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Capstone Research Seminar

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## Prospectus

### **Introduction**

Social media has become an integral element of everyday life, serving as a significant platform for acquiring information on which consumers make decisions. With this new digital age of marketing comes a new strategy: influencer marketing. Over the course of a decade, influencers have become experts in their field and are responsible for making decisions as they have a disproportionate amount of influence over their peers—to meet the marketing and commercial objectives of an organization (Abed and Ali). But what begins to happen when people start to rally against and rise out of this hyper-consumerist lifestyle? This exercise of discouraging consumers from purchasing certain products, is an interesting concept called 'de-influencing'. In a social media landscape that has recently seen a boom in sponsored/paid posts by influencers, this trend seems like a respite for consumers, who wish to get genuine reviews. It must be mentioned that one of the most important goals of de-influencing is to discourage over-consumption (Chawla).

For this project, I will be analyzing and comparing four different research objects highlighting the features and aspects of the social media de-influencer movement. My research object is four social media posts (three from Instagram, and one from TikTok), that use the #deinfluencer & #deinfluencing within their descriptive captions. The first and second research objects are Instagram reels from de-influencer Laura Girard's account: @laura.girard. Both

videos represent the intended definition and purpose of the de-influencer trend and cover anti-consumerism and perceived expectations of influencer culture and products. Girard's videos will stand as comparative examples to the third and fourth research objects, as they engage with the #de-influencer and trend in the supposed "correct" manner. The Third research object is a video from influencer Rachel Finley, @hydrationceo on Instagram. Within her video's caption, she includes the hashtag "deinfluencer/deinfluencing", though as I will discuss in my analysis, there is no deinfluencing occurring within the video rather she is conducting a review on a large purchase Finley made for the holidays, and promoting the products to her followers. This research object is important to include as it reveals active manipulation of the hashtag and deinfluencer trend overall, for an influencer benefit and audience engagement. Lastly, the fourth research object is a video from Alyssa Stephanie, @alysastephanie on TikTok, titled "TikTok cult products that I hate" which is captioned "#deinfluencer/#deinfluencing". In Stephanie's video she capitalizes on products that are current "craze" on TikTok claiming to de-influence her audience on their consumption, yet her approach, as I will reveal in my analysis, further contributes to consumer capitalism by redirecting viewers to different products rather than refusing to consume at all. Analyzing the term de-influencer and the pattern that has emerged as a hashtag trend is crucial to communication studies as it offers a window into the evolving landscape of digital communication. These research objects specifically reveal dynamics, ethical considerations, and malleable definitions of the social media trend through discourse.

To thoroughly understand and analyze the deinfluencer trend and research, I will actively engage with the research objects through the production of a Marxist feminist critique that focuses on commodification, ecofeminism, and ideological state apparatuses. Guiding such critique will be the following research questions:

- How does each social media influencer, from the research objects, engage with the “deinfluencer” trend & are they shifting their narrative?
- What does each social media influencer being female have to do with promoting such a trend & culture?
- In what ways can each of these videos be used to analyze how women are exploited through capitalism? Do these videos reveal a perceived link between the exploitation and destruction of the natural environment and the subjugation and oppression of women?

With these research questions, I intend to analyze deinfluencing rhetoric and how these posts are reflecting broader societal shifts toward responsible consumerism. As I hope to reveal their relevant impacts on the age of consumerism and influencing as a whole, and its connection to a growing desire and redefining of authenticity in social media marketing.

## **Literature Review & Methodology**

### *Ecofeminism & Marxist Feminism*

Ecofeminism philosophy as a social movement, investigates the links between environmental issues and women’s oppression. It contends that there are striking parallels between the dominance and exploitation of nature and the oppression of women. Ecofeminism emphasizes the intersectionality of race, class, gender, and environmental concerns and calls for an understanding of the interdependence of all kinds of oppression and the pursuit of social and environmental justice (Sollund; Mies, and Shiva). As a metatheoretical perspective that provides a critique of many facets of Western culture, ecofeminism predicts global consequences of catastrophic proportions if current interrelated systems of oppression are permitted to continue to exist (Bigwood). On social media, deinfluencers often critique and challenge the mainstream

narratives that are promoted by influencers, which may include consumerist, patriarchal, or environmentally harmful ideologies (Gaard). Ecofeminism similarly seeks to challenge dominant paradigms that exploit both men and the environment, so de-influencers may align with ecofeminist goals in critiquing and offering alternatives to these narratives. Ecofeminism emphasizes the need for sustainable and ethical relationships with the environment and each other. Social media de-influencers may promote sustainable living practices, ethical consumption, and environmental activism, which are consistent with ecofeminist values of care, interconnectedness, and stewardship of the Earth (Reuther). Feminist theologian Rosemary Reuther defines ecofeminism as the symbolic and social link between women's subjugation and nature's dominance, founded on a fusion of the radical ecology movement and feminism. She specifically urges that the women's movement collaborate with the ecological movement to envisage a dramatic restructuring of core socio-economic ties and societal ideals (Reuther).

Both ecofeminism and consumerism de-influencers often emphasize the importance of collective action and grassroots organizing in challenging oppressive systems. Ecofeminist theory encourages solidarity and collaboration among diverse social movements, including those focused on environmental justice and economic equality. Consumerism de-influencers may mobilize their platforms to promote collective efforts to resist consumerist ideologies and advocate for systemic change, aligning with ecofeminist visions of transformative social and environmental justice. Overall, consumerism de-influencers can contribute to ecofeminist goals by critiquing capitalist exploitation, promoting sustainable alternatives, adopting an intersectional analysis of consumption, and mobilizing collective action to challenge oppressive systems and promote social and environmental justice.

Marxist feminist theory is a framework that combines elements of Marxist theory with feminist analysis to understand and address issues of gender inequality within the context of capitalist societies. It emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as feminists began to apply Marxist ideas about class struggle, exploitation, and capitalism to the study of gender oppression (Donovan). Marxist feminist theory and ecofeminism both critique capitalism and patriarchy, highlighting how these systems oppress women and exploit nature. They share common ground in their structural analyses of oppression, recognition of intersectionality, and emphasis on collective action for social change. Marxist feminism focuses on economic exploitation and class struggle within capitalist societies, advocating for socialist transformation. Ecofeminism emphasizes the interconnectedness of gender, nature, and spirituality, calling for sustainable and equitable relationships with the environment.

While they have distinct emphases, both perspectives contribute valuable insights to understanding and addressing the complex interplay between gender, capitalism, and ecological sustainability. De-influencers, who question the authority of conventional influencers, interact with Marxist feminist theory through criticisms of consumerism, efforts to redistribute power, identification of interlocking forms of oppression, and advocacy of collective action (Donovan). By challenging consumerist culture and promoting underrepresented perspectives, de-influencers accord with Marxist feminist criticisms of capitalism exploitation and patriarchy. They push for more equal representation on social media platforms and work with a variety of social groups, highlighting the power of collective action in opposing repressive systems and promoting social justice. In essence, de-influencers contribute to larger efforts to destroy oppressive structures and promote gender equality, following Marxist feminist philosophy. principles, and seek personal pleasure and social approval. Similar to this, Feminist consumerism is an effective marketing

tool because it is part of a hegemonic common sense of consumerism that allows companies to credibly present themselves as the vanguard of a consumer movement facilitating women's agitation and channeling resistance into commodity purchases (Johnston & Taylor). Feminist consumerism prioritizes commodity purchases above more ambitious goals such as decentering the role of beauty in women's lives, processing negative emotions, or challenging men's relationships with feminine beauty (Johnston & Taylor).

### *Authenticity & Anti-consumerism*

For this project, I will be using Beverland, Michael B., Francis J. Farrelly, and John Deighton's sourced definitions of authenticity; "Often described in terms of a "search" or "quest," the desire for authenticity is also said to be a response to standardization and homogenization in the marketplace (Thompson, Rindfleisch, and Arsel 2006). Arnould and Price (2000) identify two means of appropriating authenticity to achieve self-authentication. The first is where the consumer cocreates product value or a consumption experience as part of self-authentication (an authenticating act). The second, described as authoritative performance, is a cultural display (such as rituals, festivals, or protest actions) representative of a social unit (e.g., family, affinity group, profession, and ethnic group) and what the consumer deems are important aspects of life. Common to both is that the consumer is purposeful in linking the object or experience to stories of the self. There is widespread agreement that authenticity is a socially constructed interpretation of the essence of what is observed rather than properties inherent in an object" (Beverland, et al.)

De-influencers seek authenticity by rejecting the shiny, manufactured content that conventional influencers provide. They accomplish this by sharing their experiences,

weaknesses, and raw moments with their audience. This dedication to honesty may benefit them in a variety of ways. For starters, it develops better ties with their audience, who value the authenticity and relatability of their material. This may build trust, loyalty, and engagement, resulting in more followers and prospects for cooperation. Furthermore, authenticity distinguishes de-influencers from their more polished rivals, enabling them to carve out a distinct niche in the competitive influencer industry. They may use this authenticity to create a personal brand that appeals to authenticity-seeking consumers while also attracting companies searching for real collaborations. Sally Robinson discusses the interaction between authenticity features in anti-consumerist critique as an a priori good that is always under threat, and while a great deal of energy is devoted to detailing that threat, the actual meaning of authenticity remains maddeningly vague. As numerous writers who have undertaken to pin down the meanings of authenticity have found, authenticity is known only by what it is not (Robinson). Authenticity can be an effective weapon for de-influencers, but for it to be a weapon it must in turn cause destruction to mainstream influencers who rely primarily on polished representations and idealized lives. As de-influencers acquire popularity, they challenge the dominance of conventional influencers, thereby reducing their influence and marketability. Thus, while authenticity might be a useful advantage for de-influencers, it also threatens the influencer industry's status quo. An anti-consumerist critique often relies on and perpetuates a gendered discourse about value, identity, and meaning that favors the masculine over the feminine and, more importantly, naturalizes the binary structure of gender itself. Because anti-consumerist critique rests on the assumption that consumer culture is inauthentic and de-individualizing, it must also identify and locate the authentic and the individual (Robinson).

*Ideological State Apparatuses*

Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) are societal institutions and structures that affect people's views, values, and attitudes in ways that reinforce the current social order or ideology. They work through education, media, religion, family, and other institutions to shape people's views and actions. Louis Althusser defines Ideological State Apparatuses as:

“Ideological State Apparatuses function massively and predominantly by ideology, but they also function secondarily by repression, even if ultimately, but only ultimately, this is very attenuated and concealed, even symbolic... If the ISAs “function” massively and predominantly by ideology, what unifies their diversity is precisely this functioning, insofar as the ideology by which they function is always in fact unified, despite its diversity and its contradictions, beneath the ruling ideology, which is the ideology of “the ruling class” (Althusser, 81).

Essentially, ISAs are systems for transmitting and maintaining dominant ideas within a community, sustaining the status quo, and fostering social cohesiveness. ISAs function and legitimize themselves through ideology (Althusser). Social media and influencers are actors that perform within Ideological State Apparatuses by indirectly shaping people's beliefs, values, and behaviors. Influencers and deinfluencers with large followings, use their platforms to consequently promote specific ideologies, lifestyles, and consumer behaviors. While the social media platforms themselves reinforce the dominant cultural norms and political viewpoints through algorithms and content curation. De-influencers, or individuals who actively work to counter the influence of mainstream influencers and challenge dominant ideologies, can be seen as a part of the dynamics of ISAs. Their role is to disrupt the transmission of prevailing beliefs and values by offering alternative perspectives, questioning societal norms, and advocating for



social change. Deinfluencers rely on the use of social media platforms to disseminate their messages and engage in counter-narratives that challenge the status quo being promoted by mainstream influencers and ISAs. In this way, they contribute to the diversity of ideas and viewpoints within an ideological society, in a way that diverges thought and influential beliefs upheld by traditional ISAs. Altogether, influencers and deinfluencers form an online world that serves as an ideological echo chamber to normalize certain behaviors and promote consumerist ideology as it contributes to the maintenance and reinforcement of existing social order.

For my Methodology, I will be using a comparative and descriptive analysis of my research objects through each of the lenses discussed in previous sections; Ecofeminism & Marxist Feminism, Authenticity & Anti-consumerism, and Ideological State Apparatuses. To do this, I will be taking the transcribed audio (or if present, closed captions) from each video and rhetorically analyzing the language being used in the context of a deinfluencer video. I hope that by dissecting the individual videos and the language being used as opposed to examining deinfluencer culture as a whole, it will provide specific insight and thought on the connections between feminism, consumerism, and this new age shift for social media influencing and consumer culture. There is already an existing field of scholars studying the discourse around consumer culture, yet because of its newness, there is a lack of scholarly or peer-reviewed studies that directly analyze de-influencers and their content. Looking at popular sources, *Vox*, *Ruby Media Group*, and *Dazed* are all media outlets that are studying these videos directly and discursively analyzing their contents and audience receptiveness and reactions. Rebecca Jennings from *Vox*, writes about the “lie of de-influencing” and how influencers will never influence the public to buy less stuff – It’s antithetical to the job (Jennings). Diyora Shadijanova from *Dazed*,

analyzes whether the new ‘deinfluencing’ trend is genuinely an antidote to our culture of overconsumption, or if it’s just a symptom of our economically turbulent times (Shadijanova). Kris Ruby from *Ruby Media Group*, has the most thorough study of the deinfluencer trend overall as she divides the video from the producer and rather discusses how the trend has evolved and connected to broader ideas of American culture overall. Although these sources are not scholarly by definition, I will use them as references as they are directly engaging with videos similar to my research objects and the deinfluencer trend including its evolution.

“I have acted with honesty and integrity in producing this work and am unaware of anyone who has not” - *Chloe Ouellette*

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