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Critical Cultural Methods

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Makers of Their Own and Others' Worlds: The Construction of Solo Travel Female Influencers

As technology becomes more prevalent in each generation's lives, scholarship must grow to explore the new avenues in which rhetoric is formed, where it lives, and how it spreads. Social media is the site of production, audiencing, and circulation for many discursive formations. Whereas social media is a new technology where ideologies may form, strengthen, or weaken, the practice of mobility extends far back into history. Travel and tourism, as we know it for leisure today, have not been performed by *all*, though, as travel is intertwined with several intricacies and is not equally accessible to all. When something as complex as travel is displayed online through a collection of personal experiences created by Instagram travel influencers, a discourse surrounding travel is formed.

In my research, I analyze three solo female travel influencers (STFIs) - Ciara (@*hey_ciara*), Gabby (@*packslight*), and Annie (@*goanniewhere*) - in order to investigate the discourse that is produced on their platforms. Specifically, I aim to discover how STFIs represent themselves on their platforms, and how their online identities "work". Operating through lenses of both intersectional feminism and popular post/power feminism, I seek to locate and draw conclusions about how these feminisms function within STFIs content, and how STFIs utilize subject-positioning through both feminisms. Digging further into the subtleties of intersectionality within each STFIs social media content, I work to draw conclusions about how

gender, race, ability, class, and/or mobility live discursively within the three influencers' pages, and how the discourse may produce world-making effects for those in non-dominant social positions.

In my analysis, I first contextualize Instagram as a platform, influencers, and the traits that STFIs embody. Then I provide previous literature regarding intersectionality, mobility, and geographies of fear to contextualize my findings within existing academia. Leading into my analysis, I define staged authenticity and later detail post/power femininity in order to support my conclusions. Through an intertextual coded semiotic analysis of each STFIs Instagram content, I found that solo female travel influencers display their marginalized bodies traveling alone not only to monetize and make possible their lifestyles but also to construct an actionable reality in which it is safe for women and multiply-marginalized individuals to travel alone. Thus, STFIs result as world-makers - both for their own living realities and for the actionable reality of their audiences.

Introduction

Launching in 2010, Instagram originated as a picture-sharing social media site, first used by amateur photographers to share their images with the public. Its creators, Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger, initially focused on minimalism within the app's interface to highlight "images (with the option to add filters), comments, and "liking" features" (Eldridge). Now, as the interface has morphed to encompass many more intricate features, Instagram acts as "one of the biggest social media platforms in the world"; "Instagram surpassed two billion monthly active users in 2022" (Eldridge). With the rise of short-form video posting becoming popular on applications such as "Vine" (discontinued in 2016) and "TikTok" previously ("Musical.ly"),

Instagram expanded its interface capabilities to encourage short-form video content in the form of Instagram "reels". "Reels" are short videos, shot in a 1080 x 1920 pixel vertical view, lasting anywhere between 15 and 90 seconds in length (Demeku). Reels are displayed in conjunction with static photography posts on one's Instagram feed and can use different cover photography on the feed than the reel's content itself, creating an interesting intertextual landscape of linguistic, audio, and visual content to be woven together by users and viewers. Whereas Instagram as a purely photo-sharing social space is typically used by both business entities and personal users alike, reels are more often used by business entities and content creators; they take more editing, processing, and planning than formulating a post with static pictures does, thus appealing to dedicated content creators who may look to grow their viewership and/or monetize their platform.

The increase in video content on Instagram and the affordances that come along with it have led to an intersection of person, business, and marketing, realized in the form of social media influencers. Anyone, online or offline, can be an "influencer": someone who impacts others' actions, habits, or monetary decisions. Social media serves to amplify people's voices to a wider audience, though, making their influence stronger than ever possible prior to social media. "The concepts of influencer marketing and social media are inherently linked: influencers need the exposure provided by social media platforms to get notoriety, and those platforms achieve at least part of their appeal through the content posted by influencers active on them" (Haenlein 7). Although there are well-known personalities such as Kim Kardashian (*@kimkardashian*), Rhianna (*@badgalriri*), and Cristiano Ronaldo (*@christiano*) who influence over 100 million followers on a macro-scale, there are many micro-scale influencers (typically with followers in the 100,000 to 500,000 range) who exclusively maintain a following on social

media platforms, rather than having a following due to fame elsewhere in popular media. Because these influencers have built their presence through the platform alone, they often present themselves as "normal" people who are driven to produce their content by passion and interest. They also tend to "have higher engagement rates relative to the total number of followers and a more homogenous follower base" than influencers at the macro scale, oftentimes creating a space in which these influencers speak directly to and with their audience (Haenlein 13).

Solo female travel influencers (SFTIs) are a niche micro category of influencers. They are young, 20 to 30-year-old women who produce content regarding the specificities of traveling the world without accompaniment. This type of influencing dates back to the 1980s, before the use of mobile technology and social media. Mary Morris' *Nothing to Declare: Memoirs of a Woman Traveling Alone* (1988) acts as a past form of female solo travel influencing material, finalized as a polished collection of stories and experiences to share with the world. Six years after this, Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love* was popularized first as a memoir (2006) and then as a film (2010), highlighting Elizabeth's solo travels across three distinct countries. Both women were in their early 30s, sharing their experiences through the young, white female demographic positionality. They both came from high socioeconomic backgrounds and sought travel as a means for self-discovery and life change after facing emotional distress in their everyday lives. These identity markers highlight points of similarity and difference to the STFIs of focus for this analysis.

All three SFTIs that I engage in this research (Ciara (*@hey_ciara*), Gabby (*@packslight*), and Annie (*@goanniewhere*)) started traveling in their late teens or early twenties. They pursued corporate positions after obtaining their undergraduate degrees, but quickly left their jobs to pursue solo travel content creation full-time instead. They all have multiple means of gathering

income through this self-employment: they blog on personal websites, post content on social media, create and curate original materials for sale (books, products, guides), and promote sponsored products. Generally, STFIs speak about their career positively, because their work allows them the flexibility to travel on their own time. All three STFIs emphasize how solo travel allows them to be spontaneous and free, and not miss out on their dreams of travel, all while breaking out of corporate molds. As detailed above, the micro-scale of the three STFIs of focus allows them to build a community within their Instagram pages, maintaining a regular audience that engages in their content.

In addition to STFIs, other forms of online communities promote solo female travel, such as the Instagram page "Girls LOVE Travel" (*@girlslovetravel*) and the website "Solo Female Traveler Network". Although these resources share information about travel just as SFTIs do, these networks differ as they are not person-forward. Instead of connecting audience members as these online groups aim to accomplish, STFIs focus on showing viewers how they *themselves* move through space, offering viewers a person-forward lifestyle model.

Mobility, Geographies of Fear, and Intersectionality in Tourism

Mobility is both an act of *doing* and an act of *making*. When multiple people "do" motion, they, as an effect, make places that are "implicated with complex networks by which hosts, guests, buildings, objects, and machines" interact, thus "[producing] certain performances in certain places at certain times" (Sheller & Urry 214). In this way, mobility can be thought of as a constantly-performed action. Women and multiply-marginalized individuals, when situated in a "cultural reality laden with sanctions, taboos, and prescriptions," learn how to perform mobility as a "ritualized, public performance" that differs from those who are non-marginalized,

but may work against these expectations to break down structures of power (Butler 40; Butler 526, Lloyd 6).

This difference in the performance of mobility originates from Valentine's *The Geography of Women's Fear,* which asserts that "the association of male violence with certain environmental contexts has a profound effect on many women's use of space," deterring women "from being independent" and robbing them "the confidence to live alone" (385 & 389). "Spaces and places are gendered," imbued with power relations that are experienced throughout marginalized people's daily lives (Valentine; Jordan & Gibson 198). Here, power is defined by Foucault's thinking, as fluid, negotiable, and "dispersed throughout society rather than being imposed from the top down" (Jordan & Gibson 198).

One's unique intersection of social positionality influences this performance of moving throughout the world; it is not just gender that alters a solo female traveler's use of space. Originally theorized by Kimberle Crenshaw, intersectionality first assessed the unique intersection of being a black woman and the lack of representation for this axis of identity within United States law. Now, having been extended to various identity traits and applied to countless studies, intersectionality as a theory illustrates "how individual social locations (e.g. gender, age, class, and race) constitute experiences" (Crenshaw 57-80). Intersectionality theory in travel and mobility has "been neglected in academia to date", so this framework is crucial to bring to my examination (Kong & Zhu 408; Hopkins). Within the context of this study, intersectionality theory will work in tandem with Veijola & Jokinen's "corporeal travel," which says that "tourists moving from place to place [are] comprised of lumpy, fragile, aged, gendered, racialized bodies" (Urry 3). So, through this corporeal travel, STFIs are uniquely raced, classed, gendered, sexed, etc. at distinctive intersections.

Taking into consideration their demographics, all three SFTIs of focus identify as young, able-bodied females in their 20s. Ciara and Gabby are African American, whereas Annie is a US immigrant from Asia (country not specified). Annie briefly discusses her struggle to go to college coming from a low-socioeconomic background, whereas Ciara and Gabby do not speak about their economic backgrounds whatsoever. It is of note that all three STFIs of focus are multiply-marginalized, situated at unique intersections apart from being solely identified as women. The STFIs speak openly about their oppressed positionalities and still perform mobility by traveling the world freely and displaying themselves doing so, thus creating a dynamic to be explored.

Constructing Credibility Through Aestheticization & Selling "Authenticity"

Before delving into their intersectional identities, the rhetorical patterns that make STFIs "work" must be detailed. STFIs function at the convergence of aestheticization and authenticity, constructing themselves as friends, motivators, and travel guides. These multiple facets of STFIs work together to build power over and credibility with their audiences, thus leveraging themselves, monetizing their content, and making possible their lifestyles.

When immediately clicking on the homepages of each STFI's Instagram accounts, viewers are met with a collection of photographs displaying the STFI's body traveling in various picturesque locations. Whether it's gazing up at a gushing waterfall, soaking up the sun on a pristine beach, or admiring the unique architecture of a landscape, the imagery STFIs
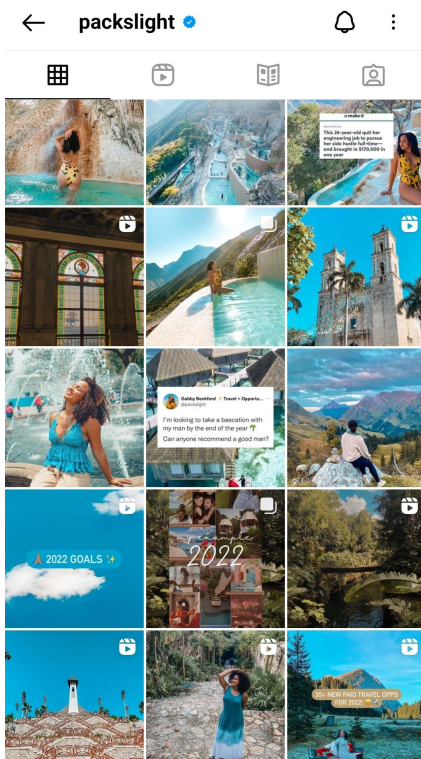
select to display on their Instagram pages all depict the STFI as a mobile body, moving throughout the world while experiencing a wide variety of cultures and landscapes. These images work intertextually with one another on the homepage to immediately assert the STFI as being well-traveled, instantly working to build their credibility and self-declared brand as solo-female travelers.

The way in which each STFI displays themselves within this homepage photography is distinct, though. The majority of the photography includes posed and perfectly positioned imagery where the entire body is placed centrally in the frame, bringing the body into salience. Kress & Van Leeuwen define salience as elements that are "made to attract the viewer's attention to varying degrees" through features such as placing objects in the foreground or background, tonal, color, or sharpness differences, or variations relative size (177). Additionally, using a compositional analysis of the imagery, there is a repeated center/margin relationship within the cover imagery, where center/margin occurs when one element of an image is in the middle, or center (here, the STFI themselves) while the surrounding marginal elements "are in some sense subservient" (here, the travel destinations that surround the STFI) (196). Considering the maximum salience and centrality that is placed on the STFIs themselves, they put emphasis on themselves as what's important about their page; *they* are the key to their own lifestyle, and the key to learning more about how to travel alone. In
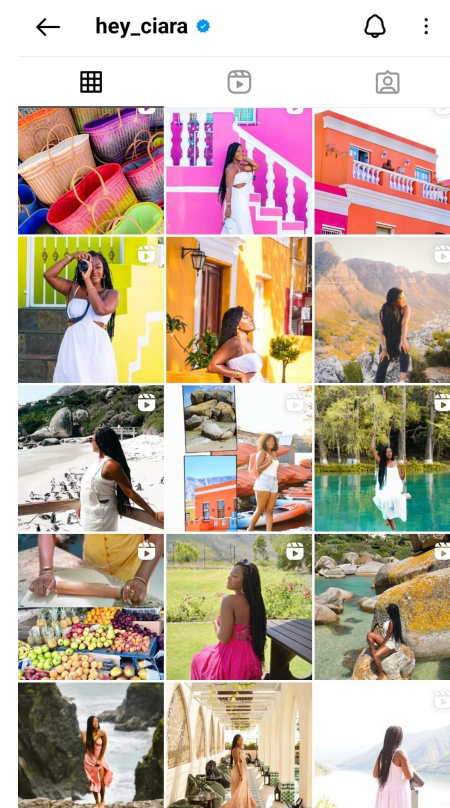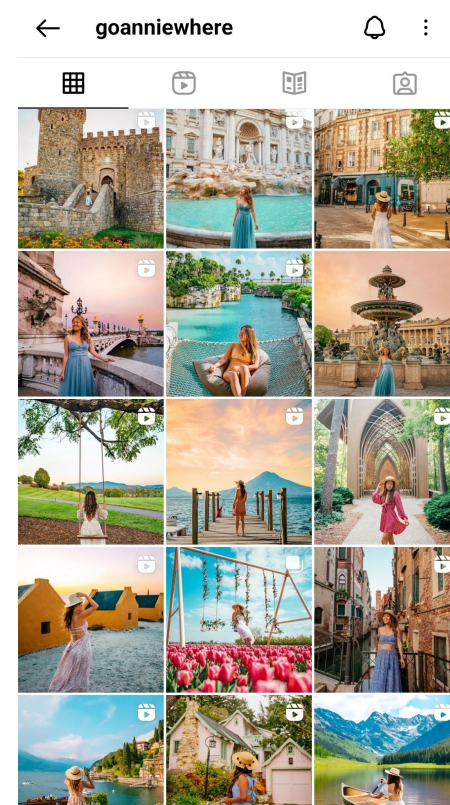
placing their travel destinations as less salient and in the margins, STFIs ensure that the destinations are still to be seen, but not without themselves in the picture. But, this framing works in tandem with the color filters added and photography enhancements made to each photo to construct each travel destination in the margins as beautiful, alluring, and almost magical.

When analyzing the imagery closely, there is a subtle hypocrisy between the fact that the STFIs are alone, and the perfect photography that is taken of them. The imagery comes across as being taken with no demanding effort, as though the STFI went on with her day of travel and effortlessly snapped a brief photo while experiencing life "authentically". Authenticity in the context of this research can be defined using MacCannell's concept of "staged authenticity", which is characterized "by social organization designed to reveal inner workings of [a] place" (MacCannell 959). With this particular brand of authenticity, "there is a staged quality to the proceedings that lends to [it] an aura of superficiality, albeit a superficiality that is not always perceived as such by the tourist," or audience (MacCannell 959). So, although this cover photography appears natural, effortless, and as an authentic snapshot into the lives of STFIs, in actuality, these photos are usually taken with considerable set-up involved: by using camera tripod equipment and/or self-timer settings on a camera to get the "perfect" shot. The hypocrisy of this staged authenticity is not always perceived by the audience, thus even further enhancing the STFIs' goal to appear as a naturally well-traveled expert. Producing this content is part of STFIs' job, and having the audience view the photography as natural (and the STFI as naturally situated within it) aids in constructing the credibility of the STFI, thus working towards gaining trust in the audience and furthering the monetization of their lifestyle.

Not only are the STFIs posed and framed perfectly within the shot, but they're also often depicted as looking toward the glamorous travel site depicted

behind/aside from them, or as closing their eyes and enjoying the destination, rather than looking directly at the camera. The majority of this cover photography places the STFIs in an offer position, which can be defined as imagery in which "an offer of information is made," commonly through a lack of eye contact with the camera (Jewitt & Oyama 146). Here, the STFIs frequently pose with their backs facing the camera or their bodies/glances turned askew from it. This places the audience as looking at the STFI when she's "off-guard" and casually enjoying her travels, rather than demanding her audience pay her attention. From this positionality of the STFI, there is no acknowledgment of the presence of an audience, or of being watched by an audience, again playing into staged authenticity: in "doing" travel, the STFI is producing her content, producing something that appears natural and alluring but is, in reality, a construction of herself *as* authentic.

The overall relationship between audience, STFI, and travel location in the context of this photography brings focus to both the STFI as being necessary to and central within her page, but also situates the STFI as placed "naturally" within her travel destinations, creating allure around the places. When this relationship is then viewed repetitively as a web of images on their pages, it builds STFI's as authentic lovers-of-travel and constructs credibility for the more detailed information found within each individual social media post; "the enmeshing of authenticity and self-branding results in a discourse in which it is possible to both *sell* and *become* oneself" (van Nuenen 1 & 5). This *becoming of* oneself (a traveler who is
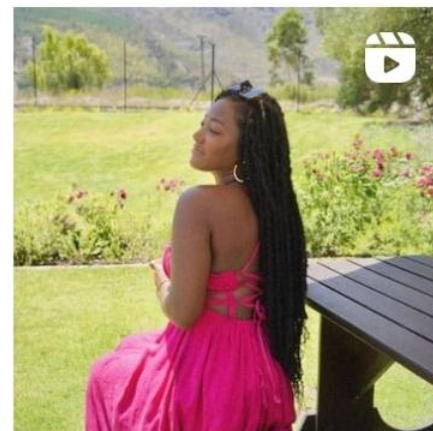
multiply-marginalized) allows the STFI to *sell* (monetize her platform) thus making possible her lifestyle, but also representing a world where marginalized individuals travel freely.

Female Solo Travel For Dummies

In displaying themselves traveling, STFIs set themselves up to be credible travelers, and therefore credible sources of information. When digging further into the contents of each STFIs page (uncovered after clicking on the aesthetic imagery), one can find details about how to travel cheaply, safely, and enjoyably. From this style of content, STFIs construct a rhetoric of being teachers and travel guides. This role of educator is predicated on the "asymmetrical power relations between knowledgeable and authoritative experts" (STFIs) "...and novices in need of guidance" (their audiences), thus leveraging the power and trust gained from staged authenticity, and continuing it, to then influence their audiences (Lazar 509).

STFIs first strengthen this asymmetrical power by interpellating their audiences as novice travelers. When addressing their audience in captions and reel content, the STFIs use language that assumes the audience is either looking to start solo travel, transition out of corporate positions, or travel more efficiently. STFIs base much of their content around providing basic tips and tricks for travel, such as "Here's how to Save $$$ on your Next Trip", or "3 Must-have Carry-on Essentials After Traveling to 60+ Countries" (Annie, Ciara). Not only do they
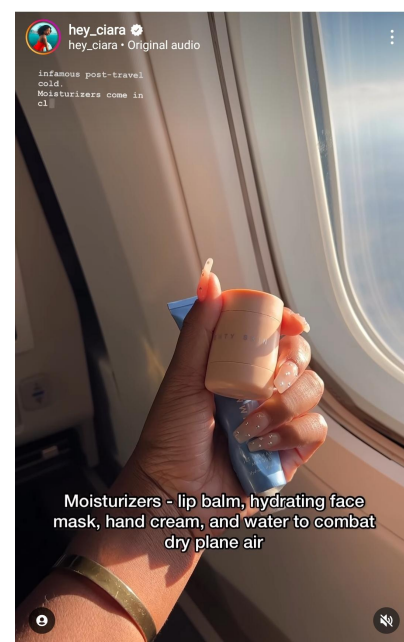
textually write out their knowledge, but also show it, mainly through edited videography footage. For example, in Ciara's carry-on essentials Reel, she not only lists her essential items for a flight, but also *shows* herself using them, holding them, owning them, and shows her mobile body traveling through the airport and on the plane, further placing the audience in a subservient position, as "less knowledgeable than".

In addition to providing beginner travel advice to their audience, STFIs also deliver general travel recommendations, serving as a location-based virtual travel guide. Although all three STFIs in question perform this content, Annie focuses the majority of her content within this format, producing reel content such as "Must See in New York City", "Free Things to Do in Paris", and "The Most Underrated Destinations in Italy" (Annie). To provide a specific example, Ciara's "Cape Town Markets" post includes concrete textual recommendations, details, and personal accounts of various market locations in Cape Town, Africa, found in the caption of her post.

Whereas the multiple cover images first detailed display STFIs in the offer position, most

of this educational content centers the STFI in the demand position. Demand positionality can be defined as when "the people in the picture symbolically demand something from the viewer," oftentimes looking directly at the camera and talking to the camera (Jewitt & Oyama 145; Beckford; Annie). If not centered on their face, the content depicts the STFI's point-of-view, which occurs in the Cape Town Market post in particular: the visual content accompanying the caption's recommendations features a video of a crowded market hall,
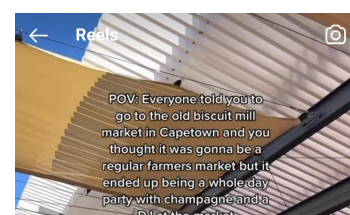
where Ciara's back camera is used to film what she is seeing, *rather than* herself (Ciara). This positions the audience in Ciara's travel experience and mobile body, legitimizing her travel recommendations and building her credibility and self-brand as someone who has experienced something the audience wants to experience for themselves. In positioning the audience through the eyes of the STFI, it also frames Ciara's solo travel experience as something that is obtainable for the audience (likely females who desire solo travel) to experience, adding to the role of STFIs as models for more equitable travel.

Sometimes the recommendations given and displays of travel are endorsed purely by the STFI alone, whereas other times the recommendations come attached to the STFI as co-branded deals. Co-branding occurs when "the blogger's authorial persona is connected to and reinforces other brands, such as guides, booking companies, and credit cards" (van Nuenen 14; Blackett & Russell). This co-branding is often marketed by STFIs as equal to that of a personal recommendation, appearing as another point of staged authenticity. Though receiving money from partnerships with brands, such as Ciara with Clorox, the STFI describes the product/activity/destination as equally genuine to a non-sponsored recommendation. Looking beyond this staged authenticity, these co-branded deals and recommendations are mobilized through the teacher/travel guide role of STFIs to make a monetary gain for the STFI more likely, further funding and making possible their lifestyle.

**Traveling Alone… Yet Together as Friends?**

All three STFIs of focus engage in staged authenticity in some capacity, although they mobilize this appeal to "realness" in varying degrees. Annie performs staged authenticity solely as described previously - through idealized imagery, travel recommendations, and

professionally-shot video compilations of majestic destinations. Through her lens, travel is constructed as highly aestheticized and her life is displayed as an offer - a model for her audience but nothing further. Gabby and Ciara take their relationship with the audience to a deeper level by including relaxed-style content in tandem with the aesthetic front. Through this content, Gabby and Ciara stage themselves more casually, as friends with their viewership.

In conjunction with the physical act of traveling through space, illocutionary acts entail "the performance of an act in saying something"; "a saying that is simultaneously a doing" (Austin 94; Lloyd 17). Within the content of Gabby and Ciara, they utilize their caption and textual means of communication to state casual sentiments, and therefore "do", friendship. For example, in one post, Gabby lists various past travel locations and explains how the different cultures shaped her as a person. The lessons she learned are presented informally, including

heavy use of emoji symbols, text message lexicon, and addressing the audience casually (such as "girl", or "ahhh"). Similar casual-style content is produced by Ciara, such as humorous memetic Reel videos that parody trends using popular audio. One example of this style of post features Ciara at the top of a hike, admitting to being miserable throughout the experience. Again, the caption features a conversational address of the
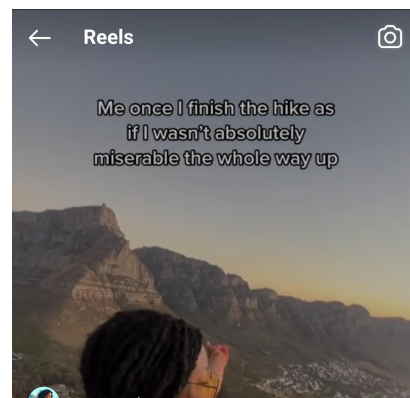
audience, frequent use of emojis, and causal lexicon/improper grammar.

These colloquial ways of communicating with viewership textually, as illocutionary acts, stage Gabby and Ciara as "authentically" friendly. Ciara and Gabby utilize the same manner of communication with the audience that they would use with close friends, but to communicate with a majority of people whom they've never met, who the STFIs *need* in order to purchase their products, interact with their social media, or recommend to others, all to continue their full-time travel lifestyle.

Not only is the casual manner of speech important to this construction of "friend", but within their content, all three STFIs also admit to various personal lessons they have learned and faults within themselves. These "confessions", so to speak, convey to viewers that STFIs are "real" people who are still learning things about themselves and the world, and who have faults of their own. Their pages are not run as professional business accounts or polished travel guides, but instead feature personal details and confessions, mirroring the details one would discuss with a close friend. Although potentially not perceived as superficial by the audience, this rhetoric is just as constructed as the glamorous travel photos are. The power of staged authenticity is the power of *appearing* to choose to share inside knowledge about real things. In choosing to project an "inside look" into their life reflections, the STFIs gain more credibility and trust among their audiences; in connecting to followers as if "on the same level," STFIs actually increase the likelihood that followers will accept their rhetoric at face value.
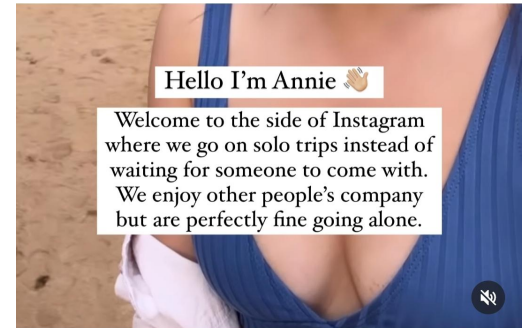
The staged authenticity of friendship, therefore, mobilizes STFIs as trustworthy, as "like" the audience (a real human capable of connectivity), and with the same goals as the audience. Though both the STFIs and audience members all desire to travel alone, they ironically depend on their relationship with one another to achieve their objectives: the STFI to continue their full-time paid travel lifestyle, and the audience to achieve some sort of solo travel experience.

Don't Wait for Your Prince Charming

An adjacent feature to many "friend" relationships is one who encourages, motivates, or empowers another. All three STFIs fill this role of empowerer, specifically when staged authenticity is joined with a rhetoric of power femininity. Power femininity can be defined as "a global discourse of popular (post)feminism which incorporates feminist signifiers of emancipation and empowerment as well as circulates popular postfeminist assumptions that feminism struggles have ended… that women of today can have it all" (Lazar 505). Commonly used in social advertising as a media-friendly discourse, power femininity takes the rhetoric of post-feminism and orients it towards consumers as a brand of commodity feminism. In doing so, these feminisms fit into the demands of popular advertising practices: they critique "any definition of women as victims unable to control their own lives", and favor "a flexible ideology which can be adapted to suit individual needs and desires" of women (Lazar 505). These individual needs and desires are framed, through power femininity, as achievable through personal choices, where women are "compelled to be the kind of subject who can make the right choices" (McRobbie 261). Through power feminism, one can make "the right choices" by improving the self - typically through the purchase of goods or by enacting some sort of capitalistic activity. Although STFIs are not representative of a large advertising scheme or

mass-media production, they serve as a host for the rhetoric of this power/postfeminism, in addition to being sites of intersectionality; STFIs result as sites displaying the delicate tension between the empowerment/freedom associated with travel and the power relations embedded in consumer-driven industries of travel.

In popular media and advertising, the improvement of the self associated with power feminism is typically superficial and appearance-based. However, within the rhetoric of STFIs, this self-improvement goes deeper, typically describing ways in which people can enrich their lives *as women* by experiencing the most the world has to offer, through travel. On STFIs' pages, this operates in various ways. All three STFIs have at least one post introducing themselves as STFIs and detailing their origin stories. Within the captions of these stories are power femininity phrases that allude to the simplicity of choosing to travel alone, such as "we all got tired of waiting around for others to travel with us that we just decided to go ourselves one day. And we never looked back!" (Annie). Staged confessions like this play off the "friend" relationship described above, setting up

Hello I'm Annie 👋

Welcome to the side of Instagram where we go on solo trips instead of waiting for someone to come with. We enjoy other people's company but are perfectly fine going alone.

2,785 likes

goanniewhere Solo travel has changed my life and allowed me to see so many places I wouldn't have today!

The connection with fellow solo travelers from all over the world is also instantaneous. Because we all get it…and appreciate solo travel so much.

We all got tired of waiting around for others to travel with us that we just decided to go ourselves one day. And we never looked back!

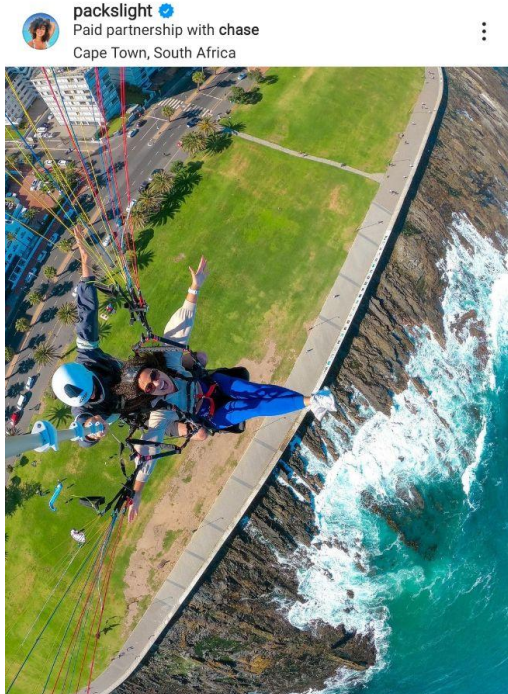I also want to inspire and encourage others who have never been on a solo trip to take that leap of faith!

If you're thinking about going on a solo trip, but you're scared or nervous…that's totally understandable! I was also scared and nervous before going on my first solo trip which is why I use this platform to share tips and guides on solo travel!

the punchline that follows: encouragement. Annie goes on to say: "I was also scared and nervous before going on my first solo trip… which is why I use this platform to share tips and guides on solo travel!". By acknowledging her vulnerability and then reinforcing it with an assertion of expertise and advice in this illocutionary act, Annie sets herself up as an empowering force, with language reminiscent of power femininity. This theme is repeated vastly throughout all three

STFIs' content, with even more direct textual and spoken claims such as "IT'S POSSIBLE…It's beautiful. And possible!!" (Beckford).

In recent academic studies, those who questioned women about their solo travels were met with the anticipated "geographies of fear" and barriers to mobility but *also* found that women enjoy solo travel despite these geographies, and maybe even in spite of these geographies. Traveling alone allows some women to "experience unprecedented freedom by 'rejecting dogmatic traditions', a set of social expectations and rules that require women's subordination" (Kong & Zhu 407). Solo female travel then, even with its barriers, serves dually as an act of precaution and as an act of resistance. These individual acts of resistance "can be used to subvert and alter the power relations governing particular spaces… leading to a potential reclamation of power" (Jordan & Gibson 199). Although echoing that of power/postfeminist rhetoric, the empowerment language found within STFIs content is centered around breaking a larger-scale gendered myth: that women wait around for a man to initiate action, such as in the case of Snow White's "Someday My Prince Will Come" and other commonly-told fairytales. This gender dynamic - that women are dormant and men are actionable - is actively being worked against in the empowerment rhetoric that STFIs produce, thus framing STFIs as makers of a world in which women take action for themselves by traveling alone despite potential geographies of fear.

Textual encouragement to take action oneself is often reinforced by the imagery that surrounds it on the STFI's page, displaying the STFI as one who has taken action for herself and has not waited for a man, thus not only visualizing a model for solo travel life as a woman but also making it seem achievable when contextualized by words of empowerment.

Additionally, the improvement of self is often linked to co-branded monetary deals within

STFIs' content. For example, when discussing the best credit card for travel (in her sponsorship with Chase Bank), Gabby centers the choice to be within the hands of the individual audience members but also prompts them to make the "right" choice. In her caption, she says, "Because if you're going to choose a travel credit card, you might as well make sure it has awesome benefits!", and proceeds to list why viewers should choose this card - ultimately to improve the self in one's pursuit to travel solo. This caption is accompanied by an "epic" image of Gabby paragliding in Cape Town. The adventure-filled imagery depicts freedom, as Gabby is suspended in visual and mobile space with her arms outstretched and a gaping smile on her face. When placed in conjunction with the informative choice-oriented caption, this visual and textual content produces a reading that works to show the empowerment one may feel *if* one makes the right choices towards self-improvement (in this case, by purchasing Chase's credit card).

The various roles that STFIs construct themselves to be - an aesthetic, teacher, friend, and empowerer - exist within a delicate rhetorical ecosystem. These various roles when placed intertextually with the visual display of STFIs' marginalized bodies traveling alone reinforce STFIs' ability to monetize their platform, by resulting in credible, trustworthy, and authentic sources of information and

recommendation. In this display and encouragement, though, STFIs also construct a reality online in which it is safe for women and multiply-marginalized individuals to travel alone.

The Duality of Post/Power Feminist Travel for Women of Color

When displaying travel destinations on social media, Instagram partly plays a "role in the perceived risk of selecting destinations," as it allows travelers to display some destinations over others, or advise about navigating foreign territories (Geoghegan 38). STFIs play off their roles as teachers/friends/empowerers by providing guidance for navigating geographies of fear. This advice acts in opposing ways similar to some of the empowerment advice detailed above: by utilizing power/post-feminist rhetoric, but also by providing concrete techniques to combat friction created by geographies of fear.

For example, Gabby shares three "essential skills for solo travelers": the ability to hide your presence, expand it, and use situational awareness. In the caption of the post, she states, "Truly, the energy we project can keep us safe". The advice given here is highly reminiscent of postfeminist ideology, which asserts that women are in complete control of their destinies, having unlimited flexibility to make choices that suit their desires. In pushing this ideology, postfeminism actively ignores the gendered power dynamics found within many countries' dominant cultures. To assert that a solo female traveler should shrink and expand (make choices about) their "presence" (themselves) in order to safely travel is to say that it is a woman's responsibility to fit herself into the existing power dynamic. This placement of responsibility is found consistently within the content of all

Posts

Gabby Beckford ⚡ Twitta Travel Girl
@packslight

3 essential skills for solo travelers:
* the ability to hide your presence 😶
(ex. blend into a crowd)
* the ability to expand your presence 🤗
(ex. enter a room with confidence, make ppl
think twice about messing with you)
* a fine-tuned intuition 🔮 (i.e. situational
awareness)

three STFIs, with phrases such as "be aware of your surroundings," "be careful with any type of travel you do," and "the most you can do is keep your wits about you, do your research, prep accordingly & travel wisely" being asserted consistently (Annie; Beckford; Ciara). This rhetoric works to say: "It is *your* responsibility to stay safe; you *will* experience a lack of comfort at points".

There is a dual nature to this postfeminist rhetoric, though. Although it does situate the woman as an action-taker in making the "right" choices to stay safe, this safety advice also serves to equip women to navigate existing power imbalances and potential threats to one's well-being. In an ideal world, gender and racial inequity would not be an issue for solo women travelers, but due to the history of travel, it has to be rhetorically addressed as "a thing" within the STFI's content. Rather than prohibit solo women travelers of color from enacting corporeal travel at all, the postfeminist advice rhetoric used by STFIs actively provides travel-seekers with techniques to keep their mobile bodies safe.

Gabby and Ciara even go as far as critiquing the voices of those who have discouraged them from traveling at all due to their identities. In a reel video, Gabby looks at the camera with
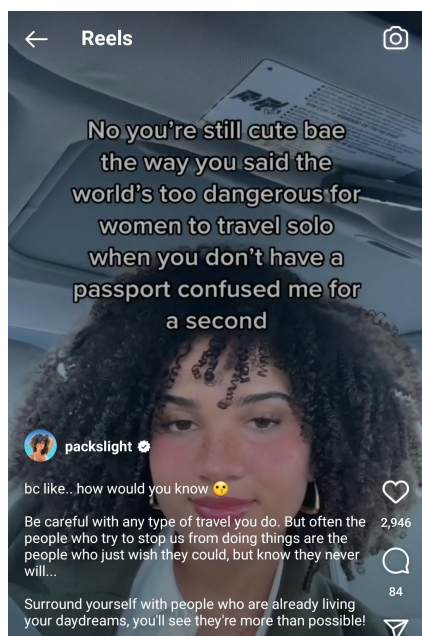
a confused and skeptical look on her face, with sarcastic text overlaid that states: "No you're still cute bae the way you said the world's too dangerous for women to travel solo". So, rather than limit WOC solo travelers from enacting their desires, the STFIs of focus equip their audiences with the knowledge and skills needed to successfully navigate the existing world as marginalized individuals.

These advised techniques may be centered on postfeminist rhetoric, yes, but as acts of staged authenticity, they are again likely not perceived as negative or superficial to viewership, and instead enforce STFIs' "empowerer" and "teacher" roles. In further enforcing these roles, the STFIs still gain monetization from this content, making their lives possible through this niche of appealing to the marginalized traveler. Dually, the act of displaying this content (where multiple-marginalized STFIs depict/speak about themselves traveling and encourage others like them to travel) is in itself working to produce a reality where travel is performed by marginalized individuals, asserting STFIs as world-builders.

World-Making for Multiply-Marginalized Individuals

In the context of travel and tourism, Instagram is "a tool that reaches across borders to showcase any part of the world from any point of view,"; the power of Instagram is that it is indiscriminatory - anyone's voice can be amplified on it, which has not been the case in history when only the white upper class had access to printing, news media outlets, or increased resources due to privilege (Geoghegan 44). By producing content on Instagram, STFIs work towards altering the perceived demographic of what a solo traveler can be/look like; their rhetoric centralizes voices that have historically been made to consume less space.

Apart from centering STFIs voices, the depiction of the STFI in various landscapes visually centers multiply-marginalized bodies performing travel, when the travel industry itself is largely marketed towards male, white, or coupled bodies. As previously discussed, the majority of the cover imagery on the STFIs pages places the STFI in the "offer" positionality, bringing salience to the landscape that they are in. Although the "offer" position typically denotes less power of the visual subject and more power of the onlooker, I argue that here, the offer positions

allow these WOC travelers to look "naturally placed" within their environment, offering a paradigm shift that normalizes solo WOC corporeal travel.

While Annie does not engage with her identity any further than by placing her body within travel imagery, Gabby and Ciara do consistently acknowledge and discuss their
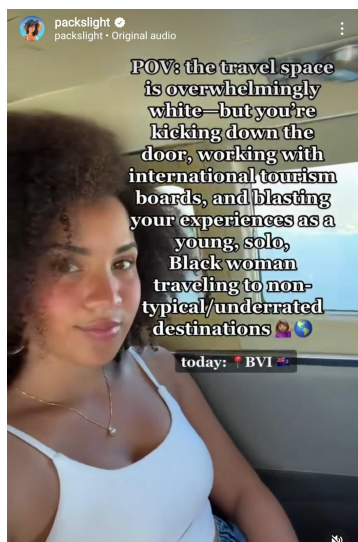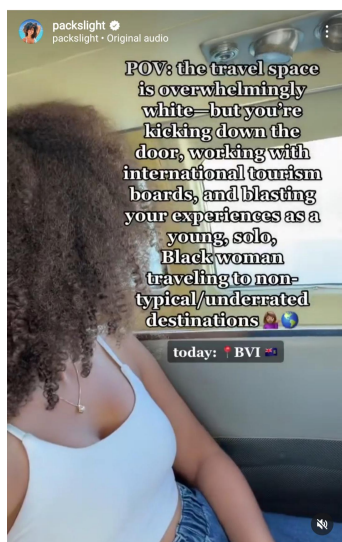
intersectional identity. For example, Gabby's reel depicts her looking away from the camera and then looking toward it, with text overlaid that states "POV: the travel space is overwhelmingly white - but you're kicking down the door, working with international tourism boards, and blasting your experiences as a young, solo, Black woman traveling to non-typical/underrated

destinations". By looking away and then toward the camera, Gabby makes it emphasized that she is placing herself in the demand position, claiming power over her self-identification (the text). The text, written in the second-person, is meant to be read by other WOC travelers and empower them too, by speaking directly to them but also about Gabby herself. This constitutes and interpellates the audience as aligned with her, asks the audience to do as her, and ensures that her audience fully knows who she is and how she identifies. By explicitly stating their identities throughout the content they produce, Gabby and Ciara take ownership of their simultaneously overdetermined and invisible bodies in a holistic sense and actively work to insert themselves (and therefore others like them) within the travel industry.

Additionally, Gabby and Ciara actively work to produce travel as more accessible for their audiences, separate from their person and self-identification. It could be argued that Annie's

content acknowledges socio-economic imbalances by providing low-cost/free activity recommendations to engage in when traveling. However, these recommendations are typically centered on Eurocentric destinations (such as Paris) *and* fail to acknowledge how one with a lack of resources would get to the destinations themselves, thus resulting in empty assertions, not alluding to world-making to the scale that Gabby and Ciara produce.

Ciara mobilizes her paid-travel opportunities to purposefully travel to and engage with lesser-known and/or stigmatized locations. In selecting these locations, Ciara educates her viewership on the actual day-to-day culture of the locations and the social issues that occur within them; she paints a more-realistic image of these non-mainstream locations in order to create a reality in which solo female travelers feel more comfortable visiting them. In a series of Reel videos, Ciara highlighted her time in Cape Town, Africa by including a mix of recommendation content, advice content, geographies of fear/safety content, *and* social justice content. For example, in one video's caption, she states: "One of the first things that jumped out to me aside from the stunning landscapes? The segregation. I've honestly

never seen anything like it and that's coming from an African American from the South. While racial and economic inequality can't be denied in the US, It's just so distinct and eerie in Cape Town". She then explains a brief history of Apartheid, inserts statistics about racial imbalances in the city, and goes on to recommend "Airbnb experiences that reflect the Black experience,"
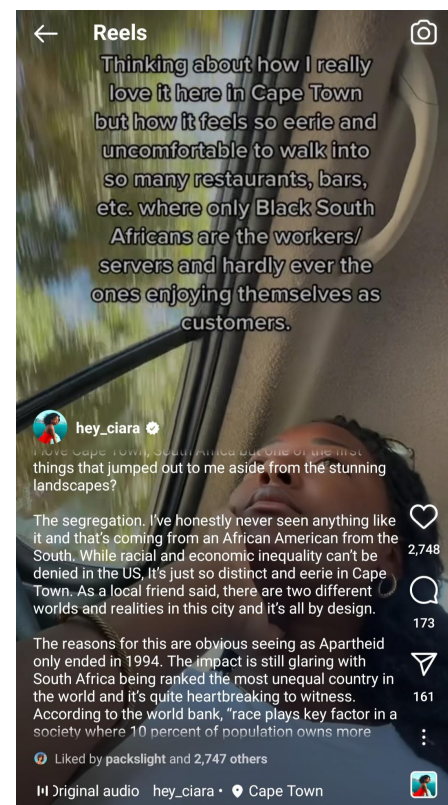
rather than typical tourist locations such as Camps Bay & Clifton. Other reels educate viewership about load shedding (the regular power outages that occur in South Africa), the traditional cuisines of Cape Malays (who "were once enslaved people brought from Malaysia, Indonesia and the rest of Africa"), and the incorrect preconceived stereotypes of Africa that travelers may have. This educational content is not restricted to Cape Town, either. Ciara makes it a point to speak on the culture and/or inequities of many locations she visits, such
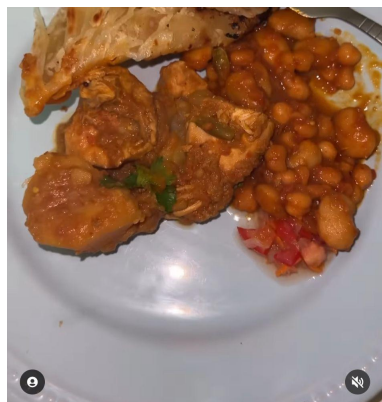
2,275 likes
hey_ciara Biggest travel tip? Get a true taste of the culture & cuisine wherever you travel by taking a local-led cooking class! !(SAVE & SHARE!) If there's one thing ima do when I travel, it's take a cooking class. After all, the true spirit of every culture is expressed through its food. Might as well treat your taste buds while getting a real glimpse into another country's way of life!
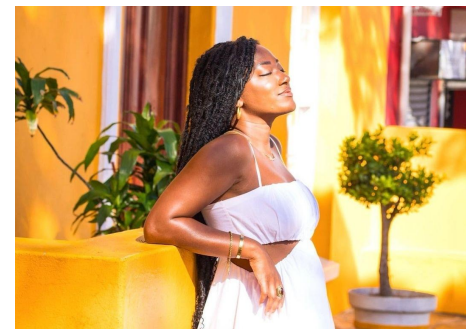

Liked by sierras_ecopassport and others
hey_ciara The (literal)dark side to Cape Town? Let's talk Load Shedding/Daily Outages!(Save This) You need to know about Load Shedding before going to South Africa, but what is it??

Basically the power goes out several times a day for several hours a day. The times depend on what part of town you're in, but you'll experience it in any & every part of town at some level. You can expect the power to be out for roughly 2-3 hours, 2-3 times a day. Wi-fi will still work in most(not all)places, but there's no electricity.

as most recently, Japan. By frequently admitting to her privileges as an American and full-time traveler in the midst of bringing light to many issues within the travel industry that are unacknowledged, Ciara works to alleviate potential geographies of fear for lesser-traveled destinations. Additionally, she encourages travel to non-mainstream locations where the native citizens would benefit from increased travel and tourism in comparison to highly-trafficked destinations, and actively works to break stigmas and stereotypes surrounding these destinations. This education works again as staged authenticity, producing an image of the "post-tourist" that is highly aware of the social issues occurring where one visits (Urry). Even while producing an image of authenticity and awareness that acts to monetize her content, Ciara works to expand the common conception of *where* solo travel is capable of taking place within a global setting, thus expanding the reality of possibilities for solo travelers.

Differently, Gabby utilizes the co-branded deals she has access to as a full-time travel influencer to provide monetary resources and opportunities for her audience, so they can

experience travel themselves. Targeted specifically at those who are multiply-marginalized or have lacked travel opportunities, Gabby puts resources online in order to create an *actionable* reality for solo travel to occur. Gabby created three grants of her own, each worth $5000, for a "study abroad redo" opportunity. She specifically markets the scholarship towards those who are multiply-oppressed, explicitly stating that "undocumented citizens, any gender, people ages 18 to infinity, non-students, students, or moms" are all welcome and encouraged to apply. In addition to her own grant, Gabby also frequently shares paid-travel opportunities
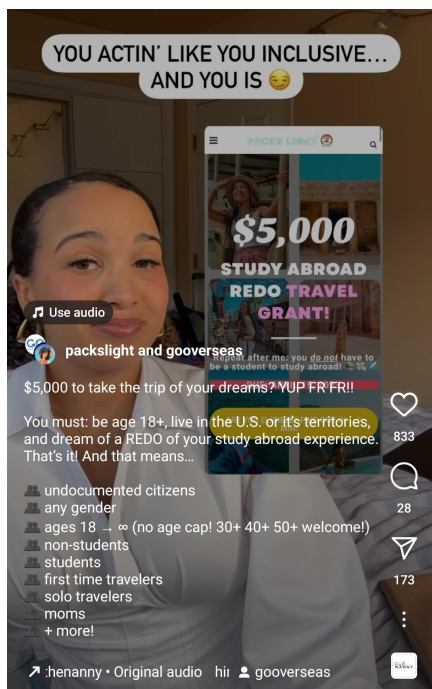
(PTO): in a humorous reel video, Gabby promoted a one-week all-expenses paid trip to Aruba by visually modeling herself applying online, and reinforcing the visual content with clear and concise deadlines, links, and details about the program in the caption.
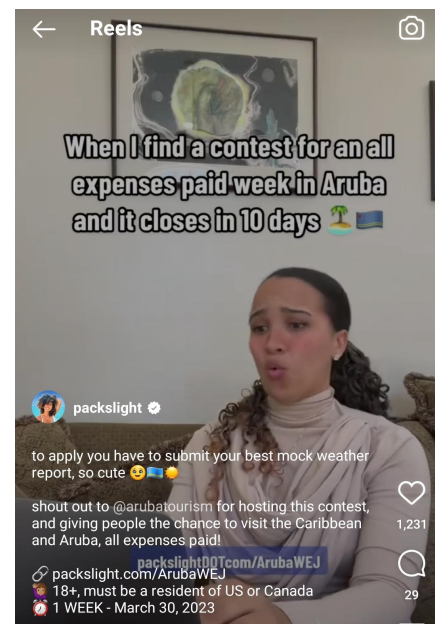
As a person who is multiply-marginalized and who outwardly acknowledges it, Gabby actively works to oppose the roadblocks that people with less privilege face. She directly acknowledges oppressed audience members and travel-seekers as bodies that can in fact travel, and provides the resources to make this proposed world actionable. Some of these resources are linked to her website, where there are then opportunities for Gabby to monetize the audience and maintain her lifestyle from this sharing of resources. Still, part of Gabby's lifestyle includes displaying herself traveling in order to provide alternate opportunities for multiply-marginalized people to travel alone, just like herself.

Conclusion

Built on the underlying facet of staged authenticity, STFIs fill many different roles that serve both themselves and their audience members. The various roles that STFIs represent themselves to be - an aesthetic, teacher, friend, and empowerer - exist within a delicate rhetorical ecosystem. Built by represented interaction, subject-positionality, power/postfeminism, intersectional feminism, anecdote-sharing, co-branding, and illocutionary acts, STFIs mobilize their content to enact multiple world-makings. In building a relationship with the audience that encompasses trust, vulnerability, credibility, and perceived authenticity, STFIs make possible their lifestyle by promoting the very thing they perform; they monetize their actions of traveling full-time by gaining money from their audience and/or companies that sponsor them, all in order to travel more. Simultaneously, STFIs enact the dual rhetoric of power/postfeminism and empowerment, and display themselves as performing corporeal travel, to depict and encourage a world in which it is safe for women and multiply-marginalized individuals to travel alone. Gabby, in providing concrete monetary resources for her audience, and Ciara, in bringing awareness to stigmatized travel destinations, both create somewhat *actionable* realities in which travel is safer for solo women and multiply-marginalized individuals, thus asserting STFIs as world-makers.

Here, I use "somewhat" due to the irreplicable nature of STFIs for the average audience member. To fully emulate the reality created by STFIs would be to become a STFI oneself, affording various opportunities to get paid to travel and produce social media content. Although this is not the case for most viewership, audience members still to some degree can take the encouragement, advice, resources, and/or model for life from this intersectional point of view

and apply it to theirs, working to slowly create a movement of multiply-marginalized solo

travelers who together *and* alone can change the landscape of travel and tourism.

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