**Is This What a Feminist Looks Like? Curating the Feminist Self in the neoliberal visual economy of *Instagram***

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**Abstract**

Social media, particularly image sharing platforms such as Instagram, has changed the nature of what it means to be “visible” in the contemporary political climate. The accessibility of Instagram offers hitherto unimaginable opportunities for users to perform their political beliefs. The feminist potential of Instagram as a platform is apparent in the number of overtly feminist accounts. Such accounts go some way towards harnessing the power of the spectatorial gaze by turning the camera on themselves as they challenge traditional constructions of gender and beauty and perform for an audience other than a presumed able-bodied, white, male, heterosexual spectator. This article analyses the potential of instagram as a site of feminist activism, resistance and visibility. Using examples from instagram accounts that engage in feminist discourse it demonstrates the ways in which Instagram facilitates the performance of feminist politics for its users. However it also interrogates the limits of Instagram as a space for feminist action. Taking into account the normative boundaries imposed by dominant neoliberal capitalist discourses and instagram’s own rules and regulations, it will explore the limitations of feminism on Instagram.

**Key Words:** Feminism, Social Media, Instagram, Postfeminism, Neoliberalism, Gender, Body-Positivity.

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**Introduction**

The extent to which online spaces have become a primary site of engagement with feminist discourse has led scholars to identify a fourth wave of feminism primarily located online (Ealasaid Munro 2013). With 1 billion active monthly users Instagram is an important site for the construction and consumption of feminist discourses (Jenn Chen 2020). Instagram is a photo and video-sharing platform that allows users to upload, edit and caption images that are then published to their profile. Current data shows that 64% of people aged between 18-29 use Instagram and that, at the beginning of 2020, Instagram has in excess of two million monthly advertisers, 25 million business profiles and 500,000 active influencers (Salman Aslam 2020).[[1]](#footnote-1)

 The availability of feminist content and discourse on sites like instagram, teamed with their general accessibility offers an influential site of engagement with feminism.[[2]](#footnote-2) In 2013 Munro identified an evolving set of feminist terminologies that stem in part from fourth wave feminism’s location online. In 2019 Keller examined Twitter, Facebook and Tumblr as platforms for teenage feminists to engage in activism and Kaitlynn Mendes (2015), Melissa Brown (2017) and Candi Cater Olson (2016) have traced feminist movements that began online before spawning “real world” movements. Feminist discourses have been distilled into symbolic and hashtag friendly terms such as #MeToo (used by women to indicate experiences of sexual harassment), #Bringbackourgirls (used in the wake of Boko Haram’s kidnapping of 267 Nigerian school girls in 2014) and #Timesup (a campaign to end gender based discrimination in the workplace) have delineated spaces for feminist discussion and activism online.

 However, this is not without issue. Sarah Banet-Weiser and Kate M. Miltner (2016) note that the increased visibility of feminism on sites such as Instagram has been met with a concomitant rise in what they term “popular” or “networked” misogyny (171).[[3]](#footnote-3) Instagram specifically is also enmeshed in problematic politics of gendered looking and runs on algorithmic market -style metrics that influence the popularity of content posted to the site (Paige Cooper 2020). These factors inflect and in some ways inhibit the potential of Instagram as a feminist platform.

 This article seeks to interrogate the feminist potential of Instagram by studying three women who use Instagram to engage in feminist discourse and attempt to resist neoliberal postfeminist regimes of beauty and self regulation. It will explore the ways in which these women exploit and contend with the parameters of Instagram to perform and curate their feminist selves. It will question whether, by turning the camera upon themselves and re-inscribing images of their own bodies with feminist meaning, these women have succeeded in resisting objectifying regimes of looking to open up spaces for feminist communication. Taking into account debates over the utility of online feminism to real world political struggle, as well as the neoliberal capitalist structure of Instagram, this article will consider the potential and utility of Instagram as a platform for those seeking to engage in meaningful feminist discourse.

**Instagram and Looking**

As a platform that deals primarily in images Instagram is an important staging ground for the analysis of scopic relationships and pleasure. A survey carried out in April 2020 documented that the gender divide on Instagram is almost equal; 51% Female 49% Male (Cronin 2020).[[4]](#footnote-4) However “women receive five times more likes than their male counterparts” on Instagram, averaging 578 likes per post, to 117 for men (Cronin 2020). Men are also “10 times more likely to like, comment or […] regram posts by women as opposed to men” (Cronin 2020) suggesting a gendered dynamic to interactions on Instagram.

 John Berger’s description of woman as both surveyor and surveilled, “her own sense of being supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another,” is particularly apposite, as Instagram’s like function provides numeric value to this appreciation (2008: 46).[[5]](#footnote-5) When uploading an image, Instagram offers users the option to resize or crop the image, apply a filter which changes its appearance, add a caption and add a hashtag, which groups it with other images that have the same tag. Through this process of selecting, editing, captioning and tagging images, Instagram enables users to present images of themselves, their lives, their interests that contribute to a stylised and curated account of themselves. In other words, it gives users the tools to curate the version of themselves that they would like to be appreciated as by others.[[6]](#footnote-6) Captions and hashtags allow users to offer normative prompts as to how the image should be understood, to brand themselves #happy, #cute, #beautiful (etc.) and to monitor the success of this branding through the accumulation of likes and comments.

 The politics of looking that permeates Instagram as a visual platform has specific implications for feminist content within it. At the time of writing, of the 50 billion+ posts on Instagram (Aslam 2020) there are 9.9 million posts with the hashtag “feminism” and 7.3 million with the hashtag “feminist.” These numbers are relatively small compared to the most popular hashtags, such as #love which has 1.8 billion posts, #instagood which has 1.2 billion posts and #cute which has 570 million posts.[[7]](#footnote-7) The use of multiple hashtags on one image inserts that image into multiple networked conversations, some of which ideologically align the image with specific discourses (such as #feminism), while others seek to boost its reach (such as #instagood).[[8]](#footnote-8)

**Living Your Best Life: Accountability, Documentation and Instagram as a Tool of Neoliberalism**

Hashtags provide users with the means to document and categorise their lives and activities. For instance, the “Livingmybestlife” hashtag has 4.8 million posts at the time of writing. This tag encapsulates the idea of neoliberal entrepreneurialism. It does not “align with the most beneficial or realistic conceptualisation” of the phrase, but rather “is usually a caption that accompanies an image of perfectly placed food, selfies, and […] travel destination[s]” (Ramia 2018). The hashtag endorses these practises of discerning consumption as markers of this 'best life,’ however it erases societal and economic barriers that may render them unattainable.[[9]](#footnote-9)

For those posting under feminist hashtags, Instagram provides a way for them to document themselves living and performing their feminist politics. However, this also opens an avenue for ‘accountability.’ By uploading images of activism, slogans, merchandise they have purchased, made etc. and adding captions and hashtags that endorse feminist discourse, users can offer evidence of their actualised feminist selves. Attendant upon this is the danger of failing to adequately evidence feminist practices. In 2017 Paris Jackson encountered criticism from sections of her followers after posting a topless picture to Instagram (Roisin O’Connor 2017). Because of the dialogic nature of the comment function, users were able to voice concerns, objections or anger directly to Jackson. The same function allowed Jackson to respond, but, in order to maintain her feminist identity on the the platform, there was also a sense that she was obliged to do so (O’Connor 2017). In this way, Instagram can be conceptualised as a tool of neoliberal self regulation. Through their posts, users present themselves for scrutiny to their followers, who can offer their opinion (positive or negative) via likes and comments. Instagram allows users to document their ongoing performance of neoliberal subjectivity, or alternatively their feminist politics, and provide evidence that they are ‘living their best life.’ It also offers other users the facility to call them to account for a perceived failure to do so.

RosalindGill and Laura Favaro (2019) characterise postfeminism as a form of gendered neoliberalism with imperatives towards “self-determination, entrepreneurialism, competition and meritocracy” (1). The nature and structuring logic of Instagram make it an ideal tool for users to document and be acknowledged for performing these neoliberal traits. By posting photographs of their fitness or beauty routine users can demonstrate their commitment to the “endless work on the self” required for neoliberal subjectivity (Gill 2017: 609). Instagram propagates the postfeminist notion that such acts of self regulation are pleasurable by allowing users to label them as such via captions and hashtags.

 Banet-Weiser describes the implications of an increasingly visual market economy in which visibility is prioritised over other more politicised goals (Banet-Weiser, Gill, Catherine Rottenberg 2019:7). Since 2016 when Instagram ended its “reverse-chronological” feed, the content of every individual user’s feed is determined by an algorithm (Cooper 2020). This algorithm uses three “ranking signals”: relationship (users are more likely to see posts from an account that they have previously engaged with), interest (users are more likely to see posts of the same type as those that they have interacted with before - e.g. posts tagged as “fitness” or “feminism”) and timeliness (more recent posts appear at the top of users’ feeds) (Cooper 2020). Engagement functions as the currency of Instagram’s visual economy, making likes, comments and shares essential for visibility. It is therefore necessary to understand the kind of content, or more specifically, the kind of ‘feminism’ that attracts engagement. The ‘feminist’ content that is likely to gain traction on instagram is that which poses the least challenge to established heteronormative, patriarchal, racial and classed structures (Banet-Weiser 2018: 11). Instagram, therefore, propagates and rewards images which display and validate neoliberal ideals and constructions of femininity.

 In a 2017 study, 72% of 2,000 instagram users surveyed reported that “they have made fashion, beauty or style-related purchased after seeing something on Instagram” (Cara Salpini 2017). Instagram Influencers cultivate what Edgar Cabanas Díaz and José Carlos Sánchez González refer to as “human capital” (2012: 173). “Micro” influencers, those with 6,000 - 10,000 followers earn an average of $88 per post, those with 50,000 - 80,000 followers earn $200 and those with over 1 million followers average $670 for each post (Influence 2020). Influencers establish themselves as the ideal discerning and entrepreneurial neoliberal subjects through their documented lifestyle and practices of consumption and offer strategies for their followers to emulate them.[[10]](#footnote-10) For example, Geordie Shore (MTV 2011- ) star Chloe Ferry has used Instagram to document her recent body transformation and to advertise the dietary supplements that she uses and sells as part of a Multi-Level-Marketing scheme (Ferry 2020) .

 The options on Instagram to edit images and include normative prompts as to how the image should be understood in captions, erase much of the labour required from Influencers to maintain their capital. This process of erasure also occludes the fact that “the resources to become an entrepreneurial subject,” the concept of which is embodied by Influencers, “are unevenly distributed” (Ana Sofia Elias, Gill & Scharff 2017: 23). This is true not only for women who lack the financial resources to purchase products that are advertised as necessary for neoliberal subjectivity, but also in the narrowness of the Influencer demographic. Stephanie Yeboah highlights the disturbing and “continued pattern of blatant sidelining of women of colour” in the Influencer community (2019). Yeboah cites a Nilson report that demonstrates that, compared to white women, “black women spent almost nine times more on ethnic hair and beauty products in 2017” (2019). The skew towards “white, slim and able-bodied” influencers would therefore seem to be a result of the normative parameters of the ideal neoliberal subject, rather than market or economic factors (Yeboah 2019).

 Instagram therefore operates according to clearly gendered politics of looking as well as a market structure that privileges images adhering to narrow postfeminist ideals of beauty and consumption. In its capacity to document neoliberal subjectivity Instagram becomes another tool of neoliberalism. This has implications for all feminist content posted to the platform. However, Instagram also offers a potential site of resistance to neoliberal discourses. In the case of individual users, the fact that they have turned the camera upon themselves and taken some control of Instagram’s means of production grants them a degree of agency. This agency is, in some instances, enough to reframe the conversation and carve out a space for feminist interactions and discourse.

**Resisting the Forces of Neoliberalism**

The three Instagram users that are the focus of this article use their profiles to document and curate their feminist selves and to resist traditional practices of gendered looking. Although the women considered here are not necessarily “celebrities,” all three are Influencers (Georgina and Megan have achieved verified status on Instagram).[[11]](#footnote-11) Georgina Cox (@FullerFigureFullerBust) is a plus size fashion and lingerie blogger based in the UK (Figure 1). She reviews clothing and lingerie for plus sized bodies. The majority of her posts are images of her modelling the clothes and lingerie gifted to her, as well as professional burlesque and boudoir photoshoots. Georgina also discusses personal topics such as her struggles with body image and overcoming her anxiety about going to the gym as a self-described fat person.

[Insert Figure 1 around here.]

**Figure 1: ‘Sunday Plans.’ (Horne 2019c). Photographer: Debbie Murray.**

Using comments and Instagram Stories, Georgina regularly interacts with her followers. She defines her page as a space exclusively for those who identify as women, excluding men and those who would interact with the content she posts as pornography.

 Megan Crabbe (@bodyposipanda) is a UK based body positivity (BOPO) activist and author. She is in recovery from an eating disorder and references her own struggles with body image and disordered eating in many of her posts. Megan states that BOPO offered her “another option to respect and accept the body you have and stop punishing yourself for it” (Millie Feroze 2019). As well as selfies, quotes and BOPO content, Megan also posts what she calls “jiggle videos” (Figure 2). In these videos Megan dances in clothing that shows the way her body moves. She explicitly draws attention to the way that her body “jiggles” and lacks the definition and control that are normative markers of the ‘ideal’ female body under postfeminism.

[insert Figure 2 around here]

 **Figure 2: ‘I checked in with Destiny’s Child earlier and they confirmed that some people just aren’t ready for this jelly’ (Crabbe 2019c).**

 In the caption to a video posted in 2017, Megan writes “REMEMBER: your body is worthy of love in all the shapes that movement creates. Your wiggle is wonderful! Your squish is spectacular! OWN YOUR JIGGLE MY BOPO BABES!” (Crabbe 2017b). In these videos Megan calls on her followers to defy normative beauty standards and celebrate their bodies.

 Finally, Bec Chambers (@becchambersfit) is a personal trainer and power lifter based in Australia. She offers online training programmes, posts workout videos, tips and candid photos as well as posed shots (Figure 3). Bec frequently posts content relating to her mental health, as well as her struggles with self esteem and body image.

[Insert Figure 3 around here]

 **Figure 3: ‘These are adductor exercises,’ (Chambers 2019b).**

All three women discuss the problems that they encounter as they attempt to navigate instagram’s neoliberal visual economy because they, in their own opinions, fall outside of postfeminism’s normative boundaries of “attractiveness.” For each of them, their body is the primary means of production within that economy as well as their site of resistance to its demands. The remainder of this article will focus on examples of the ways in which they utilise Instagram as a platform for this resistance as well as a means of recruiting and encouraging their world-wide followers to similar defiance. It will also consider the ways in which Instagram, as a tool of neoliberalism, simultaneously limits, facilitates and obliges them in their documentation of these acts of resistance.

“**This isn’t Curvy! This is Fat!” - Fat-Phobia and Public Health Discourses**

A frequent issue that both Megan and Georgina interact with is fat-phobia in the guise of concerns over health and wellbeing. Concerns over obesity have taken on the dimensions of a moral panic in which fatness is discursively linked to personal failings and a lack of self discipline.[[12]](#footnote-12) Significantly, debates over fatness and public health are frequently played out on women’s bodies, as shown in the following posts from Megan and Georgina.

 On January 1 2019, Megan uploaded a jiggle video in which she punches and kicks away phrases such as “new year’s crash diets,” “magazines selling body shame,” that are edited into the video (Figure 4).

[Insert Figure 4 around here]

**Figure 4: ‘SETTING THE MOOD FOR 2019 LIKE,’ (Crabbe 2019b).**

Megan calls the video her “January survival guide for when diet culture comes along and tries to make profit by selling you insecurity about your body” (Crabbe 2019b). This directs her followers to understand the video as a rebuttal to post-Christmas imperatives to loose weight.[[13]](#footnote-13) Participating in critique originating from fat acceptance activists and scholars (see Samantha Murray 2008), Megan posts “before and after” photos that demonstrate the weight she has gained in recovery from her eating disorder. Subverting the standard formula of such transformation images, Megan’s “before” pictures show her with the slim, toned body that is designated desirable by postfeminist beauty standards. In the “after” pictures she is notably larger and less toned. In the caption to one such image, Megan calls attention to this convention and its utility in commercial diet culture which offers “the promise that it’ll all be perfect once we hit the other side of the before and after. We’ll be the version of ourselves that we were born to be!” (Crabbe 2018). This kind of transformation or ‘Cinderella narrative’ is a significant mode of address to women in neoliberal postfeminist media (Moseley 2002: 134). The makeover paradigm suggests that by submitting to extensive and harmful regimes of self-surveillance and physical transformation women may reveal what is “purported to be a better, more authentic self” (Cat Mahoney 2017: 136). Megan’s celebration of her own alternative transformation explicitly contradicts this fundamental postfeminist precept.

 In a post from 2018, Megan included screen shots of some of the negative responses she received to a transformation image (Figure 5).[[14]](#footnote-14) The comments suggest that by allowing herself to gain weight Megan had “just [given] up” and “really let herself go” (Crabbe 2018). The terminology used in these comments is revelatory of the neoliberal ideology that underpins them.

[Insert Figure 5 around here]

**Figure 5: ‘Do you want to know something?’ (Crabbe 2019a).**

They imply that, as a woman who has “failed” to maintain herself according to postfeminist beauty norms, Megan is no longer useful. Megan responds to the comments in the image’s caption, in which she states:

 I have given up on my body. I’ve ‘given up’ on my body becoming something that it was never supposed to be. I’ve ‘given up’ in my body being a measure of my value as a human being, I’ve ‘given up’ on my body being the reason why I don’t deserve

 happiness because I’ve always deserved it. And I’ve finally ‘let myself go’ into a the world without believing that fitting into a bullshit cultural standard of beauty is all I have to offer (Crabbe 2019a).

In this way, Megan rejects neoliberal postfeminist discourses that link moral worth and success for women with the maintenance of a slim, disciplined and controlled body for appreciation by others.

 Georgina posted a similar image in which she superimposed screenshots of comments left on an image of a plus sized woman posted by the Calvin Klein Instagram account onto her own body. The comments include statements such as, “This isn’t curvy! This is fat! And definitely not healthy for the body!!!” and “stop glorifying fat lazy slobs as being ‘beautiful’” (Horne 2019a). The idea that fat bodies are “lazy” draws on neoliberal concepts of productivity as determinative of worth. In the caption to this image, Georgina admonishes people who “mock and sneer […] under the guise of being concerned about diabetes and ‘promoting obesity’” (Horne 2019a).

 In the above examples, Megan and Georgina use images of their bodies as sites of resistance to the neoliberal parameters of Instagram’s visual economy. They do this by documenting themselves living and enjoying bodies designated as “unhealthy” and “undesirable” by postfeminism. Through captions they label these images as radical and direct their followers to understand them as such.However, these images also fit within and contribute to the persona that both women have curated for themselves and are composed in a way that is likely to appeal to their followers.

 Bec Chambers addresses this directly in a post which shows two images of herself side by side (figure 6). In the first, she is posing in lingerie with a made up face and styled hair. The lingerie, as well as the way she is posing, shows off her toned and athletic body.

[Insert Figure 6 around here]

**Figure 6: “80% of fitness Instagram profiles summed up in one paragraph” (Chambers 2017a).**

In the second image Bec is seated and slouched. She holds a jar and spoon full of chocolate spread which also covers her mouth and teeth. The first image is labelled “Me on Instagram,” the second, “Me in real life” (Chambers 2017a). Bec draws attention to the artifice of Instagram, and particularly fitness content, in the caption that challenges fitness Influencers who “Writ[e] about being real and unapologetically who you are but also us[e] Photoshop to make bum slightly bigger and rounder and waist slightly smaller” (Chambers 2017a). Bec distances herself and her own Instagram use from such accounts, whilst acknowledging her own use of artifice to navigate Instagram’s visual economy. She admits, “saying that I don’t get a kick out of Instagram engagement would be a downright lie” (Chambers 2017a). She ends her caption with a call to action: “I wish more people would realise that you are worthy irrespective of the way your face, bum or body looks […]” (Chambers 2017a). However, in terms of Instagram engagement, as well as calling on followers to simply choose not to participate in internalised neoliberal discourses of beauty and self regulation, Bec’s final statement is not true. The algorithm that dictates the exposure of particular posts is dependent upon likes, comments and shares and, in Bec’s experience of Instagram, stylised, posed and perfected shots are the ones that attract the most engagement.

 As Influencers, the position Georgina, Megan and Bec occupy in relation to their followers is very similar to the emotional relationship identified between celebrities and their followers (Christine M. Kowalczyk & Kate Pounders 2016: 347). As such, the demonstration and documentation of their “authentic lives” on Instagram is central to Bec, Megan and Georgina’s continued engagement with their followers and, for Megan and Georgina, with the brands that sponsor some of their content (Kowalczyk & Pounders: 347) . Bec’s acknowledgement that her content is curated and geared towards attracting likes is an admission of the ideological balancing act all three women perform. On the one hand, they court followers along the neoliberal boundaries of engagement that Instagram operates within. On the other, to maintain the authenticity of their feminist personas and messages, they resist and importantly are seen to resist the parameters of that engagement.

The Gross Men of the Internet - Resisting Objectification and Sexualisation

Another issue Georgina and Bec regularly post about is unwanted sexualisation from men. Both women routinely post pictures of themselves in lingerie, swimwear or naked and discuss what the display of their naked bodies means to them (Figure 7).

[Insert Figure 7 around here]

Figure 7: ‘Its always fun to play in the @nicolamyboudoir #BoomBoomRoom’ (Horne 2018). Photographer, Nicola Grimshaw-Mitchell.

Georgina’s images evoke Burlesque, “an alternative mode of femininity […] that involves reclaiming traditionally normative sites of identity production” (Debra Ferreday 2008: 47). Georgina is heavily invested in this process of reclamation as she uses captions, as well as her ability to report and block users, to define the audiences of her photos and specifically exclude people who would consume them along these normative lines. In a blog post concerning “The Gross Men of the Internet,” Georgina addresses men who send sexual comments to women “who [have] not invited you to do so,” calling it “a violation” (Horne 2016). Importantly, she does not condemn women who use Instagram to invite this kind of interaction. Rather, she frames her withdrawal from such interaction as a matter of consent and sets the parameters of her own interactions along different lines.

[Insert Figure 8 around here]

Figure 8: ‘This is a message to anyone concerned about my lack of pants’ (Chambers 2017b).

 In July 2017 Bec posted an image in which she is topless with her arms and two doughnut emojis covering her breasts (Figure 8).[[15]](#footnote-15) The caption is addressed specifically to “anybody who is concerned about my lack of pants, tops, or coverings and to anybody who is concerned about anybody else’s” (Chambers 2017b). She goes on to assert, “I will be in my undies whenever I want to be” and that she wants to “enjoy my nude self because its imperfect, natural and because I like my nudiness” (Chambers 2017b). In a similar way to many of Megan’s posts, Bec frames her acceptance and love of her naked body as a radical act. She also lays claim to her naked body, nominally removing it as a site of consumption for anyone other than herself. In doing so she attempts to resist the traditional construction of images of naked female bodies. By turning the camera on herself she dictates through captions how the image should be consumed and understood. In posts such as those discussed above, both Bec and Georgina offer their followers an alternative way of understanding and constructing their own naked bodies.

Conclusion

This article has considered the potential of Instagram as a platform for the construction and consumption of feminist discourses. By analysing posts from three women who use Instagram to engage in feminist discourse it has shown the ways in which they use images of their own bodies to navigate the neoliberal visual economy within which Instagram operates, but also to offer resistance to its normative parameters. One of the main ways in which these users curate their feminist selves on Instagram is through their use of captions to dictate the ways in which their images should be consumed and understood. The comment and direct message features on Instagram also facilitate dialogue regarding those images. These features enable followers of accounts to interact directly with account holders and with each other.

 The three Instagram Users discussed here are particularly responsive to their followers and frequently encourage them to engage with each other. For example, in a post sponsored by medical technology company Ava Women, Georgina asked her followers to comment with “the funniest names or terms that you’ve heard to describe periods/vaginas” (Horne 2019b). In the resulting comments, women talk openly and with humour about the ways in which they and others talk about women’s bodies. In May 2019, Bec posted an image with a caption referring to anxiety and depression. She explained that she had been struggling with her own mental health and offered space for followers to do the same. As well as messages of support and love many of her followers took the opportunity to share and reflect upon their own struggles, with one user commenting “thank you @becchambersfit - I needed to hear every word of this” (Chambers 2019a). Similarly, in April 2019, Megan posted an image of lettered tiles that spelled out “you will do great things despite your anxiety” and invited her followers to comment sharing their accomplishments (Crabbe 2019d). In the comments, followers posted things that they had done, achieved and overcome, offered praise to others and were praised in return. By initiating this conversation, Megan created a space in which (mostly) women could connect with and celebrate each other.

 However, the pressing question with regard to Instagram and these three users specifically, is whether the efforts towards resistance discussed here constitute effective sites of feminist protest? In a political sense the answer is almost certainly no. The nature of Instagram as a platform means that these instances of feminism are constrained by the parameters of its visual economy. The structuring algorithm that regulates Instagram content has the potential to suppress images and voices that deviate from the prevailing norm. Whilst all three women challenge these norms and the power structures of neoliberal platforms such as Instagram, they simultaneously adhere to and utilise those structures to ensure their continued visibility. The sample of accounts represented here is necessarily very small, but its demographic is revelatory in that all three women can be considered middle class, are able bodied and only Megan is a woman of colour. In October 2017, Megan posted “An Apology to All of the Fat People I’ve Hurt With My Account” (Crabbe 2017). In the article she acknowledges that her Instagram account, out of all of the body positivity accounts on Instagram, quickly became the most prominent:

 Because I was saying the same things as the people around me whose bodies were bigger, whose skin was darker, who were differently abled, who were outside the gender binary, whose bodies placed them further outside of our cultural standards of beauty than my own. But from my body, […] that still fit several of those cultural standards, the message was more easily palatable. […] My privilege made my voice louder than others. (Crabbe 2017)

The kind of privilege that Megan talks about extends to Bec and Georgina as well. Despite placing themselves outside of the narrow definition of postfeminist ‘attractiveness,’ as able bodied, light skinned, middle class women, they do not fall far outside of its boundaries.

 However it is their awareness and acknowledgement of their position and privilege as operators within Instagram’s neoliberal visual economy that bolsters their attempts to subvert and resist it. By sharing their own anxieties, experiences and feminisms they normalise and support those of others. By creating a space in which alternate readings may be ascribed to images of women’s bodies, readings that are directed by the women themselves, they alter the parameters for the consumption of such images. In the way that they present and talk about their own bodies and invite others to do the same, Megan, Georgina and Bec endorse an alternative vocabulary to talk about, consume and understand images of women in a neoliberal postfeminist visual economy.

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1. The term Influencer refers to instagram users who have amassed large numbers of engaged followers who are influenced by and seek to emulate the interests, behaviours and opinions of those users (Nicola Cronin 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Accessibility is obviously predicated upon access to the internet. According to statista.com in August 2019 4.3 billion people have access to the internet, which accounts for 56% of the global population. 3.5 billion of those people use social media (statista.com 2019) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See also Banet-Weiser (2018) and Karen Boyle (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. It must be noted that this survey did not account for non-binary respondents. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In 2019 Instagram made like counts private for users in seven countries. Like counts remain visible to the user, however they less readily available as users must view images individually to access them. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For research into the negative impacts of Instagram on self esteem, see Mary Sherlock& Danielle L. Wagstaff (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Figures are taken from searches for the relevant hashtag on Instagram on June 6, 2020. Numbers are likely to rise over time but these figures are given as an indication of the relative popularity of each tag. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For further discussion of the use and function of hashtags, see Magdalena Olszanowski (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The hashtag has also been used sarcastically to mock the culture that it perpetuates. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For further discussion of this conception of the neoliberal subject see Gill 2017; Gill, Banet-Weiser, Rottenberg (2019); Christina Scharff (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. A verification check mark indicates the authenticity of content and confers what Alison Hearn refers to as considerable “reputational capital” (2017: 69). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For discussion of the response to the so-called “obesity epidemic” see Lee F. Monaghan et al 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For example: “get back on track after over-indulging at Christmas” (Luke Gray & Jo Gray 2017); “9 Tips to Get Your Diet Back on Track During the Holidays - So your pants still fit in January” (Elizabeth Nairns 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. In the caption to the image, Megan credits Instagram User @heylauraheyy, the originator of this format. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Instagram policies on nudity have been the subject of widespread debate see Olszanowski (2014) for a discussion of feminist tactics of circumvention of Instagram censorship. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)