

God Fearing Content Creating:
Affective Worlds of American Homemakers as Digital Influencers

by

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INTRODUCTION

Nearly every social media site implements a “stay logged in” cookie that collapses the threshold between being online and being offline. Push notifications constantly beckon and entering into the space takes less than a few quick passive finger gestures and haptic responses to be “in.” This is something intuitive, this is smooth, this is merging and blending. This is what everyone knows.

In beginner guides to user interface design, “invisibility” of design is rhetorically paramount, with task pathways and flows. These massive and domineering online hubs, like Instagram, are multifunction social and shopping plazas, and in them, the “task pathways” are designed to be overwhelming and disorganized. The application is everything at once, and shifting often- famously, the “post” button turning into a promotional pathway for the Reels space, to rival TikTok.

The same passivity of logging in extends to changing accounts, with a few gestures, you change managerial positions, between “private” and public accounts, between modes and personas. A “flow” becomes a suspension. Most if not all of these sites have switched away from chronological feeds with no option to reorganize. Instagram offers the present, but does not privilege or define it. 20 seconds ago above a 2 days ago above a 1 hour ago. Some appear before others, best friends before acquaintances, but often strangers or fascinating know-the-name-and-I-lingered-too-longs get stuck reasserting themselves back into your conscious, or subconscious, at the surface of the feed. From the beginnings of the medium, photography has always concerned itself with ghosts, and selfie art has a history, specifically by women artists, of being about gendered embodiment, and about the void captured by the

medium, photography memorializing what only was for a fleeting and ungraspable present. (Sylvester 2019).

I arrived at my field site organically living and browsing on the internet, choosing the space of Instagram. The subjects of this project, what I can describe best as domestic influencers, share flashes of content by way of 24-hour disappearing “Stories” or family photography and/or advertisements for products and subscriptions. On Instagram specifically, their content mixes in with those I follow that are in my real life, those I love most, my family, and the periphery folks of my multi-year Instagram following accumulation. I check-in and out of the documented lives of these influencers with the same compulsivity of my social use. I process quickly and discard heaps of waste memory, I look away and often can’t recollect in detail what I just witnessed. There is frustration and tension in trying to be lingered on in the infinite scroll. Paid lifestyle workers and the unpaid lifestyle consumers both share this intense space, often putting in a similar amount of labor for recognition.

In my focus, the family influencer, “stories” become a dominant medium. With an even shorter span of attention, storytelling becomes gamified. Interacting with Story tools that can ask followers questions, as well as quick linking and polling, are important ways of building relationships, and active engagement blends them deep into a daily routine. In this exchange, even the silence of no new stories may suggest a story unpictured: births, deaths, there is some disruption that we queue into once this relationship forms.

I don’t appear to be the average follower of these influencers, I’m not a fan of big box stores and fast fashion, and often I have different politics about topics that seep into even the most politically avoidant influencers- on topics like traditional values and patriotism. Even so, the integration of these influencers into the feed of my family and friends feels like an

appropriate orientation toward feeling the connection between these influencers and their followers. Albeit critical, I'm not a hater. I get excited when I catch live Story posting, and fill out linked forms guessing the weight and hair color of a newborn, with the off chance of winning a Starbucks gift card. Writing and logging through this consumption feels like pushing back against letting content pour over me and through me and out of me. I analyzed short-form video, photography, and captions, as well as comment sections, Reddit threads, and Facebook fan groups. In the scope of this project, I did not conduct interviews, as the subject of study is these online expressions of influencer and followers. I joined a Facebook group for the community of Kansas Michalke, read through countless comment threads, usually moderated clean of inevitable internet hate, and followed tabloid and nighttime news coverage of Brittany Dawn's lawsuit.

In the scope of this project, I can't speak for the followers, whether or not they actually buy the products the influencers sell or make judgments on whether fostering parasocial relationships with influencers is healthy, as there is inevitably a myriad of different experiences and outsider/insider orientations that I don't feel could benefit from generalizations or probed successfully further than their own already expressed reactions in comment sections. These public expressions do have merit and are a part of the affective worlds and outward presentation that I wish to focus on.

Further, my work with internet culture is an inquiry generally into control. I write to try to stop a passive engagement with an excess of content, and I try to take back my view of reality, articulating it through my language. Influencers put their "stuff" out there, sometimes more constructed to be more outwardly and intentionally vulnerable, but always including the image of their family, their children, and their home for the purpose of building a relationship with you to

convince you to buy things. This is the simplest it can get. I struggle to figure out whether they have control or not. They choose a few frames a day, they choose the orientations and aesthetics, and they're often their boss. They have things they share and boundaries they don't cross. The business of making your intimate public is contingent upon these negotiations with the self, and then further with your platform and your audience. In their specific content, the domestic space they influence is concerned with control, in the precision and drive toward decorating, parenting, the ethics of diet and wellness, and the fictive agency of consumer choice.

In the introduction to Lauren Berlant's *Intimacy*, there are several ways in which intimacy exists and transforms, or dealt with. Berlant references Jurgen Habermas in which the intimate is the "stuff" of the public sphere in liberal democracy. Classical publics prepared citizens for their self-governing role in intimate spheres of domesticity through critical public discourse over the intimate. The public is constructed as an analog in this purpose to, as Berlant notes, tabloids and Reality TV in ways that are similar to the reality-straddling role of influencers.

Berlant tries to detach the idea of intimacy. from this governing role and suggests that there are more mobile forms of attachment, harder to organize, and based on drive and desire. Berlant's goals in freeing intimacy from self-governance are in the context of situating queer identity out from the trappings of identifications, and a look toward potential anti-capitalist futures. It is this work of imagination itself, the world of fantasy, that is enriched in its forward drive by the power of intimacy, and can have potentials outside of hegemonic trappings, "[intimacy] is interfered with by metadiscourse (relationship talk) and prefers the calm of internal pressure, the taken-for-grantedness of the feeling that there would be a flowing reiteration where the intimate is" (Berlant 1998). Intimacy becomes problematized when it's brought to language, intimacy, when named needs to be hegemonically incorporated. Intimacy, when brought into

language, can mark identities, and push us into arrangements, and loyalties. As much as intimacies have bound us to the relationships which sustain our society as we know it, Berlant sees the power in “intimate unintelligibility” to be a route for new directions, and new attachments that the inherent abstraction of intimacy fuels.

When assessing functionally are marketing strategies that domestic influencers implement to widen profit margins and direct consumers to affiliate links, I wish not to simply lament the clear construction of it all, the “fakeness” that popular works on influencers seek to uncover and expose. Youtube videos and Reddit threads rifle through these influencers’ content, trying to find holes, hypocrisies, evidence of harm or abuse, or expose a political affiliation. There is some merit in the notion that domestic influencers are harmful, that it is a job that blurs boundaries of consent with children, and can promote standards for beauty, wealth, and consumerism that are unattainable. In one of the more extreme examples, a family vlogging Youtube channel is no longer on the site following losing custody of two of their children, a decision sparked by prank videos in which a father berated and humiliated his son in published videos. In a media landscape in which these criticisms have long reached the national stage, the domestic influencers included in this project operate with these ideas in mind. I am not interested in assessing whether they have achieved an ethical balance, but rather the ways they display a negotiation between their reality and their virtual marketing work, and the ways many try to elude easy intelligibility into culture wars.

A blog post on the company website for Parker Management, which oversees a number of the domestic influencers I follow, headlines, “What is a lifestyle influencer and why the heck we love them...” The Lifestyle Influencer is indicative of many of the top talent represented by the company. The Lifestyle Influencer is a key to success in a crowded landscape of online

marketing. The post describes, “Along with making us laugh or showing us that we too can build that mudroom bench, they are fun and fearless and we can’t wait for the next Story slide to see what they’re cooking for dinner. It’s an inspiration on a different – and updated – level rather than scrolling on Pinterest or flipping through a magazine.” Hybrid work of domestic life is uniquely parallel to this advice of unclear boundaries and multiplicities of roles. The category of “lifestyle” is but a stand-in for a harder to pin down relationship a consumer can have to advertisement.

In a feminist impulse, I am inclined not to write off this women’s work of influencing. Emma Grey Ellis, in an article for *Wired* magazine, “Why Women are Called ‘Influencers’ and Men ‘Creators,’” points out the reassertion of gender roles onto self-categorizations in the field and emerging academic “platform studies”, noting that many men who do online work don’t identify with the word “influencer”, and also have a strong propensity against being interviewed in articles that include influencers by name. On top of a level of misogyny that may feminize the identifier “influencer,” there is an additional meaning of influencing as adopting the work or lifestyle into your identity that men may feel less inclined to accept. Ellis notes that many male “content creators” use a particularly telling photography trope of artfully arranged objects seen from above, with clear boundaries, gaps, and a view from the eye of the creator. Women influencers, in this theorizing, have some awareness and acceptance of themselves as being a part of the product, as subjects of whom society awards back agency for being a part of their objectification.

In this feminized women’s work of homemaking, as it coalesces with the world-making that makes a “lifestyle influencer” successful, new forms of intimacy arise between homemaker influencers, and, from my analysis, the mostly homemaker followers. This intimacy exists in the

structures of self-governance, as well as something Berlant looks for, a more abstract and indiscernible attachment. Those intimacies use the visual power of the image, the reproductive qualities of image sharing, and the subsequent spectacle, defined by Guy DeBord as representing people “solely in terms of their subordination to commodities, and experience itself becomes commodified” (DeBord 1967). At a point where the medium of the internet has become so entrenched, and the boundaries have dissolved, I am seeking out a redemptive clarity gained from the relationships we’ve stumbled into and the new intimacies that have emerged, instead of admitting to numbness and nihilism, or holding onto some idea of there being a way we can go back, or ever truly log off without leaving society.

I keep a tab open while doing this project, an AI art generator, NeuralBlender, which has gotten popular quickly. I write image descriptions of the Instagram pictures from the influencers. Each one takes around 10 minutes to process and generate, breaking up input and output that requires a type of patience and intentionality that feels in direct opposition to social media consumption. I try to get more and more specific, hoping it will spit back out the exact image I’m describing, trying to get the AI on the same page as me, to produce the same affective qualities right back to me. What it ends up generating is correspondingly uncanny in a different direction of absurdity, and something new. This chain of associations and misunderstandings plays with the speculative practice of letting go.



A blonde middle-aged woman and her husband pose in front of their pillar entryway to their French style mansion home in Texas, which decorated with an overabundance of fall pumpkins
17 Nov 2021 0:41:58



Mama wearing a distressed band tee from forever 21, holding her baby with a big pink bow, outside of their SUV in the driveway of their Texas home, with the sun setting behind them
17 Nov 2021 0:27:54

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Grounding research into digital influencers is a matter of understanding how power functions, in what political backgrounds it can wield influence, and the material geographies of the platform that they use, or rather how these platforms use them. Traditional celebrities, like models, actors, musicians, and TV stars have come into doing marketing on social media in various ways, but those are an extension of a previously established public relations and persona creation and are one medium of many that make up the modern-day celebrity. All of the influencers in the scope of this project have achieved their relative fame solely coming about from their influencing work, specifically stemming from the niche of traditional homemaking, and paired with the material culture of American Christianity being an integral structural backdrop for the “influencing” to resonate with the American public.

In Volume 3 of *The History of Sexuality, Care of the Self*, Michel Foucault analyzes the key ontological framework that structured cities as described in classical philosophies. The construction of the individual takes on different forms that are not necessarily fixed together, such as the freedom of being judged by society independently, self-orientated relationships with family, and the self as a knowledge project (Foucault 1988:42). Foucault argues that the “cultivation of the self” is a principle that directs the art of existence laid out by ancient philosophers. Ethics, the groupings of learned behavior that one should enact in the relationship one has with oneself, is the labor of the cultivation of the self. In turn, self-construction fosters a public life, servicing the structure of ancient city-states expanding territory, and the centers of control and discipline becoming mobile. This responsibility of self care is, by all means, is not an exercise in solitude, but a social practice constituting a confession of the soul, including mentoring, “which for that matter constitutes a beneficial exercise for the giver, who is called the

preceptor, because he thereby reactualizes it for himself” (Foucault 1988:51). Early Christian Thinkers, Foucault notes, heavily borrowed and incorporated this classical idea of ethics that has come to define Christian relationships to the body, sexuality, and self-examination. This idea has had major implications on the positive construction of the late modern person, as an individual having the right to be a consumer concerned with the adjustment of the self.

The coalescing between the ancient basis of liberal democracy with the media consumerism of today requires an understanding of major political projects which use individualism as a given to implant a particular set of ideas and policies. Anthropologist David Graeber in “Neoliberalism: An Extremely Brief Introduction” reckons with people's relationships with both the impacts and the term itself of neoliberalism, an economic policy system and hegemonic mode that has influenced social relations since the 1970s, privileging free and unregulated markets, global trade, and economic austerity, particularly against social welfare. Graeber notes that most Americans don't recognize or relate to the term “neoliberalism,” even though it is such a force in American life that influences most cultural production. The incorporation of individualism into the rhetoric of neoliberalism amounts to “a simultaneous emphasis on personal self-realization for the affluent, and of ‘personal responsibility for the poor’” (Graeber 2010:8). This analysis sums up the dual soft power of neoliberal ideology and how this ideology is embedded in so-called “common sense” in US social relations. The ideal self in this model is a goal post that is constantly moved, where the constant pursuit of bettering oneself through specific ethics becomes who you are, lest you be socially outcast or severely punished by a carceral system. Using this foundational analysis, the basis for the power of influencing is ingrained in how we see ourselves, that we are an individual by way of

self-examination, and these influencing relationships we create, not just with experts, but with anyone who can confidently impart wisdom on us.

The niche of domesticity that this project focuses on is a fruitful one in its feminist implications and conservative nuclear nostalgia performance, but homemaking is one of any number of influencer niches that use neoliberalism to empower the knowledge of influencers, aided by the governing structure of monopolistic and un-regulatable tech giants like Instagram. Influencers in this project impart many different types of knowledge, particularly in the realms of parenting, beauty, health, wellness, and love that often enforce capitalist, heteronormative, post-racial, and Christian ideals. Reality television most notably serves the cultural production of neoliberalism, going back to the 90s. The distinction between these two media of television and the internet is depthful in understanding how neoliberalism will either survive and transform or just no longer be relevant, at least in the cultural landscape. This question in its wholeness is beyond the scope of this project and in many ways still developing with the speed of post-pandemic political engagement. Even so, looking to newer theories of analyzing power can offer different ways of thinking about the future, often creatively and in the space of the senses, a pursuit that I find especially interesting when analyzing the photographic work of influencers who use the power of objects, landscapes, and beauty.

Affect theory provides a framework for trying to better understand the relational modes of the self to the sensorial environment, objects, and each other. Affect is a space of sensation that occurs before processing through the fields of emotional language, biases, and analysis. Affect is intensities. The space of Affect is pre-abstraction, before naming and placing intensities into contexts and judgments. Affect need not need to come “before” this processing through language, it can seep its way through and be an underlying yet dominant model for how we work

through our sensations and perceptions. Intensity leaves a resounding impact that determines how much certain things are remembered by the subject and assumably, that remembrance follows the subject into their perception of the world afterward. Affect has power in forming relations between objects, and creating culture. In considering and defining affect, Brian Massumi concludes, “Our entire vocabulary has derived from theories of signification that are still wedded to structure even across irreconcilable differences” (Massumi 2002:27). Engaging in a post-structural analysis means discovering and identifying affects, unwinding from structure and signification that abstracts away from these relations of encounter. In Sarah Ahmed’s, “Happy Objects,” there exist structurally dictated associations between capitalist goods and heteronormative rituals with expectant positive emotional responses. Ahmed posits that instead these associations are mutable and often only briefly fixed in real observable time, and the abstraction of language protects this truth from hegemonic happy objects. “Bodily transformations might also transform what is experienced as delightful. If our bodies change over time, then the world around us will create different impressions” (Ahmed 2010:31). Delight is associated by Ahmed here with the body, with an affective relation more than a concrete quality held in the object.

Expanding on this, Nigel Thrift’s article on non-representational theory, “The Material Practices of Glamour” reflects on materials, colors, and facets of celebrity that possess affects and agency that have potential for activation in all matter of ways, for different goals. Foundationally in this text, objects are a feature of reality itself, not simply accessories and furnishing. In this definition, Glamour is a creation of capitalism, and is the tool that is harnessing these affects and positioning them in an attainable market sphere, and into a described celebrity figure. Thrift describes glamour as being the driving force creating worlds, and “fractal

bodies,” breaking down separations between alive and dead, and in this uncertain position, the subject explodes into multiple selves. The me who is in the selfie and the me who took the selfie. These same objects and qualities possess powers that are not trapped by capitalism, the wielder of the power of glamour can free objects and materials into new possibilities by using their same “sorcery” (Thrift 2008:21). This piece is important to expand past the trappings of critical theory and not stop at describing the ways the fetishized commodity eats up identity and personhood. Being in the affective space of these objects’ beauty and ugliness is an access point to understand their power as weaponry in an aesthetically charged battle for power, especially fought across the template of Instagram.

A WOMAN NAMED KANSAS

@KansasMichalke is Jesus-seeking, God-fearing, and content creating. She is Mom to Memphis and Tullsa, both under two. She is a doting wife to Brandon Michalke. She’s a proud Texan and patriot, and owner of Michalke Made, a craft company that upcycles Louis Vuitton branded leather into watch bands and keychains. She also owns The Citizen + Co, a retailer for curated baby goods, including newly published Christian storybooks and graphic tee shirts with groovy fonts printed with sayings like “Make Heaven Crowded” and “Rhinestone Cowgirl.” She has 100,000 Instagram followers and is growing at the time of writing. Her life looks like a sunset, or sherbet. Distressed band tees are her thing and Target is her go-to, and Memphis is her mini-me.

@KansasMichalke is active daily in Stories, the consistent selfie-cam public appearances having a signature filter over them, mimicking film grain and smoothing out the skin and brightening the eyes. She offers regular interactive check-ins via question feature, picking out

discourses her followers suggest to wedge between try-on hauls and advertisements and the balanced banality of every day life. Her home is a meditation on a theme, and her domestic life blends with the brand. A brand that spills out trendy descriptors and yet all fails to capture the careful individual craft of her curation. It is a bohemian, chic, eclectic, and clean style– but it is so “her.” Her space is constantly transforming, and shifting, her family grows, and her floor plan needs reevaluating. She considers adding onto the house, and posts a poll asking which corner of the property, modified, would create a better flow. In Instagram feed images, her infant Tullsa sticks her baby tongue out, squirming on a plush throw gifted from one of the small Instagram-based businesses that use Instagram brand representatives as a primary marketing strategy.

Her toddler daughter, Memphis, is an apparent Louis Vuitton lover, and she isn’t allowed any “screen-time” except when she gets involved with her mother’s influencing work; the iPhone camera app is a creative and sensory pursuit. This parenting method is one of a few defining hybrid structures of their family life that @KansasMichalke uses her platform to share and recommend. She works from home as an influencer and owner of her online companies, which run out of the family garage as well as a rented studio space, and on her Story she announces her decision to unenroll her daughter from a Christian preschool program, expressing her desire to spend all the moments with Memphis, and seeing sending her away as needlessly traumatic.

Behind funky and color-coded patterned icons on her Instagram are profile stories she made permanently accessible, instead of disappearing in 24 hours, about her veneer journey, breast pumping tips, faith-based school choice, emergency kidney surgery, and Montessori play. Amongst those are saved Stories titled like *sketchy*, which claims that Dr. Anthony Fauci is corrupt. The *wake up* Story sequence begins with a Converse ad collaboration featuring

controversial gothic makeup and prosthetics artist @matieresfecales and outlines Bible verses detailing the traits of Satanism. *sleepovers* explains her parenting boundary restricting overnight playdates as they are corrupting and linked with childhood sexual abuse. These are just a few of the, in the influencers words, “spicy topics” that sprinkle throughout her online expressions. The cohabitation of these topics beside photo selections of her younger daughter’s birth is compatible in this influencer landscape with a dynamic brand, and one that built a community of fans and customers of her online shops.

Domestic Influencer branding, however, is often not compatible or palatable to political party loyalty, @KansasMichalke, similar to all the influencers I follow, never post about Donald Trump, or for that matter any local or congressional representational politics, even though many expressed positions on spicy topics resemble a Trump voter constituency, but Reddit pages forum users often dig up evidence on these vaguely apolitical influencers donating or previously stating support for political campaigns.

A number of sociological texts and journalistic works emerged in the last decade, attempting to sort through the identity creation that they essentialize Trump voters to have, including Arlene Hirschfeld, in *Strangers in their Own Land* then examining “Tea Party” voters who would come to make up a constituency in 2016. Hirschfeld attributes the pull to media rhetoric of hatred that pushes people on both sides into a defensive state. Hirschfeld uses archetypes of a misled mass to show that these people, with real concerns about their livelihoods and environments, are tricked by the media into the wrong solutions. This analysis, like many attempting to reckon with a divided country, miss, or deprivilege a sensorial aspect of Conservatism and more, a positive construction, rather than a simply defensive one, of identity that includes politics.

The aesthetic construction of the political “Story”-telling in @KansasMichalke’s marketing can withstand and adapt beyond representational politics. The political aspect of this influencing work is certainly reactionary, (apparent here and with @RealBrittanyDawn later in this project), but fits in, rather than being a shock to the domestic daily life, especially with financial stability rewarded by influencing. @KansasMichalke asserts that cultural politics can be simply affirming of the forever-good of faith and family and can be decisive on the aesthetically charged “vibes” of the Holy Spirit. @KansasMichalke often recommends praying about any of the big and sometimes politically charged decisions that one must make when it comes to parenting and career, an ethic of self-reflection and loyalty to Christ. Christian Domestic Influencers have a political power of communitizing and aesthetic identity creation, regardless of whether prayers metaphysically work toward outcomes.

The Citizen & Co. Community, a private Facebook group started by Kansas Michalke, named after her baby brand, explains its purpose in the group description, “From the beginning we've wanted to be more than a store, we want to be a community for Mamas everywhere.” 21,600 members at the time of this writing are a part of this part-fan group for the influencer and part-live shopping experience. Women ask for prayers for their children diagnosed with Autism, for votes on which first and middle name sound best for a soon to be born baby, or for recommendations for all matters of grocery, wellness, and home products. The women of this group are like-minded on matters like school choice, and anti-vaccination, often quoting and linking each other to conservative speaker Candace Owens, of whom @KansasMichalke reposts frequently on Instagram. This space is for sorting through or trying out the visual information and rhetoric of the Instagram page, women often repeating the same feelings that @KansasMichalke had expressed with a wider audience.

As an example of this, an app that @KansasMichalke promotes frequently, Yuka, scans consumer goods barcodes using the iPhone camera, and presents the user with a rating of that product, depending on whether it contains ingredients that are “clean” or “toxic.” Some of the metrics that the app scans for include additives, like artificial color or flavoring or preservatives, sugar content, or calories, labeling goods as “Too Sweet” or “A bit too caloric.” @KansasMichalke shared her own experience using the app, where she reported scanning excessively and throwing out cleaning products and canned seltzers. Several members after this Instagram story went up took to the Facebook group to nearly repeat this same testimonial, one user posting,

I just want y'all to know that I walked around Walmart for TWO (or more) hours last night scanning items with the Yuka app like a mad woman. I'm certain almost everyone looked at me crazy when I was knee deep in the freezer aisle scanning everything I liked and putting it back when it said ZERO. I was in shock at how many items we eat daily that said 10 or below. Pretty sure someone else could relate in this group... right?

45 comments under this post confirm their own mimicking experience of @KansasMichalke's Story. This app, with its decisive determinations and user-friendly design gives some structure and comfort back to the rhetorically expansive consumer choice. The Yuka technology of data collection is aided by the social technology of influencing and Facebook group communitizing. The internet group form, as fast assembling and changing, encouraging of repetition and mirroring, high engagement goaled, is a defining form for the identity and kin creation that powers which ideas stick in the online political landscape.

TURTLE CREEK LANE

Preparations for holidays get underway at least two months early at @Turtlecreeklane, an Instagram famous mansion in the Highland Park suburbs of Dallas, Texas. Basement warehouse corridors of the @Turtlecreeklane complex have marked bins for seasons, themes, and colorways. These things need to be reorganized and inventoried by someone, maybe the family that lives there, or their live-in assistants. Extras need to be ordered from the Dallas World Trade Center in bulk for the audience to order with affiliate links from @Turtlecreeklane. Curated moments by Jennifer Houghton, the homemaker and influencer who is the face of the account, share a careful attuning of the mantel, the foyer, or the front steps and she asks the audience via Story if decoration arrangements look better in different colors and complexities.

The audience is instructed that they can raise a decorated tree in the home at any time of year. With the popularity of this concept, aesthetically transitioning the Christmas tree into a Valentine's tree becomes buying a whole other blackened faux tree for Falloween (a maximalist-minded hybrid between fall harvest and Halloween theme). They raise the tree in the middle of the sitting room, wrapped with checkerboard orange ribbons and with felt pumpkins wedged between branches, and tiny ceramic broomstick witches as ornaments. Year-round, even in the shortened “ordinary time” between holiday decorating, every part of this Instagrammed home seems to be spilling out over itself, expelling an intensity of inorganic materials, and carries through a paramountly feminine and fantastical kitsch interpretation of a rustic and refined French-style.

Corn stalks from the nearby @Turtlecreeklane ranch, harvested by an untold someone, and transported in the back of a sports SUV to the main house, bound to each other with wire, and resurrected in the front yard, lining the concrete walkway, mimicking a corn maze for true

Falloween inspiration. Local Instagram followers volunteer to assist in the set-up and in exchange get a tour of the complex and try samples of products that have accumulated from brand deals with @Turtlecreeklane, like a breakfast cereal with no refined carbs and zero-calorie water flavoring drops.

Before leaving to pick up children from school, and returning to banality from the internet fame next door, they take a “boomerang” video photo for the feed: a group of women jumping with joy in the finished walkway, springing backward and forward between a few seconds in time, over and over again. Weeks after the corn stalk walkway display came down, Jen, with her everlasting joy and surprise, showed sprouts from errant corn that had taken root in the monoculture lawn grass.

Jennifer Houghton grew up, rather fittingly, in Bountiful, Utah. She is one of the ten siblings, and has five children of her own, with a large age gap between her three oldest and two youngest after a fertility battle. Two of her grown and married children have committed to full-time online marketing since the success of @turtlecreeklane. She and her husband (who, before selling his company was the CEO of an energy and real estate investment firm) sit on the advisory board for Brigham Young University, an institution in which The Church Of Latter Day Saints’ tithing revenue subsidizes tuition. Their life, as performed online, interconnects with their involvement with the Mormon faith, a belief system that has particular historical connections to material culture and with the importance of family life as dictated by the doctrine of eternal families.

Kim Abunuwara provides a framework for analysis of Mormon art as well as domestic decoration as it relates to faith practice and relationships with the everyday in “Mormon Domestic Art: Comfort and Communion.” Abunuwara focuses on the high prevalence of realism

and representational storytelling in Mormon iconography, a visual language that reaffirms that truth makes itself known, and that divinity is visible on Earth, as foretold in the story of Joseph Smith, the founder of the Mormon Church. Mormon artists tell this defining story through paintings as floating human-appearing God and Jesus surrounded by white light, appearing in a dense brush of the forest to Smith.

In 2020, top leaders in the Church of Latter-Day Saints ordered that foyer space in religious meeting houses should reserve space solely for direct depictions of Christ. In a press release, a choice of 22 acceptable paintings are attached in the letter communicating this decree—all of which depicting a living Christ, blue-eyed and light-haired Jesus, one of which being Del Parson's widely distributed "Christ in Red Robe" in which Jesus's portrait resembles a family wallet portrait. Devout Mormon Artist, Jon McNaughton uses this realism tradition to depict Christ, and garnered viral attention for creating paintings with conservative political messaging, painting President Donald Trump in varied Norman Rockwell Patriotism inspired representations, as well as political cartoon scenarios of Trump, humble in prayer, in the face of flag stomping Democratic leaders.

Abunuwara notes that this style is alienating to viewers who may be agnostic or unsure of the Church's doctrine by privileging realism, which reaffirms the presupposed knowns of faith, including the appearance of Christ. More generally, the fault of using realism to depict the divine is that it is ever-caught in the constraints of a finite medium. Faith in Mormon domestic art, exists simply as constant comfort of direct representation, paired with the kitsch sensibilities of American idealism, without discomfiture or what Abunuwara describes as "jolts" that can strengthen faith, like the first fright at the sight of the angel, or the incognito, the unrecognizable

state of Jesus returning to the disciples. Abunuwara optimistically concludes that the power of realism in art need not only represent a reaffirmation of truth, or nationalism.

Representing reality in unexpected, destabilizing ways has the potential for representing varied relationships with faith for everyday religious rituals in the home. Brian Kershisnik, a contemporary Mormon painter, operates in the traditions of his faith, depicting the ordinary, family situations, and sometimes the Gospel with a human-like appearance of angels. He utilizes a primitivism and two-dimensional representational style, often with ambivalent though emotional facial expressions. Kershisnik has often reflected in interviews on the struggle of religious representation, and his paintings, often autobiographical and rarely daring to depict Christ, show the possibility of Mormon art to transcend these challenges in traditions of realism and offer personal varied readings on the emotional state of the specifically Mormon coexistence of the divine and the mundane.

@Turtlecreeklane is in many ways an abundant representation of this domestic art criticism, with an overwhelming web of family portraits lining the grand staircase, and the painted storytelling tiles around the fireplace, which, in Jen's words on Pinterest, "commemorate a special event or moment in one of our lives. One tile is labeled Commitment and was painted to remind my children how they all went without sugar for a year to earn a go-cart. One of the plates shows us all holding hands singing our Houghton Family Song." Beyond these loaded pieces of domestic art, the comfort of consumerism and accumulation of real estate then becomes religiously justified without a critical inquiry. There is undoubtedly a layering in the affect of the "over-decorating" in this home, where materials, colors, and kitsch pushed to such an extreme extent produce a sense of uncanniness, or some awareness of void even as it produces the comfort it sells itself to.

During the 2021 Texas Snowstorm, @Turtlecreeklane suffered from busted pipes from the rapid and unexpected temperatures. Jennifer, via Story, led viewers around the mansion, emergency plumbers in tow, to different guest bathrooms, closet spaces, and basement corners, trying to locate where the leakage was originating from. It isn't to say that there is something unusually sinister behind the scenes, but the mystery seepage somewhere in the house of obvious abundance aligns with the thought that the wholeness of divinity and eternity cannot truly show itself in any medium especially not the home, visual overabundance and exuberance make clear the architectural boundaries and breakable materials that keep it confined and structured.

PARADISE

@Ockeydockey boasts a following of 400,000 people and documents the influencing lives of Lauren and Josh Riboldi, Utah born and living in Hawaii for the past 11 years. They are followers of the Church of Latter-Day Saints, avid surfers, photographers and videographers, and parents. They embrace comparisons to the couple from the 1980 romance movie, *The Blue Lagoon*, and Disney's *Tarzan & Jane*. Lauren has long straight hair and her gummy, whitened smile scrunches up freckles around her button nose when she poses with her two sons under two years old, and her surfer husband Josh.

Lauren, describing herself, explains in a recent post that she learned that she is a highly sensitive person, an identity phenomenon grounded in some biological evidence popularized by a popular psychology book, *The Highly Sensitive Person*, by Elaine Aron. Ever since Lauren was a little girl, she explains that she has felt things deeply, and struggled with the feeling of burdening others with the expression of such deep feelings about her world. She is learning to embrace the strengths that come with this, she notes. She captions this on a set of two selfies of her wearing a

flower crown and smiling sheepishly while sitting on the beach. Her body is both of the two selfies creating a vertical boundary between two sides of the backdrop, one side being the ocean horizon with a distant mountain, and on the other side of Lauren, an encroaching wall of tropical brush, with mangled branches reaching out over foot-printed sand. She is the threshold between the rest of the world and the entrapping paradise of Hawaii. She later makes this selfie her icon for her profile. This image fits in expectantly with the rest of the @Ockeydockey page, a feed of deeply tanned skin, turquoise waters, and green non-specific lush in an expectant cycle of positions and patterns across a conveyor belt of square paradise family portraits.

They stand as an outlier to the other family influencers in this project as being outside of the mainland of the United States. Their exact proximity is unclear, as well as their home. I think of other influencers who share blueprints for room additions, describe their landscaping woes and neighbor dramas, or invite followers to Christmas-decorated home tours for charity. @Ockeydockey, in this line-up, appears extremely private when it comes to the geographies of their domestic space. There is little content on decorating or the routines of everyday life. What we do see of their home are certain corners, clean white walls with teak and rattan mirror, and bed frames, noting congruence of their space to their lifestyle that they don't seem to need to prove.

They have no clear patriotism or loyalty to culture besides that of their traveling Mormon religiosity, which they post sparingly on, except to note how they met on a missionary trip to Argentina, both learning Spanish and living there together for nearly two years. They post primarily outdoors, on non-specific beaches and valley fields of sunflowers. The tops of trees and mountains blur at the edges into stark white skies on days in Hawaii that aren't so blue, as if light penetrating through the fog had carved out the land. They are most often in swimsuits, or

flowing soft light-colored fabrics. The family smiles wide in their photos and often in some comfortable action, Lauren's shoulders pushed forward in a humbling pose-breaking laugh, her son, Cru, sillily squirming and cheesing in his parents' portrait hold.

They've remarked on their stories before about their reluctance of sharing the geo-locations for their photo spots, noting that the joy of these spots comes from their secrecy and privacy, these geographies fragile and rarefied, and that tourist influx, maybe from their influence, may be the cause of destruction. When she becomes pregnant with her second son, she poses with two longtime friends, who also live in Hawaii, who are also mainland-born Mormons, who were pregnant too, expecting in the same due date week. They wave long ultrasound strips like tiny flags on an otherwise empty beach.

Her content is primarily concerned with milestone-based storytelling-- falling in love with Hawaii and with each other and starting their family. She posts through her pregnancies with both of her children. Family photoshoots mark each month of the growth of her stomach away from her slight frame. They post another set of the "official" maternity photos, where the influencer is enveloped in vines as she nurses her other son, his small body wrapped around her large stomach. In a photo from the birthing room, she fashions her bashful, highly sensitive smile, her husband touching her pregnant stomach for seemingly one last time, because she has IVs attached to her, preparing for labor. A framed artwork behind them of highly saturated red and yellow corn breaks the stark whiteness of the cushy birthing room. I watch through their posts as a baby is born, and in a day or two an infant boy's slight face and gentle rippled skin make a first appearance on the feed, next to a round wooden carved name announcement sign, "INDI" - like Independent, Indian, Indiana, or invoking the Latin initialism INRI.

The @Ockeydockey niche invests in these surprises and breaks of routine, births, anniversaries, and announcements, marking each month of both of her sons' lives with new reasons to celebrate. Vacations, across the influencer board, have a similar impact, with surprise trips feeding back into the engagement of their often monotonous domestic lives. The @Ockeydockey family brand faces the reality of what would be for most of their American audiences, a perceived constant vacation of living in Hawaii. They uniquely find ways of embracing and aesthetically playing with the suspension of time on their constant vacation lifestyle. On their feed, no discernible seasons are changing, they rarely embrace holiday decorating, and a single, high saturation, for-sale Photoshop preset filter creates true synchronicity between all of these life moments. Lauren herself rarely undergoes physical changes, her long, thin, pin-straight light brown hair is consistent, as is her husband's shoulder-length surfer curls. “Throwbacks” often look identical to the present, with the same, half blurred paradise backgrounds.

Through short-form editing platforms like Reels and TikTok, the couple, self-aware of their aesthetic sameness across time, often seamlessly edit together clips of time passing. At a quick cut, Lauren’s big belly turns into their infant held in front of her flat stomach, standing in the same especial sunset spot, with the same minimalist beach-living clothing, then again, her husband snaps his fingers, and they jump, mid-air cutting to another pregnancy, and then another baby, now overflowing from their arms, as if a magic trick. In another, Josh feeds a skinny Lauren a pint of chocolate ice cream, and as she digs in with a spoon, they cut to Lauren again, her face covered with smeared chocolate, pregnant as if she gained a “food belly.” They tell their story in different formats, of love and procreation with different popular song snippets, “Watch our family grow in 30 seconds,” “Our story in 15 seconds,” and “Our love story in 5 seconds.”

In a Youtube video published by the couple “Our Most Vulnerable Video Ever,” Lauren and Josh sit in their home, holding up a phone screen between them, and they watch a video. An insert of the video comes into the corner of the screen, so we can watch it together. Canadian Professor, Jordan Peterson, a clinical psychologist, and the author of the popular self-help book *12 Rules for Life: The Antidote to Chaos* imparts this such observation with his famously severe and confidently charismatic intonation,

You have little kids for four years, and if you miss it, it's done. That's it. So, you gotta know that. [sic] It's, you know, lot's of things in life you don't get to do more than once. Now, if obviously you can have more than one child but all I'm saying is that period between zero and four, zero and five, there's something about it that's really- it's like a peak experience in life and it isn't much of your life you know cause you think of it as a long time-its not that long man, four years go by so fast you can't believe it and if you miss it, it's gone. So, you miss it at your peril and you don't get it back.

Lauren and Josh Riboldi's faces redden while Professor Peterson speaks. As soon as the clip ends, Josh breaks out in a sob, and Lauren nods in empathetic and teary agreement. They recollect memories for the remainder of the video, of their children's milestones, superimposing clips from their Instagram of videos of their sons running along Hawaiian sands and learning how to swim. These clips are re-contextualized as representing the void of the past, reminders of an unstoppable temporality, and memorials to moments. The couple reflects on how quickly their children have already grown, a shocking speed that contrasts with a slow-moving tropical landscape. “Our Most Vulnerable Video Ever” cements the thesis of the @Ockeydockey project,

as being a representation of processed emotional excess caught in between different time scales, and fragilities of the landscape.

PRAYER WARRIOR

“The enemy will bruise your heel but you’re going to bruise his head, and I commission you that as you go into this marriage and go into this as a wife that you step into a new authority....even as you walk down the aisle, you’re going to bruise the enemy’s head.” In three-ten second intervals of Instagram story, a woman in a salmon pink bridesmaid’s dress whines this prayer, eyes tightly shut, over the right shoulder of the bride, Christian influencer @RealBrittanyDawn. Half a dozen other bridesmaids in salmon dresses, each individualized with different cuts and sleeve orientations, poised collapsed around the central figure sitting on a cream couch. They lay hands over each other’s hands, reaching languidly towards @RealBrittanyDawn’s semi-sheer mermaid dress, preemptively splayed out, displaying embroidered lace willowing over the jute rug in the specially decorated bridesmaid’s suite.

The bride flutters her thick eyelashes and nods with her head and sculpted blonde updo hanging down low in veneration and submission. The bridesmaids frame the bride and face outwards toward the camera in a theatrically minded orientation. They are still in kneeling prayer and careful not to block the view of the bride or each other in the semi-circle. A selection of Instagram handles have links in the upper right hand corner of the Story to the profiles of the bridesmaids, many also influencers in self-help and religiosity, but none of which have as big of a following as the bride, who’s wedding stories are presumably highly anticipated by 431,000 followers. (at the time of the wedding). It is to this audience she has been documenting her

wedding planning process and her faith journey, beginning with her early notoriety for fitness and body image content.

Pictures of a slim-toned and spray-tanned Athleisure and Bikini Brittany, often in high contrast against stark white backgrounds had motivational captions written for early hashtag Instagram virality on topics of self-love, body positivity, and perseverance with workout routines. She shared her history of anorexia, bullied for her weight as a child, and her scoliosis. Many posts were side-by-side comparisons in the tradition of diet culture, often using the same “before photo” from 2009, and later, side-by-side comparisons of Instagram Vs. Reality, the reality showing her stomach folding on itself when resting.

In February of 2022, the State of Texas filed a lawsuit for false or misleading business practices against Brittany Davis, seeking anywhere from \$250,000 to \$1 million in damages and court fees, first reported by The Dallas Morning News. The public outcry leading to this case dates back to 2018 when @RealBrittanyDawn advertised a personalized text-based coaching service managed by her fitness brand, which would provide workout regimens, diet recommendations, and messages of encouragement. A Facebook group formed of hundreds of unhappy purported customers, feeling scammed of varying amounts of money for these programs and figured out through this online communitizing that many of their personalized plans were identical to each other, or generic and non-specific.

Many of the diet plans provided by Brittany Davis reported by customers in these groups have low caloric counts. The lawsuit includes damages to people suffering from eating disorders, claiming the marketing for the coaching service implied some specialization or authority to help such specialized and dangerous issues, which Brittany Davis does not possess. A massive amount of hate comments flooded all of the posts on @Realbrittanydawn’s page, chastising her

for greed and responding to all of her long captioned self-care posts back to perceived hypocrisy, “Said the con artist...” “Did u buy that with our money” read some of the comments from this time. As often happens on the internet, the backlash snowballed, especially following tabloid television specials on the matter by Inside Edition, resulting in a constant slew of hate comments, and according to @Realbrittanydawn, death threats.

It is in the aftermath of this controversy, which became a media spectacle, @RealBrittanyDawn faced a crisis of brand. It is at this time that her testimony begins. She begins hash-tagging posts with #newbeginnings, and her self-care captions become enriched with expressions of love for Jesus Christ. She starts a side Instagram page, @shelivesfreed, posting screenshots of tweets by @Realbrittanydawn’s accompanying Twitter account, which read platitudes such as:

Reminder that you can’t carry your cross and throw stones at the same time.

Not sure who needs this right now, but God’s mercy is far greater than your biggest mistakes

A woman just has a different kinda glow when she finally sees herself as God does.

Over time, @shelivesfreed became a Texas women’s retreat, hosted by @Realbrittanydawn, selling one to three-day experiences of group testimony sharing and prayer circles. In photosets, @Realbrittanydawn shows the group baptisms at these events, with the influencer herself assisting in lowering young women down into baptismal waters, one session documented on Stories as impromptu during a long night of prayer, in a hotel bathtub. An essential part of this retreat and @Realbrittanydawn’s new online identity is that The Holy Spirit is present, and available, at all times of the day, in any setting, and with any materials handy. There are certain ethics associated with a worthwhile devotion, to strive toward purity, modesty, and a specific politics.

@Realbrittanydawn on her main page begins a reactionary style of content- responding to trending events with a Christian and newly conservative and patriotic perspective. A picture of a tattered Holy Bible, with a long caption starting with “I pulled this Bible out of a pile of trash after a protest in Dallas TX this weekend over the Israeli and Palestinian conflict.” A tanned hand outstretched with a small paper note reading “Lil Nas X, Jesus Still Loves You” She releases a longer IGTV video, describing popular Christian satanist theories linked to video footage of Astro-world crowd crush event. @Realbrittanydawn, through these calculated responses to trending events, gains control in culture war and utilizes the chaotic nature of anonymous energy of internet commentary with the shield of Christ. Each of these reactions produces a surge of commentary, positive and negative, on her page, growing her page and expanding her brand and inviting engagement, ballooning beyond a critiquing of the details of her body, life, and actions.

In a Reel, @Realbrittanydawn edits an image compilation comparison of how Christian women appear on Earth vs. in “the spiritual realm.” On Earth, they appear bowing their heads, crying in mega-churches, and singing in a gospel choir, images not dissimilar to the content put out by @shelivesfreed. In the spiritual Realm, @Realbrittanydawn states that Satan sees Christian Women as iron-clad knights, bruised and bloodied, with Celtic braids and modelesque features, protected by a giant lion in front of a castle. This reel establishes a power behind the images that she may share, inserting new meaning to these posts, that these images have an altered dual-appearance of prayer war. Christian influencing takes on a strategic image-sharing power in a spiritual battle, a fact that is clear in its particularities of strategy and its affective outcomes through the ritual of marriage presented on @Realbrittanydawn’s platform.

She begins dating Jordan Nelson, a man with a private Instagram account, but whose face and name begin to cover her page, in long captions describing him in shining praise, as a God-fearing man who extended himself to Brittany at her lowest, and she makes cheeky Reels promoting their promise to wait until they get married to be intimate. Reddit users on the community [r/Fundiesnarkuncensored](#), a place dedicated to compiling and mocking fundamentalist Instagram influencers, made the connection between [@Realbrittanydawn](#)'s new boyfriend to be a former Kansas City Police Department officer, with an ongoing lawsuit against him by the ACLU of Missouri, for a 2013 incident wherein Jordan Nelson, on released dashcam footage, brutalized Black Kansas City resident Joshua Bills during an arrest. [@Realbrittanydawn](#)'s coupling with Nelson, and tracking this new season of her life, and over time, especially around her wedding preparation. In the bridesmaid's speech, she directly addresses the re-presenting of the event as the event occurs, praying, "The pictures from the- [sic] The pictures, every excellent thing you've chosen for this wedding, you've done and there's no shame in it because you're good at your job and the pictures that go out are gonna stomp on the enemy's head"

The "pictures that go out" of Brittany's wedding, including the portioned video of the bridesmaids' prayer, drop on Instagram a few days later, presumably from a hotel room in Cabo, Mexico. The first, breaking the anticipatory silence of two days of no posting, (void that amongst these influencers, may be a birth, a death, a crisis, or, in this case, a wedding) is a picture on the permanent feed of the uniting kiss. This image has layers shrouding the pictured couple. A giant bouquet of wheat in muted Earth tones obscures the locking lips fitting with an overarching wedding aesthetic of decorations and colors dried, sun-bleached, and pre-preserved. The apparent late summer grass of the outdoor ceremony has biblically Persian faded rugs,

overlapping, as a wedding aisle. Over the picture is a photoshop edit preset, for sale on her website, deepening oranges in the skin and lifting the burden of contrast, making the bright blue sky an even and cloudless sage, and color-correcting her groom's naturally pink head and neck.

Interacting with the photo on Instagram, haptically pressing on it, obscures it behind twenty gray hyperlinks to other pages, all businesses related to the details of the ceremony. From the dress and florals to catering and makeup to calligraphy, coffee cart, waffle cart, dinnerware rentals, the spray tan, the transportation, and the wedding Bible guest book. Each of these companies @Realbrittanydawn further links on every photo of the ceremony and reception, and links additionally trail under each caption. Each thing she chose is deliberate and shameless. She is consumerist self-care as Godly intentionality, newly authorized to influence, freed from haters, crossing the threshold of the marriage ceremony.

DUPES

Dupes, defined as a trick, a cheat, and a deception, reimagine luxury items into different materials and sources. Dupes have a long history of culture and government debating, regulating, and often criminalizing their existence. I think of the long tradition of designer bag tables lining Canal Street in New York City, a secret treat for women to carry in the passing and fast-paced public with the notion that glances won't register the difference. Many women don't care if someone does notice. Others go for the fiction of the "factory extra," an imagined backdoor that sells the real bags at reduced prices, but priced higher than the more honest dupe. The dupe-haver is aware of the flimsiness of the designer label, to begin with. The dupe-haver is savvy- smart with her money, and most of all, ambitious. The dupe is a placeholder for the real, which may or may not come later. The sight of the dupe reinforces the pursuit.

The dupe has become the mainstay of beauty magazine listicles and influencer strategies. There are attempts by both tastemakers and journalists to ward them off, warning of dangerous chemicals permeating the pleather and arsenic in roadside dupe eyeshadow palettes. Some take an ethical stance and point to the offshore labor conditions from which cheap products originate. The dupe begs the question whether the original was any more ethical in its production, despite its high-profit margin. The idea of “accessibility” washes over this debate, the right to own the beautiful being a mainstay of neoliberal ordering.

I play a game on the Story of @Taralynnn. She regularly posts several-slide Story sequences asking “which is more expensive?” with cropped photographs from online furniture shopping websites. Through collage, The big-box store and the high-end retailers are cropped and positioned against each other. Two nearly identical rattan stand lamps next to each other. I examine the cross-hatching and weaving, which one is more intricate, and most naturally distressed? Is this console table laminate or real wood or, which is real wood but only medium density, compressed wood chips covered by a thin veneer? The next slide reveals the price difference, often hundreds of dollars off. @Taralynnn links both through affiliate links, where buying either product will gain her commission. I think I’m really good at this game, but I find I get better each time I play. The moment I find myself to be wrong, I can suddenly see the difference. I just happened to miss that irregularity or that visible plastic screw. It’s harder just by sight alone. But sight alone is ready-made for photographing these objects, contextualized in the consumer’s own home. No one will be able to reach through the screen into a sitting room and feel the lightweight of a faux brass bar cart.

The communication between the origins of the two objects is unclear, this may be a purposeful dupe, one an original and one a direct copy, or they both may be coincidentally

similar meditations on the same theme and trends. The more expensive one may be duping an even more expensive one that an influencer could not get commission from linking, if for sale online at all. A non-visible haunting is in the mass amount of these objects produced, abundance of warehouses, deep material extractions, and the percentages of air permeated by the fumes of production. There is also an abundance of copies, a lineage produced, changing with each generative form. Sam Binkley, in “Kitsch as a Repetitive System: A Problem for the Theory of Taste Hierarchy” notes a major quality of kitsch is its untraceability. Kitsch creates imagined histories, a coffee table can exude “vintage” -ness with no discernible era that it may reference. Binkley points out that kitsch's repetition reflects the repetition of domestic life and tasks, and proposes that this aesthetic quality can be a motivator to keep going. Kitsch is a fitting choice of modes for domestic influencers to function in, both in this parallel to domestic life and to grip onto relatability to their followers, even as they gain enough wealth from influencing to buy the true luxury. Dupes provide a communication line between levels of access. They also compete, visually challenging each other on levels of worth. The imposter affirms that our position and access can be just as beautiful, and just as (un)ethical.

CHRISTIAN GIRL AUTUMN

“Christian Girl Autumn” is a 2019 meme derived from Twitter, in which a photo of Caitlin Covington and Emily Gemma, with parallel swooping wavy hair, skinny jeans, oversized scarves, and matching kate spade purses, were recontextualized by a Twitter user in a comedic aftermath of rapper Meg Thee Stallion’s “Hot Girl Summer.” Thousands of replies poured in, the image conjuring associations of who these women could be: grown-up bullies from high school,

homophobic “Karens” ordering pumpkin spice lattes, and “voluntourists” who would theoretically pose for photos with poor and starving children in faraway lands.

Several tabloid news articles sprung up in the wake of the mainstreaming of this meme and in the following few autumns when the meme resurfaced, reporting on these responses and giving space to the subject of memeification, the influencers. Given this platform in *Cosmopolitan*, *Newsweek*, *Buzzfeed*, and *Vox*, among others, Caitlin Covington took to print to correct these assumptions, asserting that they are not homophobic or racist and that their style has since become less “basic” and in true influencer fashion, providing more autumn selfies that she liked better for circulation. Later reports aided in this public relations, noting that Covington donated to the original Twitter user’s gender-affirming transition procedures via a crowdfunding platform.

This moment of “Christian Girl Autumn” is also in the context of the last decade of even more decentralized “basic white girl” memes that also often hinge on the season of fall. This image, as well as a selection of similar others, which became part of the meme, became objects for social justice, as seen in thread replies to the original reshare of Caitlin Covington’s picture charged by its comedy and memetic sharing capacities. Narratives, aided by these images of super-filtered worldmaking and loaded commodity objects like luxury bags, are a site of uniting power for social justice and a disempowering of heteronormative whiteness. The “Hotness” of Hot Girl Summer, of rhythmic pop-rap, unbothered self-love, and freedom from controlling men and racial respectability politics, contrasts clearly but is complementary and parallel to the “Coolness” of Christian Girl Autumn, of unbridled control over the self-image, religious self-governance, and finding glorious beauty in decay, of Autumn, leaves turning and of the diminishing hegemonic power of whiteness.

This moment of mainstream media attention exhibits domestic influencers in aesthetic confrontation with social justice, LGBT, and irony-centered online meme communities. This represents a challenge to Subcultural studies when brought into the postmodern, fast communitizing space of the internet along with the technologically specific social organizing mediums of Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, etc. Dick Hebdige concluded subcultures to be “expressive forms but what they express is, in the last instance, a fundamental tension between those in power and those condemned to subordinate positions and second-class lives.” Hebdige describes outsider identification of aesthetics to be an essential part of this diffusing of the threat of subculture to the hegemonic order, as the marketing of punk leather jackets.

There are well-documented and analyzed internet subcultures that have emerged in early versions of the internet, from UFO seeker forums to furies and fandom visual culture, often coalescing into real-life meetups. In the era of social media marketing, identity politics, and the “explore” space of algorithmic content mediums like Instagram, new “subcultures” online have, in their formation, come together first as groups of commodities and shopping lists to participate.

Instagram influencers who have successfully fit themselves into a traditional hegemonic domestic ideal are not, in the Hebdige definitional sense, a “subculture,” but the flattening out by the medium of these platforms create the qualities for new expressive relational groups to form, defined by tying identity to consumer choices and style. Digitization, even with its immense access to people, reduces all to the aesthetic, sublimating and reprocessing subcultures.

Michel Bakhtin’s idea of the carnivalesque perhaps can account for the way the dominant culture appears absurd in aesthetic reproduction. Underneath a repressive form of power, there is some sort of chaos and social dysfunction, even from the inside. Carnavalesque spaces for destabilization, mockery, and role reversal aid in allowing those without power to rid themselves

of the emotional excess that might otherwise be a threat to power. In trying to disempower oppressive traditions of the habitus of whiteness, Christianity, and the wealthy, “Christian Girl Autumn” exposes this class of people and their assumed subscriptions to lifestyle to be just as reducible to aesthetic, commodifiable signifiers as a traditionally defined subculture or threat to hegemony.

In trying to parse out how subcultural studies have relevance or fail to address post-internet communitizing, it is clear that the idea of aesthetic identification, across new contexts, still is a powerful weapon. This new space is distinct from the world Hebdige is writing from, where centralized tabloids, talk shows, and other news media created a hegemonic communication line from which to attack subcultures. Fragmentation has offered up these tools to any group who might want to use them, and a more nebulous version of this process occurs.

These readings of this meme are the surface of a depthful interaction, where the allure of the Other has the outcome of new layers of meaning and more, new possibilities for reflecting on your own life. Memeification of these images makes clear there is something affective about them that transcends the “basic” reading of influencing and shared consumer habits, as well as the subcultural layer of social justice fodder. These women went viral because of their celebrity, as well as mockery, but also because of the affective allure of the images they created.

In ““Look at Us Now!”: Scrapbooking, Regimes of Value, and the Risks of (Auto)Ethnography” anthropologist Danielle Christenson, conversing with communities of scrapbooking women, recognizes how the work of auto-ethnography, autofiction, or performances of the self, seen clearly in the work of influencing, can result in a “meta engagement” with the world. Christenson defines this relation as scheduling your life and perceiving the world around you as potentialities or rejections of datum for “content.” Influencer

@Lolo_webb reports this phenomenon in her own life, extending to her family. On her Instagram story one day, she posts screenshots of texts with her husband, who, on his way home from his job, managing an astroturf company, sends her a picture of a mural on the side of the road that would be perfect for a post for their Instagram feed. She laughs as she recounts this, noting how influencing has taken over her life, always looking out for a good background, or processing events through narrative. Influencing, in this way, with an aesthetic outright construction of life moments, fueled by the affective labor of online marketing, question the fictions of authenticity that users of the internet negotiate through decisions of anonymity and self presentation. @Lolo_webb asserts an earnestness, perhaps with her intentions to build her brand as an online marketer. She reflects on a curatorial angle of her work and her life that breaks through the question of whether her life is as she makes it out to be. Her curated life is both her "real" life and her profession as one and inseparably. Aptly, she puts this on her "Story" function of her page, rhetorically fitting herself into a tradition of storytellers, those whose control over narrative gives them power and meaning in society.

Textural elements of flannel and brown leather, imagined smells of pumpkin spice and hay bales, are disturbing and uncanny in their hyper-construction but to the extent that they provide a respite for being honest and humorous about the often existentially pressing issue of self-making on the internet. To award agency back to Caitlin Covington, Emily Gemma, and other influencers recontextualized by mockery and disempowerment, it is clear they have created, even if in the 'non-art' context of marketing, photography visually similar to a tradition of women self-portrait artists, a selfie art of embodiment and gender that has opened up this space for subversive readings and reflexivity. The meme of Christian Girl Autumn and the consumption of influencer content is attractive because of an affectively charged recognition of

the self, as an online person, to reflexively see how you relate to self-making by coming into contact with the absurdity of the image.

PRIVATE BOND (END POINT)

Using the botnik.org predictive text processor, I input 50 Instagram captions from a selection of different domestic influencers. These captions were birthday wishes for their husbands, advertisements for Walmart benches and air fryers, grief-filled stories about a dog passing away, advice for women waiting until marriage, and simple selfies of children while waiting for a vacation plane, among numerous issues, holidays, and emoji-filled expressions. Botnik processed the information and gave me back a keyboard, where it guesses, based on the sample, which words come in sequence from the ones you select. All of the women I have been writing about become one mass, speaking each other's husband's names, loving different children from their own, their words can be recontextualized and collaged. I then write through them, using only their words, and produce my expressions.

My family in charge at home looks like they can be gifting our private bond. a sister is filled for your mama. 🙏 happy toxic patterns wearing our marriage story so loved to spend with humility. We want god will i have this? We feel god strategically howwww did they fall? On here i can't find the big sport... Looking back i get you exactly i come up and recommend my world story brand brand brand the weekend is kinda about whenever a man is consistent yet persevered you realize what made finding you ours.

I play with this and think of how English must sound to non-English speakers. The influencer's vernacular, once so expectant and calculated, becomes unfamiliar and confused. The limits of the word predictor fail and phrases circle back on themselves:

My faith on empty days in vermont with how beautiful the time who hate consistently i feel anxious and trust are actually underestimated to consistently i feel anxious and trust are actually underestimated to consistently i feel anxious

I try and scale back and go in with more control, pushing from inside out, trying to squeeze truth out of her:

I love hardest. I was stubborn enough to get up on the cross. I don't know why or how this happened. Girls: a woman who knows my stories. Definitely not what i have up my sleeve for our new house. Everything i am, never is still fully stocked in every size. When mama must stop for the photo: I just collapsed towards jesus on my worst days where i thought i don't care if i have this photo of god.

Later, I feel compelled to break it up into lines and verses.

For me to thank you can i truly mean best baby?

You guys and i dressed wayy too sleek for a trailer

you snagged these beautiful things from target 🎯

life with husband and wife

started calling him " wonder boy "

our big summer making diy designer pillows

out of time for this post

this is gonna be fun

this is gonna be scary

we ♥ cleaning feet at your wedding

I had every reason in the world.

It makes sense.

👧 it will never bring something else 🙏

the comments below all were actually a great reveal

for me to see what i did to you

via my stories.

I love you for being consistently being a jesus seeker †

buying god 's redemption is your favorite purchase.

I see a woman refined by consistently questioning her mind.

Linking the products here: i just wish i could cry in this beautiful blue appliance.

Each extreme timeline is shattered.

And it only got more children until she 's okay with loving.

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