds chock full of aspirational content.

Accordingly, *visibility*, or--perhaps more aptly--the widely touted social media directive to “be visible” is another theme that cuts across the literature on influencers (Abidin, 2016; Bishop, 2019; Banet-Weiser, 2018; Cotter, 2018; Duffy & Hund, 2019; Khamis et al., 2017; Bishop, 2019). Hearn and Schoenhoff (2016), for instance, note the similar capitalist logics that drive users to emulate celebrity practice, describing how metric-driven platforms “[invite] users to work to

*achieve visibility* and attention and to take part in a life of consuming without cost” (emphasis added, p. 206). Of course, as Banet-Weiser (2018) points out, despite the cultural logics that compel social media users to “put themselves out there,” visibility is a profoundly fraught ideal for women, with the benefits of accruing online visibility almost always coming *with* a cost. Influencers’ requisite career visibility has thus opened them up to intensified public scrutiny and, in some cases, networked hate and harassment--all of which are exacerbated for women, communities of color, and the LGBTQIA community (Duffy & Hund, 2019; Lawson, 2020). Moreover, critiques of influencers often take on a moralistic tone; as Marwick (2013) noted of participants in a hateblog targeting at proto-influencer Julia Allison, members were seemingly roused by a sense of “moral and ethical anger” directed at Allison (p. 154). More recently, amid the spate of digitally networked critiques detailed above, media reports (e.g., Grossbart, 2020; Griffith, 2020) have speculated on the “influencer *backlash*,” thus invoking a term deeply imbricated in gender politics (Faludi, 1991).

### **Anti-fandom in Context: Morality, Gossip, Cybermisogyny**

The concerted critiques waged at influencers evince a larger culture of “anti-fandom,” wherein communities exhibit intense feelings of dislike and hatred toward a media object or personality (Click, 2019; Gray, 2005; Harman & Jones, 2013; McRae, 2017; Miltner, 2016). As Gray (2005) explains, antagonism can operate just as powerfully as admiration, producing “just as much activity, identification, meaning, and ‘effects’” and uniting and sustaining a community or subculture equally as powerfully as fandoms (p. 841). Gray suggests that although “outright moral posturing may be considered decidedly uncool” within most anti-fandom communities, the crux of anti-fandom is decidedly moralistic (p. 849). What unites members is thus their interest in--and

even sense of responsibility for--sharing their perspective about a particular text/individual and encouraging others to share that perspective (ibid).

Much like conceptualizations of anti-fandom as fundamentally moralistic and normative activities, both gossip and celebrity culture have also been framed as places where “relationships, identity, and social and cultural norms are debated, evaluated, modified, and shared” (Turner, 2004, p. 24). But, crucially, while communities of anti-fans are not expressly gendered, gossip has long been understood as a feminized practice. “Gossip,” offered Jones (1980) more than four decades ago, “is essentially talk between women in our common role as women” (p. 195). In more recent years, gossip communities been described as discursive sites for “feminine” topics: “fashion, beauty, and glamour...as well as the “real” private lives and relationships of stars (Meyers, 2015, p. 77).

Despite the tendency of anti-fandom and gossip/celebrity culture researchers to foreground the social role played by shared appraisals of public figures, these literatures often overlook the impact these appraisals have on the targets themselves (Jane, 2014; Click, 2018). Anti-fandom research, moreover, tends to overlooks the patterned ways that hate and gossip blogs tend to focus on marginalized groups; as Jane (2014) argues, the content of hate and gossip blogs would be deemed sexist, racist, and/or homophobic if expressed outside of a media context (p. 177). Much of the attention to these targets comes instead from members of the Internet Studies community, who have in recent years focused extensively on the origins and impacts of online antagonism and misogyny (e.g., Banet-Weiser, 2018; Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2015; Massanari, 2015; Nakamura, 2015; Phillips, 2014). The majority of this work contends that the “toxic technocultures” (Massanari, 2015) that are at the root of these behaviors are not merely aberrant subcultures, but rather that misogyny and racism are part of the weft and weave of broader internet culture (Banet-

Weiser & Miltner, 2015; Phillips, 2014; Reagle, 2015). Not only have platforms neglected to adequately protect users from such expressions, but the algorithms that govern them often promote and reward this kind of content (e.g., Massanari, 2015; Matamoros-Fernández, 2017; Noble, 2017). Consequently, the intersections of digital platforms and celebrity culture have “become spaces for ideological battles over race, sexuality, and gender” (Lawson, 2018, p. 819). Among the ways these battles manifest in influencer culture is through intensified public scrutiny and criticism from various social factions: advertisers, the media, the platforms themselves, and of course, audiences (Duffy & Hund, 2019; Marwick, 2013; Miltner, 2017; Lawson, 2020).

### **Polarizing Perspectives on Social Media Influencer Hateblogs**

Given the audience-oriented nature of anti-fandom studies, it is perhaps not surprising that analyses of influencer/social media creator hateblogs have largely focused on their community-building aspects. Hunter’s (2016) study of GOMI members’ critical appraisal of mommy bloggers underscores this community-building function--as well as the gender-coded nature of participants and their targets. McRae (2017) offers a similar perspective in her research on the travel section of the GOMI community. Noting how participants target images and posts that defy norms of authenticity, namely “all things staged, insincere, unethical, and exaggerated” (p. 14), McRae explains that many GOMI participants “feel that bloggers’ attempts to pass off their lifestyle as achievable are dishonest” (p. 24). A premise guiding both of these studies is that social media’s demands for “realness” and candor hold internet personalities to different (and arguably more stringent) standards, making them more susceptible to critique than traditional celebrities and other public figures understood as products of the industrial publicity apparatus (Marwick, 2013). As

Duffy and Hund (2019) contend to this end, women influencers confront a double bind of sorts, given expectations that content on Instagram should be neither “too real” or “not real enough.”

While this literature helpfully illuminates the motivations of hateblog participants, it fails to account for the impact these activities have on their almost exclusively women targets. However, both media reports and personal anecdotes have highlighted the damaging consequences for individual creators. A feature in the *Guardian*, for instance, detailed cruel, incessant critiques waged at creators, who describe it as a “toxic” space that has harmed them professionally and psychologically (van Syckle, 2016). Jane (2015), moreover, suggests that women who are the focus of online “hate” are often blamed for the campaigns against them, with the implication that they brought this activity on themselves due to the publicness of their behavior (e.g., Razer, 2017; see also, Duffy & Hund, 2019). The typical suggested remedy for targets of online antagonism is either to grow a thicker skin or retreat from online life. The latter solution, Jane explains, not only penalizes women “by advising them to withdraw from a domain that is widely acknowledged as being an integral – and essential – part of contemporary life and citizenship” (2015, n.p.), but also amounts to workplace harassment and economic vandalism for those whose careers situate them in the public eye.

Together, such accounts offer important insight into the culture of hateblog participants and their targets; however, the totalizing nature of these perspectives position hateblogs on opposite ends of a spectrum: as either a woman-centered community-building activity or a misogynist form of hate speech. This paper seeks to offer a more nuanced analysis that incorporates both perspectives. We suggest that hateblogs offer their audiences a venue to push back against the excesses of influencer culture and the unrealistic, gendered expectations of “having it all,” but that the manner and focus of this critique simultaneously reinscribes a pernicious gender politics.

In doing so, we recognize the underlying motivations of many hateblog participants' complaints while also acknowledging the profoundly detrimental nature of such modes of expression, particularly for its targets.

## **Methods**

Our analysis of GOMI involved a qualitative textual analysis of 400 unique comments, or *snarks*,<sup>2</sup> collected across two waves of data collection (n=250, n=150) during 2017-2018. The first wave was a pilot study that informed the coding and analysis but was not included in the final study due to ethical considerations (i.e., the registration and login requirements indicate posts were considered "private"). The more recent phase of data collection and analysis involved comments available on ten of GOMIBLOG's public forums.<sup>3</sup> Five of these focused on fashion and beauty influencers and their respective brands, while the remaining five were dedicated to lifestyle content, which spanned fashion, travel, home design, and fitness, etc. The forums--which focused on a single influencer target--were selected based on their popularity on GOMI, defined by the number of unique snarks each forum contained. To compile a sample of snarks within each thread, we started with the most recent comment posted on each individual thread and then selected every 20<sup>th</sup> snark in descending chronological order. Through a grounded theory approach, that is a "simultaneous data collection and analysis, with each informing and focusing the other" (Chamaz, 2014: 508), several coding categories were created, including but not limited to commercialism/selling out, physical critiques, references to wealth and class, community building, and marriages/partnerships.

Finally, it seems important to mention our position regarding the identity of subjects/participants: in an attempt to avoid amplifying critiques that could put the targets at risk (see Phillips, 2018), we have opted to conceal the identities of the GOMI targets. Moreover, to

minimize the risk of re-identification of both the commenters as well as the targets, we have engaged in the practice of fabrication (Markham, 2012), where we have converted direct quotes into “representational interactions” that reproduce the essential meaning and style of the materials while changing specific wording to prevent the quotes from being searchable.

### **“Fakes” and “Phon[ies]”: Policing Influencers’ Depictions of “Having it All”**

While the critiques issued by individual participants in these anti-fan communities were wide-ranging, they collectively revealed participants’ preoccupation with fraught ideals of realness, truth, and sincerity. Indeed, gendered authenticity policing was among the core activities of the GOMI community and ostensibly helped to sustain members’ active engagement with the texts as well as with each other.

Here, it seems worth noting the various markers of “community” visible on GOMI and made legible throughout our analysis. Participation, for one, was staggering, with one of the most popular forums (dedicated to a single fashion blogger/Instagrammer) ratcheting up 50,000 snarks and more than 200,000 views (as of January 2021). Although there is a disparity between comments and pageviews, active commenting is at the core of the community’s functioning; “lurking” (i.e., reading without commenting) is expressly discouraged through the caution that the accounts of those who don’t contribute will be “removed from our servers” (GOMIBLOG, 2021). Community members, moreover, deploy various in-group referents that are likely indecipherable to outsiders. For example, the community uses a variety of cat-oriented references--“meows” are posts, and community status tiers include: “Cat,” “Baroness of Ham,” “Count de Meowmy,” and “Feline Porklord.” Together, these references reinforce the feminized nature of the site (i.e., “cattiness” is considered a gender-coded euphemism for spite).

Members also use mocking pseudonymous account names that both reference particular influencer tropes and play with codes of gender and social media presentation (i.e. “Botox for Life,” “Curating Fiascos, “Hot Pink Nail Polish” “Nip Slip McGee”). Such self-referentiality about influencer culture suggests that members likely consider themselves as “apart from the rest of the audience” (Andrejevic, 2008, p. 40; see also Gray, 2005). More expressly, they dismissed *other* influencer followers as “stupid fans” and “idiot fangirls.” But, of course, GOMI members continue to consume influencers’ content alongside these reader-followers. As noted above, a key reason mommy bloggers’ turned to GOMI to critique perceived performativity and commercialism is because they felt a sense of betrayal upon discovering that the “authenticity” that drew them to the genre was ultimately a farce (Hunter, 2016).

The critiques in our sample were rooted in expressly gendered moral discourses decrying the perpetuation of unrealistic feminized norms through artificial means, with a particular focus on self-authored projections of success (and, perhaps fleetingly, challenges) in the domains of career, relationships/parenting, and aesthetics/looks. In other words, anti-fans’ critiques centered on the use of “fakery” to curate idealized portrayals of what Campo (2005) described as the “ultimate trifecta” of postfeminist discourses of *having it all*: possessing a successful career, marriage and children in a way that “balanced” feminism and femininity.<sup>4</sup> At the core of these critiques is the idea that by resorting to dissimulative means to project unachievable and regressive projections of “having it all”, influencers are unethically profiting off of the perpetuation of unrealistic expectations for women.

### ***Fake Careers: Acts of Avarice and Self-Aggrandizement***

The careers of influencers, though variable and quite precarious, tend to rely upon a consistent set of promotional activities: hyping content across the social media ecology, recommending sponsored goods/services, and--for a choice few--peddling their own entrepreneurial product lines. Hateblog participants denounced the feminized nature of these profit-making strategies along with the perceived inauthenticity of influencers' professed brand devotion. Yet, in constructing a boundary between "legitimate" careers for women and the superficial, frivolous, and even deceitful work of influencers, the anti-fans contributed to a conception of work that was similarly narrow.

While GOMI members widely disparaged the consumer-centric nature of influencers' posts, they seemed particularly aggrieved when social media personalities pushed their own product lines, particularly when those product lines were seen as misaligned with the influencers' aesthetic or overall ethos. Given that influencers trade on representations of their "authentic" lives, selling products or product lines that were seen as low-quality, overpriced, or otherwise disconnected from an influencer's carefully curated image was seen as unforgivably disingenuous and even "scammy." The fashion line of one blogger-*cum*-dress designer was thus described as "cheap," and "garbage she wouldn't think of wearing herself if it wasn't an income stream for her." Another influencer's Etsy wares were described as "re-sold thrift trash at an absurd markup price." In another snark, posters debated the merits of re-wearing fashions—an act which seemed to belie the aspirational ethos of influencer consumerism. But, after conceding it was "refreshing [to see the influencer] re-purposing previously worn items," a GOMI member clarified, "what I really dislike is that she still links to related stuff so she can still get those affiliate link dollars...Influencer consumerism is off putting, but transforming every single post into a money-making opportunity is particularly unappealing, not to mention annoying." In response, another

GOMI member agreed that the accused influencers’ “avarice is limitless” They added, “[She’ll] do anything for cold, hard cash.”

A related critique was that the targeted social media personalities’ career success was unmerited--a product of luck or privilege rather than earnest talent. In response to an influencers’ sponsored Instagram post, a GOMI member concluded, “I can’t believe she is getting these opportunities. She’s totally clueless, how is she a promotional partner?” In contrast to the earlier-mentioned denigrations of crass commercialism, this comment suggests that the influencer is doing a disservice to the brand she’s representing by failing to promote it according to proper standards. Another GOMI member, meanwhile, critiqued an influencer’s ineptitude at contributing creative content with the rhetorical question, “Can she not come up with at least one original thought!?” As this comment suggests, perceived career failings were a persistent refrain on GOMI. After a mommy blogger announced that she would be traveling with her family, GOMI members mocked her inability to successfully mine her personal life for content—implying that she was unable to sustain her career. As one wrote: “Just watch, she won’t even post anything about the trip-- I bet we’ll get no vlogs or blogs, and maybe one boring family photo weeks after it would have been relevant.” Such comments indicate how anti-fans seemed to invoke a double-standard when evaluating the promotional subjectivities: *both too much* and *too little* personal content was a source of relentless critique.

GOMI members were also critical of influencers they deemed insincere or inauthentic, most especially in their showcasing of what Instagrammers’ routinely describe as a “highlight reel” (a phrase commonly used to signal excessively performative or staged content that contrasts with one’s “real life”). In an explicit critique of an influencers’ curated social media persona, a GOMI member noted that the target “projects this image of a woman with this kind of path-less-taken life

and a unique, fascinating personality, but the truth is that she's the human equivalent of Starbucks." Other GOMI members deployed the language of "hypocrisy" to describe how a religious influencer's "saintly" image belied her Instagram feed, where she's "nearly naked" and "pretends to be oblivious to the fact that she's showing way too much side boob." To be deemed "hypocritical" was in defiance of the much-hyped social media ideal of authenticity (e.g., Banet-Weiser, 2012; Duffy & Hund, 2015; 2019; Marwick, 2013; McRae, 2017; Schoenhoff & Hearn, 2017).

As the preceding comment attests, exploiting one's sexuality in the service of careerist self-promotion was treated as a moral affront. After an influencer posted an image of herself in a bikini, a GOMI member declared that she was posting "pathetic thirst traps."<sup>5</sup> Members responded to a similar Instagram shot with: "thirst traps like that sunbathing photo? She needs to turn down the wannabe-sexpot dial." Ostensibly, the act of showcasing one's body in the highly public realm of social media was perceived as a violation of gender-coded norms for professional decorum and respectability. Other GOMI participants critiqued a "itty bitty teeny weeny" swimsuit that was described by another member as "nipple pasties tied together with dental floss." As they concluded, "The amount of skin she's showing is disgraceful."

Taken together, these examples reveal antifans' disapprobation with influencers' efforts to profit from their femininity and sexuality in purportedly regressive ways. Despite the considerable labor required to create monetizable personae (Duffy & Hund, 2015), influencers' careers did not meet the GOMI community's standards for "real", or legitimate, work. Through these critiques, GOMI members constructed a boundary between appropriate career choices and the model of social media success peddled by influencers.

### *Fake Relationships: Commercialized Children and Cast-worthy Friends*

In their depictions of idealized womanhood, influencers routinely draw upon well-worn scripts for affective relationships: partners and parents, kids and companions are thus fixtures of their social media feeds. However, anti-fans cast these internet-hyped images of marriage, motherhood, and friendship as shallow, performative, and ersatz. Not only were certain tropes of marriage and parenting treated as suspect and problematic, but the act of capitalizing on these private relationships by thrusting them into the public realm was considered instrumental at best- and exploitative at worst.

Anti-fans considered influencers with children to be out of touch with the “real” challenges of parenting; instead, they were accused of relying too heavily upon (paid and unpaid) childcare and superficially inflating their involvement in child-rearing. For instance, similar to the curational strategies used by participants in beauty call-out culture (Lawson, 2020), GOMI participants pieced together platformized evidence of outside care work. While a member described one influencers’ parents as her “ghost babysitters,” other commenters tried to determine the identity of a new woman appearing on an influencer’s feed during a family trip. The conclusion was she was a nanny, but the influencer and her partner were “pretending she was a new member of the clique.” Other GOMI hatebloggers found influencers’ depictions of motherhood disingenuous. In response to an influencer’s shared family photos, a GOMI member critiqued: “She spent like half a day with her child. In all the time I’ve been following her, this is the first time she’s spent any kind of significant time with him. Way to be Mother of the Year, a whole half day!” Another post similarly mocked an influencer’s participation in a podcast wherein she “bragged about her ability to balance being a mom, wife, and Girl Boss, like some sort of über-woman. Sure, girl.” These designations of supermom/superhuman are, of course, closely related to the “having it all” mythos. Relatedly,

a fashion blogger was ostracized for sharing what was considered an inauthentic depiction of adoption—one that neglected the difficult realities of the process. As the GOMI member critiqued: “I worry that her fawning fanclub will assume that adoption is a rocky start for a short while and then ta-daaaa! Instant family, just add kid and stir. Showing adoption like this is unrealistic and problematic for everyone involved.”

Much like the critiques waged by mommy blogger anti-fans (Hunter, 2016), those in our sample denigrated depictions of parenting that doubled as commercial appeals. In one post, a GOMI member suggested an influencer was so preoccupied with sponsorships that she neglected her children’s hindered speech development: “She’s so obsessed with making the most money that she can out of her kids that she hasn’t even noticed that her precious little bundles are six months behind normal communication skills.” Another poster, relatedly, took issue with the decision to feature one influencer’s recently adopted child in a sponsored [paid] post. As the commenter queried, “...is anyone else feeling uncomfortable about the fact that she’s trotting out the kid as a skill after less than a month? Major yikes.” A more pernicious critique was that a blogger’s family-planning decisions were entirely wrought by business directives. As the GOMI member noted, “If she wants to keep her engagement numbers up and continue getting sponsorships at the rate she’s getting them, she’s gonna have to get knocked up ASAP.” The implication here is that a desire to attract sponsorships supersedes any “real” interest in growing one’s family.

Accusations of exploiting one’s children for profit were not dissimilar to anti-fans’ dubious treatment of social media friendships. Addressing a query about what happened between two Instagrammers who formerly appeared in each other’s social media feeds (“they were besties last winter”), a GOMI member speculated, “I’m sure their *cross-promotional agreement* was up so they could stop shoving each other down their audiences’ throats.” Another participant surmised

that an American influencer’s decision to invite “a very popular British influencer to be a bridesmaid in her wedding” would “be the ultimate synergistic branding move.” These comments testify to an assumption that friendships in the social media sphere are purely instrumental and based upon logics of reciprocity and engagement boosting—rather than more sincere forms of intimacy. Similarly, a GOMI participant suggested that a fashion influencer had “cast” another woman in her photoshoot because of her hair color. Invocations of *casting* suggest relationships that are manufactured—much like media productions—and hence devoid of the deep affective bonds that structure “real” relationships.

A separate albeit related critique took aim at marital/partner relationships considered excessively normative or traditional. After accusing an influencer of excessive drinking, a commenter suggested the social media star’s husband policed her behavior; the GOMI member concluded, “They both seem to adhere to the maxim ‘hubby knows best.’” In other instances, commenters questioned whether a particular influencer was upholding her status as a “Stepford wife” and mocked another influencer’s purported obedience to a partner who “doesn’t permit her to post things on Instagram.” Such critiques seemed to deconstruct influencers’ idealized marriages by suggesting they lacked the agency and equity of “real” partnerships.

### ***Fake Appearance: Artificial Beauty and Photoshop Lies***

Concerns about the moral character of someone who allegedly “fakes” her physicality well predate the rise of social media, with the specter of Victorian era “painted women” (Peiss, 1998) lingering in gendered ideals of authenticity (Duffy & Hund, 2019). Accordingly, the GOMI community focused intensely on the bodies and aesthetic practices of their targets, with members exhibiting a particular preoccupation with the policing of artificial depictions of beauty.

Influencers who were deemed to be misrepresenting their “actual” looks through augmentative beauty techniques (e.g., plastic surgery) or technological trickery (e.g., Photoshop) were deemed to be both contributing to unrealistic beauty standards for women, and also to be unfairly profiting from their duplicity. Misrepresenting one’s looks, in other words, was to belie the strategic *effort* and *privilege* demanded by “having it all” femininity.

Some claims of influencers’ physical duplicity centered on material techniques of artifice—cosmetics, hair-dye, surgery, and/or diets; a failure to acknowledge the requirements for aesthetic labor was to strategically conceal the reality of gendered standards of beauty. One GOMI member, for instance, noted the supposed contradiction of an influencer who “pretends she doesn’t care about aging but totally dyes her grey hair.” Another GOMI member disavowed an influencer for flaunting her “hot new body and fake boobs,” adding, “Nobody wants to see your chicken cutlets.” Other critiques were wrapped in *did she or didn’t she* (?) cosmetic surgery accusations, similar to the wider policing of women celebrities’ bodies (Meyers, 2015). Several members thus weighed in after a fashion influencer shared an image that commenters deemed markedly different from her earlier photos. Disagreeing about the degree of variance, a GOMI poster offered, “I don’t see the difference. Maybe some lip injections.” Then, they added that before-and-after comparisons are “pointless” given the pervasiveness of Photoshop.

Accordingly, GOMI members relied upon various platformed curatorial practices (Lawson, 2020) to identify instances of perceived photo manipulation. In one case, a GOMI member accused the influencer of using excessive digital editing to conform to normative ideals of Western beauty: “Her hubster must spend hours and hours in photoshop turning her Roman nose into a cute button. She must think she’s the bee’s knees.” Another GOMI member deployed discourses of authenticity expressly, noting: “Finally, [the influencer’s] teeth are blindingly white

like the rest of them. Thank you Photoshop. So #genuine. Such #authenticity.” These critiques evinced a wider concern with artifice and manipulation wherein the allegedly photoshopped images were subject to heavy scrutinization. For instance, a GOMI member described how the influencer “totally photoshopped those shots. If you look more closely, you’ll see how blurry they are-- heavily edited with loads of filters. She’s always had a thin figure so it’s pretty easy to look good when the rest of your body is photoshopped within an inch of its life.” Meanwhile, an influencer anti-fan suggested that the target’s repeated references to junk food were orchestrated for Instagram—rather than something on which she routinely indulged:

I was expecting her body to look amazing but she’s mostly just skinny. And we knew that. Celebrities used to do this-- claiming to eat junk food all day long. She probably doesn’t eat that much, and she probably has a naturally fast metabolism/good genetics.

Not only does the commenter suggest the influencer is privileged with good genes, but also that she is disingenuous in how she communicates her body discipline to audiences. Both faked images of beauty—and misleading accounts of achieving this ideal—were thus considered a disservice to other women—especially those who were keenly aware of the laboring requirements of effortless perfection.

### **Discussion and Conclusion: The Fraught Politics of Social Media Backlash**

In the previously mentioned *Refinery29* article assessing changing attitudes towards social media influencers, Cait Munro (2020) argued, “It makes sense to have high expectations of those who claim to lead the lives, inhabit the perspectives, and communicate the ideas that are valuable enough to influence others” (para. 7). Indeed, this ethos of accountability is ostensibly what motivates influencer hate bloggers and, more broadly, those at the forefront of efforts to “cancel” public figures.”<sup>6</sup> As this paper has argued, GOMI provides a forum for anti-fans to critique

influencers who transgress a perceived moral boundary. Our analysis reveals the patterned ways these critiques aim to deconstruct the tropes of entrepreneurial femininity--challenging narrowly defined norms about “successful” womanhood. These critiques are ostensibly rooted in frustration and anger that the influencers in question are profiting (for a handful--quite considerably) from representations of femininity deemed “unrealistic” or impossible to maintain without some degree of artifice. The subtext of critique is that “fake” projections of career/relational/aesthetic perfection perpetuate unachievable expectations for women and, further, that such ideals are consequently regressive or un-feminist.

Such critiques are not without precedent; Nakamura (2015) describes the practice of *calling out* as “the crowd-sourced labour of internet users who, with varying degrees of gentleness or force, intervene in racist and sexist discourse online” (p. 106). In many ways, members of the GOMI community presume they are participants in call-out culture; as McRae (2017) suggests, the influencers featured on GOMI are often chosen because they seem to “harmfully downplay factors like class, education, nationality, racialized background, and [dis]ability” (p. 24). Our own analysis indicates that GOMI members seem aggrieved by women influencers’ perpetuation of post-feminist ideals of success 21st century, particularly when such ideals rely upon perceived fakery of various kinds. While “having it all” has long been deemed unattainable, many social media influencers seem to amplify and capitalize on this image. However, despite the passion and intensity with which GOMI members critique this image, their efficacy in dismantling gendered norms is dubitable.

In her analysis of celebrity gossip blogs, Meyers (2015) draws attention to the role of such spaces for women to “challenge dominant norms of femininity”; however, these very same norms are reinscribed “under the guise of the pleasure and connections of gossip talk” (p. 89). In other

words, while gossip blogs and hateblogs may offer opportunities for women to push back against gendered standards, the gender-coded nature of that pushback ultimately reinforces the significance of those standards and the power inherent in them. The intent of GOMI participants may be to “call out” problematic influencer behavior and challenge the version of femininity they project, but the fact remains that through their intense policing of influencers’ in/authenticity—almost exclusively in the areas of career, relationships, and looks—they reinforce these categories as constitutive of contemporary womanhood. Furthermore, in their focus on “real” work, “sincere” relationships, and “authentic” beauty, these critiques construct a similarly narrow-- albeit oppositional--version of idealized womanhood.

At stake in such discourses is not just the continuation of competing versions of womanhood (reminiscent of the longstanding debate of *feminist* versus *feminine*), but also the standard mode of engagement that sustains GOMI and similar communities. As the preceding analysis shows, communication on these sites is frequently harsh and can verge on cruel. As feminist scholar Loretta J. Ross reminds, “call-outs are often louder and more vicious on the internet,” (2020, para 3.) Furthermore, while mockery and lampoonery are well-worn methods of speaking truth to power, it is questionable as to how much of a power differential actually exists between hatebloggers and influencers. As Ross (2020) points out, “Call-outs are justified to challenge provocateurs who deliberately hurt others, or for powerful people beyond our reach...but most public shaming is horizontal and done by those who believe they have greater integrity or more sophisticated analyses” (para 16.) To be sure, the profoundly lopsided nature of the influencer economy leaves much room for criticism—particularly given how existing markers of privilege (including race, class, sexuality, and body aesthetics) structure this relatively new career subjectivity. However, the solution to the structural concerns associated with capitalist patriarchy

is not, we contend, to label individual influencers “stupid famewhores” and disparage their mental health in ways that invoke the specter of hysteria (e.g., “batsh\*t crazy,” “delusional,” “lunatic”). As Chemaly (2018) argues, it is necessary that girls and women express their anger, but such a directive “is not an endorsement of unbridled rage, or permission to deliver a swift roundhouse kick to the face of anyone who upsets you, or to regularly fill the spaces you live and work in with hostility and discomfort” (p. 26). While venting anger at these influencers and their purportedly questionable choices and/or behavior may provide some form of much-needed catharsis, such gender-coded vitriol amplifies the rampant misogyny and toxicity that women already face in online environments.

The question thus remains about what productive and generative critiques of influencers look like, especially when these highly visible social media personalities seem to traverse moral boundaries. “Influencers” are defined in part by their potential to wield sway over networked audiences; unfortunately, a spate of recent press coverage has indicated that such power is not always for the good. In the past year alone, accounts of disordered eating and body image issues (see e.g., Gerrard, 2020), problematic portrayals of international adoption (see Moscatello, 2020), and pervasive racism (Dodgson, 2020) have all come to the fore. In such cases, a response more robust than “smash[ing] the unfollow button” (Munro, 2020) feels warranted, especially amongst impacted communities.

Ross (2019) proposes that, rather than “calling-out,” we should enact forms of *calling-in*. “Calling-in,” she explains, “engages in debates with words and actions of healing and restoration, and without the self-indulgence of drama...[or] the weaponization of suffering that prevents constructive healing” (para 19). Of course, the success of calling-in requires an openness to dialogue that is risky, especially for those whose careers are hitched to metricized expressions of

audience affect. Indeed, as Ross points out, “People avoid meaningful conversations when hypervigilant perfectionists point out apparent mistakes, feeding the cannibalistic maw of the cancel culture” (ibid, para 17). Many influencers have thus sought to insulate themselves from harsh and/or embarrassing criticism through the liberal use of the “block” and “delete” buttons, treating social media accounts as their “personal spaces” where they set the tone and boundaries of discourse. An Instagram post from influencer Caroline Calloway (2019) exemplified this perspective, where she explained, “You may think you’re entitled to access to my life. But you’re not. It is not your unalienable right to be able to consume what I make. It’s a privilege.” Of course, no one--whether influencer or private citizen-- should have to endure abuse and harassment. However, when influencers, who profit handsomely off of their audiences, delete all but the most positive comments and block their commenters, the possibility of more nuanced conversations--or any conversations at all--are foreclosed.

Establishing productive dialogue between influencers and the communities that develop around them, then, seems a possible way forward for both parties. As mentioned earlier in this article, GOMI exists as a place for influencer audiences to “give their opinion without being shut out”; should these audiences feel heard and acknowledged, the appeal of communities like GOMI would likely decrease, and with a gentler discursive environment, influencers would likely feel less attacked and defensive. Given the increasingly contentious stances taken by both influencers and hatebloggers, however, this seems unlikely. It also continues a long history of women being pitted against each other; women being hostile to other women has been a characteristic, if not constitutive, feature of US gender politics since the feminist battles of the 1970s (e.g., Faludi, 1991; Slaughter, 2012; Luker, 1984). Given the complex, thorny, and rapidly evolving nature of this landscape, it is clear that there are no easy or straightforward solutions. However, to approach

this issue with nuance and care is the best (and only) way forward, as polarized perspectives only reinforce the tired history of gendered, in-group antagonism.

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<sup>1</sup> Across accounts of influencers being “called out,” the focus is overwhelmingly on women. For instance, *Insider*’s list of “27 times influencers were called out...in 2019,” 20 were women, 4 were heteronormative couples. Meanwhile, concerted efforts to “call out” men on Instagram focused on the fact that these “frauds” had scammed people financially (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/11/style/baller-busters-online-scams.html>).

<sup>2</sup> We have opted to retain the term “snark” to label our units of analysis as it is an emic term used by GOMI community members.

<sup>3</sup> The designations “public” and “private” are fraught, of course, especially in the context of online research (Kantanen & Manninen, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> The categories of career/love/looks were not entirely distinctive in our analysis; at times, they overlapped in telling ways. Our decision to separate them is thus for analytical value, speaking to wider ways in which “having it all” is co-constructed.

<sup>5</sup> A “thirst trap” is an overtly sexual social media post (typically a photograph) that is meant to attract attention by inciting sexual desire.

<sup>6</sup> Another (now-defunct) hateblog, Reblogging Donk, often referred to their activities as “forced accountability” for the internet personalities that they discussed.