

Candidate Number: 2309755

Year: 2023

Course Code: MN5616

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Assignment No.2

Degree Title: MSc Digital Marketing

Question No. and Title: The rise of 'cleanfluencers' – a dialectical critical analysis

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The rise of ‘cleanfluencers’ – a dialectical critical analysis

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Digital Consumer & Online Culture (MN5616)

Word Count: 2950

1.0 Introduction

The rise of Web 2.0 has allowed Internet users to easily create and share their own content online with anyone worldwide. Consequently, this has led to the introduction of social media influencers (SMI) – individuals who obtain a large following by creating personal content daily. This is then used by advertorials to market products (Abidin, 2016, p.86). From this context, cleanfluencers have emerged in recent years - this new form of influencer attempts to glamorise housework as a form of therapy for busy women (Lines, 2022). Although the term ‘cleanfluencer’ is relatively new, there have been videos on digital platforms such as YouTube and Instagram showing women teaching new and innovative cleaning practices, home hacks and tips to viewers for several years. These platforms are known as user-generated content spaces (UGC). Before this, there were reality shows such as *‘How Clean is Your House?’* (2003) showing professional cleaners tidying houses. Cleanfluencers aim to demonstrate housework in a fun and creative format. However, although this phenomenon may appear empowering there are various criticisms, including the suggestion that the movement exacerbates negative gender stereotypes and exploits free labour (Salmon, 2019). This digital phenomenon can be described by Casey and Littler as ‘a positive housework movement’ – It is in many ways a form of hyper-conformity – one which fits in and reinvigorates a conservative form of femininity, reinforces highly traditionally gendered roles and gives value to them’ (2022). Therefore, many scholars have criticised the phenomenon for enhancing gender stereotypes and misogyny.

In order to critically analyse this digital phenomenon, it is necessary to use theories and frameworks such as Goffman's staging theory, influencer capitalism, visibility labour, digital proletarianism and Butler's gender performativity in relation to gender roles. This essay will aim to critically assess cleanfluencers using these frameworks, questioning whether the rise of cleanfluencers is beneficial or damaging to society and examining how the influencer lifestyle is portrayed through social media platforms. It will focus on the issues surrounding gender stereotypes, and exploitation of free labour.

2.0 Internet development

In order to critically analyse the effects of the cleanfluencer digital phenomenon, it is necessary to understand the evolution of the internet and its role within digital culture, focusing on the structure and agency of social media and how this has changed culture today. Shirky defines social media as tools that 'increase our ability to share, to co-operate, with one another, and to take collective action, all outside the framework of traditional institutional institutions and organizations' (Shirky 2008, p.20 as seen in Fuchs, 2021). Consequently, this has allowed the evolution of influencers to rapidly increase and create many different forms such as cleanfluencers. It is important to note that Fuchs refers to social media as a 'techno-social system' where the existence of the web is not possible without societal input. Therefore, proving that digital systems are derived from social systems and it is possible to use theories based on social systems to critically analyse the effects of cleanfluencers in society. However, Fuchs notes that the system is 'techno-social', it is a combination of technology and society, therefore it may

be argued that traditional social theories will be of limited use as they were not created in a technological society and may not be completely accurate.

Adorno and Horkheimer state that popular culture is heavily focused on powerful people and the messages displayed on media platforms form the basis for society's view of reality – 'culture industry' (2015). This view suggests that influencers have more power in altering the behaviour and views in society. Furthermore, the trickle-down effect coined by George Simmel suggests that upper-class individuals determine what is fashionable and the lower-class individuals will follow the trends. This can create further class divisions and inequalities. In the context of influencers, the majority are middle-upper class therefore they may have some advantages in creating content online. According to this theory it is easier for upper-class individuals to become influencers and therefore create high quality content as they have the power to determine what is fashionable in society. Therefore, the rise of Web 2.0 has given society a platform to share and exchange ideas, however this may result in large discrepancies in power and widening inequalities. Two of the main issues raised from the cleanfluencer culture are reinforcing gender stereotypes and exploitation of free labour which will be necessary to critically analyse using social system frameworks and theories.

3.0 Reinforcing gender stereotypes

Historically, housework and chores have always been gendered fields and with the rise of cleanfluencers this view has not shifted. It could be argued that a large majority of cleanfluencers are female and upload videos of cleaning tips to offer guidance and help to other females who may feel overwhelmed. However, some viewers have shared their positive opinions online, '*It's*

nicer to watch a cleaning video than listen to news, or think about work, or listen to my brain telling me how boring and hard cleaning is, and how it takes forever and is so pointless and endless – Rachel Bolstad.” (Froio, 2022). Therefore, cleaning videos in some cases have been seen to motivate women to complete their daily tasks. Cleanfluencers have further argued that cleaning may also offer therapeutic and wellness qualities which can help women tackling mental health issues. One example includes, renowned cleanfluencer Mrs Hinch states, *‘Let’s release some of that anxiety and worry with a good solid cleaning sesh!’* (Hinch, 2020). Mrs Hinch (Sophie Hinchcliffe) is one of UK’s most well-known cleanfluencers with over 4.6 million followers on Instagram. Her account was initially made as a personal blog, however due to a large following developing she altered her account to a more ‘business’ approach. She has made several brand deals with manufacturing company Proctor and Gamble and supermarket chain Tesco releasing her own product range.

Moreover, whilst cleaning may appear to be therapeutic for some women, it may not be the universal answer to solve mental or physical issues. However, Hinch’s content and self-branding has arguably reinforced the obsession with domestic housework and led to ‘spectacular housewifization’ where cleaning becomes the new trend (Hearn, 2017). Consequently, the view of cleaning becomes in some means ‘fashionable’, although this can increase inequalities regarding class and gender.

However, from a sociological point of view these videos may encourage neo-liberalist capitalism and patriarchy which confine contemporary women into unpaid work (Casey and Littler, 2021).

The videos solely concentrate on women, emphasising the gender stereotypes that exist and reinventing the traditional 'housewife' image through digital mediums.

Historically, domestic housework has always been an activity that contributed to defining the meaning of femininity and women's role in society. Feminist Simone de Beauvoir argued that housework prevented women from other roles in society and men were given more power and control in the economic and business environment (Casey and Littler, 2021). Housework creates an environment of exploitation and alienation for women where they cannot express their individuality. Arguably, this form of digital phenomenon reinforces traditional roles and further emphasises gender inequalities.

However, scholars have noted that domestic housework communities have brought women together and allowed them to share thoughts. For example, Tupperware parties in the 1950's allowed women to socialise of similar backgrounds and form friendships. Similarly, cleanfluencers today are providing a platform for women to share their ideas and form communities (Casey and Littler, 2021). These forms of same-sex communities coming together and exchanging thoughts have existed before the digital era, which suggests that women may want to feel connected to the same sex and the cleanfluencer phenomenon has not negatively affected gender stereotypes but has created a community where women can talk about their housework openly and honestly.

However, in most cases, women still feel that housework is a 'moral obligation' rather than a hobby or a choice, suggesting that this type of influencing is reinforcing detrimental traditional values. A 2018 McKinsey report highlighted that whilst women may have more education than

previously, a majority are still restricted due to household duties, ‘working mothers spend more time on work, household labor, and child care than fathers’ (Germano, 2019). Therefore, cleanfluencers’ content may be elevating this issue which reinforces De Beauvoir’s view that housework prevents women from accelerating in society, whilst men are given more credibility and power.

On the other hand, sociologist Dr Stephanie Baker states that ‘lifestyle gurus’ have existed for centuries and are contributing to ‘the broader self-improvement movement’ (Mahdawi, 2019). People have always been finding ways to improve themselves, nowadays these methods are found on digital platforms whether this is in the form of makeovers or cleaning tutorials. Some women may find this type of influencer more relatable than those who pose in expensive outfits and travel the world. Women have claimed that this digital phenomenon has been more ‘refreshing’ to witness women standing with a cleaning mop looking casual (Mahdawi, 2019). The content created by cleanfluencers has perhaps increased productivity and mental health for some women. In some cases, the videos produced are not directly aimed at women, therefore the audience may be both men and women and has no intention of creating gender stereotypes. Nevertheless, this digital phenomenon may be perpetuating negative gender stereotypes and preserving the idea that housework is a job for women only, statistics have shown that women still do 60 percent more housework than men in Britain (Mahdawi, 2019).

One framework that can help to critically analyse the gender stereotype effects associated with cleanfluencers is Butler’s gender performativity theory. This states that gender is the stylized repetition of acts through time. Therefore, according to Butler gender is a ‘performative choice’

made in the public sphere. With the increase in digital platforms, content has been made easily accessible to anyone in society and the concept of cleanfluencers further emphasises that cleaning and housework is a feminine act and subject to women only. Acts such as cleaning therefore become associated with femininity and society starts to create further gender stereotypes and enhance prejudice. Taking this into account, there are strong arguments supporting the statement that cleanfluencers are perpetuating a gender stereotype as the vast majority of cleanfluencers are women which creates the implication that women are the dominant gender in relation to housework which impacts the overall societal view and reinforces gender stereotypes. Therefore the gender performativity theory supports the argument that cleanfluencers are enhancing negative gender stereotypes and reinforcing cleaning as a repetitive act for women.

However, it may be argued that women are more interested in cleaning than men as there are no claims that cleanfluencers are specifically targeting women but are creating a positive community where people are motivated to engage in housework such as cleaning. It has been noted above how these communities have always existed and are a benefit to women in society, not a hinderance. It could be argued that the gender balance in cleanfluencer material is purely based on differences in gender interest, however even if this is the case, the large mismatch between men and women making this material is perpetuating the historical societal view towards housework (Froio, 2022).

4.0 Exploitation of free labour

One issue raised by influencer behaviour is the exploitation of free labour. Social media contributes to digital labour and this is exploited by large corporations. An additional vital

framework to consider in relation to influencer behaviour is Goffman's staging theory. This theory suggests that society is changing behaviour accordingly to suit others' expectations. For example, influencers dedicate time to improve their online profile, however, off-screen they act in a way truer to themselves. This can lead to false personalities and manipulation of the audience. This is also known as dramaturgy and can have large impacts on societal values and beliefs. Self-presentation and personality changes online based on users wants and needs. This dramaturgy then creates exploitation of free digital labour.

Therefore, cleanfluencers become actors and perform online in order to gain interest and engagement, and the content is then sold to businesses and exploited for capital. Social media in this case becomes a key element in exploiting influencer's self-presentation and digital performance in order to sell content for advertisements. For example, the majority of cleanfluencers do not have brand deals and advertise products online for free, capturing the attention and collecting the marketing data of thousands of online users.

However, Ritzer and Jurgenson enthusiastically believe that this form of free labour becomes an expression of pleasure and enjoyment where users are willing to devote time marketing products. Furthermore, emphasising that free labour enhances creativity and provides an environment where the audience can build on each other's content and create new and innovative ideas (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010, p.21-22). Hinch notes that *'I have never been motivated by money . . . What's most important to me is being true to myself and authentic. The truth is, I'm just being me!'* (Hinch, 2020). Therefore, this may suggest that for some women housework is a hobby or

therapeutic activity rather than a motivation for making money. Perhaps the majority of cleanfluencers are motivated more by helping other women in society than financial gains.

Although, it may be the case that for some cleanfluencers this ideology of content creation for enjoyment purposes may be true, the concept of presumption capitalism suggests that influencers are unaware of the lack of privacy their content has online. This leads to, businesses making large profits and exploiting society with user-generated content (Hesmondhalgh, 2010). Regardless of their intentions, the foundations of social media have made it extremely difficult for society to take control of their online privacy.

Due to the popularity of cleanfluencers such as Mrs Hinch, 'influencer capitalism' has emerged and allowed some influencers to accumulate wealth through paid brand partnerships and advertorials. Moreover, influencers are shifting their personal accounts to be more orientated towards business which exploits loyal fans who unknowingly contribute to their success. Fuchs describes this ideology as an - 'online manifestation of the American Dream's ideological claim that in capitalism everyone has an equal opportunity to make a career, from a dishwasher to a billionaire, by having a good idea and believing in themselves.' (2021, p.174). The reality of being successful as an influencer is extremely rare and, in most cases, leads to many people in society sacrificing time and effort with minimal benefits in return and often leading to exploitation.

Additionally, it is important to note that whilst fame and popularity may generate wealth to some influencers, the overall result leaves many women dedicating their time and making cleaning videos but not receiving anything in return. Whilst at the same time are helping to promote

brands through product testing, therefore leading to capitalism. This concept is known as ‘digital proletarians’ – people who work with brands unpaid in a hope to improve their social status, profile and visibility. Therefore, resulting in higher engagement levels and audience attention which is then sold to advertisers. The content created by influencers remains online and is used and exploited by businesses. In most cases, the content creators do not receive any recognition for their work and work as freelancers. This leads to many businesses especially monopolies such as YouTube and Tik Tok, making substantial profits selling this online content to advertisers.

Furthermore, this results in the ‘visibility of labour’ – influencers such as cleanfluencers upload their content in order to seek noticeability and attention and followers use hashtags and comments in order to increase brand engagement. Therefore, leading to a neoliberalist society where influencers are exploited by large companies and their content is not considered a commodity according to Marx. Marx states that influencer’s content can be described as a ‘fixed constant capital’ that helps to draw attention to certain commodities (Marx, 1885). This suggests that cleanfluencers are purely workers exploited by capitalism and their content is free to use. Additionally, Fuchs states that influencers are ‘prosumers’, whereby they both produce and consume content while media platforms such as Instagram or Tik Tok do not pay internet users for their content but instead grant them free access to these platforms. This leads to capitalist prosumption and exploitation resulting in surplus labour time (Fuchs, 2021). Large businesses have noticed the effects that SMI’s have on advertising, for example cleanfluencers promoting cleaning products and understand that their audience can resonate with these individuals as they appear more ‘genuine’ than traditional forms of marketing and advertising.

However, some may argue that influencers such as cleanfluencers are aware of the implications of sharing their content and as Berthon and Potts state, ‘It is a form of creativity and an ethos of collaboration, where everyone builds upon everyone else’s content in ways that can lead to new and unanticipated outcomes’ (Van Driel and Dumitrica, 2020). This view suggests that social media and the internet are simply environments where people can collaborate and share their ideas.

5.0 Conclusion

In conclusion, the digital phenomenon of cleanfluencers has arisen due to the growth of social media platforms and significance of Web 2.0 for user generated content. Housework has become ‘fashionable’ due to cleanfluencers content and frameworks such as Butler’s gender performativity and Simone De Beauvoir’s feminist ideologies suggest that this digital phenomenon is emphasising the pre-existing gender stereotypes and creates more differences in power across society. Social media influencers are being used in society as a new form of advertising and marketing due to audiences having more trust in influencers. However, this leads to prosumption capitalism, visibility of labour and digital proletarians where content is used and exploited by large businesses and many influencers are taken advantage of. However, to reach a dialectical critical analysis, it is important to note that there may be a minority of women who are influencers purely for enjoyment purposes and are unaware of the labour exploitation that occurs.

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