**PhD Research Proposal:**

# Under the Influence:

Gendered Subjectivity and the Politics of Instagram Influence in South Africa

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**ABSTRACT**

The social media influencer, who continues to function as a cultural, political and economic tastemaker, glamourises and normalises particular ideas of gendered subjectivity. Given the transnational circulation of neoliberal and postfeminist ideals of gendered subjectivity, it is vital to understand the impact influencers have on their followers, particularly the ways in which followers interpret, replicate, repurpose, contest and also reject influencer performances of neoliberal and postfeminist subjectivities, particularly in the South African context, where issues of gender, economic and social inequality remain deeply entrenched. This project, by conducting a feminist qualitative study, will investigate the manner in which a select group of female South African Instagram followers engage with the content of two historically marginalised female South African Instagram influencers. Premised on the understanding that influencer-follower performances and relationships are shaped by contemporary neoliberal and postfeminist ideologies, this project will employ a thematic and critical discourse analysis to investigate expressions of subjectivity, gender norms and gender performances and the larger ideological implications these ideas of gendered subjectivity carry in the South African context. This project also draws on the work of Stuart Hall and Henry Jenkins to frame insights into how South African followers engage with issues of authenticity, (digital) surveillance and discipline on Instagram.

Key words: social media influencing; Instagram; neoliberalism; postfeminism; authenticity; surveillance and discipline

# CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Background of the Research

Social media influencers play a significant role in shaping and promoting certain forms of subjectivity[1]. These subjectivities, while presented as playful and aspirational ways of being, inform our understanding and performance of gender. Additionally, influencers model a certain type of ideological subject[2] aligned with dominant systems of power, including imperialism, white-supremacy, capitalism, heteropatriarchy. Equally significant is the role of followers – concerns about how followers (i.e. the influenced) interpret and internalise the performances they observe are of particular importance, since followers play a key role in reproducing and normalising what they see on social media in everyday life[3]. Further, social media fosters a sense of community, where notions of friendship, support, and belonging intersect with practices of surveillance and discipline[4], making these platforms important sites of contemporary socialisation.

While research focused on the intersection of subjectivity, social media, neoliberalism, and postfeminism continues to expand, it is largely shaped by scholarship from the global North

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[1] Following Marwick (2013), I understand subjectivity to refer to the ways in which we think of ourselves. These ideas are influenced by how various aspects of identity are portrayed in the media (representation), as well as the ways in which individuals present themselves to others (self-presentation). The decision to focus on subjectivity, rather than identity in general, stems from the premise that neoliberal and postfeminist ideology permeate representations and self-presentations in ways that impact the understanding of who and what we are, as well as ideas of how we should act (Bröckling, 2016). In this project then, subjectivity refers to our ideas of Self as it relates to various facets of our identity (including gender, race, class, religion, sexuality, nationality etc. – and how these intersect to reflect issues of privilege and power) as well as our ideas of how to function in society, politically (including ideas about work), socially, and culturally.

[2] While ideas about womanhood and motherhood etc. are of key concern, my interest also lies in specific ideas about work and political subjectivity that influencers convey to their followers. In this regard, understanding what the neoliberal/postfeminist subject is and the ways these ideas are reinforced and perpetuated in contemporary society are vital to this project.

[3] A key assumption here is that social media platforms have become an important aspect in the process of socialisation – in fact, it is my contention that in contemporary society, social media function in the same was as churches, families and schools in the transmission of gender roles, norms and practices.

[4] Surveillance and discipline play key roles in the perpetuation and reinforcement of various aspects of identity – including how we understand and think of ourselves. Drawing on the work of Foucault, and specifically his treatment of Jeremy Bentham's conceptualisation of the panopticon, I argue that this idea of surveillance (including self-surveillance) and discipline offers a compelling framing of how people comply with and acquiesce to cultural, political and societal norms. For Bartky (1988: 27) the Panopticon illustrates power, not just over the disciplined, docile body, but also over the mind: "[i]n the perpetual self-surveillance of the inmate lies the genesis of the celebrated "individualism" and heightened self-consciousness that are hallmarks of modern time." While surveillance on social media could be likened to Thomas Mathieson's (1997, cited in Gill 2019) model of the *synopticon,* where the few are being watched by the many as opposed to the few watching the many, followers, especially, are positioned as key players in this system of surveillance and discipline especially since the condition of digital hyperconnectivity (Brubaker, 202) allows for 24/7 monitoring and engagement.

(see Abidin and Gwynne, 2017; Gill, 2003, 2007a, 2007b, 2008, 2016a, 2016b, 2017, 2019; Gill and Scharff, 2011; Romele et al., 2017; Winch, 2015). The dominance of perspectives emanating from the global North often results in epistemic blind spots that universalise whiteness, urbanity, and capitalist subjectivity as normative, overlooking the complex and situated ways gendered subjectivity plays out in postcolonial, racialised, and economically unequal contexts like South Africa. While authors situated in the global South are indeed adding to research in the above-mentioned field – with notable contributions from Dippner (2018a, 2018b), Dosekun (2015, 2021), Iqani (2019), and Iqani and De Araujo (2023) – a significant gap remains in South African scholarship. Therefore, this project seeks to address the gap in literature on influencer and follower culture by examining, specifically, how South African Instagram followers engage with influencer content – interpreting, reproducing, resisting and/or rejecting it – within the localised systems of power that shape South African social realities.

Ultimately, this study not only addresses the empirical absence of global Southern perspectives but also engages critically with the theoretical frameworks used to understand digital cultures, notably, neoliberalism and postfeminism. It challenges binary logics that tend to Other non-Western contexts while remaining attentive to the dangers of universalising narratives that overlook the specific historical, political, and social dynamics of South Africa.

### 1.2 Statement of the Problem

Despite the growing influence of social media influencers, critical scholarship has been slow to interrogate how influencer content intersects with neoliberal and postfeminist ideologies in shaping followers' understandings of selfhood, success, and social belonging. Existing research predominantly emphasises the economic and marketing dimensions of influencer culture, often privileging the perspective of the influencer while neglecting the follower's perspective. This gap raises the following questions: How do followers interpret, reproduce and/or contest the neoliberal and postfeminist ideals articulated by influencers? And, how do these dynamics shift across intersecting identities, particularly within the South African context?

This project further explores an underexamined dimension: the emergence of affective spaces of belonging between influencers and followers. These intimate online spaces – situated at the

nexus of self-(re)presentation[5] and the performance of relationships – offer critical insight into the ways women's cultures are negotiated on social media platforms, particularly where race, class, culture, and (hetero)sexuality intersect in distinctly South African ways.

In addition, this project interrogates the nature of the relationship between the influencer and the followers – a relationship that is understood to be asymmetric but also mutually constitutive. Questions related to who becomes an influencer, how and why they became an influencer, alongside questions about why and how these influencers continue to garner followers to influence, are all integral to understanding the role and function of the influencer in contemporary society. Given that the influencer, by definition, uses their micro-celebrity status for economic gain, it is necessary to critically evaluate the tools influencers use to influence their followers – such as those related to platform and algorithmic affordances or performances of authenticity – and, importantly, to study how the followers respond to this kind of influence. These issues take on specific meaning in the context of the surveillance and disciplinary practices used on media platforms by followers, such as call-out/cancel culture – prompting the following questions: how much power does the follower have over the influencer? How is power distributed among the followers themselves? When it comes to the power of looking – are followers more likely to be swayed by the influencer themself or by the engagement of fellow followers with the influencer? Moreover, the power dynamics between the influencer and the follower online cannot be divorced from the intersections of power and privilege that exist offline. As indicated above, in the post-apartheid South African context, the performance and (re)presentation of femininity, motherhood, entrepreneurship etc. must be understood in the context of deeply intertwined issues of race and class, alongside issues of (compulsory) heterosexuality, ableism, culture and religion, among many others.

Therefore, by centring the follower, this project critically examines how South African Instagram followers engage with influencer content – here followers are not merely positioned as passive consumers, but as active "prosumers" of neoliberal and postfeminist subjectivities. This project also explores the nature of affective spaces created online, specifically peer-to-peer surveillance and discipline and the attendant power structures that frame these affective spaces of belonging within contemporary digital cultures.

[5] By investigating the visual content on Instagram, this project centres matters of representation and presentation. Following Rettberg, 2017 [Preprint]), I understand *representations* to be constructed – "it stands instead of an object to which it refers"; while a *presentation* is something that a person does/an act. While this matter will be complicated in later sections, I find these definitions a useful starting point when studying influencer content.

### 1.3 Research Questions

This project will broadly investigate the following problem areas with the aim of narrowing these down to more specific questions as I continue to engage with literature on this matter:

1) Engagement and interpretation and contestation

   (*with the focus on how followers engage with influencers/influencer content on issues of femininity, motherhood, entrepreneurship*)

   - How do South African Instagram followers understand, interpret and embody influencer representations of femininity, motherhood, entrepreneurship?
   - In what ways do followers actively challenge, reframe and/or reject influencer content that promotes normative gender ideals?
   - How do followers engage with transnational gender discourses in relation to South Africa's socio-political conditions and how does this shape their send and understanding of selfhood and belonging?

2) Gender normativity and aspirations and cultural mediation

   (*with the focus on the circulation of aspirational ideals – ideals of success and desirability – and how they are culturally shaped/received*)

   - What gender norms and aspirational ideals are promoted by influencers, and how do these align with or challenge dominant cultural expectations in South Africa?
   - How do intersecting factors like race, class, culture, tradition, and sexuality mediate interpretation and reproduction of gendered aspirational performances on social media in the South African context?
   - How do followers adapt, reinterpret, or reject the gendered aspirational ideals promoted by influencers within their specific socio-cultural contexts and what does this reveal about the negotiation of normative gender ideals?

3) Intersectional Power Structures and Ideological Alignments

   (*with the focus on broader ideological structures and the politics of power in influencer–follower dynamics*)

   - How are intersectional power structures—shaped by race, class, gender, sexuality, and other axes of difference—reinforced, negotiated, or challenged through influencer–follower dynamics on South African social media?
   - How do South African followers navigate and negotiate the ideological tension between local socio-cultural frameworks and globalised (often Western) gender norms and subjectivities promoted by influencers?

- What ideological narratives are perpetuated and/or contested through influencer culture and how does follower engagement align with and/or disrupt dominant power structures?

### 1.4 Research Objectives

This exploratory study examines how social media influencing – particularly through practices of prosumption – shapes the perceptions, ideals and narratives associated with subjectivity, gender norms and gender performances among a select group of female Instagram followers South African. This research foregrounds how followers engage with influencer content – specifically, how followers interpret and reproduce influencer performances, but also how they resist, contest and reject the normative ideals influencer content promotes. While the qualitative nature and limited scale of this project limits the ability to make broad generalisations, this project does aim to provide empirically grounded insights that enrich theoretical understandings of identity and gender construction in the digital sphere, especially within the South African context.

This theoretical contribution is necessary to expand current knowledge on how social media facilitates both emancipatory and harmful narratives around gender norms, practices and performances. Ultimately this study draws awareness to social media's powerful role as an agent of socialisation, capable of either reinforcing or challenging dominant gender ideologies. In this regard, the connection between digital self-presentation, prosumption and broader socio-political issues such as gender-based violence and inequality demands critical attention. Given the severity of gender-based violence in South Africa, this project contributes to ongoing debates about the socio-political consequences of influencer culture and the potential need for regulation of social media platforms.

## CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The intersection of neoliberal ideology, postfeminist sensibilities and participatory digital cultures provides a critical theoretical framework for analysising Instagram influencer/follower culture in post-apartheid South Africa. Neoliberalism, understood as a pervasive cultural logic, shapes the values, identities, everyday practices and ways of being, by centring individualism, entrepreneurialism and self-optimization. It discursively frames success as the result of personal effort, thereby obscuring deeply-rooted structural inequalities. Postfeminism, as a

form of "gendered neoliberalism", depoliticises feminism by recasting it as consumer-driven gender empowerment – aligning seamlessly with the aspirational aesthetics and self-branding techniques that characterise influencer/follower culture. Participatory social media platforms, such as Instagram, facilitate high levels of user interaction, making it possible for followers to engage with the highly curated influencer content – enabling followers to validate, co-produce, share and prosume – or challenge and reject – the subjectivities (re)presented and performed by influencers. While the transnational nature of neoliberalism and postfeminism are recognised, this study foregrounds how these ideological and cultural formations manifest in specifically South African ways – i.e. shaped by the local histories of colonialism and apartheid, capitalism, gender inequality and digital access.

### 2.1 Neoliberalism

Neoliberal capitalism is often associated with the political, economic and social practices that extend the neoliberal principles that govern the market to all spheres of life (Salmenniemi and Adamson, 2015; Scharff, 2016). While neoliberalism is regarded as "a controversial, incoherent and crisis-ridden term" (Venugopal, 2015: 166), it is broadly related to policies concerned with privatisation and deregulation, where the state plays an active role in ensuring that the market is free from rules and regulations (Gill and Scharff, 2011; Grzanka et al., 2016; Vallier, 2022). It is neoliberalism's normative features, particularly as they relate to human relations, including emotions and even creativity, that are of import to this project. Foucault (cited in Hofmeyr, 2011: 30) argues that neoliberalism manifests as a particular form of governmentality: "neoliberalism produces a certain 'representation' of the governing reality…that necessitates a certain intervention or exercise of power, which in turn conditions the 'mind set' of the subjects of the neo-liberal regime" (Hofmeyr, 2011: 29-30). This governmentality constructs a particular kind of subject – the *homo oeconomicus*, or "entrepreneurial subject", who is both freely choosing and self-regulating, self-optimising and actively committed to investing in themselves as human capital, as well as constantly engaged in competition with other subjects (Scharff, 2016; Genz, 2015).

For Hall (2011: 711) neoliberal ideas "have long been inscribed in social practices and institutions sedimented into the 'habitus' of everyday life, common sense and popular consciousness". The social media influencer[6] together with her followers and the communities

[6] My treatment of the social media influencer is highly influenced by Bröckling's (2016) investigation into the entrepreneurial subject and the manner in which literature across multiple genres and disciplines anchors the

they form, are all prime examples of how neoliberal ideology is subsumed into contemporary (digital) culture. These figures simultaneously represent "two popular discursive figures", nurtured by neoliberal discourse, who, in contemporary parlance, can be described as the hardworking hustler, and the aspirational consumer – both understood through the rhetoric of free/personal choice, individualism, commodification and aspiration (Hall 2011). Therefore, commonly-held ideas associated with the influencer, the follower and the affective networks they create, are deeply intertwined with neoliberal ideology. In line with the idea of the entrepreneurial subject, the social media influencer in particular illustrates the necessity of treating oneself as a (marketable) brand (Duffy and Pooley, 2019; Khamis, Ang and Welling, 2016; Senft, 2013; Winch, 2015), further entrenching key tenets of neoliberal ideology, such as individualism and meritocracy[7], among followers and attendant affective networks.

Furthermore, this entrepreneurial discourse finds particular purchase in contemporary late-stage capitalism which is increasingly characterised by job insecurity and the gig economy – which have consequences for our understanding of labour as well as self- and work-identity (April, 2024). To this end, a neoliberal framework can help elucidate issues of digital labour (Fuchs and Sevignani, 2013; Stevens, 2022), visibility labour (Abidin, 2016 and 2020; Cotter, 2018) and aspirational labour (Duffy, 2016), and for women specifically, issues of immaterial labour (Gill and Pratt, 2008; Jarrett, 2014; Rose and Spencer, 2015), affective labour (Carah, 2013; Hopkins, 2019; Mohamad 2020; Wissinger, 2007) and glamour labour (Hearn and Banet-Weiser, 2020; O'Gorman 2019; Soehendar and Widjayanti 2020; Wissinger, 2014). The social media influencer, by virtue of the precarity of work, engages deeply with these aspects of labour, often unpaid, in ways that normalise and entrench these aspects for her followers.

Another contemporary issue that can be understood through a neoliberal lens pertains to surveillance - not only do influencers and followers alike engage in (self)surveillance practices,

idea of the entrepreneur, it's necessity and inevitability, in the public imaginary by "[defining] a zone of the utterable and the knowable, while directed, above all, at the doable" (pp. xiii). In Bröckling's (2016) terms then, the influencer provides an example of w*hat* we are supposed to do in contemporary society, and also models *how* we are supposed to do it.

[7] Littler (2018) offers an in-depth look into neoliberal meritocracy, showing how the language of "equality of opportunity" across political, cultural and social spheres promises opportunity and progress while simultaneously widening the gap between rich and poor. This is reminiscent of arguments that characterise the internet as a democratising and equalising force. This kind of rhetoric is particularly relevant to South Africa, the most unequal country in the world and with a youth unemployment rate of nearly 60% (Maleke, 2025), where people seek not only to augment their income with influencing endeavours, but where influencing is increasingly considered a legitimate and ideal career path. As a result, a key part of this project involves untangling the ideas and performances that keep these neoliberal meritocratic narratives in place, looking specifically at the ways followers engage with how influencers blur the lines of survivalist ventures and aspirational posturing.

they do so voluntarily. Individuals are expected to engage in self-surveillance practices as a means to gain visibility and to remain competitive – while Duffy and Hund (2019) consider these themes in the context of digital economies specifically as it pertains to content creators on Instagram, issues of visibility and competitiveness have seeped into everyday notions of work[8]. Foucault's (1995/1977) use of the panopticon to explain surveillance and disciplinary practices continues to be applicable to our understanding of contemporary surveillance and disciplinary practices on social media. Within the neoliberal framework, this takes on a more social character (see Marwick, 2012 on social surveillance) with peer-to-peer surveillance and disciplinary practices often reinforcing neoliberal norms of success, visibility and self-optimisation. (Lumby, 2011)

Neoliberal ideology directly links (conspicuous) consumption and choice to issues of self-actualisation and "identity, status, aspirations, cultural capital, and positions within a social group" (Paterson, 2017 cited in Sana, 2024: 178) This kind of framing finds purchase in contemporary South Africa, where the fall of apartheid marked a transition to greater freedom – be it freedom of movement, freedom of choice or freedom to consume (Posel, 2010; Sana, 2022; 2024). The fall of apartheid also marked South Africa's transition to a neoliberal society. Given the levels of inequality in South Africa, issues of choice and consumption continue to be deeply political – by extension, the portrayal of aspirational lifestyles that forms part of influencing, also takes on political meaning. While buying certain brands and experiences are understood to symbolise freedom and success – consumption takes on affective value especially since the very act buying a specific brand becomes an act of empowerment, self-love and self-care (Gill and Scharff, 2011). In this way, neoliberal cultural logic makes it possible for individuals to buy products and experiences that symbolise their authentic selves – the latter being an integral, albeit contested, part of influencer/follower culture.

Therefore, a neoliberal lens will help make sense of contextual nuance influencers and followers contend with on Instagram specifically, but also in the context of a neoliberal post-apartheid South Africa.

### 2.2 Postfeminism

Postfeminism is a complex and often contradictory analytical position that elucidates a specific contemporary understanding of women's position resulting from a wide range of shifts in

[8] LinkedIn is a prime example of the normalisation of kind of visibility and competitiveness referred to here.

cultural and societal trends relative to, and within, feminism and neoliberal capitalist culture in general. In her much-cited description of postfeminism, McRobbie (2004, cited in Lumby, 2011: 95-96) argues that postfeminism "positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasise it is no longer needed". Put differently, there is a simultaneous acceptance and rejection of feminist ideals that offer young(er) women "particular kinds of freedom, empowerment and choice 'in exchange for' or 'as a kind of substitute for' feminist politics and transformation" (McRobbie 2007, cited in Gill and Scharff, 2011: 4). Dunn and Falkof (2021: 2) simultaneously draw on and refine McRobbie's description in their articulation of this term, in a way that clearly indicates that postfeminism is mediated by commodity-driven late-stage capitalism: "[postfeminism] can be summarised as a set of popular discourses claiming that feminism is no longer necessary as women can now become empowered through shopping, bodily enhancement and modification, career success and assuming a prominent position in a male-dominated society." While postfeminism's entanglement with feminism – and by implication anti-feminist discourse – is important for framing our understanding of influencer/follower subjectivities and their engagement on social media platforms, for the purposes of this project, a more salient aspect of Gill's (2007) postfeminist sensibility revolves around the prosumption of a specific kind of femininity, as it relates to work, motherhood and womanhood, that is played out in mainstream media. Postfeminism is thus framed by and expressed through dominant ideologies connected to contemporary cultures, such as those related to globalised neoliberal capitalism (Gill, 2016). Gill's (2007a; 2008; 2016a&b; 2017) work on postfeminism is integral to my understanding not only of postfeminism, but in my recognition that postfeminism is a specific form of gendered neoliberalism which manifests in performances of femininity in media, which, in turn, impacts the interior life of contemporary women.

Characterising postfeminism as a sensibility, Gill (2007; Gill and Scharff, 2011) was able to identify several stable features that characterise postfeminism: the idea that femininity is a bodily property; the sexualisation of culture; a shift from (sexual) objectification to subjectification; and emphasis on individualism, choice and empowerment; the prominence of self-surveillance and discipline; the prevalence of the makeover paradigm; the reassertion of natural sexual difference; irony and knowingness in the context of feminist and anti-feminist rhetoric; and finally, a general emphasis on consumerism and commodification. These features, rather than being static markers of postfeminist culture, continue to evolve, intersect and

overlap in ways that demand attention. Therefore, to understand how postfeminism manifests in the South African context, it is necessary to pay close attention to the nuance and complexity that emerge from the unique set of circumstances under investigation in this project. This is in line with Lumby's (2011) call to move "past the post" and for researchers to be cognisant of "the particularity, the spatiality and the diverse modes of media productions and consumption…[in order for researchers to meaningfully] grapple with contradiction and ambiguity and [to] interrogate the relationship of the researcher to the researched" (p.97). Therefore, while centring Gill's (2007) articulation of postfeminism to frame the data produced in this project, it is also necessary to move beyond the type of analysis that simply looks for evidence in line with Gill's (2007) sensibility. By applying an intersectional (see Banet-Weiser, 2007; Brüning, 2019; Butler, 2013) and transnational (see Dosekun, 2015; Kim-Puri, 2005) lens to the data produced, I want to avoid reproducing the kind of Othering implicit in setting up frameworks and interpretations originating in the global North in (binary) opposition to knowledge produced in the global South.

### 2.3 Follower Subjects and the Media

Much of this project revolves around follower engagement with influencer content on Instagram. A foundational assumption grounding this project relates to Butler's (1988) concept of performativity: there is a cyclical interplay between influencers and followers regarding how particular forms of subjectivity are (re)presented, enacted and performed resulting in the normalisation of certain (re)presentations of femininity related to work, motherhood and other aspects of womanhood. Furthermore, these (re)presentations are deeply intertwined with neoliberal and postfeminist ideological ideas that go beyond performances on social media platforms, but are also embedded in the cultural, social and political fabric of the South Africans prosuming these performances. In order to understand exactly how followers, specifically, understand, interpret, replicate, repurpose, contest and also reject influencer performances of certain subjectivities, I will frame follower engagement in terms of representation, audience reception theory and participatory culture, as articulated by Hall (1980; 1997) and Jenkins (2009).

This project will centre the content posted on Instagram by influencers – as well as the responses to the aforementioned content posted by followers. Therefore, this project will consider images, including short videos, captions and comments (which often include emojis).

Rettberg's (2017) work on self-representation in social media distinguishes between three types of self-representations in social media, all of which are useful for understanding influencer content and follower responses: visual self-representation (selfies and other images/icons used to express ourselves), written self-representation (status updates and comments, as well as captions), quantified self-representation (in reference to data taken from technology that allows for self-tracking). Hall's (1997: 27) work on representation provides insight into how to understand these kinds of representations – specifically the theory that meaning is constructed. Here, the focus is on the social character of language and the attendant symbolic practices and processes people engage in that necessarily only find meaning in the shared "conceptual systems" (be it linguistic, cultural, political etc.). Further, I acknowledge that "meaning and meaningful practice is…constructed within discourse" (Hall: 1997: 44). The historically constructed nature of discourse means that the contemporary understanding of neoliberal/postfeminist subjectivity – such as ideas related to work, motherhood, femininity etc. – takes on specific meaning as ideas move transnationally, but also in (the specific version of) post-apartheid South Africa as displayed on Instagram.

Adding further nuance to the above-mentioned constructivist idea of shared meaning, is Hall's (2019[1980]) encoding/decoding model, which problematises the linearity of communication between media producers and (passive) audiences. Therefore, while media producers (in this case, the influencer who often creates content for/in the hopes of working with brands) might *encode* their content with preferred meanings in line with dominant ideologies, it is not guaranteed that audiences will receive the message as the producer intended – instead these messages can be *decoded* by audiences, whose interpretation is coloured by their specific positionality, in three ways, 1) in terms of a dominant/preferred reading (where the audience accepts the message as intended by the producer); 2) in terms of a negotiated meaning (where the audience partially accepts the message as intended, but also adapts the message in ways that align with their values and experiences; and 3) in terms of an oppositional reading (where the audience completely rejects the message, often interpreting the message in a way that challenges or rejects the dominant ideology) (Hall, 2019 [1980]).

Another lens through which I will view follower interaction with influencer content stems from Jenkins et al's (2006) work on participatory culture, which includes *affiliation* (membership to online communities built around specific media, or content) and *circulation* (where participants contribute to shaping the flow of information). In their elucidation of the concept of "spreadable

media", Jenkins, Green and Ford (2013) outline the increasingly active role of audiences in participatory culture, while also highlighting their roles as active prosumers of media content and the messages it carries:

> Audiences play an active role in "spreading" content rather than serving as passive carriers of viral media: their choices, investments, agendas, and actions determine what gets valued (p 21).

> As people listen, read, or view shared content, they think not only—often, not even primarily—about what the producers might have meant but about what the person who shared it was trying to communicate (p 13).

Taken together, this points to the complexity of the communication between influencers and followers, which allows as much space for normative messaging to be reinforced and for that messaging to be challenged and rearticulated.

## CHAPTER THREE: LITERATURE REVIEW

There is an abundance of literature on the topic of the social media influencer as it explores neoliberal and postfeminist subjectivities. Literature on this topic from the perspective of the follower is harder to find – especially literature emanating from the global south, generally, and South Africa, specifically. This project will address this substantial gap in existing literature in two ways: 1) by contributing to literature on authenticity, and 2) by contributing to literature focused on matters of surveillance and discipline, especially homosocial, peer-to-peer surveillance and discipline. The section below, briefly addresses the main argument in recent literature, on this matter

### 3.1 Authenticity

Instagram centres images as a key part of expressing one's identity – images that often "[privilege] aspirational self-expression" (Duffy and Hund, 2019: 4987) which is a necessary part of Instagram's guiding logic, which focuses on visibility, attention and reputation (Marwick, 2015). A key part of influencer performance involves the embodiment and communication of authenticity – referring to sincere expressions and realness. Authenticity is often interpreted in aspirational terms where the successful influencer is required to balance

postfeminist performances, focused on the body and the self, as well as affective labour linked to displays of who they aspire to be, who they feel they are expected to be and how they can inspire others (Dunn and Falkof, 2021). Further, the influencer is expected to project themselves authentically while also adhering to the demands that secure platform visibility[9] (Abidin, 2016). Contributing to the idea that authenticity is just another tool in an influencer's arsenal, Bull's (2022) study of micro-influencers operating in the Western Cape, showed that influencers were more focused on establishing a perception of authenticity in the minds the followers, as a way to commodify the self. While Duffy and Hund (2019) argue that the idea of authenticity has been contested from the beginning, their research on Instagrammers shows that it continues to be a meaningful concept around which both influencers and followers organise. In fact – followers are increasingly engaged in authenticity policing, "in which they call out individuals who seems to defy norms of authentic self-presentation" (Duffy and Hund, 2019: 4988) – a matter women and members of marginalised communities are more inclined to fall prey to. Emphasising the latter point, Banet-Weiser (2021) notes that performances of authenticity often revolve around specific cultural, social and economic factors – and for female influencers operating in these postfeminist times, being authentic necessarily means "adjusting yourself to correspond with dominant white ideals of femininity." Given that Instagrammers face accusations of "being too real, and, alternatively, not [being] real enough" (Duffy and Hund, 2019: 4983), my project aims at filling the gap in understanding how followers engage with and police authenticity – especially in the South African context where norms related to culture, tradition, class, religion etc. are strictly governed.

### 3.2 Surveillance and Discipline

The call to be visible – and therefore valuable – in the contemporary neoliberal attention economy culminates in social media influencing. This visibility often comes with intense scrutiny and critique. While Duffy and Hund (2019) show that their participants understood criticism and 'hate' to be part and parcel of influencing, they also note that such sentiments position online criticism as inevitable, while also normalising them. Showing how contemporary surveillance has shifted from a panopticon to a gynaeopticon, Winch (2015) studied the female friendship and surveillance networks that form around particular brands - arguing that brands are able to infiltrate online homosocial groups, effectively harnessing

[9] Influencers build their platforms on social capital and authenticity – which they then use to engage in branding activities (Gnegy, 2017 cited in Sana, 2024: 181). Hence, the perception and maintenance of authenticity has financial implications.

female friendship groups to form more intimate relationships between brands and consumers. Making it possible for the "girlfriend gaze" (Winch 2012), to be used alongside concepts like Mulvey's (1975) male gaze when analysing the (self)portrayal of women in contemporary media. This shift in looking/gazing is particularly interesting because it shows how women's intimate spaces are used to monitor and police the actions – and bodies – of women, further entrenching neoliberal/postfeminist subjectivities. By "foregrounding gender in relation to the politics of looking" (pp. 158), Gill (2019) argues that surveillance is a distinctly feminist issue, with multiple modalities that are necessarily shaped by neoliberal and postfeminist "ways of seeing and apprehending the self and others" (pp. 158). There remains a gap in literature addressing peer-to-peer surveillance (such as the type of surveillance illustrated by the "girlfriend gaze" or the "gynaeopticon") on Instagram, specifically in the context of post-apartheid South Africa, which my study will be able to address.

## CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY

### 4.1 Research Design

This will be a qualitative feminist study in which data will be collected and analysed from popular female South African social media influencers (2-4) and their overlapping female followers[10] (6-8). This research will consider three types of data: 1) content (images, videos and captions) posted by influencers, 2) the engagement by followers with the content posted by the influencers, and 3) the specific content and engagement between influencers and their followers on their broadcast channels[11]. While the bulk of the data will be extracted from archival posts, I plan to look at content and engagement over a period on 1 year – from 1 June 2024 to 1 June 2025.

The importance of employing a feminist approach to this project cannot be underestimated. A feminist approach will ensure that the study remains flexible while I attempt to describe,

[10] The decision to focus exclusively on women in this study stems from an interest in exploring the manner in which contemporary neoliberalism and postfeminism manifests in concrete ways for women in the global South. Focusing specifically on the South African context, the aim is to draw conclusions about how these ideologies manifest in concrete ways in the lives of black and coloured South African women on social media. By focusing on this specific group of women, my intention is to highlight the nuance and complexities these women contend with in post-apartheid South Africa, particularly after more than 30 years of freedom".

[11] A broadcast channel on Instagram is a one-to-many messaging tool that allows creators to send updates, announcements, and exclusive content directly to their followers through Instagram Direct Messages (DMs). Only the creator can send messages, while followers can react with emojis and participate in polls.

explain and interpret the complex and nuanced data related to often deeply embedded ideas of subjectivity/gender norms/gender performances as structured by neoliberal and postfeminist ideologies. By structuring this study in terms of feminist methodological principles, my aim is to be cognisant of intersecting social realities women in South Africa face, while also applying an ethic of care while conducting this research aimed at amplifying historically marginalised voices.

### 4.2 Data Collection

1. *Netnography*

I will use netnography to explore the digital communities and cultures that form around influencers, focusing specifically on how followers engage with and interpret influencer content. This method will involve observing the comment section of the chosen influencers as well as engaging as a participant in dedicated broadcast channels on Instagram (where influencers communicate directly with their followers, and share new context here first)[12]. The aim is for this approach to provide insights into how followers negotiate, resist, and/or internalize the ideologies presented by influencers. It will also reveal the communal dynamics and social norms that emerge within these digital spaces. Data will include follower comments, discussions, and interactions, as well as personal (field) notes on observed behaviours and patterns. Ethical considerations, such as anonymizing data and obtaining (active) consent will be prioritized.

2. *Grounded Theory*

Grounded theory will be used to develop a theoretical framework that explains how followers' perceptions and behaviours are shaped by influencer content. I will draw on grounded theory to analyse qualitative data from interviews with followers, as well as (netnographic) observations. This inductive approach will allow for the emergence of themes and patterns directly related to the data. Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with a select group of followers, exploring their experiences, interpretations, and emotional responses to influencer content. Participants will be recruited through Instagram's direct messaging service. Every effort will be made to ensure a range of perspectives based on gender, race, class, and other intersecting identities will be included

[12] It should be noted that over the last three years, my work has focused on a small group of South African social media influencers. I will draw on this, already familiar, group of influencers to anchor the present study.

in this study. However, I am aware that this sample of followers will not be representative of South African society.

### 4.3 Data Analysis

1. *Thematic Analysis*

   Grounded theory lends itself to thematic analysis where, data will be coded iteratively, starting with familiarising myself with the data with the aim of identifying initial codes (concepts and categories). These codes will be developed into themes focused on distinguishable, reoccurring patterns or themes. These themes will be reviewed and refined continuously to ensure that each one is coherent, distinct and supported by the data. in order to which will followed by axial coding to establish relationships between categories. Finally selective coding will be used to develop a core theoretical narrative. This process will ensure that the findings are deeply rooted in the lived experiences of followers. The final step will be to make sure that these themes align with the research questions in order to provide a coherent, comprehensive and critical overview of the data collected.

2. *Critical Discourse Analysis*

   Critical discourse analysis will be used to explore *how* these themes identified from the thematic analysis are constructed, communicated, and legitimised within influencer content and follower interactions. This kind of analysis is particularly suited to examining the ideological underpinnings of language and visual communication, which make it ideal for analysing how influencer and follower culture intersect with neoliberal and postfeminist ideology.

   Honing in on specific content that exemplify the themes identified from the thematic analysis, I will look at how written and visual language are used to convey meaning – and how that meaning is understood by the followers – and how certain behaviours, ideals and narratives are normalised and justified. Attention will also be paid to the behaviours, ideals and narratives that are Othered – in an attempt to grapple with how and why followers enact discipline. Furthermore, I will analyse the power dynamics inherent in these behaviours, ideals and narratives with the aim of connecting it to specific ideologies – while neoliberalism and postfeminism have been identified as overarching ideologies, it is important that I remain open to the particular ways these ideologies manifest in the South African context, specifically as it relates to race, class and culture etc.

### 4.4. Reflexivity

Reflexivity is a defining feature of feminist research, and can be used as a tool for researchers to reflect on the "assumptions, investments and decisions that shape the research process" (Bailey, 2012: 397). It is therefore important that I remain aware of, and continuously reflect on my positionality throughout this project.

For Kiguwa (2009: 226), research is political "both in conceptualisation and effect" – necessarily making the idea of a neutral, objective researcher, or even universal academic knowledge, a fantasy. No researcher can "claim to be removed from the subject [under investigation], as their worldview has most likely influenced [the] development of [every aspect of the project, from the] specific research question [to the development of the analytical themes]" (Parry, 2020: 9). This is particularly true in my case, as I am deeply embedded in the culture, language and meaning-making practices that I aim to study in this project. I have grown up with, and witnessed the evolution of, the social media platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, I aim to study – making me at once both an insider, in terms of my use of these platforms, but also an outsider, where I find myself keenly aware of how much these platforms have changed over time. As a black woman, living and working in post-apartheid South Africa, I form part of the target audience these influencers address – through the aspirational products, lifestyles, as well as the attendant cultural, political and social assumptions they promote.

Furthermore, I must remain aware that my choices as a qualitative researcher are intimately tied to my positionality. In fact, all methodological choices, including the choice and implementation of analytical methods, are inherently shaped by the researcher's lived experiences and insights (Khan and MacEachen, 2021). Here my decision to focus specifically on Instagram is informed not only by my familiarity with the platform, but also by my age and by my decision to centre mostly still images that communicate issues of aspirational practices. Moreover, when working with visual imagery, there is often a temptation to treat them as objective reflections of reality, as windows to the world. However, Rose (2012) argues that researcher must remain attuned to the fact that images are displayed and represented in very specific, culturally informed ways. In fact, researchers themselves carry culturally and historically situated "ways of seeing" (Berger, 1972) to the analytical process. As indicated, my positionality as a Black working-class woman, shapes how I read and respond to visual content – specifically as it relates to themes of aspiration, motherhood and feminist practices. This is an issue that I must remain critically conscious of when engaging with my research

data. Reflexivity is therefore about the "position of the critic, about the effects that position has on the knowledge that the critic produces, about the relation between the critic and the people or materials they deal with, and about the social effects of the critic's work" (Rose, 2001: 130).

### 4.5 Ethical Considerations

It should be noted that all the images, videos captions and comments to be used in this project are publicly available. Ravn et al. (2020) argue that most researchers take a "consent waiver approach" (p. 17) to the content social media users post – content which is necessarily available in the public domain.

With regard to the influencer content used in this project, each influencer considered for this study has a public Instagram profile – i.e., any person without an Instagram profile can view the content the influencer posts, while people with an Instagram account, can view and comment on, these posts, whether they choose to follow the influencer or not. Further, each influencer in this study has a minimum of 50,000 followers and, in addition to posting more personal, everyday content, they are actively engaged in creating advertising content for various national and international companies. Taken together, this implies that these influencers have a reasonable expectation that their content will reach a large audience. While the research conducted for this project does not pose a risk to the influencers involved, this is a feminist research project and for this reason, it will be informed by feminist ethical practices concerned with limiting (potential) harm to participants (Baliey, 2012; Parry, 2020), particularly as it concerns protecting the identity of the influencers and people who appear in the content posted by the influencers. In this regard, I intend to include only the images in which the influencers themselves, and other adults, appear. No images in which minors appear will be included in this project. Furthermore, all the images that will be included in this project will be anonymised – to this end, the faces, and identifying features, of both the Instagram influencers and the adults that appear in their posts, will be blurred.

With regard to follower engagement. 6-8 followers will be approached to partake in this study. Initial contact will be made through Instagram, by direct messaging potential participants. Participants will be selected on the basis of their engagement with the influencers identified for this project – here it will be important that these followers engage with the influencer on a regular basis and that they have already signed up to receive direct messages on the influencer's broadcast channel. Once initial contact has been made (where I introduce myself,

my project and explain what being part of the project would entail), I my hope is to move all communications to WhatsApp. The preliminary plan, depending on the availability of the follower-participants, is to have an initial video meeting with each of them (to establish a rapport with the follower-participants, and to thoroughly explain my research and their role in the project, as well as to establish boundaries and discuss issues of consent). Next, I will suggest that the interview portion of my interaction with these follower-participants take place in an asynchronous manner – to this end, I will send each follower-participant the interview questions, pinning it to the top of the chat, allowing them to respond to the questions when they are able to. Following Linabary and Hamel (2017) who wrote specifically about the benefits asynchronous email interviews, my intention with conducting interviews via WhatsApp is to give participants more control over the interview process as well as their responses. Another advantage of using WhatsApp is that I will be able to send and receive document, such as the consent form, easily.

### 4.6. Limitations

This project is situated within a specific socio-political and cultural context – i.e., post-apartheid South Africa – and centres a select group of female Instagram followers engaging with influencer content. Therefore, the findings of this study are not intended to be generalisable to all South African social media users or to contexts outside of South Africa, be it regional or global. While the qualitative nature of this project offers depth and contextual richness, it is empirically limited. Further, my own positionality as a Black South African women and as active Instagram user influences how I interpret influencer content as well as the attendant follower engagement with this content. While this insider perspective adds valuable cultural insight, it also introduces interpretive biases – which I am to mitigate through continuous reflexivity and methodological transparency. Additionally, access to certain types of influencer content (and therefore, follower engagement with it) may limit the completeness of the data set. The fast-paced and algorithm-driven nature of platforms like Instagram means that content visibility is inconsistent and the resulting follower engagement can be difficult to capture in its full complexity. Finally, ethical considerations around privacy and consent further complicate and constrain which data can be included and how it might be analysed. Despite these limitations, this project offers a critical entry point for understanding how digital media intersects with gender, class, race and power in South Africa.

## 4.7 Preliminary Chapter Outlines and Submission Timeline

| CHAPTER BREAKDOWN | | SUBMISSION TIMELINE | |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Chapter* | *Description* | *Month* | *Aim* |
| Introduction | Introduction<br><br>Rationale | June 2025 | Literature review;<br><br>Data collection |
| Chapter 1 | Theoretical Framework<br>- Neoliberalism<br>- Postfeminism<br>- Participatory Surveillance | July 2025 | Literature review;<br><br>Data collection |
| Chapter 2 | Literature Review<br>- Authenticity<br>- Surveillance and Discipline | October 2025 | Analysis Write up |
| Chapter 3 | Research Design<br><br>Methodology<br><br>Ethics and Reflexivity | November 2025 | Analysis Write up |
| Chapter 4 | Data Analysis 1 | January 2026 | Analysis Write up |
| Chapter 5 | Data Analysis 2 | February 2026 | Theoretical Approach Write up |
| Chapter 6 | Data Analysis 3 | March 2026 | Introduction and Conclusion Write up |
| Chapter 7 | Data Analysis 4 | April 2026 | Submit Complete Draft to Supervisor |
| Conclusion | Summarise key findings<br><br>Avenues for future research | May 2026 | Edit and Rewrite |
| Reference List | | June 2026 | Edit and Rewrite |
| | | July 2026 | External Editing<br><br>Submission |

## 4.8. Log Frame

| | **Verifiable Indicators**<br><br>**(Key Performance Indicators)** | **Sources/means of verification** | **Assumptions**<br><br>**(External Factors)** |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Overall objective**<br><br>**(Impact/Goal)**<br><br>To contribute to the refining of policies on social media use | Number of reforms in social media policy | Communication with various governmental organisations, policy makers, NGOs/NPOs | There is a need for social media policy/regulation reform<br><br>-<br><br>Government policy makers need empirical evidence to further specific reforms around social media use |
| **Specific Objective**<br><br>**(Outcomes**)<br><br>Clarification of and contribution to theories related to social media and subjectivity in the South African context which adds to the knowledge produced on neoliberalism and postfeminism in the global South. | Number of citations | Analytics from different research repositories and databases (e.g. google scholar) | There are journals willing to publish my work/ Abstracts presented to journals are accepted |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Results (Output)**<br><br>Complete thesis | 1) Write chapters<br>2) Edit chapters<br>3) Send thesis for examination > incorporate examiner's recommendation > resubmit if necessary<br><br>4) Produce individual chapters > that can serve as publishable articles > publish peer-reviewed articles<br><br>5) (Number of) Published chapters<br>6) (Number of) Chapters/papers presented at conferences<br><br>7) Present work in the WGS department at UWC | 1-2-3) Dedicate 2 months to one chapter -- one month for writing, one month for editing<br><br>4) Get sign-off from supervisors<br><br>5-6) Structure chapters in a way that align to journal articles > Correspondence with journals and conference organisers<br><br>7) Give lectures – undergrad and postgrad | Good work-thesis-life balance<br><br>-<br><br>Journals are willing to publish my work<br><br>-<br><br>Conferences and WGS courses/modules that align with my work |
| **Activities**<br><br>1) Literature review<br>2) Design interview questions<br>3) Start analysing data | 1) Collect and review at least 10-15 articles per theme<br>2) Refine interview questions based on research questions and lit review themes<br><br>3) Divide data thematically > | 1) Keep an excel log where each article is summarised<br><br>2) Set up a working document that can be accessed by my supervisors and advisors for real-time feedback | The target influencers continue their social media careers, they retain the followers |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 4) Comprehensive chapter outlines > start writing rough draft | include images and captions (from Instagram) and interview transcripts<br><br>4) Prepare a detailed outline of each chapter – include rationale/ proposed argument | 3) Create folders to store and organise images/captions/interview transcripts<br><br>4) Write 200-400 words per day | earmarked for this study<br><br>-<br><br>Enough participants agree to be interviewed |

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