

*The It Girl in the Digital Age:  
A Look at the Cultural Shift of the Cool Girl*

by

Megan Lissner

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Sponsor: Joseph Russo

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Like many teenage girls, when I was in high school I was obsessed with the concept of the it-girl. I'd pore over candid photos of Alexa Chung in Miu Miu kitten heels at Glastonbury, Chloe Sevigny in a patent leather coat at a downtown premiere, (and Jane Birkin flaunting a belt sized mini skirt and straddling her husband for the photographer. Though each represented different eras and cultural moments, they all shared an enduring quality, a connective thread that linked them together. An it-girl can define her generation, and recent history has inarguably been defined by the concept of privacy and our withering relationship to it. In the nineties, an it-girl was primarily defined as someone whose personality and life overshadowed whatever work she was doing, and someone whose symbiotic relationship with the press and large scale media took precedence over that work. Still, she needed to be working, preferably on projects deemed indie and fresh-- but that wasn't a requirement. Reality television, then the internet and its slew of emerging social platforms changed this formula. In an age where isolation and social atomization has become an inevitable byproduct of the digital world, it's not surprising that it's caused a major shift in how we view public figures, and the way they're packaged and presented to us. Now, the term "it-girl" is a standin for a title that has yet to be invented, one that signifies being famous first. Maybe the modern version of the it-girl doesn't have any projects she wants to share, maybe she's not especially personable or captivating when it comes to the press. The press probably doesn't approach her at all, she probably communicates with her fans directly from her phone, her own means of reaching them and displaying her image.

The it-girl's constitution now, is almost the exact inverse of what it's been previously. Instead of photographers documenting her every move, the new it-girl is alone, unseen until she chooses not to be. She documents herself and has full control of her public presentation and perception. More often than not, she prefers to be alone rather than seen partying on Page Six. A

modern it-girl shows her audience a highly curated, but simultaneously intimate portrayal of her life. Now she controls the perception, she's the director of the movie that is her life. You like her for her artistic direction, the cute, ironic tchotchkes and objects she's carefully placed throughout those photos. The accessibility and simultaneous fantasy of these pictures are what becomes so alluring to the viewer. The curated persona takes on a life of its own, and therefore two versions of the self are being created: an "authentic" version and an idealized projection. Maybe she has separate ambitions from the online life she presents, perhaps they're related to this persona or perhaps they are antithetical to it. That doesn't seem to matter; she's only seen through the scope she's created for herself.

As much as there is a commonality to the behaviors and general aesthetics of the modern it-girl, her novelty also lies in her variety. The same social media landscape that creates one it-girl also enables thousands more to pop up and amass followings of their own. The sheer number of online personalities that garner a dedicated following are practically immeasurable. From that wide pool of content, certain niches arise and pockets of subculture form. This idea isn't entirely new, where there have been it-girls, there has always been an eager audience to fixate over her every move. However, through the design and accessibility of social media, cultural niches and dedicated fan bases are able to proliferate almost endlessly. The modern it-girl can no longer represent the current collective aesthetic of the zeitgeist, because there's no single cultural template everyone abides by; it is fractured and fast moving, no individual or particular aesthetic can define it. In the past, it-girls have defined eras and culture, they've functioned as singular icons, representatives of their time period. Now, due to the perfunctory nature of the celebrity in modern culture the term "iconic" is attributed to a set of qualities rather than a singular persona. The magnitude of that icon can be quantified and measured by public

opinion through social media likes that signify an innate approval. Even the term “iconic” itself has become shorthand for symbolizing the popularity and relevance of a specific persona. The modern it-girl’s reach may be larger, but her ability to actually shape the surrounding culture has lessened.

### X Girl

The most enduring quality of the it-girl is her authenticity, the cornerstone of nineties youth culture. The nineties were also a time of rapid cultural change. Suddenly it was cool and socially viable to have a dissonance between modern pop culture and your own identity, society had shifted from the icon to the iconoclast. It was a fleeting moment in an era where what was trendy wasn’t forecasted by corporatized culture, in fact it was created in direct opposition to its ideals. This collectively defiant attitude created and shaped subcultural movements like Riot Grrrl, the rowdy, punk third wave of feminism that urged young women to take personal agency, and not act in accordance with stereotypical feminine passivity. The movement placed a particular emphasis on the term “girl” as well, reclaiming its infantilizing connotation and using it as a way of invoking the feelings of freedom and confidence associated with childhood. Riot Grrrl was playing off of these shifting dynamics of girlhood and was invigorating the social environment and screen. A new wave of impressive and independent female artists and influences were also ushered in, and rebellious women or “girlhood” became a large subcultural element of the era. (Christa D’Angelica, 45)

This independent cultural spirit helped to define and solidify the term “it-girl” in a new and modernized way. The young women who have come to embody and represent this era were viable because their success came from what felt like self will and determination, not through

market saturation or business strategy. This is where the original it-girl's ethos of cool comes from; an emphasis of personal choice and taste over predigested culture's. The it-girls of the nineties weren't muses, they were something much more self assured and less passive.

Many women exemplified this cultural shift - think Kim Gordon, Sophia Coppola, Fiona Apple, Winona Ryder.- All were cool, self determined and produced or chose interesting projects. In terms of the pure "nineties it-girl", Chloe Sevigny perfectly epitomizes the role. Actress, model, indie muse and downtown queen of cool, any girl with a Tumblr and a pulse knows the cultural importance of Chloë Sevigny in the nineties. The young people who would later become iconoclasts and end up embodying an era never chose that task themselves, the culture decides who represents its temperament best. Everything about Chloë; her clothes, her boyfriend, her attitude, and her seeming indifference to her own celebrity, individualized her and came to embody the anti-establishment "cool" of the nineties. Though she was incredibly successful she seemed as if she achieved her fame organically. (Mcinerney) Chloë moved to New York City in 1993, though she had been routinely visiting on the weekends as a teenager, corralling her group of friends and traveling from her hometown of Darien Connecticut to hang out with skaters and ravers in Washington Square Park. At just seventeen she had been scouted to model in Sassy and ID magazine, both times having been approached spontaneously on the street for her eye-catching look. Once at a newstand on sixth avenue browsing magazines and the other in her friend's car by Washington Square Park. (Morse) Her style was as idiosyncratic as her personality; a mix of high and low, masculine and feminine, on trend and utterly perplexing. The confidence she embodied let her pull off any garment. She looked real and so did her clothing, never too polished or pristine at the risk of appearing prepackaged or, worst of all, mainstream. Her blonde hair alternated from being worn in long locks, tucked away in a Nefertiti hat or

shaved into a neat buzz cut. Chloë's image and style didn't rely on traditions of beauty or femininity, but this bold quality to reject aesthetic predispositions and normalities is ultimately what made her brand endure. Chloë's charisma didn't appear to stem from her external performance of femininity, but instead from her own internalization of self. She exemplified trendsetting in its purest form, fostering her own unique aesthetic that just so happened to catch mainstream attention as well. All of this, rather than putting off the public from her persona, instead captured their interest and distinguished her as a girl to take note of.

In 1995 Chloë nabbed her most notable and controversial film appearance in the nihilistic cult classic *KIDS*, written by her club kid boyfriend Harmony Korine. After the film's success and critical acclaim Chloë managed to tightrope walk between many disparate worlds - film, the art world, night life - without losing her reserved charisma and mystique. Even as she gained success and notoriety, she remained a fixture in the world of raves and designer drugs, bouncing around Manhattan and Brooklyn to couch crash and sublet dingy studios, even as a bonafide celebrity. Her brand's authenticity never dwindled because her life still matched the real world. This was embodied in her role as Jennie in *KIDS*, she was able to bring a rawness and vulnerability to the part that other actresses of that era were often missing. In Chloë's world there was still a list of bars and dives to drunkenly remember downtown, there was still the blacked out walk home and there was still a shitty apartment with a tub in the middle of the living room and only a cold pitcher of tap water in the fridge. (Mcinerney) This lifestyle solidified her status as the premiere it-girl, her less-than glamorous experiences were what cultivated and shaped her public image and allowed her to develop an enviable sense of self. This is a crucial aspect of being an it-girl, to be seen you must live life as freely and openly as possible, and this includes walking pie eyed and grinning down Broadway for everyone to see. (Mcinerney)

Chloë managed to maintain her status as an incredibly significant fixture in the New York scene while never sacrificing her title of being “down low”. Typically, the conundrum of being successful and down low is that the former will eventually catch up with the latter, and suddenly you’re a commercial figure, a commodity. Chloë was able to avoid this dreaded scenario, blowing off big name fashion brands and harboring a distinct dislike for being marketed in any way that crossed her own boundaries.

Above all, Chloë represented a time in culture that many from that era, and even those who didn’t experience it, look back on nostalgically. She was emblematic of a period where, for a moment, things seemed wildly hopeful. Where there was a communal interest in independence, alternative paths and the underground. It has taken on a mythical status for many young people today, a time where forgoing the industry-standard paths to success was not only trendy, but also increasingly viable. The nineties may have seen the cultural peak of that anti-establishment attitude, going against the grain was becoming the norm and, ironically, it required something really special to stand out in the sea of supposed nonconformists.

### TV Girl

After an era marked by anti commercialism, individualism and the underground, it's only natural that the next would usher in a cultural shift marked by gouache aesthetics, flagrant self promotion and celebrity worship. This shift could be attributed to a host of different factors; the new millennium, the end of the nineties indie dream, but a defining factor that fundamentally altered the idea and persona of the “it-girl” would ultimately be the advent and popularity of reality tv. “Reality tv” has always been a broad term. Even in its infancy during the early 2000s, there was a veritable gold rush of cocaine-addled producers and writers frantically rushing to figure out the most captivating formulas. The specific brand of reality tv I’m referring to, the one

that I think most embodies this era, is the wealthy but not quite famous, often first-person based tv. The most exemplary of these, and their influence on the concept of the new it-girl was *The Simple Life*. What Chloë Sevigny was to the nineties indie scene, Paris Hilton and Nicole Richie were to reality tv. Together they helped usher in a new era of transparent commodification. The show introduced a new iteration of celebrities and iconoclasts, ones that had been formed from heiresses. Airing with a cushy prime time spot on Fox, *The Simple Life* followed a hotel tycoon's grand daughter and a mega star's adopted daughter as they abandoned their luxurious LA lifestyle of partying to travel to Arkansa to work at fast food joints, dairy farms and scandalize conservatives Americans with their casual entitlement and mini skirts. (Kaplan) It's difficult to imagine this concept winning over an audience in our current cultural climate, but *The Simple Life* was a perfect media product for its time; materialistic, campy and practically exploitative. The show served as a precursor and template to reality phenomenons like *Keeping up with the Kardashians* and *The Real Housewives* franchise, shows and characters that would further the concept of blatant self branding. (Kaplan)

Both Nicole and Paris have remained relevant in the zeitgeist for various reasons, usually having something to do with the promotions of different products or personal scandals. Paris especially, was able to establish a personal brand and image that she herself created. She wasn't fully in control of the narrative she was portraying to the audience, but she had more of an influence on how to shape her public image than ever before. The show itself provided her with the platform to do so, and in this way she became the prototype for the modern influencer. She served as a cultural bridge between the traditional it-girl (partying, nightlife, rubbing shoulders with celebrities and constantly being documented by the paparazzi) and a newly minted breed of celebrity, one who was seemingly the architect of their own fame and was successful purely for



their image. (*Kaplan*) Licensing your person was not a completely novel concept, but Paris was the first celebrity to do so without having an explicitly profitable talent. She was able to monopolize the public's attention for her own gain, and transform it into a staggering revenue and eventually a massive business empire.

The image Paris portrays on the *Simple Life* - a ditzy, vapid rich girl archetype- is still the one she is most known for even to this day. Using a medium that supposedly relies on the authenticity of its characters' personalities, Paris was able to mostly obscure her true self and only portray her own curated projection. It's ironic that someone who built her career off the back of reality tv- a medium known for stripping back the artifice of situations, and exposing its participants- was able to avoid that fate and come out on top. Now, there's an entire industry based on the notion of reality tv characters creating a profitable personal brand through social media. (*Kaplan*)

The notion that Paris is "the first influencer" is not a novel one, it's fairly easy to observe how her unique public life and image created an early iteration of the personalities that dominate our current celebrity landscape. This moment marked where the traditional it-girl began to change in definition. The "it-girl" was now at a dissonance with modern culture and its celebrities, it was no longer something simple and identifiable. The term "it-girl" is now being used as a standin for a word not yet created, one that must signify the relationship between branding and public expression explicitly. This moment was also occurring at the advent of the modern internet and the precipice of social media, publicizing celebrities and their lives to a brand new degree. It seemed the attraction to mystique and privacy that had gripped the nineties had dissipated in favor of flashy and blatant over exposure. Authenticity was and still remained extremely important to the it-girl's image, but the context for what it entailed was changing.

### The Early Internet Age:

The changing landscape of the internet has undoubtedly provided new opportunities in terms of democratizing the act of self expression through commodification. Before branding and sponsorships were commonplace on the internet, it was a semi-lawless and unshapen platform. Social media was a budding and entirely new concept, not yet infused with the now normalcy of obsessive and perfected self documentation. Its intentions were seemingly innocuous and devoid of the blatant commercialization many sites have become so closely entwined with today.

MySpace was the original and most prominent iteration of early social media. Beginning in 2003, and reaching its full user peak around 2006, MySpace played an integral role in how social media platforms are structured today. Unlike previous prototypes like Friendster, or the niche and short lived Lunar Storm, MySpace allowed for an incredible amount of customization to a user's profile and a huge potential for digital outreach. (Jones) Because of these tools, users were able to cultivate a self image and project an identity that was entirely dictated by them. Music choices, personal quotes, and most importantly, a gallery of pictures gave way for the potential to embed your profile with the specific personality you wanted to project.

Myspace also served as a place where teenagers could get their first taste of online freedom and express themselves in an environment populated by their own peers. "Friends" were precursors to followers and carried a direct correlation to your online popularity. In 2006, Myspace's most popular profiles were "scene queens", the emo royalty of the mid 2000s. Some of the more notable names of these groups were Jac Vanek, Audrey Kitching, and Hanna Beth, all California based teenagers whose profiles skyrocketed with the increased popularity of MySpace and the emo music scene. (Jones) These girls, like the it-girls before them,

represented and embodied a specific cultural moment and subgenre. With their jagged hair, smudged eyeliner, rubber wristbands and cartoon tees, these girls ruled their corner of the online world. This subgenre, the emo and pop punk scene, straddled both the real world and now the digital, with big name bands mingling with the site's premiere scene queens and effectively cementing them as the candy colored obsessions of all their Myspace friends. Even before sponsorships and influencer branding were a mainstay of social media, many scene queens were able to leverage their online icon status into careers; modeling, acting, etc. They were able to utilize their abstract online fame and transform it into something more lucrative. The girls were lauded as genuine celebrities in their pocket of the internet, with forums dedicated to their personal lives and potential boyfriends, even setting up booths at Warped Tour to do signings and sell branded merchandise. Like Paris, scene queens were able to maintain both the trappings of an it-girl while also portraying their image and narrative in an online space. This can be attributed to how early on in the social media landscape scene queens were popular, giving them the ability to both create a personal online brand or image for their audiences, while also being part of a real life scene and community. (Sunderland) They were still known for the people they associated with, the parties they went to, and the chaotic, but enviable nature of their lives.

After the meteoric rise and then decline of Myspace, Facebook became the go to social platform, reigning supreme as the most used and widely known social media website for absolutely everyone and anyone. As Facebook was filling in this gap, the emergence of the blogging platform Tumblr was filling in a more niche position. Launched in 2007, Tumblr incorporated the customization of a Myspace or Facebook profile with long form, stream of consciousness blogging and images, shifting the format of digital social platforms into a brand new direction. Tumblr made it so every user's profile could be a curated collection of whatever

they wanted to present in their digital space: a photo, a quote, a post about their life. Tumblr's multimedia approach was what set it apart from larger and more well known competitors (Facebook, Twitter, etc.). The site's reblog button also made it even easier to share this content, it enabled even the most obscure posts or people to gain traction and popularity rapidly. The freedom of this approach paved the way for a landscape that established a variety of niche political movements, digital aesthetics and fixed Tumblr as the "online underground" of the internet. Perhaps the website's biggest draw was that it was not overly straightforward to use, it required a bit of savvy that made it especially appealing, like Myspace before it, to teens and young adults. Soon enough, as Tumblr gained traction as the social media your parents couldn't find, "tumblr girls" became a prominent part of the platform's makeup. (Jennings) The tumblr girl's appeal and desirability stemmed from being both aspirational as well as attainable. She was effortlessly glamorous and beautiful, but her pictures weren't professionally taken at a photo shoot; they were selfies she took in her parents house. The "soft grunge" style of some tumblr girls seemed emblematic of the aesthetic remnants of emo subculture; dark hair, pale skin, chokers and winged eyeliner. Tumblr was also heavily intertwined with the time's current indie music scene, once again providing a tangible bridge to the world of nightlife and partying associated with the image and life of the it-girl.

Tumblr also served as a marker of when online platforms shifted from friend requests to followers, enabling more of a hierarchical approach to online figures, cementing them more and more as celebrities or icons for public consumption. Tumblr girls represented a uniform and aspirational standard of beauty, every girl who followed their blog and "hearted" their picture most likely admired and wanted what that profile was presenting to them. Tumblr girls still had ties to the recklessness and wildness associated with traditional it-girl antics, but

they were becoming more manicured and uniform in their appeal. There was an increasing number of these girls, all with similar images, all competing to be an admired and desirable digital object for public consumption.

Instagram is the social media platform that filled in a huge gap in the online market and truly cemented the capital-I “Influencer” that can be seen today. This wasn’t always Instagram’s primary usage or even direct intention. Instagram was the first popular app to be an almost entirely visual, photo based medium. In its inception Instagram served as a refuge for former Tumblr users, those who were escaping a dying platform in favor of a shinier, better one. Like Tumblr, Instagram was initially clandestine compared to the other larger platforms (Facebook, Twitter). It served as a small, insular community for the people who used it, and sponsorships and algorithms had yet to affect the app’s format and overall usage. The initial intentions and use of Instagram is perfectly illustrated by the posts made by the app’s creators on its launch day. Founders of the app Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger, launched Instagram in October 2010 with a few inaugural photos; a taco stand, a blurry puppy and a cocktail. All had minimal captions and were heavily edited with Instagram’s now trademark filters. (Wise) These photos served as the template for what the early Instagram user’s feed and profile would resemble; simple objects, pleasures and moments from your day. This genre of photo and posting still exists in modern day Instagram, but is easily overshadowed by the host of professional and ad sponsored posts that propagate the app to no end. Instagram remained independently owned and run for two years before it was bought by Facebook for nearly one billion dollars in company shares and cash.(Wise) This instantaneously increased the app’s propensity for commercialization, and once

companies began to perfect the use of internet and social media as a means of making money, the entire landscape of Instagram's platform changed dramatically from its inception.

This shift in Instagram's landscape is now a well established part of its history and remains relevant to the app in the current moment. Naturally, it makes sense that out of every social media platform Instagram became the premiere app for marketing and commodification. Growing exponentially in users every year, the once seemingly small community feel of the app had disappeared as popularity skyrocketed. Its informal and loose feel had dissipated and suddenly everyone had an account. Posts seemed much more perfected, like finalized or reviewed products now ready for public consumption. As big name celebrities and brands also joined the app, it wasn't them who were successfully influencing their audiences to buy certain products, it was seemingly "normal people" who were making a large impact on the public and growing huge followings. (Pilon)

The app was also purely visual, making it the perfect medium for smiling influencers to proudly display moisturizer, headphones, laxative teas, you name it. Photos with quippy captions and clickable hashtags worked great as marketing tools, and as the rise of Instagram influencers and partnered sponsorships became more and more prevalent, companies started dedicating large chunks of their advertising budget to marketing their products through the app. Instagram itself began to cater its interface to marketing as well, gradually creating new profile features to aid product promotion, including fully sponsored posts, business profiles, audience demographic statistics and even a shopping marketplace. The app also infamously changed its algorithm, shifting from viewing posts in simple chronological order to a feed's most popular posts being prioritized instead. (Wise)

This platform change has essentially turned Instagram into an influencer playground, providing accounts with every tool they need to commodify themselves and encourage their followers to buy whatever product they see on their feed. In terms of where influencers flock to gain commercial visibility and success, Instagram is a clear choice.

### (It) Fluencer

The influencer market is now a billion dollar industry, giving it a cultural impact of global proportions. With our real and digital lives continuously blending into one another, influencers now feel as commonplace as celebrities, receiving the same fervent dedication and worship, only now amplified by the internet and a direct pipeline to fans. They can also be just as financially successful as traditional celebrities. In terms of ways to amass wealth, becoming an influencer is an increasingly valid career route. Influencers are able to make huge profits from their followings, using themselves and their brand as a commodity. One of the biggest ways influencers profit off of their high ranking social presences is through affiliate marketing. With affiliate marketing, influencers place special links or coupon codes into their posts or in their profile bio. When people click on the links or use the codes at checkout, the influencer makes a profit from a small fee. Unsurprisingly, one of the biggest affiliate marketing programs for influencers is through Amazon. Another major option is sponsored posts, in this case, sponsored posts can be virtually any type of content created for commission. This can be anything from a full throated video endorsement, to a single post on a story. The product being promoted is typically incorporated into the content, whether that be blatant (displaying the product and urging your audience to buy it), or covert (having the product on your shelf, and referring to it as a must-have part of your routine). It is now mandatory to disclose if your content is indeed

sponsored and created for profit. In addition to sponsored posts, influencers may also become brand ambassadors. While sponsored posts are often one time events, brand ambassadorships are frequently long term commitments. (Bradley) An influencer might sign a six to twelve month ambassador arrangement with a brand, cementing a long term, symbiotic relationship between the two. Ambassadorship also requires more than just promoting the brand. Oftentimes influencers will act as a spokesperson for the product on the brand's account or website. ("How to start a brand ambassador program: The ultimate guide") One of the most well known and long scrutinized examples of brand ambassadorship with influencers, is the Kardashian's long running partnership with "Fit Tea". Kim, Khloe and Kourtney often post content of them pouring the diet supplement into shake bottles and posing in beige workout sets, with captions reading "Doing a tummy makeover on @flattummytea and I'm feeling good on this stuff!" This partnership has long garnered criticism from people who believe the endorsement of a diuretic sludge from misinformed millionaires to be a wildly irresponsible, and transparently cynical move. It's just as easy for one to imagine that the Kardashians never used this product to begin with, and therefore can't even attest to whether they're peddling pure snake oil or not. The situation seems incredibly emblematic; a perfect display of the carelessness and exploitative nature influencer's endorsements and product pushes can have. (Carroll)

It's hard to pinpoint exactly who or what the modern day influencer is or looks like, because there seems to be an endless amount of them. Instagram has become a uniform sea of online personas, and though they might change slightly in aesthetic, they are often impossible to tell apart. Each influencer is capable, or at least aspiring to achieve success by modeling their own brand off of other influencers. In a time where culture and trends are incredibly splintered,



influencers tend to serve as a form of hegemony or mono culture. Individuality or variety may seem as though it's being expressed in certain instances, but really it's just replication.

Coca-Cola, Dr Pepper and Fanta all have different packaging, and even taste different, but the main ingredient is still high fructose corn syrup. Influencers themselves are products, so why would you change a product's formula for success if it's currently working?

Influencers all share a few distinct commonalities and qualities, one being that your image must be perfectly manicured and attractive at all times. Our intrigue and obsession with influencers rarely stems from their escapades or personas, but instead from their projected perfection and idealized lives. As an influencer, you are always selling something, whether that's an object, a service, an idea or yourself and your own content. When you yourself function as a commodity you have to treat yourself like one, never letting your image falter or look undesirable. This is crucial for the influencer's brand, to maintain an attractive and inviting presence, even vulnerability and intimate revelations are filtered through strict curation. Because of this, influencers are always projecting and maintaining a certain character for their audience, playing a part or the version of themselves that has absolutely no discernible cracks or flaws. While the influencers and it-girls of social media's past also were playing into an idealized version or digital character of themselves, there seemed to be more realism to them, they didn't yet have the ultra polished veneer of commercialism embedded into influencers in the current digital landscape. Though the hypothetical appeal of an influencer is her authenticity and essentially being successful by virtue of their own personality, any and all negative aspects of her personality or life are a detriment to her brand marketability if they're not properly processed. Everything from a girl's style, to her attitude, to her cultural references are calculated choices. They're constructed qualities, even if it is a unique or individual presentation of self (a vintage

hat, a wicker bag, a cool bed frame) it's performance. Once those objects are presented for digital consumption they're sending a message and symbolizing something specific. This makes it so there can never be much vigor or spontaneity to an influencer's character and image, nothing truly candid or new can be captured when it's already been so heavily curated.

Just in aesthetic sensibilities alone, it's easy to see how uniformity and hegemony have stylistically taken over the influencer sphere. Every niche or community seems to have established a certain uniform and if you want to become popular within that niche you need to dress the part. Babydoll dresses, loafers, patagonia puffers, bucket hats, Teflar bags, all serve as aesthetic objects that signify the persona an influencer is projecting to their audience. It communicates who they are and where they fit into, and if you like that look maybe you can emulate that same persona. Within the realm of social media it's nearly impossible to find a unique or purely individual look, every garment and outfit seems to be borrowing from one another. Each look feels derivative and originality seems almost futile when your stylistic ambition revolves solely around monetary and social gain. Instagram acts as an echo chamber for style, establishing the most popular looks and acting as a template for those who want to model themselves off of it. There's no room for digression, because there's no market for aesthetic sensibilities that seem unrecognizable to an audience. Even when something seems unique or different, it's often simply a riff on a preapproved appearance. With this prescribed and predefined notion of style, there's no outlet for opposing forms of expressions. The it-girl used to function as a trendsetter in the clearest sense of word, piecing together an outfit that was new and exciting, a hodgepodge of influences and expressions. When an it-girl got dressed and stepped onto a red carpet for a premiere or out of an after party at 2:00 am, people took note of her ensemble. Every it-girl of her time has had a distinctive look, a defining aura that was

unmistakably her. Could the same be said of any popular modern influencers? It's impossible to imagine a million follower influencer rifling through fishnet slippers in Chinatown like Chloë (Natale), or donning a baby blue siron at the MTV Movie Awards like Paris.

A non-negotiable, essential part of the it-girl is having a certain element of chaos and spontaneity embedded into your life and actions. Chaos was a quintessential aspect of the public lives and even work of both Chloë and Paris (*Kids* and the *Simple Life* respectively). An it-girl is at all the right parties, she sets a trend in an outfit she threw together at the last minute, she's seen with whomever she pleases and doesn't care what happens after. The it-girl persona represents a life without limits, one where caution is sent to the wind and every experience is a good one because she's the one doing it. An it-girl acts on her impulses and makes hedonism look good. She attracts attention because she acts how everyone wants to but is either too reasonable or afraid to do so. Few are brave enough to lean into their impulses, and so everyone watches the it-girl with a mix of captivation and jealousy, wanting to see how far she'll go. The attention becomes her, she acquires it naturally and she never has to try for it because vying for publicity is inherently uncool. The role of the influencer is the exact opposite. The influencer can never go beyond her limits, even when she's pushed. She has a pristine image to uphold and anything that makes her stray away from that image undermines her curated perfection. She must remain perfect in her banality, never too controversial and therefore never too interesting. The desire to appeal to as wide an audience as possible, and broaden your reach as far as it can go, ironically undermines any sense of your own authenticity or humanity .

What makes the it-girl so captivating is her apparent indifference to public attention. Having a blatant hunger for that attention automatically excludes you from the title. To gain the social and financial benefits of prominent influencer status you have to make the conscious

decision to strive for that ideal, and that ambition itself is often achieved by copying those who are already successful. If being cool is purely done with the intent of gaining capital, what coolness is really left?

In order to be successful an influencer has to create two versions of the self: the authentic self and the idealized self. The idealized self functions as the projection or character an audience is allowed to see, this self soaks up pre-approved, selected traits, ones that are palatable and most importantly marketable. Given the scope an influencer creates for themselves, there's no room for any wildness in their persona. It's impossible to become a trendsetter when your stylistic choices need to reflect what's already popular in order to be desirable.

One of the most representative differences from the it-girl to the modern day influencer is how she's presented to the world. The shift from paparazzi stepping over one another to get a picture of an it-girl on a night out to instead, an influencer turning the camera on herself in her own bedroom, was drastic. Before, you needed to be out to be photographed, you needed to be in public to have the chance to be publicized. Now you can reach your audience from behind your own screen, and you have the added ability to be your own paparazzi, affording you the safety net of curation. I think the difference here is fundamental, once you no longer need to go out to be seen, why go out at all? There's a reason girls have gone from drunkenly stumbling out of the party to taking webcam pictures in bed. Now, they are in full control of their own image and have no reliance on traditional media for help. There can be no opportunity for recklessness and spontaneity when you solely control how you're perceived, when everything is planned. The concept of the it-girl relies on the presence of community, something the internet has eliminated and subsequently become a shallow substitute for. There's no draw to going out if your entire life takes place in the digital world. This is a culturally pervasive notion, one that has in some way slipped into modern life from social media taking up an increasing amount of our time. It's

emblematic of the digital age's simultaneous atomization of one another, as well as its constant assault on our privacy. Influencers are able to create a sense of intimacy with their content, they can make their audience feel as if they're seeing the interior of their everyday life. The life of mystery and nonchalance previously led by the it-girl is becoming increasingly obsolete in today's world. We live in a current landscape where we can no longer fully and unabashedly experience things, instead we strategically observe them and wish to be observed back, from behind our screens. Because of this, there's no room for areas of ambiguity. Everything is rigid, it is or it isn't. The social climate that digital media has now created is no longer conducive to the it-girl, and her reckless lust for life.

In a time of constant surveillance and minute to minute monitoring, it can feel incredibly difficult to imagine a time where this wasn't our reality. Living under the watchful eye of social media can take a toll on how we interact not just with one another, but with the world around us in general. As a result, fear is able to take hold of us much easier than before; fear of being perceived wrong, of acting wrong. It creates a barrier between us and the tangible world. An influencer's number one priority is projecting an image of nothing less than perfection, to act in a way no one could deem offensive or uncharacteristic of their persona. With these social parameters showing no signs of stopping, the attitude and zeal of the original it-girl will most likely become obsolete.

### Micro Influencers: Authenticity

Influencers' prevalence in the digital world has been a long-running theme for years now. As the marketplace and demand for influencers continues to grow at a healthy pace, a variety of new archetypes and forms emerge. Within these new archetypes are many more niche and sub-cultural specific influencers, ones that provide a certain particularity to their audiences that other maybe larger names don't. There's an influencer market for seemingly every subject:

motherhood, to food, to Mormonism, if there's any kind of digital community surrounding it, it's more than likely representative of influential ambassadors as well. These personalities are often distinguished as micro influencers, accounts that have somewhere between ten thousand to a hundred thousand followers and often capitalize off a specific niche or community. These micro influencers fill a niche void left by the larger, more outwardly "commercial" figures, and may provide a sufficiently indie alternative. Oftentimes brands who partner with micro influencers use their account's limited but targeted reach to their advantage, utilizing a direct and dedicated consumer base that feels an understanding with that influencer and will therefore trust their judgments and recommendations. ("Who are micro-influencers & how to find them") Big influencers can oftentimes reach the status of celebrity, their brands and images becoming so big that their endorsements or product partnerships feel disingenuous or inauthentic. When you're a huge account with a seemingly endless stream of product endorsements and deals, your audience may grow fatigued and tired of your highly curated feed of advertisements. This is where the perceived "authenticity" of micro influencers comes into play. Brands feel micro influencers are able to cut through the noise with a genuineness and a direct rapport with their audience. Micro influencers focus on promoting brands and products that align with their interests and skill set, making their audience feel as if it's a friend casually telling them about their new purchase. This cultivates a unique relationship between the audience and the influencer, one that feels unbiased and ultimately trustworthy to the consumer.

Within the world of the micro influencer, a specific variety that garners a lot of engagement is the "lifestyle influencer". The title of "lifestyle influencer" itself is a very broad one, but essentially this influencer's overall focus is the inherent aestheticization and by extension commodification of their everyday life. This is of course also prevalent in the content of large

influencers, but the distinction between the two comes from how the micro influencer is able to present her life and surroundings in a more down-to-earth and accessible way. Where a mainstream influencer might post photos in her lush, beach side airbnb in Mykonos, Croatia, or some other destination most of her audience will never get to see, a micro influencer shows you her small but charmingly decorated one bedroom apartment. The lifestyle micro influencers closet is still perfectly curated and all vintage, her kitchen is full of hand made ceramics and she's always taking walks in her adorable neighborhood. She represents an aspirational ideal that's attainable in comparison to the opulence and at times unfathomably luxurious lives of mainstream influencers. She's able to entice you into her own aestheticized world while making sure not alienating you from it completely. This is where the micro influencer is able to succeed in a way that the larger influencer is not, she's able to appeal to her audience in a way that doesn't isolate them in terms of relatability. You don't have the resources to live like Kylie Jenner, but it's a feasible goal to have a similar life to, and even communicate directly with the girl on instagram with thirty thousand followers. This relatability in turn creates a dedicated following of audience members who feel as if they know an influencer.

When discussing both concepts of the influencer and the it-girl, authenticity is a key word used in the conversation. It's a sought after quality in the digital world, and for micro influencers in particular it's possibly their biggest asset. Micro influencers are able to cultivate a sense of authenticity within their community through a direct discourse and engagement with their audience, and are then able to commodify that presentation of authenticity. (Finnegan) In terms of lifestyle micro influencers, many use multiple platforms including YouTube for their content. A video platform like YouTube is a great way for them to further foster that relationship with their audience and make them feel as though they know you on a more personal level than they

actually do. Through video you're able to fully display your projected self to your audience and they're able to feel an emotional attachment to you, despite the virtual barrier. Many lifestyle influencers will utilize the medium of video to talk to their audiences directly, making them feel as though they're involved and in a two sided conversation. Lifestyle influencers often ask their audience questions and urge them to leave their responses in the comments below, as well as ending their videos with personalized sign offs to the viewer, exclaiming "I love you guys!"

By virtue, the micro influencer is much more open and honest with her audience than that of a mainstream influencer. She feels less of a need to maintain a facade of pristine perfection and instead uses it as a way to relate to and share with her audience. When a micro influencer is constantly sharing snippets from their life with a dedicated audience who tunes in to witness their escapades daily, it can lead to what is known as a "parasocial relationship". Parasocial relationships occur when fans of a celebrity or persona extends emotional energy, interest or time, while the other party, the persona, has little to no knowledge of their existence. Parasocial relationships are not a new phenomenon, they've been around in some capacity as long as there has been the celebrity, (for extreme examples think young Paul McCartney fans weeping outside of his wedding to Linda Eastman or John Hinckley Jr. dutifully attempting presidential assassination for Jodie Foster) but they've become extremely common in the hyper saturated influencer age. Parasocial relationships themselves seem to go hand in hand with the social atomization the internet has created, making it easier and easier to simply forgo the anxiety of cultivating complicated real life connections and instead find security in one sided ones.

(Gleason, et al) While lifestyle influencers are only showing a tiny fragment of their lives to their audiences, just that small exposure can feel like an unfiltered look into their reality. Just having a quick look at any lifestyle influencer's comment section will reveal the deep investment audience



members can feel in the life of their favorite persona. *Leah's Fieldnotes*, a lifestyle Youtuber and micro Instagram influencer has cultivated an audience that functions as an exemplary display of viewers who feel a deep understanding and personal relationship with their favorite social media presence. A look at the comments on one of Leah's most viewed videos, "*Navigating a Breakup: Stage 1*", show an outpouring of not just support and sympathy for her, but also personal devastation to the individual viewer to see that her relationship had ended. The top comment on the video reads; "Silently knew that something was up but I couldn't imagine them without each other. I love them so much and their videos have inspired me so much." Other comments expressed a similar sentiment, stating how heartbroken they were and how unprepared they were to see the couple part ways. ("Navigating a breakup (stage 01): Trying to stay afloat") All these comments garner thousands of likes, both by fellow audience members as well as the creator herself, affirming the notion that despite never truly knowing these people and them never knowing you, you are right to be in deep mourning over the end of their private relationship. One comment even thanked Leah for showing her what a healthy relationship looked like, despite only ever seeing the curated snippets the creator chose to post. This is ultimately the key to micro influencers success, building a community that feels as though they're friends with everyone within it. With lifestyle influencers in particular, making the audience feel updated and involved with the minutiae of the influencer's personal life creates a strong involvement on the viewer's end. Who are they dating? What city are they moving to? Are they happy? The micro influencer will let their audience know all these things and more, letting their audience peek into that window of their life and feel as though they too are being understood.

The makeup of the lifestyle micro influencer is considerably closer to the it-girl in an aesthetic and social sense, but in terms of true authenticity and personality, she still doesn't come

close. While a micro influencer may appear to follow the distinguishing characteristics of an it-girl more closely than that of a huge influencer who seems detached from the world around her, the micro influencer's projection of "authenticity" still only runs skin deep. The micro influencer can show her audience fragments of her life through her content, and because those fragments appear grounded and at times even intimate, the audience can believe them to be fully authentic. By definition, there is no truly authentic way to live your life online, it's a curated platform, one you have full control of. The it-girl's life is a stream of consciousness, she doesn't worry about curation she leaves that up to those observing her life. There are multiple layers to the presentation of yourself online, when you pose and photograph yourself that act itself is curated and by extension inauthentic. Then posting that photo to a public forum and maybe writing an accompanying caption adds an additional layer of curation, a finalized product now ready for consumption. In that way, despite not having a direct correspondence with admirers or treating them as a community like the micro influencer does, the public is able to better know the it-girl because her life is constantly public.

The it-girl has become an entirely new and evolving concept within culture as we know it today. What was once a reflection of society's overarching cultural temperature has now fractured and come to reflect multiple different niches within the digital and real world. The it-girl is a symbol of time that has eclipsed us, it represents a world that no longer seems feasible. The idea of an active and thriving social community that can then appoint an it-girl as a representative, seems almost outlandish now when the majority of the social world and its

interactions happen online. The act of going out and being seen is no longer as common or viable as projecting an image of staying at home with only her phone for documentation. The idea of the it-girl living as freely and recklessly as she possibly can now seems like a dream from a past life, one where tabloid fodder and paparazzi photos created gossipy discourse. (Smith) Now the discourse and celebrity gossip that functioned as the it-girl's life blood has been delegated to the comment section of instagram posts. The "it" factor, the indescribable but enduring quality possessed by the likes of Paris, Chloe, Nicole, etc. can't truly be translated through a screen. It's something organic, that can't be reproduced or performed for a digital audience. Now, even when a well intentioned girl attempts to recreate the magic and spontaneity of the it-girls of yore, it never feels the same, it's a cheap recreation, devoid of the destructive and exciting energy the title once possessed. "It" is no longer something you have happen to you, it's a project, something you must work for in order to achieve. On social media an influencer is able to put on a mask of having "it", without having any of the necessary other factors that give someone the "it-factor". But a facade can only last so long, and when none of the excitement or chaos that accompanies the it-girl's persona is evident in the influencer's own, it becomes apparent how hollow and uninteresting her persona truly is. No matter how much a girl perfects her pouty, dissociative pose for the gram, she'll never have the undeniable pulling power of the wild it-girls who came before her.

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