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Ruptures in Authenticity and Authentic Ruptures: Producing White Influencer Vulnerability

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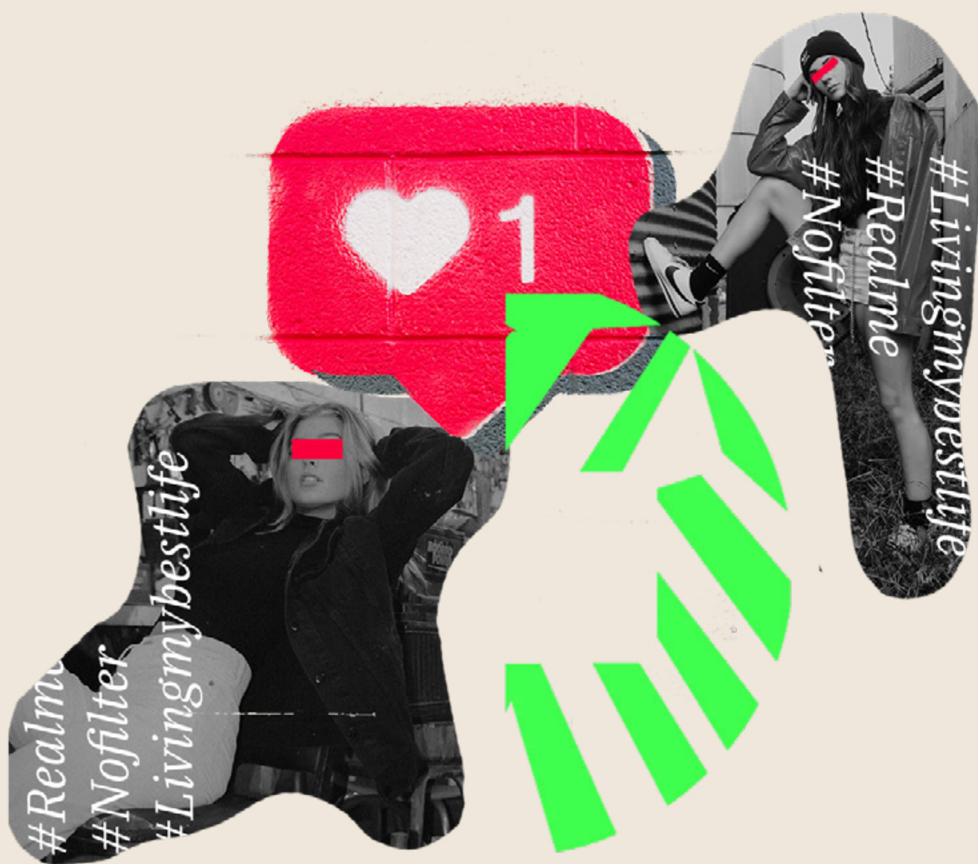

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About the Series

Children and youth stand to be especially impacted by the attention economy of data-driven technologies, educational tools that support surveillance and data collection, and toxic online environments. Engaging with a broad network of interdisciplinary scholars, this project aims to understand and address the impact of media technologies on children and youth against a broader data privacy governance agenda. The project convenes leading experts, policymakers, and impacted stakeholders to question the challenges posed by digital technologies to children and youth.

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Introduction

The idea of authenticity has been applied unquestionably as a valued attribute of the self: it is through our "authentic" selves that we inspire trust, loyalty, believability. The *appearance* of authenticity remains central to how individuals organize their everyday activities and craft their very selves. And, in the 21st century, as personal and professional identities are increasingly created, curated and manipulated in digital and social media, the concept of authenticity seems to carry even *more* weight, not less. Indeed, in the contemporary moment personal authenticity has heightened meaning, and there is at the same time a general awareness, and perhaps even acceptance, that all expressions of authenticity are themselves contrived performances. Arguably, the central question in the age of digital media is whether and how successfully one can *perform* authenticity in order to claim visibility and identity.

Yet, as philosopher Maurice Blanchot pointed out, "If there is, among all words, one that is inauthentic, then surely it is the word "authentic" (Blanchot, 1995, 60). We hear stories of failed performances of racial authenticity in academia and beyond and condemn this kind of duplicity as it calls into question all performances of authenticity. We see powerful men, like Donald Trump and Jair Balsonaro, performing an aggressive masculinity as "unfiltered" and authentic, posing as "tell it like it is" antiheroes fighting against the corrupt political establishment. And, the performance of authenticity is a profoundly and inherently gendered issue which implicates women in particular and exclusive ways. We constantly define and measure —and reward—appearances of authenticity even as we know it is always a performance.

Social media amplifies this tension, as it is often positioned as a kind of open space, where one can be "oneself," while at the same time it is also structurally designed as constantly manipulable. This has particular relevance for young cis-gendered women who perform authenticity on social media, because normative hetero-femininity is always constructed in terms of its *artifice*, where femininity is defined as a necessary contrived performance, from make-up to bodies to behaviors. We see this dynamic with professional influencers on social media, where there is a fusion of performance and identification; their performances of self are, they state emphatically, *authentic*, where they "are themselves," an identification supported by accompanying hashtags: #livingmybestlife, #loveyourself, #therealme, #nofilter. However, despite the fact that there is a general presumption that authenticity and artifice are binary opposites, I argue here that for many young women on social media, these two concepts are mutually constitutive. The affordances of social media platforms encourage "authenticity" as something both assiduously constructed and vehemently contested; fake Instagram accounts, doctored videos (deep fakes), bot accounts, branded influencers, and a plethora of apps, filters, and other tools to distort and create one's image abound in this social media environment. Maintaining both this identification with, and performance of, authenticity has a heightened significance for young cis-gendered women on social media, whose gendered identities are socially constructed as always in need of artifice, embellishment, and improvement. What kind of performance of authenticity, then, is demanded (from not only followers but also from social norms) from young women on social media? And what happens when this performance breaks down? How is vulnerability represented in these mediated spaces?

Arguably, the central question in the age of digital media is whether and how successfully one can perform authenticity in order to claim visibility and identity.

In this article, I analyze the layered relationships between and within visibility, authenticity and vulnerability in the performances of the self for young women in digital culture. I argue that performances of authenticity for young women online depend on artifice and manipulation; using case studies of professional influencers, I demonstrate how this dynamic works in this setting, and what happens when this relationship breaks down, in terms of burn-out, scandal, and creating "fake" accounts. I also argue that these performances are bounded by the privilege of whiteness; how these performances of self are received and rewarded is dependent on one's racial identity.

Visibility

There has been a great deal of scholarship that has examined the rise of the celebrity influencer; here I am concerned with what Alice Marwick has called the "micro-celebrity," the more ordinary young women who gain visibility through followers and sponsored products on Instagram (Marwick, 2013). I focus on what Alison Hearn and Stephanie Shoenhoff call the "social media influencer," who "works to generate a form of 'celebrity' capital by cultivating as much attention as possible and crafting an authentic 'personal brand' via social networks, which can subsequently be used by companies and advertisers for consumer outreach" (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016). I take as a broad case study the professional female influencer and the various ways in which she continually employs what sociologist Arlie Hochschild has called "emotional labor:" the modes and mechanisms that are employed in performances of a feminine self online (Hochschild, 2012; see also Brook Erin Duffy, 2017).

As has been well documented, a digital "public" has allowed girls and women to participate in cultural and political debate and as media makers, in ways that sharply differed from an idealized vision of the public sphere (see Eichorn, 2019; Mazzarella, 2005; Kearny, 2006; Mendes, Keller & Ringrose, 2019; and others). Indeed, girls and young women have been among the most active participants in online culture, from blogging to YouTube to Snapchat to Instagram, and, most recently, TikTok. Networked culture has proven to be rich and productive ground for a range of practices for young women; YouTubers have their own channels where a variety of topics are explored, influencers and beauty vloggers produce overtly commercial content, online feminist activists mobilize around

gender issues, alongside many other practices. Many have theorized that this heightened participation and visibility has in part resulted from the relatively lower barriers of entry for online production, where girls and young women have had unprecedented access to create, interact, influence, and practice politics (Mendes et al, 2019). Others have noted that the broader context of neoliberal capitalism, where individuals are exhorted to create self-brands and be self-entrepreneurs, has encouraged the imperative for young women to be visible (see, for example, Rose, 1999, Gill, 2017, Banet-Weiser, 2018, Hearn, 2008, Duffy, 2017).

Despite the ways in which increased digital visibility opens new opportunities for young women to create media content, it also makes sense for us to approach the heightened visibility of girls' participation in the digital media landscape

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with a great deal of caution. As many scholars have argued, while it is true that young women have been active participants and producers in digital worlds in ever-increasing numbers over the past decade, this participation rarely results in structural shifts that challenge or disrupt inequitable gender relations, practices, and institutions (see Gill & Elias, 2017, Gill & Orgad, 2015, Dosekun, 2015; Egan, 2013, Duffy, 2017, Banet-Weiser, 2018, 2020). On the contrary, one of the consequences of increased visibility for young women online is that there is more and more data for corporations and tech companies to mine and profit upon.

In the world of social media influencers, there is a general presumption that "cultivating as much attention as possible" (Hearn & Schoenhoff 2016) is not only a positive thing, but also one that is most successful if one convincingly portrays "authenticity" —the authentic personal brand—in one's own niche (indeed, in most of the how-to influencer guides the first step is "identify your own niche"). In just one of many examples, the Shane Barker marketing company says in its influencer guide: "The most significant factor that distinguishes influencers from high-profile celebrities is that the former add their unique and authentic voices to

their content… [and] establish personal connections with their followers" (Barker, 2019). For young women in particular, presenting as authentic and authoritative in their own niche and establishing personal connections with followers is key to apparently both personal and economic success on social media. There is, then, an assumed correlation between visibility on social media and individual empowerment, where a great deal of this visibility means being accessible to, and connecting with, a large, popular audience. And, this popularity and accessibility are measured in and through its ability to increase that visibility: in this way, visibility is not a static thing, it has to be in a constant state of growth; like capitalism, it depends on constant accumulation (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

But, as we also know, in a media context in which most circuits of visibility are driven by profit, competition, and consumers, simply *becoming* visible does not guarantee that identity categories such as gender, race, and sexuality will be unfettered from sexism, misogyny, and homophobia. And for young women, visibility on social media often incurs a hostile response in the form of racism and misogyny (Banet-Weiser, 2018). In this way, visibility can easily become a trap; it "empowers" one but also makes one vulnerable. Visibility is also about surveillance, judgement, and scrutiny. This trap of visibility in media has long existed for women, where sheer representation isn't what matters as much as *how* one is represented.

Numerous young women feel pressure to participate in and on social media in specific ways, where this kind of mediated participation is often culturally and socially demanded. But this kind of participation often contradicts socially constructed gendered conventions for young women who have matured in a context that shames them for their bodies, their loud voices, their flaunting of gender norms—indeed, their very participation and presence in public spaces. Amy Dobson suggests that parsing this contradiction means that the mode of self-representation for young women on social media often becomes one of "performative shamelessness," which "may be employed by girls and young women as a kind of psychological and affective shield against an assumedly critical peer audience, as well as critical adult surveillance" (Dobson, 2014).

What does this "psychological and affective shield" look like? Feminist scholar Angela McRobbie discusses this as a cultural and social mandate for girls and young women to be "perfect," in a media context where one is constantly judged and surveilled. This pressure to be perfect, and the inevitable failure of young women to reach what is an impossible goal, has increasingly been

met with violence and tragedy, with bullying, shaming and suicide among young women on the rise (McRobbie 2017). In just one of many examples, in 2015 Australian Instagram model Essena O'Neill quit Instagram because of the constant pressure to be perfect, saying that for every one picture she posted, she took hundreds with her "stomach sucked in, strategic pose, pushed up boobs. I just want younger girls to know this isn't candid life, or cool or inspiration. It's contrived perfection made to get attention" (cited in Walsh, 2017). This quest for perfection responds to, in part, a hostile climate on social media where girls and young women are constantly judged and evaluated on their physical appearance. A recent study by Plan International found that more than half of the 14,000 15- to 25-years-old women reported "being cyber-stalked, sent explicit messages and images, or abused online." Significantly, a large proportion of young women abused on-line are non-white and/or LGBTQ+ (Ahmed, 2020). The highly competitive logic of social media amplifies this pressure, where the more followers the more popular the influencer, thus legitimating and indeed celebrating a constant competition to see who is the most visible and thus profitable. This competition is folded into, and sometimes masked within, popular feminist messages of "love your body," and "put yourself out there" (Gill & Orgad 2015).

As McRobbie points out, within this context, the idea of "the perfect" fits, perhaps ironically, comfortably with the concept of the "imperfect," where women are exhorted to both aspire to perfection but also embrace who "they are": "women can thrive, if not warts and all, at least flaws and all. 'Love your imperfections' is shouted to women from so many billboards" (McRobbie 2020, 49). This function of "being who they are" is a call for young women to be authentic in their quest for perfection; the revelation that we are all imperfect amplifies the performance of authenticity. While McRobbie is analyzing the relationship of the perfect and the imperfect in the context of general media culture, I see a slightly different dynamic at work with young women in social media, where influencers engage in a cycle of authenticity/vulnerability/recovery, a process that demands relentless labour on the part of the influencer.

For social media influencers, the perfect manifests in different ways, from physical bodies and faces to upbeat and aspirational #lifegoals. After all, even the definition of "influence" suggests a *positive* connection; influencers are self-brands and also sponsor other brands in their careers and thus follow an imperative to be happy and positive. As Rosalind Gill has astutely pointed out, much of the contemporary media culture not only favors positivity but also

actively suppresses “other emotional states, including anger and insecurity” (Gill 2017, 610). And, because the performance of authenticity is so important for social media influencers, for young women this often means the conflation of authenticity with happiness and positivity, which in turn is about the exclusion of other affective expressions (what has been recently coined as “toxic positivity”).

Visibility always depends on invisibility, so some young women “trend” easier, and for different reasons, than others in the digital sphere. Primarily white, middle-class, cis-gendered girls have been very *present* within a broad digital “public”—but not necessarily as participants in the redefining and reimagining what the public means. Rather, those who are increasingly visible in a digital public are positioned in national scripts about the future as potential productive economic subjects, and whose data is mined for corporate profit. These girls are what Anita Harris calls the “Can Do” girl, typically white, middle class, and entrepreneurial, someone who embodies the themes of confidence and empowerment, and are filled with capacity (Harris, 2004). Visibility for young female influencers thus yield different gazes, or forms of surveillance, based on race and class, where white women for example, are often rewarded for their *shamelessness* on social media, and Black women are in contrast *shamed* for their self-representation. This constant surveillance, in turn, encourages girls' and women's participation in the circuits of media visibility in terms of their performances of authenticity.

Authenticity

Performing authenticity is certainly not new to individuals who have media visibility. As Hearn and Schoenhoff have documented about the history of celebrity visibility, the more the publicity and image management machine developed within celebrity culture, the savvier the public grew about its mediating role in constructing celebrity personas. In the late 20th century, the celebrity as a product or a standardized type was increasingly devalued in favor of a "real" person who existed underneath. Thus, there was a demand for increased access to the "authentic" person behind the celebrity, a concept of authenticity that is supported by audience demographics and measurement systems that were precursors to the "likes" and "followers" of the social media age (Hearn & Schoenhoff 2016). As Hearn and Schoenhoff document, in the rise of the celebrity brand, "authenticity' becomes the ultimate arbiter of value; beyond the roles played or music created, today's celebrity brand is predicated on convincing consumers of the authenticity of their inherent 'being' beyond the limelight" (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016). With regard to social media influencers, building their brand means cultivating relationships with their followers: "Regular users, in turn, are offered the promise of being able to interact with their favorite stars in ways that seem more equitable, cooperative, and 'authentic;' users may be retweeted, become a 'friend' or have their picture 'liked' by a celebrity" (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016).

Thus, when the social media influencer arrived on the media and economic landscape, there was already a context for the "micro-celebrity," the ordinary people who found a niche in digital media and thus had heightened visibility

(Marwick 2013). Unlike traditional celebrities, influencers begin their careers as “ordinary” people—again, they are “playing themselves,” emphasizing what Graeme Turner has called the “demotic turn” in media culture, where ordinary people seek increasing visibility in the media, essentially transforming themselves into media content (Turner, 2010). There is perhaps no better media platform for this kind of transformation than Instagram, where young women perform “authenticity” as ordinariness, yet one that is nonetheless delimited by a “highly hetero-normative vector of competition” (McRobbie, 2017). In other words, for young women on social media, playing themselves in the mediated stories they create means that performances of authenticity are always gendered; authenticity for women ironically means always applying a filter.

Of course, authenticity is a slippery concept, and I do not intend to define it here. But I do want to argue that performances of authenticity have always depended on the assumption that certain actors are authentic and that these actors have been authorized with the mantle of authenticity in their understandings of the world and of themselves. For most men, being “real” and authentic means conforming to particular conventions of dominant masculinities, conventions that imply that the persona is un-constructed, un-mediated, and unfiltered. For most women, on the other hand, being “real” is ironically applying artifice (in a variety of forms, from intentional silence to make-up to conforming their bodies). Performing authenticity is always a gendered practice, which means that for (white) men it is to construct a persona with no filter, and for (white) women, it is to construct a persona using multiple filters. Both translate and are communicated as authenticity.

The performance of authenticity that is demanded for young female social media influencers is one that is dictated by patriarchy—the authentic young woman is typically white, thin, conventionally beautiful, with just enough edge, overly ambitious with her life goals that fit within the dominant narrative, yet unspecific in how to reach them except through personal merit and resilience. How, then, do social media influencers negotiate the demands of authenticity, especially when their socially mediated projections of their “real selves” are so carefully scrutinized by networked audiences? And in what ways are these negotiations implicated in gender norms and expectations? (Duffy & Hund, 2019)

In fact, professional influencers have been particularly profitable for women (especially white, cis-gendered women), but this success is dependent on a particular curation of the self, one that is enhanced by technology. As Ana Sofia

Elias and Rosalind Gill have argued, there has been an explosion of digital beauty apps for women in recent years, which offer opportunities to continually change one's appearance digitally, increasing not only self-monitoring of the body but also "an hitherto unprecedented regulatory gaze upon women, which is marked by the intensification, extensification and psychologization of surveillance" (Elias & Gill, 2018). This regulatory gaze functions as a disciplinary mechanism for women, a constant striving for a particular version of (white, cis-gendered) perfection.

One manifestation of this is what has been coined as "Instagram face;" the visual representation of women who use selfie filters and FaceTune to create what Jia Tolentino has called the "aesthetic language" of Instagram, one marked by a "generic sameness" (Tolentino, 2019). Feminist media scholar Sophie Bishop argues that Instagram influencers "are beautiful in a specific way that aligns with dominant, mostly white/European beauty ideals" (Bishop, 2019). The body, especially the body that identifies with dominant norms of white femininity, is "an unusual sort of Instagram subject: it can be adjusted, with the right kind of effort, to perform better and better over time" (Tolentino, 2019). But the performance itself is hidden as a performance; rather, as with all performances of authenticity, young women on social media are "presented as behaving in ways that are not pre-meditated.. .uncontrived and natural-seeming, expressing themselves in spontaneous showings of feeling" (Dubrofsky & Wood, 2014).

Clearly, being understood as "authentic" on Instagram is required if one wants to actually profit from their online identities. Yet ironically, beauty apps and filters are practically mandatory for young female influencers to *appear* to be authentic. There are other modes of artifice and filtering for influencers as well: we also see this with young women who construct online selves that are pointedly "not real," using ghostwriters for their accounts and fake sponsorships. The presence of these filters and performances helps to validate the "aesthetic language" of Instagram, so that making oneself more "authentic" often means, paradoxically, conforming one's visual representation to dominant white beauty norms. After all, crafting an authentic self is also about who buys it and buys into it: social media is often about capitalizing on social interaction and making it a domain for profit.

Social media has been lauded as a utopian space for ordinary users outside the greedy hands of corporate gatekeepers as it simultaneously has been vilified as the height of narcissistic self-branding. Authenticity on social media, then, is framed by a profound tension: for female influencers on Instagram, being

authentic is often about constantly adjusting yourself to correspond with dominant white ideals of femininity. Being authentic is also, perhaps ironically, about how well one can *sell* the performance of authenticity.

The detailed and rigorous performance of authenticity is important in part because social media is understood, and indeed celebrated, as endlessly manipulable. This tension is one historically familiar in popular media; for example, audiences for reality television know programs are heavily scripted (and thus not "authentic") yet still are outraged when performances are revealed to be fake. For women, however, this tension has a much longer history: a woman's performance of authenticity is always a performance because women are defined predominantly by artifice. Unlike the performance of authentic masculinity, which emphasizes its unfiltered quality, the performance of authentic femininity is always already suspect, always already a contradiction in terms.

In the surveillance and manipulable gazes of reality television as well as social media, young women are often on the precipice of being revealed as inauthentic, resulting in what Megan Wood has called "the call to authenticity," where "the more one is seen as disclosing via surveillance technologies like Twitter, the more one is constructed as being supposedly real. Similar to what occurs on reality TV, people who appear authentic despite surveillance are valorized as the most authentic" (Wood, cited in Dubrofsky & Wood, 283). This "call to authenticity" is always in tension, as social media influencers are subject to intense scrutiny and critique for the ways in which they perform authenticity by "putting themselves out there" as they are simultaneously encouraged to feel empowered by this visibility.

This tension is, in fact, a key component to performances of authenticity on social media; what the "authentic" looks like changes depending on cultural, social, and economic factors. While for the past decade Instagram has imagined the "authentic" young female influencer as one who could perfect the Instagram Face, in the current moment the equivalence between the perfect and the authentic has now apparently shifted. In a 2019 article titled "The Instagram Aesthetic is over," reporter Taylor Lorenz reports on how young women who have an increased visibility as influencers are rejecting "the notion of a curated feed in favor of a messier and more unfiltered vibe" (Lorenz 2019).

Of course, this "messier and unfiltered vibe" is also one carefully constructed. Lorenz writes that influencers are going out of their way to "make their photos

look worse," including using cameras and apps that make one's images look as if they were taken with an outdated camera. She also points to brand marketers who are capitalizing on the new Instagram Face:

> "Everyone is trying to be more authentic," says Lexie Carbone, a content marketer at Later, a social-media marketing firm. "People are writing longer captions. They are sharing how much money they make … I think it all goes back to, you don't want to see a girl standing in front of a wall that you've seen thousands of times. We need something new" (cited in Lorenz 2019).

Indeed, this is the irony of conformity. In an economy that also values variation and innovation, too much repetition becomes unprofitable. Yet, as Louis Morales-Chanard has written, "there is still no such thing as authenticity on Instagram. Even the messiest picture is as painstakingly curated or distorted as the heavily filtered ones. The bad flashes, the quirky outfits, the faces — every detail one posts is there to show how cool, 'non-self conscious' one is" (Morales-Chanard 2019). Authentic spaces feel like—indeed, we *need* them to feel like—something that is driven and shaped purely by affect and emotions, "non-self conscious," something outside of consumer culture, of profit margins, of capital exchange (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Social media influencers are clearly within normative confines of consumer culture, profiting from their accounts, and engaging in sponsorships and branding as a sign of success. So when the Instagram look changes, it is a shift toward yet more capital accumulation and a more profitable performance of authenticity, one that is as carefully cultivated and constructed as the Instagram Face (indeed, the images in Lorenz' article all featured thin, white, cis-gendered influencers—even if they were making silly faces or posing in dirty bathrooms) (for more, see Elmhirst, 2019).

Vulnerability

Clearly, it is difficult to navigate the tensions that are inherent in the gendered performances of authenticity demanded of young women who are influencers on social media; they can never be resolved, so they are constantly managed. Simultaneously lauded and critiqued, praised and surveilled, and relentlessly scrutinized, young women will inevitably fail at the performance demanded of them by patriarchal norms and what Marwick has called "social surveillance" (Marwick 2013). What happens in this failure? What are the coping mechanisms for not performing authenticity well enough? As we will see, some of these failures are recuperable, depending on one's position within the influencer universe. As Dobson and Kenai have argued, the insistent and relentless positivity that is addressed to young women on social media often means that there is no discursive or material room for suffering, pain, or anger for them to express: "They are invited to reformulate potentially crippling gendered insecurities and social disadvantages as manageable, pleasingly minor problems, rather than acknowledge failure, loss, and frustration within a punishing neoliberal system" (Dobson & Kenai 2017).

Thus, for young women artifice is required to be believable as authenticity, but then this artifice is policed, scrutinized, and judged, resulting in yet another performance, one of vulnerability.

Indeed, authenticity is also about failure, pressure, depression, tears, and vulnerability. What does it mean to share oneself and to become vulnerable? I

wrote about this kind of vulnerability as the *labor* of authenticity in the context of women being believed in sexual assault cases (Banet-Weiser, 2020). In the current moment and in the context of performances of authenticity on social media, this labor is now more visible and becomes part of the narrative, if not brand, of influencers. The more *effort* women make in crafting themselves according to a particular version of apparently effortless authenticity, the more authentic their self-presentation. It is an endless feedback loop, one that in the current moment often results in a performance of both visibility and vulnerability.

Thus, for young women artifice is required to be believable as authenticity, but then this artifice is policed, scrutinized, and judged, resulting in yet another performance, one of vulnerability. Influencers need to manage these different performances, so that the vulnerability expressed is instrumentalized as the necessary obstacle to overcome. But others cannot manage this dynamic so well; the combination of the "new" Instagram aesthetic of appearing to be imperfect in one's authenticity with the material realities of actually *being* vulnerable can become too much to bear. As Annelot Prins has argued, the lived realities of sadness and pain that influencers (like all people) feel, and the disconnect of these realities with their Instagram stories point

> "to a discrepancy between the promise of happiness upon which Instagram builds and the lived realities in which this promise is never fulfilled. Happiness might be highly visible on the horizon, but it routinely remains just out of reach. The idea that we are always-almost on the cusp of happiness stabilizes ideologically grounded unequal power relations" (Prins 2020).

This discrepancy also describes authenticity, where performing authenticity is supposed to orient one toward happiness. Yet given that this is an impossible performance, and is a contradiction in terms from the start on social media, they are always bound to fail. The endless feedback loop can only go so far before it breaks. So what does this break look like, what forms does it take? When the "can do" girl can no longer "do" what she needs to in order to perform authenticity, what shape does that failure take?

As a way to conclude this essay, I want to offer three modes of failure in this context of constantly maintaining performances of authenticity and managing artifice and multiple filters. In each of these modes, it is clear that the burden

of maintaining these performances is simply too much for one individual influencer; help is needed if one is privileged enough to obtain it. Indeed, we can see that it requires privilege to mediate particular kinds of vulnerability.

In the first example, Tavi Gevinson, fashion blogger, founder and editor-in-chief of the girls' online magazine Rookie, is a highly influential presence in girls' culture, a stellar example of the "can do girl" (Keller 2015). She built her online persona on her authenticity, and assiduously cultivated this persona in her blogs, with Rookie, and on her Instagram account. The labor of this constant maintenance of authenticity proved to be too much, and eventually broke down: Gevinson burned out from her constant performances of authenticity on Instagram and eventually hired an assistant to take over curating her persona. The second example offers a different coping mechanism for the failure to be a "can-do girl," when a widely read essay revealed that influencer Caroline Calloway hired a ghost-writer to manage her Instagram posts. The essay, written by the ghost-writer Natalie Beach, reveals the various ways in which performances of authenticity are especially available for white women who aspire to and for a middle-class sensibility. Finally, the third example is not an examination of an individual influencer but of a particular kind of Instagram account: the "finsta" or fake Instagram, where young women allow only a few, intimate followers and use the fake account to ironically be more authentically themselves. That a new account has to be maintained reveals the extra labor of coping with failed authenticity—and also reveals the failure of always being a "can-do" girl, as one needs to seek a new audience of followers, one that is not the commodity audience of the successful influencer, in order to reveal the tensions in performances of authenticity.

All of these modes have connections and similarities: they all engage explicitly with artifice, and they all are about some kind of recovery from the exposure of this artifice (be it through a confession or burn-out or the creation of a second account). They also all hide privilege: the privilege to experience this kind of vulnerability. The cost of having to constantly perform authenticity is clear here: the loss of a job, of well-being, of oneself.

Burnout and Recovery

Tavi Gevinson, the Chicago-based young woman who founded and edited the online girls' magazine Rookie, was a fashion blogger at 11 years old, is widely popular as an influencer today, and has been heralded for her authenticity in her self-representation. She began her fashion blogging career in 2009 at the age of 11 by posing in her own backyard. She created Rookie in her teenage bedroom, and went on road trips to meet with her fans as a peer and confidante. She is by all indicators a cultural and economic success; aside from Rookie and fashion blogging, she has modeled and acted in both film and theater (Keller, 2015).

Gevinson is constantly described in the press in a way proximate to her performance of authenticity: quirky, young, and media savvy. Founding an online magazine for girls at the age of 15 that covered fashion and feminism was an integral part of that authenticity; as Sophie Elmhirst points out, "Youth helped Tavi retain a kind of moral safety – a sense that she was above, or at least detached from, the murky commercialism of the media class" — despite the fact that she has made an entire career out of this authentic detachment from media commodity culture. When Instagram began to achieve heightened attention as the primary vehicle for young women to represent themselves, Gevinson capitalized on it, quickly gaining half a million followers and began an additional career in sponsoring branded products, including a partnership with Two Trees, a company that owns luxury apartments in Fort Green Brooklyn. Gevinson was paid to live there for a year, in exchange for posting images on Instagram and hosting events for her followers. This kind of branded partnership was at the time new to influencers, and it revealed the fissures between Gevinson the individual, and Gevinson the brand. Indeed, this partnership demonstrates some of the ways

in which the influencer instrumentalizes personal and domestic relationships in accordance to brand logic.

The partnership with Two Trees, and the follower backlash to this kind of overt blurring of the individual and the brand, seemed to be the tipping point for Gevinson. It revealed the intense labor of authenticity that was demanded from her, and that she willingly gave. As with all labor, there is burnout.

This commitment to authentic "shareability" felt like, in Gevinson's words, a "black hole," where her "can-do" girl persona was constantly judged and scrutinized, a judgment that, like with most women, was internalized and translated into low self-worth.

In a widely read article in *The Cut* magazine titled "Who Am I Without Instagram?" Gevinson vividly describes the cost of constantly performing authenticity: "I had been honing my shareability lens for many years before Instagram and already received much praise for 'being myself'. Somewhere along the line, I think I came to see my shareable self as the authentic one and buried any tendencies that might threaten her likability so deep down I forgot they even existed" (Gevinson, 2019). This commitment to authentic "shareability" felt like, in Gevinson's words, a "black hole," where her "can-do" girl persona was constantly judged and scrutinized, a judgment that, like with most women, was internalized and translated into low self-worth:

> "With Instagram, self-defining and self-worth-measuring spilled over into the rest of the day, eventually becoming my default mode. If I received conflicting views of my worth or, looking at other people's accounts, disparate ideas about how to live, the influx of information could lead to a kind of panic spiral. I would keep scrolling as though the cure for how I felt was at the bottom of my feed. I'd feel like I was crawling out of my skin, heartbeat first, for minutes and hours. Finally, I'd see something that made me feel bad enough to put my phone away" (Gevinson 2019).

As a result of this blackhole of self-worth and self-esteem, Gevinson made a decision to hire someone to post and comment on her Instagram. In order to continue to appear authentic, she felt she needed someone else to curate her life. Of course, this is a position and a prerogative of extreme privilege: she not only was economically able to hire someone, she has the visibility to write about her retreat in a mass circulated magazine. Her public performance of her retreat becomes her new performance of authenticity; she ends the article by claiming she is part of the new look of Instagram: the "relatable influencer," with trends like #nomakeup, #nofilter, #mentalhealth, #bodyimage, and "Instagram vs. Reality" memes dominating the screens.

Scandal and Revenge

The same month when Gevinson published her article about her retreat from Instagram, and in the same magazine, another article emerged that also gave insight into the labor of authenticity for social media influencers. This article, titled “I Was Caroline Calloway” was written by Natalie Beach and revealed her role as a ghostwriter and co-creator of Caroline Calloway’s influencer Instagram account (Beach 2019). The article details many different aspects of Beach’s role as ghostwriter, and clearly establishes some of the logics of being an influencer: Calloway was confident, Beach was insecure; Calloway was a risk-taker, Beach timid and shy. Beach positions herself, like Gevinson, as a feminist, using Instagram as a way to break barriers of entry for young women to become visible:

> “I believed Caroline and I were busting open the form of nonfiction. Instagram is memoir in real time. It’s memoir without the act of remembering. It’s collapsing the distance between writer and reader and critic, which is why it’s true feminist storytelling, I’d argue to Caroline, trying to convince her that a white girl learning to believe in herself could be the height of radicalism (convenient, as I too was a white girl learning to believe in herself)” (Beach 2019).

Here, Beach reveals her own deep insecurities by buying into creating the “authentic” life of Calloway, a life that scarcely resembled the reality of either of their material lives. She continues, “I had built my whole career around my commitment to her persona — crafting it, caring for it, and trying my hardest to copy it, spinning

As Farah Safy-Hallan eloquently argues, this kind of feminist vulnerability is what she calls a "third wave scam" where white girls get to perform their sadness and vulnerability because they are always more "authentic" than girls of color.

out onto the streets of a strange European city as if the world existed to take care of me" (Beach 2019).

Beach's confession is filled with pain, sadness, and vulnerability; she speaks of her own talent being subsumed by having to care for Calloway, the ways in which Instagram and the performances of authenticity demanded by the platform and followers slowly and inexorably creates something, and someone, unrecognizable. It also is about the material element of the labor of authenticity; the relationship broke down in part because Beach did not get paid for her ghost-writing work, despite promises from Calloway.

Yet Beach's own performance of authenticity—her pain, vulnerability—was not only published in a highly visible magazine, the story of her relationship with Calloway was picked up in multiple media outlets—the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *National Public Radio*, *The Guardian*. Access to these outlets to confess to the world that a popular female influencer is a con artist is surprising in some ways, and utterly predictable in others. Like Gevinson, both Calloway and Beach are young white women who perform authenticity in the ways I've described above: as both perfect and imperfect. Of course, the performances themselves have important differences and different ways of resolving these tensions. Gevinson burns out and then openly hires someone else to curate her story; Calloway hides the labor of Beach and claims her performance of authenticity as her own.

The undeniable privilege of both Calloway and Beach—the conviction that together they could indeed create a persona that the world cared about—is implied in the article but not interrogated. After all, who is authorized to make these sorts of confessions? Who gets to admit to being part of a con, with the full knowledge that this admission will not only result in wide media coverage but also an inevitable landing on one's feet? As Farah Safy-Hallan eloquently argues, this kind of feminist vulnerability is what she calls a "third wave scam" where white girls get to perform their sadness and vulnerability because they are always more "authentic" than girls of color: "the scam would not exist were it not for the leeway their skin color and class affords them to be mediocre, to fail skywards, bolstered by a pedigree that extends back to the inception of the first America. In this America, there is no glass ceiling for them, only an infinite sky" (Safy-Hallan 2020).

The Fake and the "Real"

The labor of authenticity is no less real for more ordinary "micro-celebrities" and indeed most young women who aspire to be influencers. Very few influencers have the privilege and the visibility to lament their burn-out and their duplicity on mass outlets such as *The Cut*, the *New York Times*, and *The Guardian*. What does the price paid for a relentless performance of contrived authenticity look like for them? Here, it's telling that many Instagram users have established a "finsta" account. A portmanteau of "fake" and "Instagram," finstas are Instagram accounts with a small group of trusted followers where users can post unfiltered images. Finstas are most popular with young girls, which speaks to the relentless judgement and evaluation of women on Instagram—finstas are considered a "safe space" for young women to just be their "authentic" selves. The labor of authenticity exposes this profound contradiction: female influencers on Instagram are expected to be authentic, which can only be achieved by a performance of idealized white cis-gendered identity. Only in their *fake* accounts can they escape, if even for a moment, the disciplinary practice of authenticity. And even then, the scrutiny and judgment that accompanies all self-representation on Instagram can be too much.

Though not an ordinary micro-celebrity, Gevinson begins her article by discussing her three Instagram accounts: her public one, her "finsta" for her friends and family, and her own private one, where only she follows herself, which, in her words:

> "existed just to scratch an itch, to satisfy the part of myself that had learned to register experience as

only fully realized once primed for public consumption, but that was monitored by the other part of myself, the part that knew the actual sharing of these specific moments would appear inauthentic: I'd look too fancy for Rookie and too trying-to-be-fancy to be a real celebrity. So I engaged in this private fantasy of my own public life, just differently packaged — openly shrewd and braggadocian rather than 'relatable'" (Gevinson 2019).

Through these examples, we can see how the relationship between artifice and authenticity break down, albeit in different ways. For young female influencers, the presumed opposition between a manipulated, curated, filtered self and the performance of authenticity, is not at all an opposition but rather a necessary equivalence. It is when this opposition ruptures—through burn-out, revelation, or simply the exhaustion of maintaining the performance—that we see yet another performance of authenticity, that of vulnerability. Yet even this performance of vulnerability is only accessible—to an audience, a public, a medium, an industry—for some: those young white women deemed to be capable of authenticity in the first place; those who are enabled to "fail skywards" and access the infinite sky.

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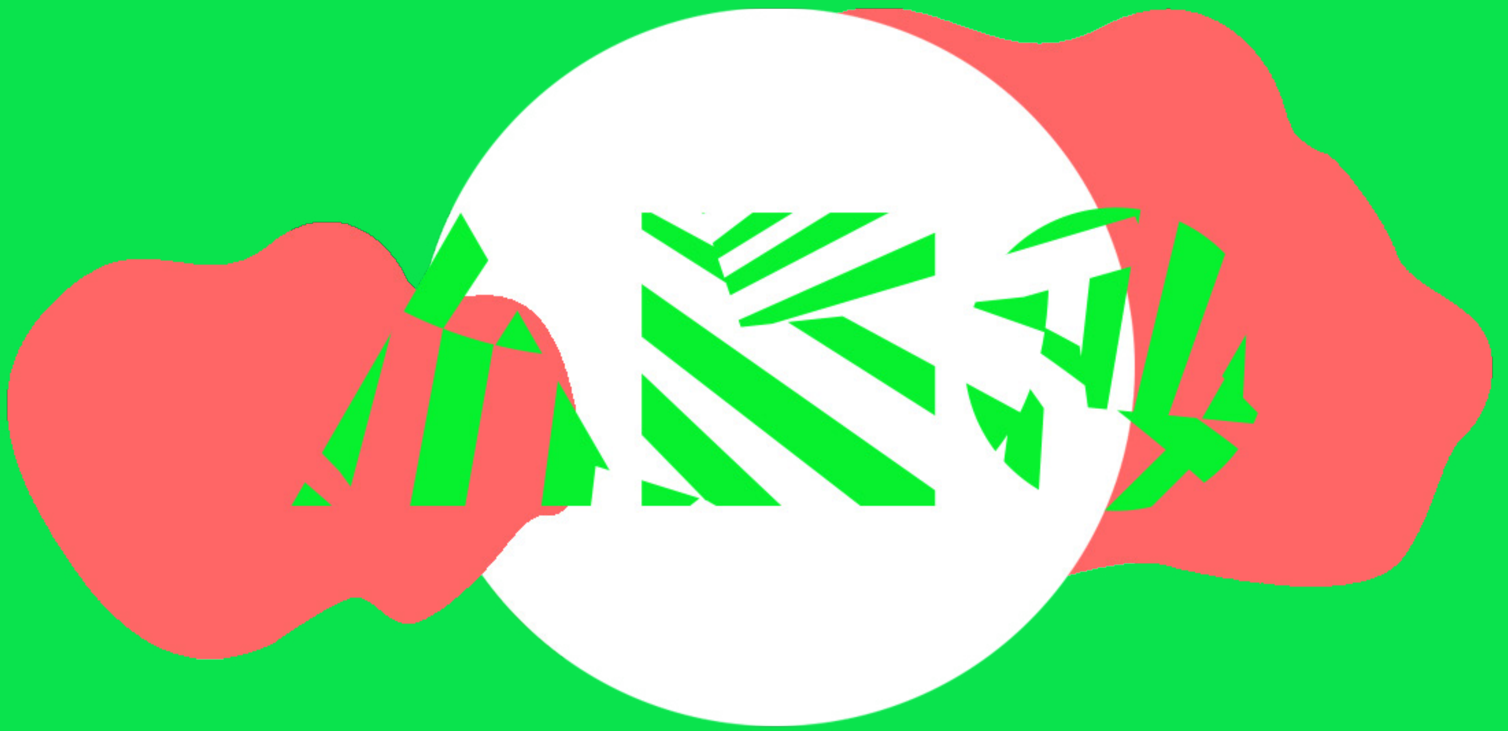

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