

# “Having it All” on Social Media: Entrepreneurial Femininity and Self-Branding Among Fashion Bloggers

Social Media + Society  
July-December 2015: 1–11  
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DOI: 10.1177/2056305115604337  
sms.sagepub.com  


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## Abstract

Against the backdrop of the widespread individualization of the creative workforce, various genres of social media production have emerged from the traditionally feminine domains of fashion, beauty, domesticity, and craft. Fashion blogging, in particular, is considered one of the most commercially successful and publicly visible forms of digital cultural production. To explore how fashion bloggers represent their branded personae as enterprising feminine subjects, we conducted a qualitative analysis of the textual ( $n=38$  author narratives) and visual ( $n=760$  Instagram images) content published by leading fashion bloggers; we supplement this with in-depth interviews with eight full-time fashion/beauty bloggers. Through this data, we show how top-ranked bloggers depict the ideal of “having it all” through three interrelated tropes: the destiny of passionate work, staging the glam life, and carefully curated social sharing. Together, these tropes articulate a form of entrepreneurial femininity that draws upon post-feminist sensibilities and the contemporary logic of self-branding. We argue, however, that this socially mediated version of self-enterprise obscures the labor, discipline, and capital necessary to emulate these standards, while deploying the unshakable myth that women should work through and for consumption. We conclude by addressing how these findings are symptomatic of a digital media economy marked by the persistence of social inequalities of gender, race, class, and more.

## Keywords

fashion blogging, self-branding, post-feminism, social media, Instagram

## Introduction

From mommy blogs and beauty vlogs to craft micro-economies associated with do-it-yourself (DIY) sites like Etsy and Artfire, the last decade has witnessed a proliferation of socially mediated cultures of creative production located in the traditionally feminine domains of fashion, beauty, parenting, and craft. Popular discourses about the role of these platforms in economically empowering women can be ascribed to assumptions about the merits of highly individualized, flexible employment conditions, especially for female workers aspiring to combine professional and domestic responsibilities. Although findings about the persistence of gender inequalities in digital media industries have productively challenged this myth of technologically enabled empowerment (Gill, 2008; Gregg, 2008), independent employment continues to be valorized through such hybrid neologisms as mom-preneur, etsy-preneur, and blogger-preneur.

These modes of creative self-enterprise are symptomatic of labor in the post-Fordist era, which is characterized by

destabilized employment, the concomitant rise of casualized and contract-based work, and the logic of flexible specialization. Indeed, the number of independent workers<sup>1</sup> has grown explosively in recent years; in 2013, there were more than 17 million, up 10% from two years prior (MBO Partners, 2013). Labor experts project that by 2020, 45% of the US workforce will be independent (Pofeldt, 2012). While worker independence is validated in the popular imagination through the ideals of freedom and flexibility, scholars and policy-makers highlight the extent to which employment conditions emblematic of the so-called “new economy” shape the psychological,

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cultural, and financial experiences of workers. For instance, workers assume the responsibility for benefits previously shouldered by organizations, including steady pay, occupational training, health care, and pension (e.g. Gill, 2010; Neff, Wissinger, & Zukin, 2005; Ross, 2009). Moreover, individuals are encouraged to invest time, energy, and capital in an imagined future as part of what Neff (2012) conceptualizes as “venture labor.”

Critical debates about worker independence are especially pertinent to the culture industries, fields that overwhelmingly rely upon freelance and project-based labor. In examining the dialectic between the ostensible rewards of a career in the culture industries—including the prestige, autonomy, and “coolness” of the job—and the very real risks of flexible employment, Neff et al. (2005) underscore the progressively entrepreneurial nature of creative labor. The rhetoric of self-investment is emphasized as cultural workers are compelled to internalize, and even glamorize, various employment risks (pp. 317, 331). To this end, entrepreneurialism has become a much-vaunted ideal in the creative and digital media industries as reconfigured organizational and economic structures command content creators to understand themselves through “the values and qualities of enterprise” (Storey, Salaman, & Platman, 2005, p. 1049; see also Gill, 2010; Neff, 2012). Against this backdrop, it is perhaps not surprising that there exists a booming market for how-to resources aimed at aspiring creative industrialists, including *The Creative Entrepreneur: A DIY Visual Guidebook for Making Business Ideas Real* and *Make Your Mark: The Creative's Guide to Building a Business with Impact* among countless other titles (see also Duffy, 2015).

These discourses often encourage entrepreneurial aspirants to engage in self-branding practices, which draw upon the codes, processes, and market logics of mainstream culture industries (Hearn, 2008). This is not to suggest impression management is a distinctly modern social imperative; rather, efforts to manage one's reputation have deep antecedents in Western culture (Pooley, 2010). Yet structural transformations associated with the neoliberal ideologies of individuality and self-governance have instigated more calculated strategies to *brand the self*. Marwick (2013a) explores the rise of these imperatives in the context of web 2.0, revealing how socially mediated entrepreneurialism gets articulated through attention-seeking and status-enhancing behaviors.

Despite the veritable groundswell of research published on creative workers and digitally enabled entrepreneurialism, we have argued elsewhere (Duffy, 2013, 2015) that the implications of this system for gendered subjectivities have yet to be fully realized. Fashion blogs, we contend, are an ideal site to explore how (mostly) female social media producers represent their branded personae given the extent to which personal style bloggers negotiate codes of heteronormative femininity with discourses and practices of masculine entrepreneurialism (Lewis, 2014; Marwick, 2013a). Indeed, mainstream media depict fashion bloggers as a particularly

visible and self-enterprising class of digital cultural producer; this perspective can be summed up by a recent *Wired* (UK) feature, which opened, “rarely are fashion bloggers just hobbyists these days—increasingly *they are entrepreneurs with business plans and revenue*” (Epstein, 2015, italics added). Accordingly, this article explores fashion bloggers through the lens of what Gray (2003) termed “enterprising femininity,” a subjectivity formed through the characteristics of flexibility, valuable skills, informal knowledges, and modes of self-fashioning rooted in the consumer marketplace (pp. 492-493).

To examine how fashion bloggers represent their personae as enterprising feminine subjects, we conducted a qualitative analysis of textual ( $n=38$  author narratives) and visual ( $n=760$  Instagram images<sup>2</sup>) content published by top-ranked US fashion bloggers; we supplement this with in-depth interviews with eight full-time fashion/beauty bloggers. Drawing on this data, we argue that well-known bloggers utilize a series of interrelated tropes—predestined passionate work, staging the glam life, and carefully curated social sharing—to depict an updated version of the post-feminist ideal of “having it all.” These tropes articulate a form of entrepreneurial femininity that obscures the labor, discipline, and capital necessary to emulate these standards, while deploying the unshakable myth that women should work *through* and *for* consumption. We close by tying these findings to more widespread trends in a creative economy marked by social inequalities of gender, race, class, and more.

## Creative Work in the New Economy

Studies of creative laborers and their employment conditions have flourished over the last decade, offering key insight into the shifting positioning of worker subjectivities within various technological, political-economic, and regulatory contexts. This mushrooming body of literature encompasses various theoretical frameworks and subfields, including political economy of communication, sociologies of work, critical theory, and policy research (e.g. Blair, 2001; Deuze, 2007; Duffy, 2013; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011). Despite significant variance in their conceptual approaches and sites of analysis, these scholars collectively highlight key features of labor in contemporary media and cultural industries, including high barriers to entry, unstable employment, occupational flexibility, and the pervasive mentality that “you're only as good as your last [TV script, novel, magazine article]” (Blair, 2001). Of course, these characteristics are offset by the perceived glamour and independence associated with a creative career. As Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011) explain, “good work” in the culture industries is ascribed to assumptions about compensation, involvement, autonomy, and the production of high-quality creative products (pp. 17, 39).

More recently, scholars have shifted their attention to the nature of creative work across the information and technology sectors (e.g. Gill, 2010; Gregg, 2011; Neff, 2012). Using

a Foucauldian lens, Gill (2010) characterizes the new media work environment as one wherein traditional power hierarchies are supplanted by a new worker-subject tasked with “*managing the self in conditions of radical uncertainty*” (p. 249, italics original). This technologically mediated worker must constantly perform the labor of the self as her “entire existence is built around work” (Gill, 2010). Not only does this mode of self-governance shift the burden of management from formal structures onto the individual, it also testifies to the further encroachment of commercial discourses into all realms of social life (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Hearn, 2008).

For creative aspirants seeking employment in fashion and magazine journalism, online resources such as Ed2010 and the Independent Fashion Bloggers (IFB) Coalition advocate crafting a personal brand “to set yourself apart from the competition and highlight what makes you special” (Foresto, n.d.). Noting that blogs, in particular, are assumed to be “an extension, or representation, of [yourself],” IFB positioned self-branding as “the most important way to proactively control your career development and how the market perceives you” (Noricks, 2013). Furthermore, an expert advised Ed2010 readers, “If you’re passionate about something, that’s going to shine through . . . but if you’re being inauthentic or trying to sound like you’re someone you’re not when you’re online, people are going to pick up on this really fast” (Foresto, n.d.). These requirements for personal branding rely upon participants’ emotional labor, which “requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others” (Hochschild, 1983, p. 7). The gendered nature of “emotional labor” is part of a long history of “women’s work” comprising activities that are undervalued and unpaid—despite their central role in maintaining the capitalist circuit of production. As Jarrett (2014) compellingly argues of contemporary modes of digital labor, “the uncanny, ghostly presence of women’s labor can provide a framework to reinvigorate analysis of specific qualities of the laboring involved in the digital economy” (p. 26). The success of fashion bloggers and other cultural producers who make their living by sharing their “passions” and connecting with readership makes clear that a substantial (and ever-increasing) amount of value and capital is generated by this type of work.

### Post-Feminism, Self-Branding, and Social Media Production

The infectious rhetoric of personal branding has been linked to gendered discourses and, more specifically, the contemporary logic of post-feminism, which celebrates individual choice, independence, and modes of self-expression rooted in the consumer marketplace (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2004). Gill (2007) identifies the similar injunctions of post-feminism and neoliberalism, compelling subjects to “render one’s life knowable and meaningful through a narrative of free choice and autonomy” (p. 154).

Exploring the imbrication of this narrative to various shifts associated with emergent digital technologies, Banet-Weiser (2012) notes how post-feminism and interactivity are constitutive of a “neoliberal moral framework,” that calls for the cultivation and regulation of a self-brand (p. 56). This post-feminist self-brand is constructed through girls’ and young women’s bodily display, cultivation of affect, and narratives of authenticity. What is especially problematic about digital expressions of the post-feminist self-brand is the extent to which visibility gets articulated through normative feminine discourses and practices, including those anchored in the consumer marketplace (p. 64).

The contemporary ideals of individualism, creative autonomy, and self-branding provide the necessary backstory for understanding forms of gendered social media production that have emerged in recent years: mommy blogs (e.g. Lopez, 2009), hauler videos (Banet-Weiser & Arzumanova, 2012), DIY craft sites (Gajjala, 2015; Luckman, 2013), and fashion blogs (Duffy, 2013; Luvaas, 2013; Marwick, 2013b; Nathanson, 2014; Rocamora, 2012), among others. Of these, we argue that fashion blogs occupy a particularly prominent place in the popular and scholarly imaginations. Mainstream media coverage of fashion bloggers is ubiquitous with top-ranking personal style bloggers making deep inroads into the book, magazine, television, and retail fashion industries, among others. Scholars, too, have studied personal style bloggers as part of critical inquiries into the commercial logic of authenticity (Duffy, 2013; Marwick, 2013b), post-feminist commodity culture in an age of thrift (Nathanson, 2014), emergent global fashion ecologies (Luvaas, 2013; Pham, 2013), and the relationship between “traditional” and “new” sources of fashion journalism (Rocamora, 2012), among others. While much of this research addresses the promotional nature of blogger activities—including what Nathanson (2014) describes as the *dual-level production of the self and of the career*—scholars have not yet examined fashion bloggers through the lens of entrepreneurial femininity, which we argue is a key theoretical context. Furthermore, as these critical studies tend to draw on a few paradigmatic exemplars, systematic studies of fashion blogging are lacking. Moreover, by looking only at media texts, they ignore the value of understanding the production of the fashion blogger subject *in her own voice*. In this article, we attempt to address these gaps in the literature by providing a broad analysis of bloggers’ digital self-brands as well as a look at the lived experiences behind these socially mediated personae.

### Method

In order to examine the self-presentation strategies of well-known bloggers, we conducted a qualitative analysis of the textual and visual content of the top 38 US fashion blogs, drawn from a list of the highest ranked bloggers in this category published on Bloglovin, a website used for following and discovering new blogs. Because our focus was

on individualized self-production and self-promotion, we eliminated those with more than 10 employees; two others in our original sample were eliminated as they were either defunct or had since been bought by corporate blog networks. Most of the bloggers we studied were between the ages of 18 and 35; the majority were either Caucasian (30) or Asian-American (5).<sup>3</sup> To this end, we found that the bloggers overwhelmingly conformed to a Western, heteronormative beauty aesthetic (young, thin, light-skinned).<sup>4</sup>

The textual and visual elements of each blogger's "About Me" section were coded or, in the cases where none was included, we selected a media interview in which the blogger spoke about the creation of her blog. Indeed, we found it important to retain a sense of what Banet-Weiser and Arzumanova (2012) call "creative authorship," wherein the curated authorship of the self is done against the backdrop of feminine confessional culture (p. 164).<sup>5</sup> We also gathered a strategic random sample of 20 Instagram photos of each blogger ( $n=760$  images),<sup>6</sup> using the Instagram account linked to the blog; both visual and textual elements of blogs were coded. The coding sheet was guided by a preliminary review of the data and further refined inductively. The categories that emerged included expressions of authenticity/relatability, passion/creative autonomy, self as brand, American Dream, education/experience, personality, commercial affiliations, and travel, among others.

We supplemented this data with information gleaned from in-depth interviews with eight professional bloggers, including two in our original textual/Instagram sample.<sup>7</sup> Although these interviews were conducted as part of a separate project on women, creativity, and social media, they nonetheless helped to provide a more reflexive account of the production of the socially mediated self. Interviews were conducted in person or over the phone and lasted approximately 45 minutes to an hour. Topics included participants' background and/or expertise, narratives of "getting started" and aspirations, creative production and promotion processes, reflections on branding and entrepreneurship, and relationships to advertisers, audiences, and other bloggers.

## Entrepreneurial Femininity Among Fashion Bloggers

Our analysis of blogger narratives and Instagram images revealed that bloggers utilized three interrelated tropes:

1. The Destiny of Passionate Work;
2. The Glam Life; and
3. Carefully Curated Social Sharing

to articulate a form of "entrepreneurial femininity" that draws upon post-feminist narratives of individual choice, independence, and self-fashioning; yet, bloggers tended to downplay the discipline and investments that go into this mode of self-production. Our interview participants, meanwhile, brought

the labor of social media creation, distribution, and promotion into stark relief; the project of the fashion blogger, they assured us, requires significant reserves of time and energy.

### The Destiny of Passionate Work

Discourses of "passion" have been used to rationalize un- or under-compensated labor in both the fashion and new media sectors, illuminating how producers derive value from their creative activities irrespective of monetary compensation or material rewards (Arvidsson, Malossi, & Naro, 2010; Postigo, 2009). The bloggers in our sample also invoked the narrative of career passion, despite the fact that they *also* earn a presumably sizable income from their digital media brands. For instance, while one blogger articulated her site as a forum to "share her passion for life, art, and all things style" (eat.sleep.wear), another described her blog as "a creative outlet fueled by a passion" (Happily Grey). Similarly, recalling what inspired her to launch Late Afternoon, Liz C. wrote, "I started out when I was still in college working on my degree in social psychology. I was drowning in lab work and needed a creative outlet." These narratives of passion and creative expression suggest individuals came upon blogging unintentionally, as an escape from the banality of unrewarding professional lives. By downplaying calculated entrepreneurial aspirations, these bloggers reaffirm the post-feminist ideal of individual success obtained through inner self-discovery.

Indeed, the version of passionate work offered by the bloggers in this study is noteworthy for its seemingly *destined* nature, which deflates the notion of masculine self-enterprise. For instance, on her "About Me" page, Garance Doré encouraged readers to look at "the five part story that explains *how I came to find my calling*, [ . . . ] and then finally, start the blog that you're reading right now" (emphasis added). Geri's (because I'm addicted) personal narrative invoked the "creative outlet" rhetoric while calling attention to the successes that seemingly unfolded at her feet over the years:

I started this blog in 2005 chronicling fashion, music, food (including a culinary school stint!) and art as a creative outlet while miz [miserable] at my full time job and over the years it has been named a favorite by Women's Wear Daily, *Vanity Fair*, *Lucky Magazine*, *Refinery 29* and *WhoWhatWear*. This bloggy [sic] has afforded me all sort of incredible opportunities like launching a capsule collection clothing line with Lovers + Friends, starring in national commercials, traveling the world for all sorts of rad things . . . I can't imagine what life would have been like if I hadn't clicked over onto blogger and hit the "create blog" button.

By emphasizing an almost mystical inevitability of their fashion blogging careers (borne out of following their hearts and experimenting with digital technology), bloggers demonstrate what happens when the self is a project of continuous labor (Gill, 2010) matured into the social media age.



Passion is no longer just a driver or a byproduct of new media work, but *also* a means of rationalizing individualized success. Implicit in this narrativization, however, is the notion that one need only to look inward and fuel oneself with passion to find success; those who are not successful are simply not passionate enough.

Bloggers' profiles and Instagram feeds were also spaces to reconcile the contradiction between production and consumption. Indeed, despite the central role of consumerism in providing fodder for blog and Instagram content, those we analyzed were meticulous in their efforts to show what they were doing was indeed *work*, albeit a highly pleasurable form. On Instagram, bloggers included images of DSLR cameras, smartphones, and laptops to reveal the technologies of creation that were a regular part of their daily work routines. Often, these images depicted a well-organized, inspirational working environment, instances of what Pinterest and Reddit users have dubbed "workspace porn." Wendy (Wendy's Look Book) posted a photo on Instagram of her sitting on a window seat, propped up by a white pillow with an Apple laptop resting on her outstretched legs (see Figure 1). Her clothes are casual-chic, and she is wearing light makeup with a headband in her long, wavy hair. The image is captioned, "Favorite spot in the room! Typing away and working on tomorrow's blog post." This image was not an impulsive "selfie," but carefully staged to ensure adequate lighting and a clean aesthetic, underscoring the labor required to display the working subject.

In other instances, bloggers implicitly and explicitly defined their practices as productive labor rather than leisurely consumption; of course, the boundaries between these are—and have been—muddled in the feminine realm (Gregg, 2008). In one of her Instagram posts, Olivia Palermo is posed in the foreground of a retail space captioned, "popping by this morning for my monthly meeting @piperlime" followed by a string of emojis. While the visual display locates her in the *consumer* sphere, the textual referent clarifies that she is there on business, as a cultural *producer*. Mary (Happily Grey) posted a similar photo outside the British high-street shop Whistles, noting, "Thanks for an amazing afternoon to my new friends at @thisiswhistles #hgxlondon." Travel images, which we discuss in the following section, were also framed as a pleasurable yet necessary part of the job. For instance, Aimee's (Song of Style) image of the sun setting over a hillside is captioned, "Working on a Saturday evening at the job site but not complaining with a view like this and the coolest clients. #ilovevmyjob #hustlin." Although she justifies the incursion of work on her leisure time with acknowledgments of an enviable location, her comments speak to the "always-on" lifestyle of the social media entrepreneur.

And, accordingly, our interview participants brought the less glamorous aspects of this lifestyle into sharp focus. As personal style blogger Jenn explained, "I do it all. I do styling, I write for my site . . . I do TV segments . . . I have a weekly syndicated radio segment, and I just started a vintage jewelry



**Figure 1.** Instagram image of Wendy (Wendy's Look Book) working.

business." Then, identifying one of the main challenges involved with this mode of entrepreneurialism, she added, "we all have to work really, really hard to build up our own [audience] numbers." Similarly, in explaining why she recently hired an intern, couture fashion blogger Joy explained,

It is getting harder and harder to handle everything. And people don't understand that a blog is like . . . a company, and you need people to help you out, to keep growing. Because it's a lot of work doing everything . . . I used to do photographing by myself, going to the event, tweeting at the event, coming back home and blog, edit the pictures, I did the videos too, like, it's too much for one person.

Although this honest self-appraisal of blog labor was omitted from most "About Me" statements, Blair Eadie (Atlantic-Pacific) was an exception who acknowledged the level of self-discipline required to manage her blog:

During busy weeks and sometimes busy months it feels daunting to keep up both a day job and the blog, but I have so many lovely readers and supporters who make it all worth it . . . I went to a big state school that taught me very early on the importance of self motivation. There is no one there to make sure you came to class or check in on you if you haven't turned in your homework in a while. You have to be disciplined and motivated to push yourself, knowing there is no one else there to do it for you.

Eadie's comment directly invokes the neoliberal ideal of the enterprising worker-subject; yet her acknowledgment of her "lovely readers and supporters" reveals the calculated nature of this post (i.e. compare this description with Jenn's comment about "numbers"). Taken together, bloggers' spectacular images of "predestined passionate work" romanticize the project of the fashion blogger while concealing the less



**Figure 2.** Instagram image of Natalie Suarez (Natalie Off Duty) with model Kate Upton at an Express jeans events.

dazzling aspects of production: flexibility, self-management, and the “always-on” persona, all of which represent the kinds of immaterial labor that increasingly characterize cultural work in an era of advanced capitalism (Lazzarato, 1996).

### *The Glam Life*

A separate yet related way that fashion bloggers unsettle the binary between labor and leisure is through their staging of “the glam life,” characterized by global travel, invitations to exclusive events, and access to luxury goods and swag. By depicting this lifestyle on their Instagram accounts, the bloggers in our sample engaged in what Marwick (2013a) has described as “aspirational production,” an attention-seeking practice whereby an individual presents herself in a high[er]-status social position (pp. 122-123). For example, Fashion Squad’s Carolina Engman shared a photo of herself sandwiched between actress/writer Lena Dunham and musician Taylor Swift, ostensibly an attempt to elevate her standing in the imagination of readers and advertising partners. Casually dressed, the three women smile for the camera in what appears to be a café or shop, indicating that they are peers rather than individuals encountering each other in some other situation (e.g. a fan meet-and-greet) that would imply a status differential. Similarly, Natalie Off Duty posted a photo with model Kate Upton (Figure 2) at an Express jeans event for which they collaborated: “Thanks to my girls for coming out to meet me and #KateUpton for @expressrunway #expressjeans night!” By aligning their personas with established celebrities, these bloggers situate themselves within what Mears (2011) described as the glamorous aura of elite work, wherein prestige becomes a vital form of social currency.

It is perhaps not surprising that designer goods are also central to bloggers’ staging of “the glam life”; the blogs and Instagram feeds we analyzed displayed a compendium of Valentino pumps, Chanel handbags, and Céline sunglasses,

luxury goods offset by the occasional thrift store purchase or product identified with a discount retailer such as Kohl’s or Old Navy. In many cases, these products were “gifted” from designers and publicists as part of a mutual incentive structure that mobilizes the activities of social influencers in the aptly named “attention economy.” The practice of “tagging,” or linking to a branded product in one’s blog or Instagram feed, stands as public recognition of a commercial gift; for instance, the bloggers we analyzed posted: “Collecting sorries. Thanks @monicavinader #monicavinader” (The Man Repeller); “Sharing my favorite @gorjana pieces today on Happily Grey. Head over to [www.gorjana-griffin.com](http://www.gorjana-griffin.com) to shop my special curated section” (Happily Grey); “Oh how I love a classic black boot with a Cuban heel . . . Thanks @senso” (Ring My Bell); and “the prettiest flowers thanks to #highcampsupply” (Atlantic-Pacific), among others. Comments such as these tended to generate substantial feedback, an indicator of the gendering of the “social media audience commodity” whereby (female) consumer-audiences provide valuable data that can be harnessed by marketing institutions (Shepherd, 2014).

To this end, “the glam life” is a continually reiterated lifestyle that primarily exists through the aesthetics and language of commercial brands. For Aimee Song, a trip to Morocco is an extended marketing opportunity sponsored by Diane Von Furstenberg (see Figure 3). The caption for this image reads, “All about my rug shopping tips in Morocco on #songofstyle today! Wrap romper by @dvh. #journeyofadress <http://www.songofstyle.com>.” Travel photos were a habitual presence on the blogs and Instagram feeds of those in our sample; the cityscapes or beaches of Greece, Morocco, Korea, France, Spain, and Thailand thus provided stunning backdrops for blogger photo-shoots. Bloggers also posted artfully arranged food photos (“Winding down over fig crostini straight out of the oven and a glass of wine,” from Late Afternoon), and restaurant location check-ins were common (Viva Luxury posted of her “Late lunch at @ivyrestaurants with my girl @sydnesummer”). While these check-ins testify to the ubiquitous culture of sharing that structures social media activity, the act of “tagging” particular restaurants also speaks to the extent to which leisure activities (if we presume not all of these events are sponsored) become another opportunity to shape the contours of one’s personal brand.

Navigating this paradox of the personal brand—translating the self into a consistent yet distinct visual aesthetic, written voice, and potential partner for commercial brands—requires a tremendous amount of self-discipline. Our interviewees illuminated the work that goes into crafting this visage. Jenn remarked that bloggers can end up as “a flash in the pan,” because they underestimate the work it entails. “They think that it’s going to be really glamorous,” she said. “And so they see other bloggers maybe working at brands or getting free things and they only see . . . everything that’s through an Instagram filter that looks so fabulous.” As Jenn’s comment suggests, a key factor in the “glam life” is its effortless aesthetic. This lifestyle that includes networking, global





**Figure 3.** Instagram image of Aimee Song (Song of Style) on a trip to Morocco, sponsored by fashion brand Diane von Furstenberg.

travel, and frequent event attendance (on top of regularly creating blog content) is artfully displayed on social media, obscuring the work that goes into obtaining and maintaining the production of the self-brand.

Interview participants were also quite candid about the challenges of working with corporate sponsors that failed to resonate with their own brand image, lest they be accused of *doing it just for the money*. As Los Angeles–based blogger Eliza confessed,

If a brand comes to you and is like, “We’ll give you [a] paycheck to write two blog posts” . . . it is obviously hard to say no to things that come along because it is such a feast-or-famine kind of lifestyle . . . I think it can be a little bit scary that at the first of every month you’re like, “alright, how am I gonna make money this month . . .”

Karina, too, explained that if she had one regret, it would be her lack of selectivity with advertisers in the early days of blogging. Now, she continued, “because my site has become a business, and it is its own brand, and so now I have to be more selective because my readers expect a certain level of quality from me.” As such narratives make clear, the presentation of the self must be carefully managed in a way that still enables brand partners to communicate meaning *through* the blogger. Furthermore, since commercial brands are unlikely to partner with bloggers lacking a commodifiable (“glam”) social media image, the codes, aesthetics, and subjectivities of mainstream fashion culture get reaffirmed.

### Carefully Curated Personal Sharing

Despite their vigilant presentation of “the glam life,” most of the bloggers in our sample shared elements of their personal lives with readers, ostensibly an attempt to depict themselves

as “authentic” (for a discussion of authenticity in the blogosphere, see Duffy, 2013; Marwick, 2013b; McQuarrie, Miller, & Phillips, 2013). The gendered nature of this intimate social sharing must be historically contextualized, as Victorian era demarcations between public and private were guided by assumptions about masculine and feminine realms, respectively. However, the twentieth century saw the progressive unfolding of a “sentimentalization of the public sphere,” a manifestation of what Illouz (2007) terms emotional capitalism. While Illouz contends that the axioms of emotion and communication that infiltrated bureaucratic work cultures effaced traditional gender norms, feminist media scholars have explored contemporary expressions of a gendered “confessional culture” that compels the private worlds of young women into the public sphere (Harris, 2003). The recent ascension of social media has coincided with renewed emphases on feminine self-expression and visibility that exist within consumer spaces (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Banet-Weiser & Arzumanova, 2012). The bloggers we studied performed visibility according to scripts that made them simultaneously relatable and aspirational.

In their “About Me” statements, bloggers frequently shared personal details by, for example, acknowledging the support of parents or partners (e.g. boyfriends, fiancés, or husbands; none of the bloggers in our sample explicitly identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender [LGBT]) or offering up brief statements of faith. Children, friends, and pets made consistent appearances in their Instagram feeds; eat.sleep.wear shared “date night . . . with my boo”; See (anna) Jane shared an image of her sleeping husband and infant, “Happy first Father’s Day to this guy. He’s already the best dad ever,” and The Glamourai uploaded a photo of her pet toy spaniel next to a hairdryer, “Someone is in a fight with the blow dryer.”

In other instances, bloggers shared more candid images of their lives, seemingly letting their guard down and presenting themselves as “authentic” in ways that temper the glamour lifestyles discussed above. For instance, in the “About Me” section of her blog, Brooklyn Blonde confesses, “I grew up in a fairly bad neighborhood, but wouldn’t change it for the world. It made me, what I think, such a well-rounded person.” Damsel in Dior posted an image of herself looking fashionable albeit distraught with the caption: “‘crap my wallet is gone’ look of the day.” Similarly, Kendi’s “Blurry Selfie; Messy House,” reveals a table scattered with papers as the backdrop for a full-length shot of her in a summer outfit (see Figure 4). These images do little to disrupt the overall aesthetic but, instead, offer representations of life that would not appear in the pages of a fashion magazine. Others offered individual expressions of quirkiness or wit. For instance, That’s Chic’s Instagram feed included the blogger in front of neon sign for “Flo’s V8 Café” wearing Minnie Mouse ears and a black sweatshirt with the caption: “If you are looking for a good time, just take some smart ass to Disneyland and listen to their commentary.” Leandra Medine of The Man Repeller is particularly well known for a mode of frank



**Figure 4.** Instagram image from Kendi (Kendi Everyday) sharing her “Blurry Selfie; Messy House.”

personal sharing that doubles as entertainment; she wrote a clothing-based memoir in which she notoriously recounted her first sexual encounter, during which she wore white athletic socks.

Behind the scenes, though, bloggers reflected on the challenge of trying to seem “authentic” in the minds of readers. As Fashion Toast author Rumi confessed to a writer from *Into the Gloss*: “It’s hard not to think of things in terms of the last post on your blog.” She added that she constantly asks herself, “What’s next, what’s going to look better? What else can I do with photography? Is my clothing too inaccessible? Am I not affordable, am I not relatable?” Her invocation of the term “relatable” nods toward the popular construction of fashion bloggers as “real people,” a pervasive myth that has been challenged by findings that the blogosphere is heavily imbricated with markers of existing social and economic capital (Duffy, 2015). The bloggers we interviewed also acknowledged the personal demands of being a social media brand. As Liv reflected,

It’s hard to not have [your blog] be a personal reflection of yourself. And you like to think that everyone likes you, and everyone likes what you have to say, [But] . . . we’re human, we can’t help but change and so, as I go on in life, I might be interested in different things, or need different things, you know, maybe I’ll have a baby, I don’t know if I’ll blog about that, I don’t know if that’s on brand for me or if I’d want to keep it private.

Liv’s comment about being “on brand” indexes the blurring of separate spheres associated with context collapse, which makes it “impossible to differ self-presentation strategies” in social media environments (Marwick & boyd, 2010). Meanwhile, Karina explained her desire to make her blog more “personal,” adding,

And just being real with readers and not just, “Oh, here’s another pretty picture of me in a cute outfit.” But, you know, it’s really what’s going on. You know, everybody has difficulties in their life. And I think it would almost be a disservice to my readers if I wasn’t honest because that’s very relatable, you know, when you share those things that maybe are a little bit more personal, more guarded.

While Karina’s comment underscores how important considerations of the audience are to bloggers, other interview participants similarly explained how cultivating a relatable persona involves interactions with audiences.

Full-time blogger Claudia emphasized the imperative to be responsive to her readers, explaining,

I try to keep on top of comments. If I get a question I try to respond right away . . . when I first started I would get, like, 80 to 150 comments every time I did a post and it was crazy trying to writing back.

Her reference to responding “right away” prompted us to ask about how much time she devotes to the blog. She clarified, “I try not to do stuff on the weekends and if I do it’s just taking photos, but I try not to be on the computer too much to get a break and be with my family.” Claudia was unique in demarcating labor and leisure time, although she too admitted to “just taking photos” on the weekends. Other full-time bloggers, such as Crystal, said she “doesn’t really differentiate” between labor and leisure. Not only does this comment describe “presence bleed,” which Gregg (2011) defines as the blurring of work and nonwork time into one another, but it also offers another explanation of why bloggers’ personal images and anecdotes seep into professional spaces.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The sustained growth of the independent workforce, which marks a rupture with the so-called “era of big work” (Horowitz, 2014), has coincided with a pervasive rhetoric about the merits of social media platforms as vehicles for “getting discovered” and “making a living from one’s passion project.” Against this backdrop, genres of social media production that focus on traditionally feminine domains—mommy blogging and micro-economies of DIY craft, for example—have been positioned as conduits to financial independence and female empowerment. Despite important findings on these genres, including those that productively problematize these narratives of “empowerment” (e.g. Luckman, 2013), this research has little import for social media contexts where the enterprising self is made visible through personal branding strategies. By analyzing fashion bloggers, however, we can assess how social media producer-brands negotiate codes of heteronormative femininity with discourses and practices of masculine entrepreneurialism.



The bloggers in our sample, who have translated their voices of authority into lucrative and seemingly fulfilling careers, use social media to depict an updated version of the post-feminist ideal of “having it all.” And in contrast to the images of “having it all” that circulated in the analogue era—in the pages of *Cosmopolitan* under Helen Gurley Brown’s editorship or, alternatively, through the fictional characters of Ally McBeal, Carrie Bradshaw, and Elle Woods, among others<sup>8</sup>—these socially mediated versions are ostensibly women *just like us*. Yet, just as this rhetoric of “real” obscures hierarchies of age, race, class, sexuality, and body type (as we discuss below), the codes by which top-ranked fashion bloggers represent themselves veil the labor, discipline, and capital that go into the production of the digital self.

Through discourses of passion, bloggers create a notion of work that *doesn't seem like work* as labor and leisure blend seamlessly together: meetings in shopping spaces, photo-shoots in exotic locations, and the ability to work from home. Under this shiny veneer are very real disadvantages of an always-on, 24/7 workstyle. For instance, nuancing the much-vaunted ideal of “flexibility,” Gregg (2008) illuminates how the ability to work from *anywhere* translates into “constant contactability and the ever present possibility, if not the outright expectation, of work” (p. 290). Moreover, by articulating passion through the language of destiny, bloggers encourage the kinds of individualistic, self-discovery characteristic of the post-feminist self. Next, depictions of the “glam life” create the spectacle of a lifestyle flush with celebrities, designers, and fellow social influencers who attend parties and other social events in between international jet setting. Yet, these socially mediated representations of affective pleasure and compulsory sociality must be understood within a long history of gendered emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983). An element of “deep acting” (ibid) is no doubt necessary for the blissful countenance in photos, the gracious interactions with readers across various social media sites, and the witty expressions that enable them to rise above the din of the legions of other aspiring tastemakers. Finally, given that “authenticity” and “realness” are governing logics in the fashion blogging community (Duffy, 2013; McQuarrie et al., 2013; Marwick, 2013b), it is perhaps not surprising that bloggers moderate representations of the “glam life” with images that make them seem *just like us*. The latter depictions serve as a kind of aesthetic foil to images of artful perfection that circulate in women’s magazines. Of course, even these seeming moments of candor—with family, friends, and pets included—do not disrupt bloggers’ well-crafted social media personae.

Despite their seemingly effortless nature, bloggers’ online presentations were paragons of discipline in their displays of passionate work, glamorous lifestyles, and selective social sharing in their construction of blogging as a way to “have it all”; the interviews revealed the significant amount of time and energy required to achieve this. Many bloggers described navigating uncertain economic environments and

diversifying their work beyond that of maintaining a blog to having clothing/jewelry lines, doing media appearances, even teaching. “Having it all” is thus part of the carefully constructed, deftly managed, and constantly renegotiated self-brand.

While the articulation of entrepreneurial femininity we explored may at first blush seem to challenge conventional assumptions about male-dominated entrepreneurialism (e.g. Lewis, 2014; Marwick, 2013a), we do not believe these bloggers’ achievements should be read as wholly optimistic accounts of female empowerment in an age of social media. In fact, our findings suggest that these representations do little to resolve widespread gender stereotypes and social inequalities in the digital industries. For one, those in our sample adhered to what Banet-Weiser (2012) describes as “preexisting gendered and racial scripts and their attendant grammars of exclusion;” that is, they were overwhelming young, thin, and white (p. 89). The underrepresentation of women of color, LGBT, and plus-size models reveals how the playing field for “top-ranked” bloggers is highly uneven—even despite the outward countenance of “real women.” Moreover, the aesthetic that was represented in the blogs and Instagrams suggests a level of disciplining the body or physical maintenance that is often discussed in theories of aesthetic labor (Entwistle & Wissinger, 2006).

In closing, we must acknowledge that fashion bloggers and their content are bound to a capitalist system that reifies particular conceptions of femininity. The form of self-creation and brand-laden promotion they engage in ensures that they do not deviate too far from their traditional roles as consumer; in so doing, it privileges those with existing economic capital and/or individuals that conform to the aesthetic standards celebrated by mainstream media. These depictions of entrepreneurial femininity are thus inscribed within a culture that constructs women as feminine subjectivities, emotional laborers, and above all, consumers.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Notes

1. Defined as those who work in nontraditional environments and identify as freelancers, contractors, and/or self-employed.
2. The images used in this article have been made available to the public and are included as third-party material in a new work for the purpose of criticism and/or review. The images are directly referenced and critiqued, thus fair dealing applies, and their use falls under this copyright exception.
3. The others were Latina (2) and multi-ethnicity (1).

4. Based upon images on their blog including textual and visual data.
5. We acknowledge that some of these individuals may have managers/agents that help to construct their persona.
6. We gathered this dataset in July 2014, starting with each blogger's most recent Instagram post and collecting every 10th image until we had collected 20 images per blogger.
7. Interview informants are given pseudonyms, including those in our original sample.
8. See, for example, Moseley and Read (2002).

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