

The Constructed Lifestyle Image: An Examination of Mass Media, Online Social Influencers, and the Commodification of the Self

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Inception Statement

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Figure 1: From Instagram (villagemarketing), a wall hanging with the words "THE FUTURE IS FEMALE"

Abstract

In the ever-changing landscape of New-age social media, trendy and popular online influencers reign supreme as they vie for subscribers, followers, and the like through advancing methods of

technological reproduction. “Village Studio,” an upscale photo studio disguised as a beautiful and pristine SoHo apartment, caters to the needs of on-the-rise online influencers looking to score brand deals through creating and curating images that contribute to a constructed self, eventually leading to cultural and monetary capital

Popular photo-based social media websites such as *Instagram* encourages any person with a smartphone and a camera to participate in such an environment of cultural one-upmanship, though it should be noted that this is a gendered phenomenon and the self-indulgent nature of sharing images of wealth, beauty, and lifestyle are viewed as predominantly female.

Through examination of the Village Studio, new cultural forms are revealed and the images and marketing strategies of what has become an online industry are interrogated.



On social media websites such as Instagram, users will come across a variety of constructed lifestyle images such as those produced by the female-led team at Village Marketing who have dubbed their space the Village Studio. The penthouse apartment houses no tenants, but instead rents to content creators such as influencers and models who use the space as a backdrop to create curated images to post online, reaching the eyes of large fanbases. Viewers may be inclined to note the contrasting shades of pink against white, as well as the clean and streamline minimalist aesthetics that brighten a bedroom with energy. There is an interesting use of contrasting textures from the fur of the white pillow, to the metal and china of the silverware, and rose gold of the tray. Overall, the design of the space evokes a calm and feminine atmosphere and the block of text hung just off center near the top of the image is the chosen statement piece, with a striking shade of millennial pink emphasized by the dark wine colour of the font. The wall hanging is framed by

the brass bedframe and draws the eyes with its bold message, THE FUTURE IS FEMALE.

Those familiar with contemporary social media that follows the quickly changing trends of online beauty and fashion influencers will recognize the type of people and lifestyles that this aesthetic signifies in the sea of mass circulated online images. Modern technology encourages people to create and curate images online that contribute to a constructed self, enabling any person with a smartphone and a camera to build an image for themselves that may eventually lead to cultural and monetary capital. Instagram influencers are predominantly regarded as beautiful and exclusive, as cultural capital is associated with the millions of followers and thousands of likes per photo, and they appear unreachable in the realm of fame and popularity. These influencers fall under a gendered umbrella category of content creators, subscribing to the soft and feminine aesthetic—as shown in the example above—that signifies glamour, class, sophistication, and commodified notions of female empowerment in a fast-paced modern world. With discourses surrounding social media and identity growing prevalent in popular culture, Village Marketing caters to the needs of on-the-rise content creators looking to capitalize on their self-image with corporate brand deals, and marketing themselves in a new online technological landscape. In a Profile on the space for the *New York Times*, Sapna Maheshwari writes:

This penthouse apartment in Manhattan's SoHo neighborhood is awash in natural light, with high ceilings, gleaming hardwood floors and a rooftop deck. The living room area includes a sofa in the rosy hue known as millennial pink, the kitchen comes equipped with a floor-to-ceiling wine fridge, and the library nook is filled with books chosen for their appearance, not their contents. The white walls are spotless, and there is never any clutter.

Nobody lives here.

The 2,400-square-foot space—which rents for \$15,000 a month—was designed as a backdrop for Instagram stars, who have booked it through October. (Maheshwari)

The contrast between the beauty and decadence of the space, and its intended purpose as a photo studio is of cultural interest because the photographs that are produced there are often reflective of hegemonic expectations surrounding cisgender, upper-middle class women and their lifestyles and homes; this is subsequently tied to success and self-worth. Drawing upon prominent works of modern theorists such as Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproduction," Theodore Adorno's "Culture Industry Reconsidered," and Siegfried Krakauer's "Photography," this essay explores the connections between the Village Studio, the rise of self-made internet influencers, and the commodity fetishism of the lifestyle image, in an effort to reveal the hegemonic structures that these mass produced images have come to represent. These images connote upper-middle class, cisgender white women who are visually uniform in taste and aesthetics, but present themselves as unique. Influencers utilize their curated self-images to procure cultural and monetary capital, exemplifying the ideals of white hegemony through beauty standards and performative feminism, all under the guise of progressive self-empowerment.

Through analysis of the photographs taken at the Village Studio, the images are revealed as products to be commodified, and the function of the images—particularly the curated lifestyle image—is for capitalistic and marketing purposes. The cultural demand for a space such as the Village Studio, and the trends and aesthetics that are oftentimes associated with the space and its patrons, call to mind the continuing relevance of Benjamin's concept of the aura. When discussing the modern modes of photography and how it is used to reproduce images of classic artwork, Benjamin argues that "the stripping of the veil from the object, the destruction of the aura, is the signature of a perception whose 'sense for sameness in the world'

has so increased that, by means of reproduction, it extracts



Figure 2: From Instagram (nata_allbuenothings), a woman sitting in a bed and reading a book.

reproduction, it extracts sameness even from what is unique” (Benjamin 105). This loss of aura and sense of sameness is brought about from the oversaturation of the image, so much so that the eye becomes desensitized and “to an ever-increasing degree” the image itself “becomes the reproduction of a work designed for reproducibility” (106). In

the case of the Village Studio, what should be an architecturally and aesthetically beautiful space that would impress homeowners and their guests—providing them with the aura described by Benjamin—the space loses its aura and feeling of uniqueness as it is continuously reproduced by Instagram influencers.

Many of the images produced and shared within the space by Instagram influencers follow similar themes and call upon very specific visual aesthetics, mainly that of bright natural lights, sophisticated and glamorous brass and marble accents, as well as a colour scheme of white and millennial pink.



Figure 3: The bedroom of the Village Studio, photographed by Amy Lombard for *The New York Times*.

Chelsea Ritschel of the *Independent* writes that “the most popular room in the apartment so far” is the bedroom, which “has proven to be a hit - thanks to its memorable wallpaper and fluffy, aesthetically-pleasing bed” (Ritschel). The room is memorable because of its repetition on social media, and thus the items listed become defining attributes of the space and are essential to the curation of lifestyle images. Maheshwari for *The New York Times* states that “the photographs of the apartment taken for this article, when viewed alongside the Instagram posts that resulted from photo shoots in the same space, give an idea of how the social media sausage is made” (Maheshwari). She states this in reference to the connotations of feminine beauty in the aesthetics of the room and notes how an influencer might find allure in such a space (Maheshwari). Ritschel and Maheshwari’s analyses are illustrated in the photographs above by Amy Lombard for *The New York Times* and Instagram influencer Natalia Levsina. The photos are both bright and clean, and highlight

sophisticated feminine hues of pink and gold. The space functions as a representation of an ideal home and lifestyle; a space that is recognizable as a cultural ideal, but is framed in such a way that any viewer can imagine themselves standing in as the influencer in question. This forms part of what Adorno calls the “Culture Industry” where he describes the fusing of the “old and familiar into a new quality,” as well as “products which are tailored for consumption by masses, and which to a great extent determine the nature of that consumption” (Adorno 12). This notion is evident in the careful posing of the model and the meticulous attention to details in the placement of props, all to advertise the brands and products endorsed by the Influencer. Viewers who have interest in the fashions and lifestyles portrayed by these types of Instagram influencers shape a culture industry by consuming the images and attempting to reproduce their own, perpetuating the illusion of a chic and glamorous life that is also effortless and natural.

In *Ways of Seeing* (1972), John Berger explores how contemporary audiences view photographs, stating that “photographs are not, as it is often assumed, a mechanical record, [and] every time we look at a photograph, we are aware, however slightly, of the photographer selecting that sight from an infinity of other sights” (10). This analysis suitably describes the style of photography practiced specifically to appeal to a social media audience. Technological advancements in smartphones enable rapid photos taken in succession, allowing the subject to choose from a myriad of images based on the angle of the head, the placement of the hands, or any other variety of minute details. The Village Studio was designed to cater to an emerging culture industry that depends on the reproduction and popularity of a photographic aesthetic and style. Founder Vickie Seger says in her interview with *The New York Times* that “spaces like this are gold for them [Instagram Influencers], because then they’re able to have a place that’s a home to shoot lifestyle home moments in” (Seger). Influencers can capitalize on the commodity of online images and viral marketing at

a much easier and faster rate with a studio space set up and ready to assist them in curating the culturally popular aesthetics. Through the multiple portrayals of an ideal lifestyle in social media, the images are integrated into the larger hegemony of popular culture as they become commonplace and expected of influencers by fans and critics alike.

If the Instagram influencer is regarded as the contemporary equivalent to the popularity of the emerging film diva, largely due to the rise in self-made internet celebrities and their place in the spotlight of widespread popular culture, then the demand for a film and photography space such as the Village Studio becomes a massive business opportunity. When referencing the film diva, Siegfried Kracauer describes her in terms of the small details, noting that she is “diligently recorded by the camera, [everything is] in their proper place, a flawless appearance” that everyone recognizes because “everyone has already seen the original on the screen” (Kracauer 423). Operating outside the institutions of traditional media, Instagram influencers must create a space and community of support for themselves online, and in doing so they have created and conformed to the conventions and tropes of their field. The images and aesthetics of these beauty and lifestyle influencers are so recognizable as modes of cultural identification, that those who perpetuate them “cannot be confused with anyone else, even if she is perhaps only one twelfth of a dozen” (Kracauer 423). Adorno states that “the technique of the culture industry is, from the beginning, one of distribution and mechanical reproduction, and therefore always remains external to its object” (Adorno 14). With the reproduction and redistribution of images and aesthetics that connect and signify with each other, these images reveal a network of mass cultural production, even while their creators attempt to be innovative and unique. Berger explores this notion through an analysis of the paintings of Frans Hals, where he writes that “they [the paintings] work upon us [the viewer] because we accept the way Hals saw his sitters, [but] we do not accept this innocently,” and we

accept it “in so far as it corresponds to our own observation of people, gestures, faces, [and] institutions” (Berger et al 14). This sentiment is applicable when critiquing how we view modern Instagram photography, as shown in the following photo from Instagram account *happilyeverstyle*.



Figure 4: From Instagram (*happilyeverstyle*), two women sitting in a bed and playing with pillows.

Presented in such a seemingly natural and candid fashion, the image works upon us in a similar way to how Berger describes the portraits done by Hals work. The photograph is taken to signify close relationships, which projects culturally popular ideas about what friendship and support between women should look like. It is ideal to look both flawlessly posed and naturally relaxed at the same time. This scene has been internalized through popular culture long before the rise of

Instagram. From teen movies to childhood sleepover experiences, young adults may recall a fond nostalgia for the simplicity in being carefree, such as how the women from *happilyeverstyle* have illustrated in their posed photograph. Photographs like these perpetuate a “culture industry [that is] essentially a mixture of streamlining, photographic hardness and precision on the one hand, and individualistic residues, sentimentality and an already rationally disposed and adapted romanticism” (Adorno 15). The ease of which Influencers portray their lives online helps to generate capital from emotional connections, longing for a nostalgic past, and an aesthetically desirable future.

The online reception to Village Marketing's new studio has been mixed, with some people enjoying the opportunity to take photos in a beautiful space they could not afford to recreate themselves, and others viewing it with suspicion regarding the potential decrease in genuine and authentic content online. This is to say that there are creators and viewers alike who subscribe to the notion that one can attempt to create content that is genuine to the individual. Social media and the culture industry are oversaturated with curated imagery, so it is difficult to separate artistic ventures and selfhood from the validation and need for cultural and monetary capital. While Village Marketing claims that their space is meant to bolster creativity and promote female empowerment amongst its patrons of popular Instagram influencers, it must generate revenue to stay afloat in a quick paced, capitalist market, and it does so by collaborating with its patrons and connecting them with larger brand deals in exchange for an influencer's social outreach and followers. The commodification of an influencer's face and image is at its peak when their photos are produced at the Village Studio. This notion is emphasized through Adorno's work on the culture industry and commodities where he writes:

Cultural entities typical of the culture industry are no longer also commodities, they are commodities through and through. This quantitative shift is so great that it calls forth entirely new phenomena. Ultimately, the culture industry no longer even needs to directly pursue everywhere the profit interests from which it originated. These interests have become objectified in its ideology and have even made themselves independent of the compulsion to sell the cultural commodities which must be swallowed anyways" (13).

With a studio created specifically to emulate the aesthetics and lifestyles preferred and lived by affluent popular Instagram influencers, the photos taken for advertisement purposes blend effortlessly with photos meant to be viewed as art, or as an authentic representation of an influencer's perception of selfhood. Aside from interviewing the founder of the Village Studio, *The New York Times*

also looks towards other Instagram influencers for their insight on the matter, such as Marianna Hewitt who states that “if you shoot in a traditional photography studio, it almost looks too good for social” (Hewitt). Hewitt’s statement further emphasizes the commodified state of the lifestyle image that is constructed but appears natural and candid. How can a photograph appear “too good” when so much effort is put into each component of the process? The concept of appearing effortless and natural appeals to Instagram influencers and their audiences who are no longer receptive to traditional methods of advertising; associating the method of big budget commercials with unsympathetic business conglomerates. In the classical terms of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, these methods of advertising images can be seen as a form of “fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour, so soon as they are produced as commodities,” which is “inseparable from the production of commodities” (Marx and Engels 669). Their theory reveals the function of the Village Studio as a commodity for Instagram influencers to produce images that are commodities themselves. When the modes of production are inseparable from the images produced in contemporary culture, the culture agrees to a “general uncritical consensus, [and] advertisements [are] produced for the world, so that each product of the culture industry becomes its own advertisement” (Adorno 13). The photos taken in this space are used as advertisements for brands and endorsements while simultaneously advertising both the Village Studio itself, as well as the idealized lifestyle associated with the images and the people posing in them. Each image produced that is positively received is reproduced through the culture industry, building itself up to as a product of cultural hegemony that is commonplace and expected, easily capitalized on those creating it, and consumed by its targeted audiences.

Those who seek to attain or consume the aura described by Benjamin in these highly reproduced photographs will not find it in the sense that the images themselves do not hold any feeling of the

aura, existing as they do in a new contemporary online space that tries to emulate the curated collections of a museum. The photos taken in the Village Studio are unique in that they are not exact replications of one another but reflect Benjamin's theory on the reproduced image in the sense that they all signify the same aesthetic styles. The images promote a politics of female empowerment and an idealized lifestyle where "the power of the culture industry's ideology is such that conformity has replaced consciousness" (Adorno 17). Viewers of the contemporary modern culture are immersed in the online landscape; consuming images at an almost constant rate which in turn continually supports the mass reproduced culture industry described by Adorno. In the production of images that saturate the everyday lives of social media users, followers of online influencers are conscripted into a conformity that is continually reproduced through the creation and consumption of images, perpetuating a cycle that is commodified and sold as advertising. There is undoubtedly a cultural demand for the Village Studio, as the social media website Instagram continually grows in popularity and new users and creators join the ranks of those who wish to share their lives across the globe. The images produced from the Village Studio alongside the praise and critique they garner from social media users is indicative of the complicated discourse surrounding mass culture and identity. While the methods of the continually changing realm of new technological reproductions differ greatly from the modern era, the theoretical frameworks of Benjamin, Adorno, and Kracauer remain relevant.

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