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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

“Trust Us, We’re You”: Aspirational Realness in the Digital Communication of Contemporary Fashion and Beauty Brands

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In recent years, a number of fashion and beauty brands have developed promotional content that circulates an aspirational quality imbued with unstudied “cool” around their product. Despite the appeal of this conceit to tropes of the everyday, authenticity, and belonging, it presents a superficially relatable ideal whilst exploiting digital media’s capacities to foster intimacy and promote a postfeminist subjectivity based on consumption.

This article examines three brands that circulate “aspirational realness” around their product: Glossier, Reformation, and Maryam Nassir Zadeh. All remediate the conventions of prior fashion media to communicate discourses of neoliberal femininity to a media-savvy consumer. Aspirational realness is thus read as a means by which consumption is both encouraged and situated as a means of self-realization in the likeness of other aspirational “cool girls.”

Keywords: Digital Media, Fashion, Branding, Postfeminism, Glossier, Reformation

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Over the past decade, a marketing trope I will call “aspirational realness” has emerged in the digital communication of fashion and beauty brands aimed at a media-savvy female consumer. As an aesthetic, aspirational realness champions beautiful women with normalizing “flaws,” as opposed to the flawless hegemonic fashionable ideal. The photographs in which these women appear bear qualities of the transient and the partial: the frame is close-cropped so only half of her face is visible, or the expensive sandals on her feet are shot amidst a galaxy of blackened gum on the sidewalk. The copy that renders these images legible to potential consumers addresses them as familiars. As a trope, it seeks to collapse the distance between brand and consumer, constructing a discourse of intimacy and equivalence by drawing the consumer into the world of the brand whilst suggesting that she is the brand and that

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it is her. This is encapsulated by the assurance on beauty company Glossier's "About Us" page: "trust us, we're you" ([Glossier.com](https://www.glossier.com), n.d.).

A key aspect of this trope is the suggestion of the "real": "real" women showing the products in "real" locations, supported by a mode of direct address that seems refreshingly "real" in another way, by the writing assuming the familiar tone of a girlfriend rather than the succinct formality of product descriptions. It extends the neoliberal ideology of the individual's responsibility of self-production that is germane to women's magazines and advertising, whilst ostensibly distancing these brands, and their products, from it by adopting modes of address and representation that seem to defy neoliberalism's organizing logic of the drive towards hegemonic perfection.

Tropes of the real cyclically recur in fashion media texts: in print magazines, fashion and beauty advertising, and, more recently, on fashion blogs and Instagram feeds. These representations commonly stand in distinction to those they are designed to address, be it "regular" women cast in advertisements to supposedly remedy idealized representations of femininity (Duffy, 2013a, 2013b), or the anti-fashion editorial photoshoots of the 1990s rebutting the glamour and celebrity of 1980s fashion. Aspirational realness deliberately remediates these texts to reframe fashion branding in a way that seems both familiar and novel. In a digital mediascape in which Instagram influencers perform a luxurious everyday and a beauty ideal shaped by fillers and filters dominates, this aesthetic can seem a refreshing alternative. By presenting a supposedly more attainable fashionable ideal, aspirational realness promotes products that promise to seamlessly integrate into one's everyday, offering transformation but not at the cost of individual identity: an efficacy suggested by the so-called authenticity of their presentation.

In recent years, a number of scholars have interrogated notions of authenticity and intimacy that have found resonance on social media, in which "real" and "authentic" commercially oriented strategies seem to signal "the end of promotion" (Pooley cited in Duffy, 2017, p. 120) whilst inviting consumers to identify with the brands and individuals addressing them. As Brooke Erin Duffy (2017, pp. 133–134) has argued, performances of authenticity by cultural producers such as fashion bloggers and Instagram influencers elide the "problematic hierarchies configuring the aspirational labour market." Realness on the fashion blogosphere, for example, is "often structured through a middle-class sensibility—regardless of the aspirational laborers' own social class standing" (Duffy, 2017, pp. 133–134). This classed subjectivity reflects the middle-class position of the normative postfeminist subject, which, according to Alison Winch (2013, p. 3), is also "White, straight [and] able-bodied." While the ideal subject constructed within representations of aspirational realness partially addresses some of the limitations of postfeminist subjectivity—the women cast for such brand campaigns are more diverse in terms of age, ethnic identity, and, at times, body shape than those cast in mainstream fashion and beauty campaigns—in other ways this subjectivity is reinforced, even as the signifiers of normalcy obscure the ways in which this trope's articulation of cool is often classed and exclusionary. Also normalized

are the ways in which aspirational realness, like postfeminist brand strategies more generally, posit consumption as the route to individual self-actualization, even as they superficially champion resistance to mainstream consumption (see Banet-Weiser, 2012; Banet-Weiser & Arzumanova, 2013; Duffy, 2017; Elias & Gill, 2018; Winch, 2013).

What is noteworthy about aspirational realness as a brand strategy is that it marries this discourse with the fashionable ideal. Rather than claiming to entirely reject or refute this ideal, as is the case with advertising campaigns such as Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty (see Duffy, 2013a), brands circulating this trope encourage an irreconcilable yet aspirational dialectic: their products are often expensive but seem within reach; they are modeled by attractive women who bear enough signifiers of normalcy to encourage self-identification; and the branded marketing messages are circulated to a wide audience but, as with intimate publics more generally, consumers are addressed as known insiders who can participate in the brand's "coolness" simply by buying into their vision of femininity.

This article analyzes the strategies by which brands invoke a quality of the real in their consumer-facing digital communications, mapping the ways that aspirational realness is constructed for its target market to achieve commercial aims despite the contradictions it accommodates. As it is a trope deployed by contemporary fashion and beauty brands and aimed at a millennial, female target market, I situate this reading within scholarly debates on postfeminist discourses on social media, as well as literature on fashion media, particularly scholarship on fashion photography in the 1990s, which, like the aesthetic of aspirational realness, imaged an awkward and unconventional fashionable ideal shot in un-aspirational contexts, such as council flats, in contrast to the hyper-feminine supermodels of the 1980s and early 1990s.

In its examination of the promotional strategies of three American brands that primarily address their consumers through digital communication—Maryam Nassir Zadeh, Glossier, and Reformation—this article considers how realness is constructed through branded imagery and promotional texts. I have observed these strategies firsthand, having subscribed to Reformation and Glossier's e-newsletters since 2013 and 2014, respectively; following all three brands on Instagram; and frequently visiting their websites. In this article, I consider a range of textual examples, including the display of product on these brands' websites and Instagram feeds and stories, as well as their e-newsletters and order confirmation emails.

Maryam Nassir Zadeh (hereafter, MNZ) is a clothing boutique on the Lower East Side of New York City that stocks womenswear by designer labels such as Jacquemus and Eckhaus Latta, as well as clothing and shoes designed by the boutique's eponymous owner. Glossier is a beauty company created by entrepreneur Emily Weiss, borne out of her successful beauty blog, Into The Gloss. Reformation is an Los Angeles-based sustainable fashion company founded by Yael Aflalo, a former model who wanted to produce "killer clothes that don't kill the environment" (Holt, 2015). All employ a visual style that recalls fashion photography of the 1990s

whilst communicating discourses of feminine independence designed to appeal to a predominantly female consumer base.

Aspirational realness

The tensions inherent in aspirational realness are embedded in its etymology. Aspiration derives from *aspire*: stemming from Old French, it means “to seek eagerly, to reach,” and also bears traces from the Latin *aspirare*, “to breathe,” as in “panting with desire.” Aspiration is an orientation of longing, then, and an embodied response of desire (arguably the most important affect in fashion consumption) that collides with “realness,” a quality of existing or occurring as fact: being actual rather than imaginary. This concept of realness as an appearance communicating the illusion of facticity parallels the way that realness has been deployed by drag queens in ball culture:

A dramatic performance that gives the illusion of an ontology or theoretical “beingness” as such. It is based on the judging of a performance of identity as being real in terms of the category aimed at imitating, whether that category is conceptually understood in terms of stereotypes for behavior, replication of identifiable social and cultural visual identities, or recycled and mass produced identities of a postmodern culture (Caldwell, 2009a, p. 79).

For performers in drag balls, most notably represented in the documentary *Paris is Burning* (1990), embodying qualities of realness in one’s drag performance meant successfully replicating the look and feel of actual persons who belonged to the category being emulated: looking like an actual executive, say, and through this realness suggesting that you would actually be able to occupy that subject position were you not marginalized and excluded from it by your ethnic, gender, and/or sexual identity.

While in no way seeking to equate aspirational realness with drag realness in a definitional sense, nor to appropriate the latter, there is a superficial connection between these concepts in the sense of a category being emulated in such a way that the person emulating passes closely enough to embody the “real” thing. Aspirational realness creates the illusion of the everyday through carefully constructed discursive and aesthetic strategies. It deliberately suggests to a brand’s target demographic that they can be one of their coterie of “cool girls,” and that all it would take to embody the idealized state of one of their models—literally, for some consumers, who are chosen to feature on the brand’s Instagram feed—would be the purchase of their products, collapsing the distance between image and consumer.

Here, as with fashion advertising more broadly, these promotional texts imply that the symbolic meaning of the product would not only transfer to the consumer, but also transform her. So much is intimated by Ryan Ashley Caldwell when she writes that identity, in post-modern culture, “simply becomes the consumption of images . . . *I consume you, we consume each other*” (Caldwell, 2009b, p. 55, emphasis in original).

At the same time, this quality is always illusory, the representation that suggests the real underpinned by the myth of fashion: that it is possible to appear effortlessly fashionable in any given moment.

This myth assumes a quotidian dimension on social media, in which fashion bloggers and influencers perform an aspirational everyday that explicitly models what contemporary fashionable lives should look like (see [Duffy, 2017](#); [Findlay, 2017](#)). These entrepreneurial articulations of self seem to implicitly affirm the postfeminist sensibility that not only should women aspire to see their appearance as an ongoing project of self-improvement, but that to do so is their responsibility and the grounds upon which they can differentiate themselves from others. [Banet-Weiser and Arzumanova \(2013, p. 165\)](#) argue that the postfeminist sensibility:

Shapes everything from products to media representation to digital media by privileging the individual entrepreneur and personal consumption practices, thus providing the ethos for specific women to be “empowered” through their own visibility, individual choices, and self-promotion.

Realness and authenticity on fashion social media is perhaps best understood as an impression fostered by cultural producers as part of their image management, rather than a definitive quality that coheres with offline experiences. Yet this impression, where convincing, produces affective investment and audience loyalty, which is indeed why advertisers incorporate tropes of authenticity and realness into their promotional texts. It is a way of addressing young, media-savvy consumers disillusioned with “*inauthentic* depictions of womanhood [being circulated] to the *authentic* masses” ([Duffy, 2013b, p. 139](#)). By deliberately incorporating signifiers that mark their brands’ difference in a homogenized marketplace, companies situate their products outside of the mainstream. Such an approach appeals to savvy consumers who:

Must be interpellated through discourses that appear not to be selling or promoting anything . . . and which stress that in buying a product, style, or idea, one is purchasing a sign of one’s own individuality and empowerment. (Gill in [Duffy, 2013b, pp. 436-437](#))

As [Duffy \(2013b, p. 436\)](#) has argued, an outcome of the complex interaction between culture and subjectivity is that consumers internalize socially constructed beauty ideals and seek to replicate them whilst experiencing them as “really, truly, deeply [their] own, felt not as external impositions but as authentically [theirs].” As such, the promotional intent thinly veiled by the inclusion of realness in women’s media and advertising has been integral to the efficacy of these texts in the midst of shifting ideologies of femininity, beauty, and empowerment (see [Duffy, 2013b](#)). Part of the efficacy of aspirational realness as a promotional trope lies in its remediation of the conventions of prior forms of female-oriented fashion media to address consumers in a familiar way. According to [Bolter and Grusin \(2000, p. 65\)](#), “we cannot even recognize the representational power of a medium except with reference to other

media,” so situating this trope in a media genealogy is necessary to unpack its capacity to persuade.

Staging the real in fashion imagery

According to anthropologist Brent Luvaas (2016) early street photography implied that reality was to be found on the street by showing a human subject captured in the midst of their everyday by the photographer, with the image evidence of an encounter that really took place. Fashion photographers have elaborated the connection between real and the street from the early 20th century, as urban landscapes were embraced as an alternative to the staged artificiality of the studio. The street initially functioned as a visual counterpoint to the elegance of the couture-clad bourgeois woman (see Luvaas, 2016; Rhodes, 2010; Rocamora & O’Neill, 2010), such as Cecil Beaton’s wartime series for *British Vogue*, showing a well-dressed woman gazing at the ruins of London’s Middle Temple (Beaton, 1941). Such depictions ceded to youth culture in post-war fashion imagery, as the street was reimagined as a space for loitering, laughing, and leaping (Rocamora & O’Neill, 2010). The ways that the street formed a fashionable backdrop transformed again in the 1980s, as photographer Steve Johnston began shooting anthropological-style “straight up” images of stylish individuals encountered in London for British magazine *i-D*. His subjects were often shot standing against a wall or in the middle of the sidewalk, presumably where Johnston stopped them. These images had an unstudied quality and also endorsed the subject’s outfit as worthy of documenting, the inference being that they had literally stood out from the crowd due to their look. Fashion photography in the 1990s, influenced by the street-style photography featured in *i-D*, also featured non-professional models shot on location in unfashionable contexts, like supermarkets and council flats, to cultivate an anti-fashion rhetoric. The work of photographers such as Craig McDean, David Sims, Nigel Shafran, and Corinne Day often featured young models with distinctive features and clear skin squinting, laughing, or gazing out of a close-cropped frame.

First-wave style bloggers emulated the convention of placing fashion within an everyday context by shooting their outfit posts in the locations they had access to: their own backyards, college classrooms, and so on (see Findlay, 2017). In these bloggers’ images, as with 1990s fashion photographs, we see “the drive to incorporate the distilled signs of ‘real’ life, [in which] other locations were sought within which narratives of the everyday could be plausibly staged” (Cotton, 2000, p. 6). The effect of bloggers’ remediation of the trope of realness was less anti-fashion and more alternative-to-fashion, as their outfit posts foregrounded how they as individuals styled their own clothes rather than pursuing a commercial purpose. The images, produced largely between 2005–2011, had an off-the-cuff quality suggested not only by the locations shot, but also in how early bloggers posed, often glancing out of the frame or mimicking the straight-up by staring into the lens dispassionately, smiling, or pulling a face. The straight-up was likewise adopted by street style

photographers who shot for their blogs, a remediation keeping the connotations of everyday encounter intact: Luvaas (2016, p. 62) described this as “ordinary people taking pictures of ‘ordinary people,’” with the goal of rendering subjects—and their outfits—as clearly as possible. Gradually, the street style blogosphere became commodified space, as product placement became integral to public relations strategy (see de Perthuis 2016; Luvaas 2016), a transition that coincided with a similar shift on the personal style blogosphere (see Findlay, 2017).

More recently, the snapshots posted to Instagram by influencers often implicitly claim a connection to the everyday, as individuals present performative images of their lives in cafes, on streets, and at other public (albeit photogenic) sites. Much as with original street style photography, these images emanate a “staged quality of reality” (Rocamora & O’Neill, 2010, p. 192), portraying the “ordinary man” as an “everyday artist” (De Certeau, in Rocamora and O’Neill, 2010, p. 190) for whom the anonymity of the street—or the over-populated Instagram feed—is overcome through the spectacle of one’s personal style.

In all of these instances of fashion imagery, the street connotes the real, the gesture of the camera framing an encounter between photographer and subject that has been staged to seem unmediated. As a trope, it suggests that fashion is part of the everyday lives of the people photographed: when placed in this context, fashion seems to occur “*en passant* . . . presented as a self-evident attribute of a cosmopolitan person. In this way, the images claim proximity with the life world of the reader” (Titton, 2010).

As a continuation of this convention, the imagery of brands employing the trope of aspirational realness is often shot on the street, and it produces a similar proximal effect. For example, consider *The Street SS17*, a fashion film directed by Gillian Garcia for MNZ’s Spring/Summer 2017 collection, which was embedded on the landing page of the label’s website for the duration of that season (Garcia, 2017). As viewers, we are placed at a particular vantage point on a street in Manhattan. Over the course of some minutes, a throng of women pass, the film flickering as they wander in and out of the frame, up and down a road between Little Italy and the Lower East Side. The residual noise of the city is absent, leaving only music that grows faintly louder, all the better to call the color and movement of the clothes into relief. Meanwhile, the camera follows these women like a gaze, catching how the breeze strokes their clothes and hair, how they stroll by unconcerned. As they do, brief details catch the viewer’s eye: a pair of bright red shoes; the shape of a white frill edging a black sleeve. Gradually, others intrude on the scene—a man jogs past before a taxi zooms through the frame—authenticating touches signifying the everyday.

By situating the viewer on a street near MNZ’s store, this film constructs an encounter, with the women featured cast as the kinds of stylish personages we are accustomed to seeing in streetstyle photographs. *The Street SS17* implicates the viewer in a different proximity to the new collection, however, by being a “boutique fashion film” (Needham, 2013, p. 107): a genre of digital fashion film in which advertisement and editorial entangle to promote the wares of an online store. By “[closing] the gap between journalism and shopping” (Needham, 2013, p. 104) the film attempted to

persuade the viewer, even as it played under a row of hyperlinks leading to the featured products. Real here are the street and the women, their clothes slightly rumpled from being worn, with stray hairs blown across their cheeks. Real, too, are the clothes seen and wanted, the looking and the clicking, and the material products that could arrive within 3–5 working days. In this way, the illusion of the real seemed to draw close to what might be possible in a consumer's own life, with the film not functioning as a fantasy world so much as an invitation to cross a consumptive threshold.

Providing a context for the staging of plausible narratives of everyday life is key to the success of the aesthetic of aspirational realness. By employing this trope, brands diminish the distance between product and consumer by situating their goods in locations that signify the everyday and domestic, whilst superficially opposing a more overtly fantastical aesthetic. We see this in MNZ's product images, which are usually shot in sites connected to the consumption of the brand: the studio where Zadeh works, the brand's bricks-and-mortar shop, and the Lower East Side streets that surround it. Yet these streets, unlike those traditionally depicted in fashion imagery, feature discarded gum and rubbish bags heaped on the curb, and the models lie on grubby playground surfacing or squint into the camera, the window display of the local pawnshop in the background. As with anti-fashion photography, what Julian Stallabrass identified as unimaginable in the fashion photograph, "the fragmented, aged, dirty . . . the discarded" (cited in Rhodes, 2008, p. 201) is here included, yet does not disrupt the illusion of fashionability, but rather authenticates it. These elements—signifying the throwaway, the abject—seem to mitigate the expense of the featured clothing, most of which costs between US \$300–700. Emphasizing this dynamic is the apparently unskilled manner in which the images are shot: the model's face is often in partial darkness with her features difficult to distinguish, or she is squinting, or shot from below, so that the overall effect does not cultivate a distancing glamour, but rather, by being somewhat unflattering, a proximal normalcy. However, as Goldman argued, "the use of imperfection is part of an effort to signify the real," which essentially functions as another "marketing ploy aimed at extending the commodification of desire" (cited in Rhodes, 2008, p. 202).

In constructing an encounter, the aesthetic of aspirational realness also guides our glance. This encourages an imagining of the self using the advertised products, or looking with desire or curiosity at the possessions of another, as is the case with the photography for MNZ. In addition to invoking the momentary glance of the passerby, the brand's product shots customarily feature zoomed-in, close-cropped images that direct the consumer's gaze to the product on offer: a silver hoop in an ear lobe, the chunky wooden heel of a shoe. This technique mimics the brief scrutiny a person might direct at an article of interest worn by someone they have encountered.

Glossier guides the gaze of the consumer in a different way, as their models are shot as an idealized version of how someone would look while using their products. The camera directs our gaze to the sites of action, mirroring the way that some women regard their faces as they apply or remove make-up: angling close to search for vestiges of eyeliner, lifting the jaw to see if their foundation is blended. These

images thus function as a substitute bathroom mirror: the model's face is a proxy for our own as we meet her gaze through the frame. In one of the images for Milky Jelly Cleanser, the camera hones in on the center of the model's face, shearing her jaw out of the frame. Our eyes are parallel to hers, which are closed, the lid nearest to us luminous with cleanser. The fragments of light catching on the product echo the freckles on her clear skin. In the next image, the same model wipes her temple with a tissue, pulling her eyelid ever so slightly, revealing its lining; but the overall effect is to exaggerate her already-wide eyes. An ancillary effect of such framing is the suggestion that what we are seeing is simply the product's functionality, and that anything extraneous has been edited out. We are not being inducted into a dream world, as in mainstream fashion and beauty imagery, suggesting that these products do not need to be glamorized because they are so desirable that it is enough to see them and be convinced.

Trust us, we're you

Extending the contiguity with normalcy is the casting for such content, which usually consists of a mix of professional and non-professional models whose individual physical beauty includes features that seem to defy the hegemonic fashionable ideal whilst never entirely displacing it. As Charlotte Brundson (1986, pp. 119–120) observed in her writing on gender and film, the recuperation of oppositional images into dominant cultures may strip “oppositional ideas and practices of their bite, but they can function to make it appear as if change has been effected.”

In the three brands here considered, some of these characteristics of the fashionable ideal are always present: the women cast are always able-bodied and attractive, and their appearance usually conforms to the hegemonic feminine ideal. However other characteristics have occasionally been discarded. For example, while Glossier customarily casts women who usually appear to be in their early 20's, able-bodied, and clear-skinned, they have regularly cast models who are ethnically diverse and, occasionally, cast women who are older or curvier than is customary for beauty models. Although they seem to retouch their product images, certain physical qualities usually eradicated for major beauty campaigns are often left intact: slight variations in skin tone, freckles, and moles remain, as did the belly rolls of model Paloma Elsesser in photographs for the Body Hero skincare range. However, these latter qualities merely signal relatability rather than disrupting the aspirational subjectivity being modeled.

Relatability in casting is also cultivated by the fact that not all the women modelling for these brands are professional models. Most of the professional models engaged for MNZ have belonged to the category known as “real girl models” (Tai, 2016), being as recognized for their side projects and their personal style, as displayed on Instagram, as for their modeling work. Yet other women cast by the brand for their product shots and promotional films have included visual artists, actresses, magazine editors and sculptors. Many have been in their late 20s and early 30s: by no means

representative of all women, but decidedly older than most models commonly cast for fashion campaigns.

That these women are not professional models has been reflected in the way they have been shot: for the film, laughing and hugging each other, as friends do; in the product shots, squinting, standing awkwardly, grinning. Eugenie Shinkle (2017, p. 216) reads awkwardness in fashion imagery as disruptive, challenging “the standard trajectory of desire—the constant striving towards a state of perfection that is destined never to be reached—and grounds subjectivity in the here and now.” The relationship between these subjects, positioned in the film as girlfriends, and the ease with which they wear these clothes suggests the opposite of a striving for perfection: that these are women with other stuff going on, for whom wearing these clothes is just another aspect of their full, creative lives.

In her work on fashion photography in the 1990s, Kate Rhodes (2008, p. 200) argued that the rise of models whose skinny good looks rebutted the supermodels, “signif[ied] an unconventional snub to the idealized form of the fashion model while forming a unique marketing strategy designed to appeal to a sophisticated, image-savvy demographic.” The same intervention is at work here: as the glamorous supermodels were superseded by women with distinctive features and androgynous bodies, so too have brands like Glossier and MNZ been casting women whose faces and bodies signify their individuality and, ergo, ours.

This discourse is underpinned by the hegemonic expectation that women render their bodies attractive in a particular way and that this work must appear effortless. The preparation and all the bodily labor women are obliged to undertake to approximate the appearance of the fashionable ideal do not exist in the fashion image, unless being satirized (for example, see Steven Meisel’s “Makeover Madness” editorial for *Vogue Italia* July 2005). Not having to try reaches its apogee in the aesthetic of aspirational realness, under the guise of the body being in a constant state of preparedness, with any aspects of embodiment that do not conform to an individual beauty being elided, so that all it takes to achieve this look is to put the clothes on.

Yet when examined, these images reveal that, while some of the aspects of the hegemonic fashionable ideal are being subverted, it is a partial subversion at best. Although, as previously outlined, the women cast have embodied a range of characteristics rarely encountered in mainstream fashion and beauty imagery, the customer who is able to aspire to their model of femininity must also have certain forms of bodily capital. For example, the “no make-up” look popularized by Glossier requires unblemished, unlined skin to be achieved, and only women who wear US size 12 or less can wear most of Reformation’s clothes. The image of fashionability circulated here is also classed: the clothes sold at MNZ are expensive, and while Reformation’s clothing offering ranges in price from relatively inexpensive T-shirts to wedding dresses costing multiple hundreds of dollars, their garments are often styled with expensive shoes from designers such as Chanel and Attico. The coolness produced by these brands therefore presupposes a middle-class sensibility and limits those who are able to fully realize the fantasy of the real these brands promote.

To add further complexity to these brands' creations of aspirational cool girls, by casting a mix of professional models and women with other careers, many of whom are from the cultural industries and so carry attendant cultural capital, these women also function as role models. For the launch of the Body Hero range of skincare products, Glossier engaged, among others, curve model Paloma Elsesser, two-time Olympic gold medallist Swin Cash and model/clinical researcher Mekdes Mersha. These women were shot nude, showing the folds, curves, and lines of their bodies. Cash was heavily pregnant in her shot, whereas fashion designer Lara Pia Arrobbio's tattoos were clearly visible in hers. The intended message here was not difficult to decipher: here is a shower oil and body cream for every body. And the subtext was similarly clear: these are women to aspire to. Successful in their chosen careers, and with enviable bodies: their skin is glowing and firm, and none, not even Cash, bear visible stretch marks, scars, cellulite dimples or skin discolorations. The campaign tips its hat enough to diverse casting to seem more representative of the breadth and variation of women's bodies, yet never strays into representing anything less than ideal. In this way, Glossier could have their cake and eat it too, in much the same way as did the brands casting non-professional models in Duffy's study on authenticity in women's magazines. As she observed, this strategy:

Fulfills a dual role: it deflects critiques about the unrealistic standards perpetuated by the beauty industry while simultaneously tapping into the marketing appeal of using "real" (e.g., credible, authoritative) people rather than models or celebrities. (Duffy, 2013b, p. 146)

Rather than interrupt the effects of the products being modeled, leaving these features intact signified the individuality of these women and their supposed relatability, as well as the postfeminist implication that women are empowered by embracing how they "naturally" are. At work here is what Gilles Lipovetsky deemed:

The dynamic of postmodern, individualistic culture [which] has not eliminated the artificiality of the fashion photo, but [which] has freed it from the old imperative of ostentatious aestheticism by allowing greater openness to intimate sensations, inner feelings . . . and individual imperfections. (quoted in Rhodes, 2008, p. 205)

At the same time, these "imperfections" do not threaten to disrupt the overall narrative of fashionable figures whom the consumer is invited to relate to as exemplary, literally being the model for them to compare themselves to. By including touches like freckles or wrinkles in clothes, these images "fetishize common traits [. . .] as a sign of their commitment to the 'average' woman without venturing toward the complete spectrum of 'normality' that includes obesity, disability and deformity" (Rhodes, 2008, p. 205).

This partial commitment to the "average woman" may be most pronounced in the case of Reformation. In March 2018, the brand launched a capsule plus-size collection

in collaboration with model Ali Tate Cutler. They announced the collection to their mailing list through an email with the subject line “SORRY IT TOOK US SO LONG”:

For the last year or so we've been receiving a lot of comments and requests for more inclusive sizing – and rightly so. It's obviously unfair that we've only been offering clothing to a limited size range. So today we're super happy to launch a Spring collection available in size 0-22. (Reformation, personal communication, 26 March 2018)

Tate Cutler, who is categorized by the modelling industry as plus size, modeled the collection. A representative of the company was reported as saying that the collection was “the first step towards launching fully into the [plus size] category” (McCall, 2019). However, at the time of writing as yet the company had not extended the sizing of its mainline collections to accommodate women who require a size above XL (equivalent to US size 12), and the majority of the models cast in their product shots have the physique of the hegemonic fashionable ideal. While the company sometimes regrams an image of a plus-size consumer wearing their clothes, it is a rare occurrence.

Strategies of intimacy

Brooke Erin Duffy (2013b, p. 134) argued that “most authenticity referents are thinly veiled attempts to engage female [magazine] readers in a historically anchored culture of consumerism,” which rings true in the discourse of aspirational realness. One of the key shifts in digital fashion content is the remediation by brands and professional fashion media of familiar modes of address, such as the colloquial, chatty discourse of style blogs (see Rocamora, 2012). First-wave style bloggers were not entirely outside of consumer culture, of course, as by blogging about items they coveted or enthusiastically showing them to their readers, they were actively participating in and promoting consumption. However, this activity was initially situated within the realm of the personal rather than the promotional, which shifted in the transition of a second-wave ethos, as I have outlined in a prior project (see Findlay, 2017).

What was striking about the discourse of first-wave style blogs was that it was unabashedly personal, steeped in vernacular and direct address. As I have written elsewhere,

Style bloggers' efforts to constitute a collective readership through familiar modes of address is a kind of public imagining, as they interpellate their readers into a particular kind of “us.” It . . . acknowledges the presence of others while at the same time creating an artifice around them and the blogger, implying that not only are we readers known by bloggers . . . but also that we share equal footing with them: that we are contemporaries, perhaps even friends. (Findlay, 2017, p. 87)

As Duffy has argued for the incorporation of “normal” women into the pages of women's magazines, the use of familiar modes of address that interpellate the

consumer into the world of the brand veils their bottom line: that what is at play is a commercial strategy to encourage consumers to affiliate with the brand. At the same time, this strategy stands in distinction with the open-ended discourses of other advertising texts, which may address a target audience more generally, asking open-ended questions or making definitive statements without specifically addressing the consumer as “one of us.”

There are a number of discursive methods brands deploying the trope of aspiration realness use to achieve this implied proximity. One is addressing consumers affectionately, as in an order confirmation email from Reformation leading with a stock photograph overlaid with text reading “Thanks babe.” and signing off with an “X,” designating a kiss (Reformation, personal communication, 19 October 2014). This has been replicated in hashtags applied by consumers, mimicking the language of these brands: at the time of writing, the hashtag “#refbabe” was used on over 12,677 posts, and “#glossiergirl” on over 13,065 posts. This self-identification has been endorsed by both brands, which have reposted selected consumer-generated images in their e-newsletters and on their Instagram feeds in what could be read as the virtual equivalent of the popular girl in high school telling you she likes your outfit.

This mechanism of approval exemplifies what Alison Winch (2013, p. 5) has dubbed “girlfriend culture,” as women in a postfeminist context are encouraged to submit to surveillance from their female peers (with whom they are also in competition) and where “women bond through the bodies of other women.” Many of the examples discussed thus far have illustrated Winch’s argument that “homosocial surveillance is marketed as solidarity through the rhetoric of girlfriendship” (Winch, 2013, p. 5): whether it be a group of stylish girlfriends we encounter and long to emulate (*The Street SS17*) or individual “body heroes” who model individualistic, aspirational lives, other women in these texts function as both role models and competitors. Extending this relational strategy by adopting a mode of address that invokes intimacy and approval, Glossier and Reformation have been discursively constructed as girlfriends themselves, much like the beauty apps studied by Elias and Gill (2018, p. 72), which have been marketed as “new best friends” and beauty experts for users to consult. In a similar vein, Glossier and Reformation promise consumers a diffuse belonging to a digital network of girlfriends if they align their appearance and consumption with the brand and submit willingly “to regimes of looking by the girlfriend gaze” (Winch, 2013, p. 5).

Complicating this in Reformation’s case is that the brand also often reposts images of professional models and Instagram influencers (who frequently embody the fashionable ideal; see de Perthuis and Findlay, 2019) engaging in the same, everyday activities as the regular consumers whose images are also, albeit less frequently, reposted. A recurring feature in Reformation’s e-newsletters is a grid of images, visually remediating an Instagram feed, titled with copy reading “You guys in Ref,” “You guys dressed up,” or similar. In one such newsletter, sent in June 2018, five of the six women featured were models (each had between 85 k and 7.4 million followers) and the sixth was influencer Danielle Bernstein, with 1.8 million followers.

The images replicated the aesthetics of everyday life: model Cami Morrone laughing with her eyes shut; supermodel Karlie Kloss walking down the street holding the hand of a man cut out of the frame. By inferring that the images are of “you guys,” Reformation presents their ideal consumer, who has the looks and physique of a professional model, while also directly stating that this is “us.” As it is obviously not the majority of us, the brand presents an aspirational figure for their consumers whilst downplaying the distance between a professional model and a non-model consumer by trafficking in the aesthetics and discourse of digital fashion and social media cultures. The replication of Instagram’s mode of displaying images in a grid, the content of the images, and the emphatic title recall this familiar media form and the rhetorical traces of intimacy and immediacy that attend it.

The discursive equivalence of aspirational realness could be read, after Botterill, as another instance of the trend of contemporary advertisers to deploy authenticity in an effort to reassure young consumers that “genuine moments of humanity can still be contemplated, even in contrived and commercialized texts” (quoted in [Duffy, 2013b](#), p. 137). If brands can be a contemporary, their influence becomes ostensibly benign, their products offering an aide to becoming one’s best, natural self rather than presenting a mandate to entirely transform.

Not all brands foster intimacy in the same way, however, as the strategies through which consumers are interpellated rely on a brand’s identity. For example, Reformation has employed a dry, ironic tone, as if to undercut the saccharine ploy of calling their customers “babe.” An example is the product copy describing the “Peppermint Dress,” a sleeveless, ruffled, floor-length gown part of the Weddings/Parties line, which reads: “since people just won’t stop getting married, we’ll keep making wedding appropriate dresses” ([Reformation, 2018](#)). By contrast, youthful playfulness is a key element of the Glossier brand, evident in their free app of digital stickers that can be inserted into text messages, their offering of a weekly wallpaper for followers to download and display on their smartphone, and the regular circulation of playlists of songs that are being simultaneously played in the Glossier showroom in New York City. The latter is a neat example of the virtual equivalence fostered between the user’s private space and the bricks-and-mortar place of commerce, also seen in examples of MNZ’s product shots being photographed in her shop. More broadly, these strategies are indicative of how Glossier has encouraged a taking up of their brand by proliferating branded content as decoration for consumers’ personal devices and even their personal communication, which seems to mirror the potential for their products to become part of a consumer’s everyday. These strategies also evoke the friendly, familiar mode of address of style bloggers, who discursively construct their blogs as shared, communal spaces between themselves and their readers, despite the power imbalance inherent in the form. This has an equalizing effect, making contemporaries of blogger and reader, brand and consumer.

By contrast, the copy of MNZ’s online store is markedly different to that of Reformation and Glossier. While these two brands have directly targeted a millennial female audience, implied by the age of models usually cast and the assumptions made

by their communication strategies (that their consumers would like and/or use digital stickers of hearts and rainbows; or were of an age where they would regularly go to weddings), MNZ has seemed to target a slightly older female consumer: still young, but perhaps in her 30s–40s (if the casting is indicative here, too), with professional and creative interests that may make her indifferent to this familiar mode of address. Rather than promote a kind of extended affiliation of “babes” and “girls,” the kind of intimacy circulated in the branded communication of MNZ is that of more traditional fashion media: that these are women we aspire to resemble, whose lives we aspire to emulate, with “cool” functioning here as an embodiment of an ideal nonchalantly achieved. What this demonstrates is that the central tensions of the trope—proximity and distance, fragmentation and intimacy, the momentary encounter and the desire that lingers—are constructed in multiple ways, as befits the identity of the brand concerned.

Conclusion

This article has mapped the proliferation of the trope of aspirational realness across the digital communication of fashion and beauty brands aimed at a media-savvy female consumer. As I have argued, aspirational realness is the latest iteration in a genealogy of the “real” in fashion media and media texts aimed at female consumers. By remediating familiar tropes, aspirational realness draws on the rhetorical power of these prior media forms and representations to situate these brands’ products as alternatives to those of their competitors. By drawing on the aesthetics of prior forms of fashion and style photography, aspirational realness continues to equate the street and digital space as “authentic” sites of everyday life, while the incorporation of non-professional models or models who superficially subvert the fashionable ideal suggests that these products are for regular women. Supporting these aesthetic elements are communication strategies that foster a feeling of intimacy: gifts to consumers, a familiar mode of address or tone that signals that this brand is more of a cool girlfriend (in the manner of a blogger, perhaps) than a company trying to sell a product. In this way, aspirational realness also takes up the intimate discourse of early style blogs, and in some cases mimics the implied immediacy of Instagram to suggest that the featured women just look this good naturally as they go about their lives in these brands’ products, rather than being professional clotheshorses who embody the fashionable ideal regardless of what clothing they wear.

Digital fashion culture continues to ambiguate the distinction between public and private life and to encourage individuals to cultivate a relationship towards their physical appearance in which, as Illouz argued, “the body is the main source of social and economic value” (in Duffy, 2013b, p. 150). This is an extension of neoliberal logics that imbricates individual subjectivity with capitalist logics, so that an individual’s affiliation with a brand can feel like a personal response, yet can also be read as an instance in which “power operates psychologically, by ‘governing the soul’” (Gillian Rose in Gill, 2008, p. 443). In this way, consumers are incorporated into

brands through self-identification, with their personal choices guided by strategies that flatter their intelligence, suggesting that through consumption they are joining a community of other “cool girls” who “get it,” while brands circulating the illusion of aspirational realness appear to offer a distinctive space in an abundance of same-same commercial digital contents.

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