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## The Beguiling: Glamour in/as Platformed Cultural Production

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### Recommended Citation

Banet-Weiser, S. (2020). The Beguiling: Glamour in/as Platformed Cultural Production. *Social Media + Society*, 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119898779>

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### Keywords


digital media, platforms, aesthetics, feminism, glamour

### Disciplines

Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences

# The Beguiling: Glamour in/as Platformed Cultural Production

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Social Media + Society  
January-March 2020: 1–11  
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DOI: 10.1177/2056305119898779  
journals.sagepub.com/home/sms  


## Abstract

Arguing that questions of power expressed through aesthetic form are too often left out of current approaches to digital culture, this article revives the modernist aesthetic category of glamour in order to analyze contemporary forms of platformed cultural production. Through a case study of popular feminism, the article traces the ways in which glamour, defined as a beguiling affective force linked to promotional capitalist logics, suffuses digital content, metrics, and platforms. From the formal aesthetic codes of the ubiquitous beauty and lifestyle Instagram feeds that perpetuate the beguiling promise of popular feminism, to the enticing simplicity of online metrics and scores that promise transformative social connection and approbation, to the political economic drive for total information awareness and concomitant disciplining, predicting and optimizing of consumer-citizens, the article argues that the ambivalent aesthetic of glamour provides an apt descriptor and compelling heuristic for digital cultural production today.

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Recalling the tributes to deceased actors and other industry notables on Hollywood awards shows, the “Shorty Awards”—an event intended to “honour the best of social media”—included an “in memoriam” montage for social media platforms that had gone out of business. Somber music played as the defunct platforms’ brand logos set within gilded frames moved across the screen. The montage was intended as a joke, of course; social media platforms are far from glitzy Hollywood actors. Or are they? These days platforms like Instagram or Snapchat are, quite literally, stealing the show—attracting, managing, and monetizing our attention, propagating new ways for individuals to achieve some form of celebrity status and, at the same time, controlling the access, conditions, and measures that constitute that status. As platforms increasingly mediate our cultural lives, setting the terms for valuable visibility and influence, they themselves are developing an unprecedented, yet strangely familiar kind of power and iconicity. This article argues that the Shorty Award’s sketch contains an often-disavowed truth about contemporary culture in the digital age: the modernist aesthetic logics of superficial allure, feminized seduction, proximity at a distance, technological magic, promotional manipulation, and profound ambivalence are alive and well. Glamour lives on, albeit in uncanny ways, in contemporary platformed cultural production today.

Of course, in some senses, the ways glamour anchors much cultural production seems fairly obvious; within the contemporary context of Western neoliberal popular feminism, for example, the politics of feminism are often “glammed” up to become more palatable to a wide, popular audience (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Feminism becomes glamorous through endless images and messages that circulate on social media about, among other things, body positivity and loving oneself. As Rosalind Gill and Ana Sofia Elias (2014) have noted, much of popular feminism is expressed through uplifting, cheery, and glamorous rhetoric, where exhortations to “love your body” are communicated through images of conventionally beautiful, feminine, cis-gendered women. They explain that,

Love your body discourses are positive, affirmative, seemingly feminist-inflected media messages, targeted exclusively at girls and women, that exhort us to believe we are beautiful, to

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“remember” that we are “incredible” and that tell us that we have “the power” to “redefine” the “rules of beauty.” (p. 180)

Popular feminism is awash with pleas for women and girls to “awaken your incredible,” and to simply *become* more self-confident, while the structural conditions that are part of the broad context that subjugates and diminishes women’s self-confidence are rarely acknowledged (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill & Elias, 2014). As Gill and Elias state, within “Love Your Body” discourses, “women’s difficult relationships to their own embodied selves are both dislocated from their structural determinants in patriarchal capitalism and shorn of their psychosocial complexity” (Gill & Elias, 2014).

This “dislocation” from patriarchal structures is no doubt exacerbated by the technological affordances and commercial logics that inform the social media platforms on which much of popular feminism depends. Platforms, such as Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat, not only allow for the rapid and broad spread of these “Love Your Body” messages, but also assist in maintaining popular feminism as a highly visible, surface-level politics that targets *individual* consumers rather than collective bodies. So, while it may not be difficult to see glamour in the images of popular feminism circulating online, arguably the media platforms themselves, via their deployment of various types of alluring rewards and metrics, evince a form of glamour, which works, in turn, to obfuscate the platforms’ instrumental economic imperatives.

This article will analyze the operations of glamour in platformed cultural production through a case study of a particularly visible version of Western popular feminism, focusing on one notable popular feminist media campaign, “Strong is the New Skinny.” Defining glamour as a beguiling, superficial, promotionally driven kind of affective force involving technological magic, it will argue that the more obvious, image-based glamour of most popular feminism is amplified in part because of the less acknowledged glamour of digital media metrics and platforms. The logics and assumptions behind commercial digital media platforms and metrics are mostly opaque to those who use them, which, in turn, produces a context for the easy consumption of popular feminism’s cheery exhortations to just “be” confident and love our bodies. Digital media metrics, and the platforms that deploy them, incentivize and reward a superficial engagement with, and rapid circulation of messages and images on media platforms, so that popular feminist affective relations threaten to become about these metrics alone. *Circulation, popularity, and visibility* are prioritized over deep analysis or collective organization around what these messages might mean structurally (Banet-Weiser, 2018; see also Dean, 2009; Van Dyck, 2013). As it circulates across multiple platforms then, popular feminism marries feminist politics with the logics of capitalist production and participation mediated through the aesthetic practices of glamour; it is often the

depthless, shining example of what a feminist subjectivity should, and could, mean, and works to obscure the complex, material politics of feminism. Here, we argue that a reassessment of the aesthetic, or affective impacts of platforms allows us to more fully theorize the rise of popular feminism in the last decade.

To be sure, it may seem counter-intuitive to raise the issue of aesthetics, especially the elusive quality of glamour, in an age so thoroughly saturated by cybernetic logics, where big data and predictive analytics claim to obviate the need for narrative and interpretation entirely by rendering computable (and knowable) the whole tangled mess of human behavior and culture. The logics of platform capitalism (Srnicke, 2016) have created conditions where content no longer “matters” for its aesthetic qualities, but, rather, is valued for its instrumental function, which is to generate a standing reserve of data that keeps algorithms learning, predicting and massaging us into new and ever changing kinds of relations. In contrast, much of feminist media studies focuses, and has historically focused, on gendered bodies and how these bodies are represented through particular aesthetic forms on various media platforms; the work of the aesthetic remains paramount in this kind of critique (see, for example, Elias et al., 2017; Dale et al., 2016; Dosekun, 2017; Ngai, 2015; Ouellette, 2017 and others). Yet, while feminist media scholarship continues to incisively explore the function of aesthetics and representation within media environments, much recent media theory has moved away from discussions of aesthetics, narrative, and representation, arguing that the primary function of digital technologies is now organizational, allocative, infrastructural, or logistical (see, for example, Kittler, 1999; Parikka, 2012; Parks & Starosielski, 2015; Peters, 2015).

Given this recent turn in media theory, we deploy the aesthetic category of glamour here purposefully, as a reminder of the continued salience of aesthetic categories for analyses of a datafied culture. We fear that some current scholarly assessments of digital media tend to replicate, theoretically and methodologically, the same computational and political logics embedded in the developments they are analyzing, thereby limiting their critical purchase. Are these kinds of socio-technical approaches really adequate to a critique of patriarchal digital capitalism? What theoretical frames and modes of analysis might we be leaving behind in our rush to understand and describe the seemingly perpetual technological innovation all around us? As some recent work on digital media platforms suggests, investigating Internet infrastructures and materialities should include a focus on what is hidden and subjugated, such as race, class, and gender bias, by the assumed technological “magic” of algorithms (see, for example, Eubanks, 2018; Noble, 2018; Pasquale, 2015). Our hope in deploying glamour as a critical analytic category is to add to these insights and broaden discussions about the often problematic, beguiling effects of much platformed cultural production today.

## The Work of Glamour

A corruption of the term “grammar” and linked to the old French words “gramaire,” meaning “books of spells” and “grimoire, meaning ‘obscure, incomprehensible discourse,’” the term glamour first came into usage in the early 1800s, defined as an “delusive and alluring charm” (Gundle & Castelli, 2006, p. 4). More commonly understood as a product of the modernist moment, glamour emerged as a kind of “secular magic” (Thrift, 2008, p. 14) central to the evolving “language of commercial seduction” (Gundle & Castelli, 2006, p. 7) that accompanied the rise of mass media at the turn of the 20th century. Glamour involves a fascination with the ability of technology to arrest and fix time and so is bound up with the rise of personality and celebrity; the glossy depthlessness of the star image, which always intimated some deep “truth” behind it (Dyer, 1991, p. 136), was industrially deployed as an infinitely receding lure for the growing numbers of consumers in the market for cultural products. In this sense, the constitution and deployment of glamour is a systematic, industrial undertaking—a promotional gambit purposefully intended to distract from the more prosaic and exploitative aspects of the culture industries. Definitive of glamour is that it can never be caught or tamed; as Oscar Wilde (2014) writes about smoking in the *Picture of Dorian Gray*, glamour “is the perfect type of a perfect pleasure . . . it leaves one unsatisfied” (p. 51). Beguiling, seductive, intangible, always promising more, glamour depends on concealing where it comes from and how it is made. In this way, glamour is a fetish, and its commercial production inevitably involves manipulation, calculation, “meticulous selection and control” (Thrift, 2008, p. 15). Glamour, of course, is also deeply associated with the feminine; it is women who have historically carried the expectation of “glamour” and who most often conduct the various kinds of labor that both engender and maintain it. Finally, glamour as an aesthetic sensibility has been theorized as both elusive and generative, expressing a kind of ambivalence or indifference to the broader political or moral contexts of its deployment (Brown, 2009, p. 9).

In her book about glamour and modernist literature, *Glamour in Six Dimensions*, Judith Brown (2009) argues that glamour emerged as a degraded version of the 18th-century Kantian category of the sublime, the extraordinary experience of limitless being, which could not survive the forces of capitalism and secularization. She writes, “out of the rubble . . . from the heap of broken images, could be cobbled a dim reminder, an image of impossible desire, a fantasy of proximity, through glamour” (p. 13). Noting that glamour is often dismissed by theorists as simply an product of consumerism, Brown insists that, while glamour is linked to commodity capitalism, it is also “something distinctly modernist, formal, and tied to less material concerns than the production and packaging of goods” (p. 1). Glamour, then, is both a “capacious” aesthetic technique serving to

further entrench capitalism and a “wispy” promise of some thing or value beyond capitalism (p. 9); in either sense it comprises a kind of *affective force*. And, while the aesthetic of glamour is often dismissed as “simply” aesthetics, Brown asks us to see glamour as comprising a logic in its own right, as a key analytic, rather than merely a description of something else. Glamour, Brown argues, is at stake in any discussion of linking, for example, literature to modernism, and their interrelation.

We would like to extend Brown’s analysis and argue for the importance of the aesthetic form of glamour as both an apt descriptor and a key mode of analysis for platformed cultural production. To be clear, we are not arguing that all platformed production is glamorous in the term’s everyday meaning as “beautiful” or “exciting.” This is obviously not the case. Rather, in this article, we are appropriating the multiple significations of the term “glamour” and focusing on its twinned facets—as commodity and ineffable quality, descriptor and analytical frame—to analyze the media texts and images, metrics, and platforms that comprise popular feminism. Glamour, Brown (2009) argues, emphasizes the “formality of stasis over movement, beauty over productive activity”; “it relies on abstraction; on the thing translated into the idea and thus the loss of the thing itself” (p. 5). Like the seductive glamour of Jean Harlow or Marilyn Monroe, the accommodating quality of popular feminism, its breezy and friendly expression, while wrapped up in the technological promise of immediacy and intimacy, is deeply marked by technology’s cold, distancing effects. In its wide circulation and complex forms of commodification, popular feminism can potentially lose “the thing itself,” in this case, feminist politics and critiques of structural patriarchy, its activism, and its histories.

## Aesthetics and Digital Production

Certainly aesthetic practices in digital content production are alive and well; bloggers, social media influencers, and youtubers operate firmly on the terrain of the aesthetic, using the body, fashion, and beauty to generate feelings and attachments, with the hope of getting paid. Media scholars, especially feminist media scholars, have employed a variety of adjectives to describe this personally expressive online work: aspirational labor (Duffy, 2017), visibility labor (Abidin, 2016), relational labor (Baym, 2014), reputational labor (Gandini, 2016), glamour labor (Wissinger, 2015), and aesthetic labor (Warhurst & Nickson, 2007) to name a few. The vast majority of these concepts draw from earlier critics’ attempts to map capitalisms’ growing penetration into all aspects of our lives and its monetization of affect and subjectivity; these include Arlie Hochschild’s (1983) work on emotional labor, Mauricio Lazzarato’s (1996) concept of immaterial labor, and Michael Hardt’s (1999) theory of affective labor. All of these concepts stress the intangible, aesthetic, communicative, performative, and

deeply feminized qualities of online work. Leaving aside questions about whether this work constitutes “labor” strictly speaking or whether the content itself is aesthetically innovative, there can be no doubt that digital platforms are wholly dependent on aesthetic practices and appeals to maintain their bottom line.

While there is much to be gained from theorizing the nature of digital content production, in this article we wish to shift the emphasis somewhat—from *forms of aesthetic work to the work of aesthetic form*. Following Terry Eagleton (1988), we do not wish to naturalize the concept of the aesthetic, but see its definition as always already ideological, defined with and against dominant forms of socio-technical “rationality.” As Eagleton points out, when the concept of the aesthetic first emerged in the 18th century as the direct apprehension of experience through the senses, it was positioned as a “feminized” supplement to, and reaffirmation of Enlightenment reason; by making room for the sensual world of individual tastes and pleasures, the rule of rationality and its law could remain intact. A new kind of aestheticized subjectivity emerged at this time as well, accompanying the shift from direct political coercion to hegemony; “like the work of art,” this new aestheticized subject “introjects the Law which governs it as the very principle of its free identity and so, in an Althusserian phrase, comes to work ‘all by itself’, without need of political constraint” (p. 329). Following Eagleton, we contend that the “aesthetic” is not a passive quality found “in” texts, rather, it signifies affective, bodily impact and performs a kind of political and cultural work, especially in relation to subjectivity. Indeed, we argue that the tendencies described by Eagleton have only intensified in the age of platform capitalism; here, “structures of power” become “structures of feeling” and “pleasurable conduct” emerges as “the true index of successful social hegemony, self-delight the very mark of social submission” (Eagleton, 1988, p. 330). But what aesthetic form best characterizes platformed cultural production today?

There have been several notable attempts to define a new kind of aesthetics for the digital age. Lev Manovich (2015) has traced the emergence of what he calls an “info-aesthetics,” tracking the ways the computational logics of software, protocols, screens, search, databases, and interfaces are shaping a whole range of cultural phenomena and resulting in, among other things, new senses of scale and temporality. Focusing on contemporary visual arts, Frederic Jameson (2015) theorizes a new “aesthetics of singularity” (p. 123) best represented by the art installation. Existing only in the “now,” installations embody performative strategies that are re-made every time an individual viewer engages with them; they are “one-time devices, which must be thrown away once the trick—a singularity—has been performed” (p. 113). Noting the parallels between the art world and the global financial market, Jameson claims the installation mirrors the logic of the derivative contract, enacting “a single bright idea which, combining form and content, can be repeated ad

infinitum until the artist’s name takes on a kind of content of its own” (p. 112). In line with the rise of “fictitious” finance capitalism (Durand, 2017; Marx, 1993) and the centrality of reputation management and marketing to it (Harvey, 1990; Hearn, 2010; Lazzarato, 2004), galleries and artists are now brands, their formal promotional contours more important than the quality of their service or work. Ed Finn (2017) echoes Manovich’s and Jameson’s claims about the primacy of form, interface, promotion, and the engendering of multiplicities of singular, hyper-personalized experiences in what he calls an “aesthetics of abstraction”: “an ethos of simplification that requires abstracting away complex and messy details in order to deliver a reliable and persistent set of services” (p. 97). Citing Uber’s glossy user interface that papers over the messy material realities of the cars, drivers, and their working conditions, Finn argues that these platforms are engaged in a form of algorithmic user-arbitrage; as they insert themselves into our lives as experiential middle-men, they come, “not merely to enact our decisions, but to control the decision pathways, the space of agency” (p. 97). For example, as Netflix informationalizes cultural content to create classification, search, and recommender systems, it not only shows us the movies we like but also tells us how to think about them, inserting itself seamlessly into the formation of our individual aesthetic preferences.

Manovich, Jameson, and Finn collectively point to an informational aesthetic based on abstraction, surface, or interface, which reduces content to form, prioritizes the meta-logics of the promotional and the branded, relies on arcane techniques, and functions seductively to provide a hyper-personalized experience and a sense of proximity at a distance. We contend that these aesthetic qualities and their effects are not at all new, however. Taken together they echo those of an older, more familiar aesthetic form—glamour—functioning now in a commercially driven, digital register. Apparently, while techniques of communication may have changed significantly in the digital age, the industrial logics and interests driving their design and operation continue to engender and rely on aesthetic strategies similar to those used in the earliest years of the culture industries.

## Popular Feminism and the Glamour of the Image

As a way to think through the ways aesthetics, and glamour specifically, operate in forms of platformed cultural production, we focus on the case study of popular feminism. Popular feminism is a particularly salient case study because it is a political platform in its own right, but is also deeply dependent upon and conditioned by the logics of commercial digital platforms themselves. While there are different versions of popular feminism, here we focus on highly visible, well-circulated, neoliberal Western popular feminisms; the images, messages, and affirmations of feminism that do not acknowledge, let alone critique, the capitalist platforms on

which they are created and circulated. Some popular feminist themes, such as Love Your Body discourses and self-confidence initiatives, lend themselves more easily to these commercial platforms and achieve a heightened visibility as a result. Banet-Weiser (2018) argues that

(a)s a set of practices and expressions that circulate in an economy of visibility, popular feminism is part of the larger “attention” economy, where its sheer accessibility—through shared images, likes, clicks, followers, retweets, and the like—is a key component of its popularity. And, this popularity and accessibility are measured in and through its ability to increase that visibility; popular feminism engages in a feedback loop, where it is more popular when it is more visible, which then authorizes it to create ever-increasing visibility. (p. 21)

In this way, popular feminisms compete for visibility and attention with other feminisms in this social media economy.

As feminist theorists such as Susan Douglas, Angela McRobbie, Diane Negra, Yvonne Tasker, and Rosalind Gill (among others) have pointed out, representations of feminists as angry, defiant, man-hating women have dominated media platforms historically (Douglas, 1994, 2010; Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2008; Negra & Tasker, 2007). But, as Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg contend, media representations of feminisms are always contested and contradictory (Gill, 2007; Rottenberg, 2018). In the contemporary moment (especially in North America and Europe), media manifestations of post-, neoliberal, and popular feminisms often directly challenge representations of feminism as angry and exclusionary (Banet-Weiser, et al., 2019). Since the 1990s, Western popular culture has maintained, what Gill calls, a “post-feminist sensibility,” a set of ideas, images, and meanings where feminism is repudiated and disavowed, and women are seen to be imbued with freedom of choice, individual capacity, and are self-optimizing in both body and mind (Gill, 2007). Post-feminist culture clearly positions women as empowered individuals, with seemingly unending capacity for economic and personal success. Thus, post-feminism comprises an affective relation with individuals, not with collective politics or structural change. All of this post-feminist empowerment fails to explain continued structural gendered inequalities, however. In the contemporary moment, post-feminist culture sits (often uneasily) side-by-side with what Catherine Rottenberg has called “neoliberal feminism” and Banet-Weiser has called “popular feminism,” which are differentiated from post-feminism in the way that they “clearly avow gender inequality [yet] simultaneously disavow the socio-economic and cultural structures shaping our lives. This feminism also helps spawn a new feminist subject, one who accepts full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care” (Banet-Weiser et al., 2019, p. 5).

Examples of mediated popular feminism abound, and they do not have the same affective value, politics, or reach. But it is clear that in the contemporary moment, some versions of feminism have become “popular”:

It feels as if everywhere you turn, there is an expression of feminism—on a t-shirt, in a movie, in the lyrics of a pop song, in an inspirational Instagram post. Feminism is “popular” in [that it] manifests in discourses and practices that are circulated in popular and commercial media, such as digital spaces like blogs, Instagram, and Twitter, as well as broadcast media. [Additionally], the “popular” of popular feminism signifies the condition of being liked or admired by like-minded people and groups, as *popularity*. (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 7)

While recognizing that gendered relations of power marginalize women, this “new feminist subject” critiques gender inequities in a friendly, safe, and glamorous way. It is not only the case that this version of popular feminism is decidedly not angry (and indeed, anger [at sexism, racism, patriarchy, abuse] seems to be an old-fashioned vestige for these popular feminisms), it is also the case that the aesthetic form of popular feminism works to obfuscate its structural underpinnings. The glamour of popular feminism authorizes it to be an accommodating feminism, and, as we will see, this strategy is not just conducive to corporate expression; it in part exists to become *available to* corporate expression (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Again, we can see this in popular feminism’s endlessly cheery “love your body” messages, messages that are part of an “aesthetics of abstraction” (Finn, 2017), where the history and complexities of feminist politics are eclipsed by the easily circulated, superficial visibility of a glamorous popular feminism.

Again, the “popular” of popular feminism also means it is connected to the attention economy. That is, the circulation of popular feminism depends on numbers: followers, likes, and retweets, dollars from the sale of popular feminist merchandise, and popular feminist brands and businesses that emerge from this economy. Within neoliberal brand culture, only some feminist expressions and politics are “brandable” and commensurate with market logics: those that focus on the individual body, connect social change with corporate capitalism, and emphasize individual attributes, such as confidence, self-esteem, and competence as particularly useful to neoliberal self-reliance and capitalist success. Crucially, “brandable” feminist expressions and politics often rely on the work of glamour; not only because these expressions of feminism follow conventional definitions of beauty (meaning white, thin, and cis-gendered), but also because branded popular feminism circulates on social media, and there works to mystify and obscure the sexism, racism, and misogyny “baked in” to the algorithms and design of these platforms (Crawford, 2013; Noble, 2018).

On social media sites such as Instagram, Twitter, and Tumblr, we are flooded with popular feminist images and aspirational messages that position the female body in a glamorous frame as a conduit to empowerment. One in particular is a lifestyle brand and marketing campaign directed at women that has framed the participation of women in the sports and fitness industries: “Strong is the New Skinny.” This campaign ostensibly focuses on women’s health and

physical strength, but it also re-inscribes gendered norms about the thin, hyper-feminine body. The use of the term “skinny” indicates an allegiance to hegemonic norms of femininity; to be “strong” here is *not* to be athletic and overly muscular. As Anthony Papathomas points out about this movement, “the athletic and the feminine ideal represent two contradictory masters; to serve one is to reject the other.” (Papathomas, 2018; see also Toffoletti et al., 2018, for more on “sporting femininities”). The campaign also taps into the vague “empowerment” promises of popular feminism, suggesting empowerment comes with having the appropriately feminine body (Papathomas, 2018).

In addition, part of popular feminism is the emergence of an *industry* of empowerment, and “Strong is the New Skinny” capitalizes on this industry. Beginning with Jennifer Cohen and Stacey Colino’s (2014) best-selling self-help book, *Strong is the New Skinny: How to Eat, Live and Move to Maximize Your Power*, “Strong is the New Skinny” has become a social media campaign, motto, hashtag, and merchandising franchise for women and fitness programs. As Cohen and Colino state, “It’s time for a new conversation—and a new plan for treating, feeding, and moving your body in ways that build on your strengths inside and out. Strong is sexy. Strong is powerful. Strong is achievable” (Cohen & Colino, 2014, p. 17). The most recent iteration of “Strong is the New Skinny” is a similar campaign directed at girls rather than women: “Strong is the New Pretty.” Starting on social media as a popular photo project about girls being strong (broadly defined as athletic, brave, or loyal) by a mother and former athlete, this project, with the tagline “A Celebration of Girls Being Themselves,” went viral in the spring of 2014 and has subsequently become a book (Parker, 2017). On the face of it, there is little to critique about such projects. However, we want to point out that these kinds of popular feminist campaigns rely on three intersecting dynamics: media circulation, metrics, and platforms—all of which are marked by the visual codes and instrumental logics of glamour. Recall that these “strong is the new . . .” campaigns rely on dominant assumptions about what typically comprises “glamour”: they are both *skinny* and *pretty*.

Thus, “Strong is the New Skinny” can be positioned alongside other contemporary empowerment discourses and practices in the last 5 years that have been directed to girls and women. For example, companies such as Verizon, CoverGirl, Always, Dove, and Chevy have produced multiple emotional advertising campaigns, urging us to pay closer attention to girls and the opportunities available to them both personally and professionally. As Kim Toffoletti, Holly Thorpe, and Jessica Francombe-Webb have astutely argued, sports and athletics have become a crucial vehicle for these empowerment campaigns, where images and successes of strong female athletes are positioned as a solution to the problems of female empowerment (Toffoletti et al., 2018). Importantly, these messages of “strong” empowerment are framed within the aesthetics of glamour; as Brown (2009)

points out, the aesthetic of glamour “favors blankness, the polished surface . . . yet somehow this blankness is transmuted into something that is seductive, powerful and often simply gorgeous” (p. 5).

Images of “Strong is the New Skinny” are indeed seductive, powerful, and gorgeous precisely because conventional understandings of the gendered and raced body continue to shape media representations, sponsorships, and endorsements. But who is being empowered by these mediated images and messages? What bodies are “worthy” of endorsements? As Toffoletti et al. (2018) point out, the mytho-poetic narrative of sports has recently expanded to include mythologies about female empowerment, but these representations of women’s athletic participation tend to be framed within the discourses of post-feminism, commodity feminism, and emerging forms of popular feminism. As a result, in spite of their meritocratic rhetoric, these mythologies of female empowerment are often conditioned by the superficial promotional logics of glamour, and tend to be directed at white, conventionally feminine bodies, keeping intact established ideologies and practices about the ideal raced and gendered body.

Certainly on the surface, “Strong is the New Skinny” appears to challenge the more taken-for-granted qualities of glamour, insofar as it claims to reject thinness as a beauty ideal; ostensibly, it is about a more achievable “real” body, one that is about strength rather than weakness, a solid female body rather than a “wispy” one. Yet the images connected with this campaign that circulate on social media, especially the visually oriented Instagram, are very familiar; they portray conventional, idealized feminine bodies wrapped up in the guise of “health.” Indeed, the role of social media is not insignificant here. As Roisin Kiberd (2015) writes in *The Guardian*:

The new brand of body fascism isn’t just about fat and thin: “healthy” now functions as an aspirational hashtag, one arguably more powerful, self-righteous and potentially misleading than “thin” ever managed to be. Fed on a diet of health blogs and images labeled as “fitspo,” we risk confusing what is healthy with what attracts the most clicks.

The “strong” body remains a mediated image circulated within an economy of visibility, where visibility is an end in itself, and where the superficial allure of glamour conditions the very context for visibility (Banet-Weiser, 2018). As we discuss later, visually oriented platforms such as Instagram are increasingly the site for identity-making online; as Alice Marwick has argued, “the Internet is increasingly a *visual* medium, and more and more individuals are using images rather than written self-descriptions to express themselves” (Marwick, 2015). Thus, “Strong is the New Skinny” is more about the *image* of a strong female body, and where, how often, and how widely this image is circulated, than it is about empowering women with strong bodies to challenge patriarchal norms or institutionalized racism.



But, as mentioned, the glamorous images of “Strong is the New Skinny” do not just represent *any* body. Though there are images of women of color within this genre, the body that is regularized and recognized is primarily the thin, mostly white, toned body, with no apparent signs of labor except the labor of extreme exercise that comes with expensive gym memberships and personal trainers. When looking through the fitspo hashtag it is impossible not to view the successful body as a white body or at the very least, as a (sometimes) ambiguously racialized body.

### Popular Feminism and the Glamour of the Metric

The impact of these glamorous popular feminist images is measured by metrics, of course—the coveted likes, retweets, friend, and follower counts that annotate all kinds of platformed self-expression. As T. M. Porter (1995) has famously noted, quantification is well “suited for communication that goes beyond the boundaries of locality and community” (p. ix). But, even as numbers give off a sense that whatever knowledge they represent is produced “independent of the particular people who make it,” reinforcing a belief in objectivity, Porter argues that they actually imply “nothing about truth to nature” and “have more to do with the exclusion of judgment, the struggle against subjectivity” (p. ix). Under these conditions, “objectivity,” represented by numbers and data, and deployed in fields like politics and science, “*names a set of strategies for dealing with distance and distrust*” (emphasis added, p. ix). In this era of total computation, faith in numbers is, of course, foundational. Certainly, the supposed objective indifference of numbers works to reinforce celebratory discourses about the egalitarian, democratizing nature of much social media. Helen Kennedy and Rosemary Hill (2017) build on Porter’s insights to argue that, in addition to any rational understanding they might engender, numbers and data provoke feelings and emotions in people as well. In other words, data and metrics have distinct aesthetic qualities that derive from their contexts of deployment and modes of representation. These aesthetic qualities are part and parcel of the kind of strategic ideological work Porter suggests “objectivity” does. In this sense, then, we can argue that metrics have affective force.

In so far as social media metrics work to manage distance, reduce complexity, and function as strategies of incentive and enticement, they are the very epitome of glamour. As we have argued, the aesthetic logics of glamour involve a kind of shiny depthlessness, a form of superficial expression that promises access to depth, but actually precludes penetration or analysis, receding whenever we get too close. In terms of popular feminism, we note that this surface expression obscures, in often spectacular ways, the complex, material politics of feminism. Consider again the example of “fitspo.” The key to “fitspo” is public sharing—and public shaming—so that personal inspiration comes from clicks, likes, and

followers. As Kiberd reports, one fitspo advocate, Jess Semmens, was advised by doctors to lose weight; her commitment to following that advice involved photographing every meal she ate, and then circulating the images on social media. Semmens claims that she lost 30 pounds by “instagramming herself thin,” suggesting that the approval of her online followers expressed in comments and likes was more powerful incentive than any medical argument could have been (Kiberd, 2015). But, as Roisin Kiberd asks about this trend, is the “healthiest” diet the one with the most likes? Is it healthy to crowdsource your body image and let the Internet take over your real life? Semmens explains that her weight loss was due to the fact that she openly courted peer pressure: “If I didn’t stick to the diet I wasn’t just letting myself down, I’d be letting down all my followers too” (Kiberd, 2015).

The individualist ethic expressed in this discourse makes an explicit equivalence between empowerment, a fit body, and individual achievement, unsurprisingly failing to acknowledge structural and systemic inequalities. And yet, while there might be no one else to “blame” for Semmens, there is, apparently, everyone to “let down.” The dynamic of social media conjures a kind of collective body; after all, “crowdsourcing your body image” not only means constructing your “self” in response to your social media followers, but also positioning your “self” as *a function* of your followers’ appreciation and recognition. Metrics are the medium through which this kind of collective construction and authorization of self is expressed and navigated. Given the fact these metrics stand in for social approval and recognition, it is little wonder they are so beguiling; they convey intimacy, proximity, a fantasy of total belonging and acceptance, and yet there can’t ever be enough of them to fully satiate our desire for social acceptance or truly reveal what lies at the core of our being.

The idea of “crowdsourcing your body image” makes sense in an era of what Alice Marwick has called “instafame,” where the empowerment that comes from posting these images is one that is fleeting and non-structural, about precarious fame rather than about changing social inequities or the ways a woman’s body is valued culturally, politically, or economically (Marwick, 2015). Instagram traffics in the “aspirational,” which Marwick identifies as “marketing jargon for something people desire to own but usually cannot” (Marwick, 2015; see also Duffy, 2017). Marwick continues,

(t)hus Instafame is not egalitarian but rather reinforces an existing hierarchy of fame, in which the iconography of glamour, luxury, wealth, good looks, and connections is reinscribed in a visual digital medium. The presence of an attentive audience may be the most potent status symbol of all.

In this context, “Strong is the New Skinny” works to reinforce the idea that the body is the core value of a woman’s identity. Some call these practices “visual health”; here, posting images on social media to be evaluated is transmuted

into evidence of a woman's commitment to health in general. Clearly, this is related to the now normative practice of self-branding, where the image of the body, what one looks like, how one circulates on multiple media platforms, *becomes* personal identity and self-worth. The self-brand, like other kinds of brands, relies on standardized codes of the body, and, importantly, relies on the accumulation of numbers: followers, likes, retweets, and so on (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Hearn 2008; Marwick, 2013).

While most people recognize that metrics, in the form of followers, likes, and retweets, mean *something*, the vast majority of users are generally unaware of the algorithmic logics underpinning metrics or the myriad ways platforms work to keep these logics hidden. Nonetheless, users remain emotionally invested in them. This may be because these apparently simple scores and metrics provide us with a way to make judgments and find a path through the mountains of information and attention-seeking material online. More likely it is due to the fact that they appear to be legitimate external reflections of our own social worth, and promise access to new worlds of micro-celebrity and reputational capital - if we can drive them up high enough. As Benjamin Grosser (2014), inventor of the Facebook "demetricator," argues, the use of personal metrics on social media and the inescapable desire to increase them, is intricately bound up with the more general capitalist tendency toward perpetual growth; "within our system of capital, quantification becomes the way we evaluate whether our desire for *more* is being fulfilled. If our numbers are rising, our desire is met; if not, it remains unmet. Personal worth becomes synonymous with quantity." Under these conditions, the more metrics there are on social media, the more they come to be seen as legitimate forms of social capital, and the more our desire for them grows. This kind of fixation on capturing an ever-receding goal, whether it is access to the truth of a star or achieving more likes and followers, is definitional of the power of glamour. In the end, these kinds of metrics may be affective measures, but they are also highly *effective*, insofar as they work to produce certain kinds of profit-producing behavior in us (Beer, 2016). The social discernment and approbation they ostensibly represent and the perpetual quest for more they generate serve a disciplinary function; as glammers or fetishes, metrics claim to measure the intangibles of our social influence, but in the end work to tie us ever more deeply to the logics of the platform, incentivizing us to keep contributing to it.

### Popular Feminism and the Glamour of the Platform

The glamour of the metric, of course, is inherent in the logics and interests underpinning its deployment in the first place, those of the platform. As Tarleton Gillespie (2010) points out, the term "platform" has at least four distinct connotations:

computational, something to build upon and innovate from; political, a place from which to speak and be heard; figurative, in that the opportunity is an abstract promise as much as a practical one; and architectural in that . . . (it) is designed as an open-armed, egalitarian facilitation of expression. (p. 352)

These multiple connotations, Gillespie argues, comprise a useful discursive malleability, perfectly suited to the ambitions of major cultural intermediaries like Google, Facebook, and Youtube, allowing them to advance their interests across a range of disparate audiences, from users to advertisers, content producers to regulators. Gillespie writes,

(w)hatever possible tension there is between being a "platform" for empowering individual users and being a robust marketing "platform" and being a "platform" for major studio content is elided in the versatility of the term and the powerful appeal of the idea behind it. (p. 358)

The "powerful appeal" of egalitarian possibility that the term connotes helps to position these companies as trustworthy mediators while simultaneously affording them "an opportunity to communicate, interact and sell" (p. 351) with impunity. Building on Gillespie's insights, Nick Srnicek (2016) argues that, in spite of their claims to neutrality, these companies definitely "embody a politics" (p. 26). As essentially "extractive apparatus for data" (p. 27), they work to shape markets and the ways those markets appear to users, primarily through the use of predictive analytics. And, by laying ground rules for developers and users, they assert "control and governance over the rules of the game" (p. 27). Given the ideological work that the polysemy of the term "platform" performs for these technology companies, we could argue that the word itself functions as a kind of "glamour"—a promotional, incentivizing, industrial lure.

While promotional/celebratory discourses suggest that platforms operate computationally behind the scenes to expand and democratize access to cultural production, if we follow "Mr. Money bags" (Marx, 2013) into the hidden abode of production we see that companies like Google and Facebook are striving for total information awareness, working to govern and "optimize" us as users via the extraction of data and the application of predictive analytics. As Ed Finn (2017) argues, these activities shape our aesthetic sensibilities as well. For example, Netflix is often cited as a notable illustration of a cultural disruptor, shifting the focus from traditional film and broadcast aesthetic techniques in search of audiences to forms of "corporate, computational authorship" (Finn, 2017, p. 103) that can devise an audience for pretty well any content out of its cache of data. While this might result in a plethora of new types and qualities of cultural production, the reality is that content matters here only insofar as it provides user metadata to generate more and more finely delineated audiences to enhance Netflix's own recommender system. Even in the midst of these new processes of capitalist

accumulation that extract profit-producing data from our cultural tastes and consumption practices then, a form of glamour remains. Our emotional investment in the legitimacy of Netflix's metrics and recommendations is actually an investment in the authorizing power and glamour of the platform itself. As the Shorty Award sketch described earlier intimates, the fetish of the star image has simply been displaced; forget the taught, glossy look of Robin Wright in David Fincher's *House of Cards*, "(t)he thing that Netflix ultimately wants its consumers to love is not just the content but Netflix itself: the application, the service, the platform" (Finn, 2017, p. 104). "Instagramming" yourself thin is another potent example of the glamour of the platform; while superficially it is an expression about the power of the others' judgmental gaze, it also articulates an unexamined, unquestioning fealty to the platform itself.

## Conclusion

Arguably, the beguiling, "glamorous" nature of platformed cultural production is rooted in the foundational logics of computationalism itself. As Wendy Chun (2013), David Golumbia (2009), and Ed Finn (2017), among others, have pointed out, hyper-rationalist dreams about the ultimate programmability or computability of human life—views that see the human brain as a computer and language as code—express a desire for transcendence and are based in a belief in glamour or "magic" nonetheless. Like the concept of "logos," Chun refers to computer code as a kind of "sourcery," a form of "rational" rhetoric that promises to turn symbols into actions. Toggling between the visible and invisible, the knowable and the mysterious "yet-to-be-known," computation via software embodies "the central function of magic—the manipulation of symbols in ways that impact the world" (Finn, 2017, p. 33). But, as Chun pointedly argues, "we 'primitive folk' worship source code as a magical entity—as a source of causality—when in truth the power lies elsewhere, most importantly, in social and machinic relations" (p. 51). These authors all link cybernetic dreams about the performative, masterful power of computation and its code-based forms of incantation and seduction to regimes of neo-liberalism and the hegemony of instrumental reason. And, like computer code, Joseph Weizenbaum (1976) writes, "instrumental reason has made of our words a fetish surrounded by black magic. And only the magicians have the rights of the initiated. Only they can say what words mean. And they play with words and they deceive us" (p. 255).

Ian Bogost (2015), Chun, Golumbia and Finn all remind us that assertions about the power of total computation, quantification, and the centrality of technological logics are cultural or social metaphors or ideologies that have become articles of faith for many of us. But, no matter how platform producers and their technological innovations may lay claim to the unassailable "neutrality" of their affordances,

it is crucial to remember that those claims are themselves products of a techno-fetishistic cultural imaginary marked by capitalist domination, promotional homogeneity, and the glamour of the brand. As Andrejevic et al. (2015) argue, any critical analysis of data-driven, platform capitalism must necessarily involve an interrogation of the "post-cultural" imaginary it evinces, because, in the end, the cultural, aesthetic, and political cannot be surpassed by technologies or algorithms, no matter how complex, unknowable, or compelling they might be. Indeed, complex and compelling technologies are products of history and subject to entrenched cultural assumptions and political modes of legitimation no matter how vociferously they might claim it to be otherwise. Given this, widespread celebratory discourses about the "objective" work of computation and the programmability of culture should be all the motivation we need to attend more carefully to that which is being disavowed—the work of power as expressed in and through aesthetics, like glamour.

The dominance of computationalist, techno-solutionist ideologies have implications for politics and social movements of course, including feminism. As Golumbia (2009) argues, and as we have shown above, just because computation can be individually empowering does not then mean that "this sheer expansion of power will somehow liberate us from deep cultural-political problems" (p. 152). Over the last several years, privately owned social media platforms have provoked major crises of trust in democratic governance, exacerbated class divisions, and helped to intensify resistance to racial and gender justice; it is now painfully clear that "what has been flattened via IT is not at all individual access to culture, economics, or political power, but rather the 'playing field' for capitalist actors" (p. 147). As a form of beguilement and obfuscation, the aesthetic force of glamour expressed in images, metrics, and platforms plays a central role in normalizing these conditions.

Terry Eagleton (1988) reminds us that

what matters in aesthetics is not art but this whole project of reconstructing the human subject from the inside, informing its subtlest affections and bodily responses . . . Once new ethical habits have been installed, the sheer quick feel or impression . . . will be enough for sure judgment, short-circuiting discursive labour and thus mystifying the laws which regulate it. (p. 330)

It is difficult to imagine a more apt description of the ways in which we, as users and content producers, tend to engage in the world of social media these days; "the sheer quick feel or impression" does indeed inform and secure judgment and action online, militating against more fulsome types of debates and engagements. In this article, we have tried to identify the ways in which the affective force of glamour performs the kind of subjectivizing work described by Eagleton through the example of popular feminism. The multiple expressions of popular feminism, circulating rapidly across social and digital media, authorize a "sure judgment," not

about what feminism is or should be, but simply how it should be performed or visualized. Indeed, the glamour of popular feminism comprises the idea that one can “instagram” oneself a feminist, wispy and capacious at the same time, constituted and validated by the metrics and circulatory logics of technological platforms.

Glamour suffuses platformed cultural production, albeit in unconventional ways. At the level of the image, the metric, and the platform, glamour beguiles; as it generates affective responses in users, summoning them with a “wispy” promise of fulfillment or social recognition, it modifies and conditions what counts as legible or “authentic” forms of selfhood. All of this is done to enhance the affordances, data extraction practices, and profit of the major platforms. Feminized, magical, connoting the occult and the arcane, highly stylized and symbolic, alluring, fetishistic, deeply conditioned by technology, linked to the arts of promotion but characterized also by profound indifference and ambivalence, in this article we have argued that the aesthetic of glamour provides both a compelling heuristic and an apt descriptor for platformed cultural production today.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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